HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS
(c. 45,000 BCE–1000 BCE)
FEATURED IN

Teaching World History Thematically

Essential Questions and Document-Based Lessons to Connect Past and Present

Rosalie Metro
Event: c. 125,000 BCE–c. 10,000 BCE: Late Pleistocene era

Document: Australian aboriginal artifacts, c. 30,000 BCE–1000 CE

Grinding Stone made from Sandstone, Collected from the Marra Station on the Darling River, New South Wales*


Photo by Stewart Humphreys for the Australian Museum

Shellfish Hooks (c. 1200), in Five Stages of Manufacture, Excavated at Botany Bay, New South Wales, in 1970*


Photo Paul Ovenden for the Australian Museum

*Please visit these links to see the images. The Australian Aboriginal people whose ancestors created these objects restrict the republishing of these images, but they have granted permission to the Australian Museum to display them on their website.
**Event:** Sumerian civilization, c. 4300–1500 BCE

**Document:** Cuneiform tablets, c. 3000 BCE

Proto-Cuneiform Tablet with Seals and Impressions, c. 3100–2900 BCE


Cuneiform Tablet: Loan of Silver, c. 1900 BCE

**Event:** Egypt’s Old Kingdom, 2705–2213 BCE

**Document:** Hymn to the Nile, 2100 BCE

Hail to thee, O Nile! Who manifests thyself over this land, and comes to give life to Egypt! Mysterious is thy issuing forth from the darkness, on this day whereon it is celebrated. Watering the orchards created by Re, to cause all the cattle to live, you give the earth to drink, inexhaustible one! Path that descends from the sky, loving the bread of Seb and the first-fruits of Nepera, You cause the workshops of Ptah to prosper! [. . .]

You create the grain, you bring forth the barley, assuring perpetuity to the temples. If you cease your toil and your work, then all that exists is in anguish. If the gods suffer in heaven, then the faces of men waste away. [. . .] He brings the offerings, as chief of provisioning; He is the creator of all good things, as master of energy, full of sweetness in his choice. If offerings are made it is thanks to Him. He brings forth the herbage for the flocks, and sees that each god receives his sacrifices. [. . .]

Where misery existed, joy manifests itself; all beasts rejoice. The children of Sobek, the sons of Neith, the cycle of the gods which dwells in him, are prosperous. No more reservoirs for watering the fields! He makes mankind valiant, enriching some, bestowing his love on others. [. . .] If you have refused (to grant) nourishment, the dwelling is silent, devoid of all that is good, the country falls exhausted.

O inundation of the Nile, offerings are made unto you, men are immolated to you, great festivals are instituted for you. Birds are sacrificed to you, gazelles are taken for you in the mountain, pure flames are prepared for you. [. . .]

Men exalt him like the cycle of the gods, they dread him who creates the heat, even him who has made his son the universal master in order to give prosperity to Egypt. Come (and) prosper! Come (and) prosper! O Nile, come (and) prosper! O you who make men to live through his flocks and his flocks through his orchards!

Event: Hammurabi publishes code of law, 1750 BCE

Document: Hammurabi’s Code of Law, Hammurabi, 1750 BCE

. . . Anu [Babylonian creator god] and Bel [the lord of Heaven and earth] called by name me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince, who feared God, to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak; . . . to further the well-being of mankind. . . .

2. If any one bring an accusation against a man, and the accused go to the river and leap into the river, if he sink in the river his accuser shall take possession of his house. But if the river prove that the accused is not guilty, and he escape unhurt, then he who had brought the accusation shall be put to death, while he who leaped into the river shall take possession of the house that had belonged to his accuser.

3. If any one bring an accusation of any crime before the elders, and does not prove what he has charged, he shall, if it be a capital offense charged, be put to death. . . .

5. If a judge try a case, reach a decision, and present his judgment in writing; if later error shall appear in his decision, and it be through his own fault, then he shall pay twelve times the fine set by him in the case, and he shall be publicly removed from the judge’s bench, and never again shall he sit there to render judgement. . . .

142. If a woman quarrel with her husband, and say: “You are not congenial to me,” the reasons for her prejudice must be presented. If she is guiltless, and there is no fault on her part, but he leaves and neglects her, then no guilt attaches to this woman, she shall take her dowry and go back to her father’s house.

143. If she is not innocent, but leaves her husband, and ruins her house, neglecting her husband, this woman shall be cast into the water. . . .

