

Features of ancient societies

The activity on this page introduces students to key concepts and knowledge they will need to read and interpret a descriptive report on ancient societies. This page helps students understand the five common features of ancient societies. Research in literacy shows that if students understand the content or topic (the field), they are much more likely to be able to read with greater comprehension. See Fact Sheets 3 and 4 at the back of this book to see more Latin and Greek origins of words.



Curriculum links - pages 31-36

Australian Curriculum

Overview content for the ancient world includes the following:

- key features of ancient societies (farming, trade, social classes, religion, rule of law) ACOKFH003

Explanation and communication

- Develop texts, particularly descriptions and explanations that use evidence from a range of sources that are acknowledged ACHHS213 & ACHHS156

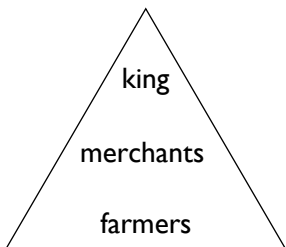
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Historical context of the overview

- key features of ancient societies (farming, trade, social classes, religion, rule of law)



Answers





Features of ancient societies

Ancient societies

Many ancient societies developed similar **features** or characteristics such as farming, trade, social classes, religion and rule of law.

These similarities occurred even when the societies were widely separated from each other and when they developed independently.



Build your word power

Many words you will learn in History have Latin or ancient Greek origins. Here are two examples:

word	meaning	origin
ancient	the distant past	Latin 'ante' - before
hierarchy	when groups of people are ranked in power or status	Greek 'hierarkhes' - sacred ruler



The list below shows five features of ancient societies. From each feature, draw three lines to related descriptions on the right.



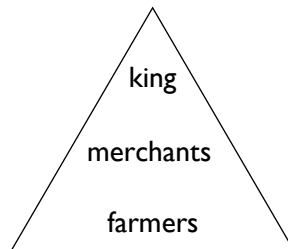
farming

- believing in gods and goddesses or divine spirits
- expectations and rules for living and working in a society
- keeping sheep and pigs for food



trade

- when some groups of people in society have more power than others
- trading excess crops for gold



social classes

- laws about how many wives a man can have or how thieves are punished
- swapping vegetables for silk
- growing wheat and vegetables



spirituality and religion

- when a society is divided into groups of people with different jobs, such as merchants or soldiers
- telling stories about the creation of the world
- keeping bees in hives and collecting honey



rule of law

- a hierarchy: a system of organisation where groups of people are ranked in order of power or status or wealth
- exchanging bread for timber
- the idea that all people in a society must behave in a particular way
- participating in ceremonies when someone dies



Facts about Mesopotamia

Ancient Mesopotamia developed from 10,000 BCE in the fertile zone around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, an area known as the Fertile Crescent. Mesopotamia was first ruled by the Sumerians, and later by the Assyrians and, later still, by the Babylonians and it was fiercely contested by the ancient Greeks, Persians and Romans.



Teaching suggestions

Here are some suggestions to help students read this model of a descriptive report. These activities are ways of helping students build their comprehension and vocabulary by interacting with the model text.

1. Review the meanings of the five features of ancient societies so that all students know what the report is about. Also, show students the map of Mesopotamia and identify its location. Revisit the concept that farming was a radical change from hunter and gatherer lifestyles.

2. Students need to know **why** they are reading. The purpose of this report is to describe features of ancient societies using Mesopotamia as an example. The next pages will teach students how to write paragraphs for a similar report using a different example (not Mesopotamia but ancient Australia).

3. Explain that the report will cover each of the features in the order they are mentioned: farming, trade, social classes, religion, and rule of law.

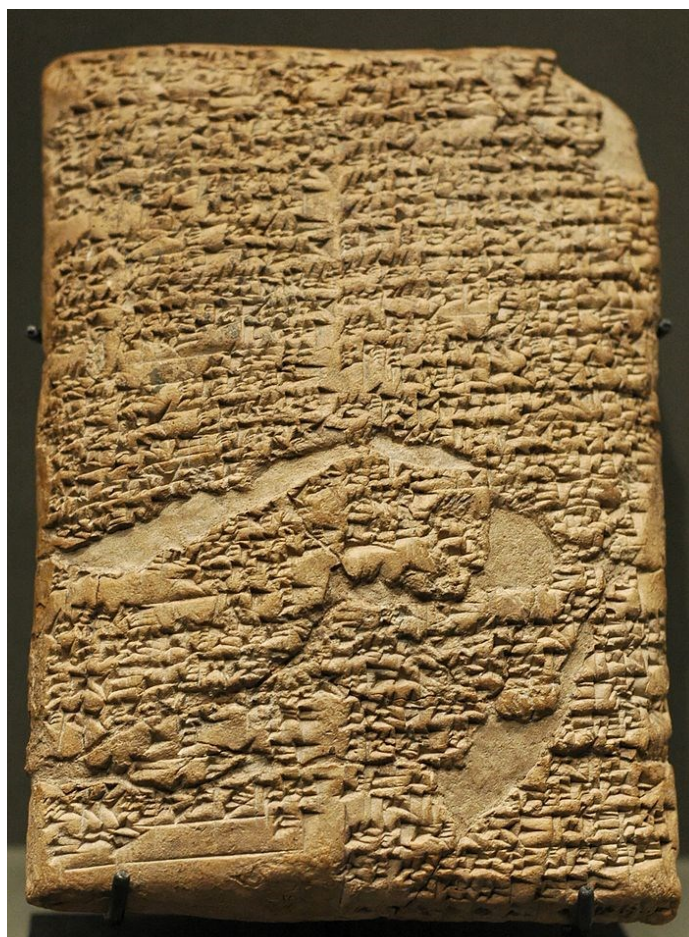
4. Ask students to underline the first sentence of each paragraph - these are the **topic sentences**. The topic sentence should preview all the main ideas in the paragraph. The topic sentence should not include any examples.

5. After reading each paragraph, look at the features in the right-hand-side column, and ask students to highlight the past tense verbs.

5. Continue to the vocabulary activity on the next page.



Map: CC0 Creative Commons



Above: A copy of the Code of Hammurabi on a clay tablet, showing cuneiform characters. Louvre Museum, Paris. Hammurabi ruled from 1792-1750 BCE.

Descriptive report: ancient societies

A **descriptive report** describes and provides general information about a historical period of time or an event. The stages of a descriptive report are:

- General statement
- Features

One example of an ancient society is ancient Mesopotamia, which developed around 10,000 BCE in a fertile area around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The area is located within modern-day Turkey, Syria and Iraq.

Map: CC0 Creative Commons



- General statement**
- Features**
 - farming
 - trade
 - social class
 - spirituality and religion
 - rule of law

Ancient societies from all over the world had many of the same features. Most ancient societies, such as Mesopotamia, used farming methods to provide food, they traded with other communities and they were divided into strict social classes. In addition, most societies had a religion and rule of law.

Farming provided a reliable source of food for ancient societies. Farming became possible when humans learned to sow, care for and harvest plants, especially grasses such as wheat and barley. This is known as agriculture. In addition, people learned to tame and keep animals for food, a process called domestication. In ancient Mesopotamia, the first barley and wheat crops were cultivated and pigs and sheep were domesticated. Farming provided ancient societies with a stable and constant source of food for their people which helped the society to flourish.

Many ancient societies developed trade relationships with other communities to obtain resources they did not have. People needed to trade so they could obtain goods that were not available in their local area. At first, goods were directly exchanged for other goods (which is called barter) such as trading grain for meat or milk. Later, goods were traded using currency or money. Ancient Mesopotamians traded luxury goods like herbs, spices and precious metals with many other societies. In this way, trade helped ancient societies to become more prosperous and it enabled cultures to interact with each other.

Ancient societies *were divided* into different groups or social classes. Usually, some groups of people *had* more power and wealth than others. For instance, the ancient Mesopotamian city of Ur *had* three social classes. At the top *were* the nobles, priests, officials and soldiers; then merchants, craftsmen and farmers in the middle; and, at the bottom, slaves who *had* no rights at all. The social structure of ancient societies *helped* maintain order and *helped* specialise the work of different groups of people.

Spirituality and religious beliefs *were* also developed in ancient societies. Religious beliefs evolved as a way of explaining creation, life and death, as well as natural disasters. For example, the ancient Mesopotamians believed that the world was created after a war between older and younger gods, with different gods creating parts of the world during the battle. The stories and beliefs of ancient societies helped people to understand their lives and the world.

Most ancient societies were based on a rule of law. The rule of law included expectations and guidelines for how all members of the society should behave and consequences if they did not follow the rules. Ancient Mesopotamia was ruled by the Code of Hammurabi, named after the first great king. This code was engraved in stone and included rules for justice. Laws helped people to understand what was expected and they contributed to a smooth-running society.

Identify the topic (ancient societies) and features and the example (Mesopotamia)

Each paragraph describes one feature of the society

A topic sentence previews the information in each paragraph (underlined)

Past tense verbs describe events in the past (*in italics*)

After the topic sentence, the ideas are elaborated (expanded on with more detail) then an example is given