195. If a son strike his father, his hands shall be hewn off.

196. If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out.

197. If he break another man’s bone, his bone shall be broken.

198. If he put out the eye of a freed man, or break the bone of a freed man, he shall pay one gold mina.

199. If he put out the eye of a man’s slave, or break the bone of a man’s slave, he shall pay one-half of its value. . . .

202. If any one strike the body of a man higher in rank than he, he shall receive sixty blows with an ox-whip in public.

203. If a free-born man strike the body of another free-born man or equal rank, he shall pay one gold mina.

204. If a freed man strike the body of another freed man, he shall pay ten shekels in money.

205. If the slave of a freed man strike the body of a freed man, his ear shall be cut off.

206. If during a quarrel one man strike another and wound him, then he shall swear, “I did not injure him wittingly,” and pay the physicians.

**Event:** The Torah says the Lord gave 10 Commandments to Moses, c. 1200 BCE

**Document:** Shemot-Exodus Chapters 19–20, the Torah, c. 1200 BCE

Moses ascended to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “So shall you say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel, You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and [how] I bore you on eagles’ wings, and I brought you to Me. And now, if you obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be to Me a treasure out of all peoples, for Mine is the entire earth. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of princes and a holy nation.’ [. . .]

The Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the peak of the mountain, and the Lord summoned Moses to the peak of the mountain, and Moses ascended. [. . .]

God spoke all these words, to respond: “I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall not have the gods of others in My presence. You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness which is in the heavens above, which is on the earth below, or which is in the water beneath the earth. You shall neither prostrate yourself before them nor worship them, for I, the Lord, your God, am a zealous God, Who visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons, upon the third and the fourth generation of those who hate Me, and [I] perform loving kindness to thousands [of generations], to those who love Me and to those who keep My commandments. You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain, for the Lord will not hold blameless anyone who takes his name in vain. Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it. Six days may you work and perform all your labor, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord, your God; you shall perform no labor, neither you, your son, your daughter, your manservant, your maidservant, your beast, nor your stranger who is in your cities. For [in] six days the Lord made the heaven and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and sanctified it. Honor your father and your mother, in order that your days be lengthened on the land that the Lord, your God, is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, or whatever belongs to your neighbor.


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**Event:** Silk Road trade, 15th century BCE–2nd century BCE

**Document:** Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela, Benjamin of Tudela, 12th century BCE

I journeyed first from my native town to the city of Saragossa, and thence by way of the River Ebro to Tortosa. [. . .] [From Okbara] it is two days to Bagdad, the great city and the royal residence of the Caliph Emir al Muminin al Abbasi of the family of Mohammed. He is at the head of the Mohammedan religion, and all the kings of Islam obey him; he occupies a similar position to that held by the Pope over the Christians. He has a palace in Bagdad three miles in extent, wherein is a great park with all varieties of trees, fruit-bearing and otherwise, and all manner of animals. The whole is surrounded by a wall, and in the park there is a lake whose waters are fed by the river Hiddekel. Whenever the king desires to indulge in recreation and to rejoice and feast, his servants catch all manner of birds, game and fish, and he goes to his palace with his counsellors and princes. There the great king, Al Abbasi the Caliph (Hafiz) holds his court, and he is kind unto Israel, and many belonging to the people of Israel are his attendants; he knows all languages, and is well versed in the law of Israel. He reads and writes the holy language (Hebrew). He will not partake of anything unless he has earned it by the work of his own hands. He makes coverlets to which he attaches his seal; his courtiers sell them in the market, and the great ones of the land purchase them, and the proceeds thereof provide his sustenance. He is truthful and trusty, speaking peace to all men. [. . .]

He built, on the other side of the river, on the banks of an arm of the Euphrates which there borders the city, a hospital consisting of blocks of houses and hospices for the sick poor who come to be healed. Here there are about sixty physicians’ stores which are provided from the Caliph’s house with drugs and whatever else may be required. Every sick man who comes is maintained at the Caliph’s expense and is medically treated. [. . .] All this the Caliph does out of charity to those that come to the city of Bagdad, whether they be sick or insane. The Caliph is a righteous man, and all his actions are for good. In Bagdad there are about 40,000 Jews, and they dwell in security, prosperity and honor under the great Caliph, and amongst them are great sages, the heads of Academies engaged in the study of the law. [. . .].