

# Themes of World History

## *How can a thematic approach help us make sense of world history?*

### 1.1 Introduction

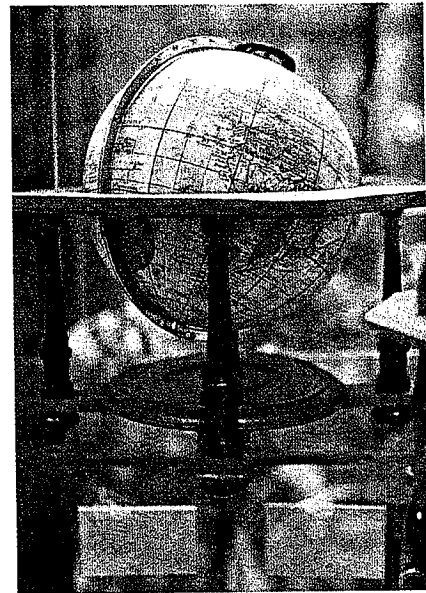
What is world history? A simple way to define world history is to say that it is an account of the past on a world scale. World history, however, is anything but simple. Our world is vast. It is diversely populated. Human history goes back thousands of years. To manage such a deep and wide subject, historians take various approaches to the study of world history.

One approach is the traditional “Western heritage” model. It focuses on classical civilizations of the Mediterranean world—such as Greece and Rome—followed by the history of Europe and other Western nations. In this approach, other world regions—such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America—get little attention.

Another approach might be called the “different cultures” model. It maintains a Western focus but includes coverage of the rest of the world. The goal is to provide a foundation in Western civilization, while promoting understanding of other cultures. This approach treats the world as a collection of separate regions, however, with little to connect them.

*History Alive! World Connections* takes a third approach. It adopts a “big picture” view of world history, stepping back to see the world as an interconnected whole. It provides details about specific countries and regions, but presents those details in a larger, cross-regional and global context. While highlighting the world’s diversity, it also makes connections and comparisons across cultures. It examines history from a global perspective, seeking to identify common patterns in historical events around the world.

One way historians identify patterns in world history is by applying themes to the study of the past. In this lesson, you will learn about the themes used in *History Alive! World Connections*. You will also learn about key concepts and ways of thinking that will help you organize information and enhance your understanding of world history.



*History Alive! World Connections* takes a “big picture” approach to the study of world history. “Era Overview” lessons look at an era in world history from a global and cross-regional perspective. Lessons that follow the Era Overview focus on specific regions and countries.

◀ The UN lists Melaka as one of its world heritage sites. Formerly known as Malacca, the city developed under Malay, Portuguese, and Dutch influences.

**evidence** information in various forms used by historians to reconstruct the past

**artifact** a human-made object from the past

**primary source** a historical record or document produced by an eyewitness or other observer who lived during the time period in question

**secondary source** a record or document referring to past events but not produced at the time

## 1.2 How Historians Work

Historians seek to create accurate, meaningful accounts of the past. This task can present great challenges, especially when the history they recount lies in the distant past. To carry out their work, historians rely on certain methods and concepts to help them evaluate, organize, and interpret information.

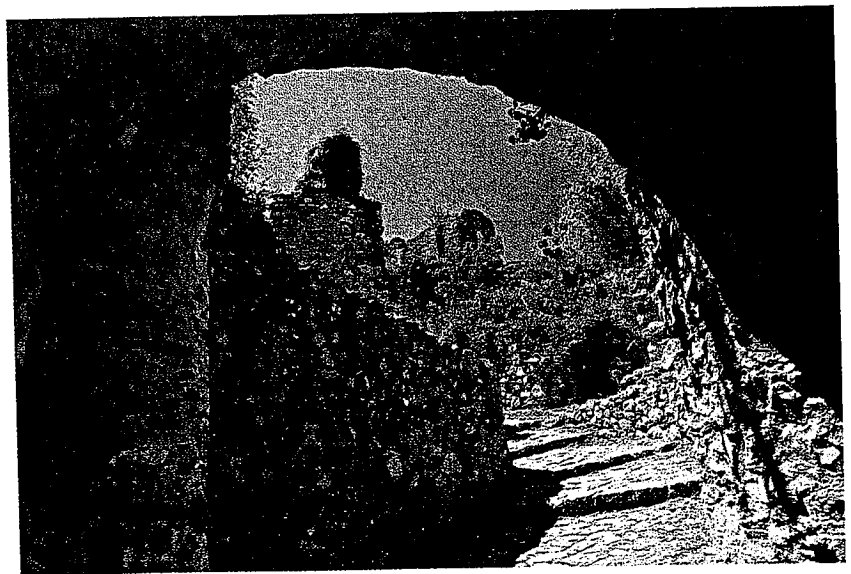
**The Process of History Writing** Historians typically begin their work with a question they hope to answer. One example might be, *How did the ancient Silk Road trade routes help spread religious ideas across Asia?*

The first step in answering that question is to gather **evidence**, information that helps in making statements or drawing conclusions about historical events. Evidence can come in many forms. It might be any one of the following:

- a document, such as a letter, a journal, or a map
- an **artifact**, or an object made by humans that reveals something about their lives or beliefs
- a drawing
- a piece of music
- information gathered from books or interviews with people

Historians refer to such evidence as sources. There are two basic types of sources. **Primary sources** are documents or other records of past events produced by people who experienced those events or who lived at the time. The journal of a Silk Road traveler would be a primary source. **Secondary sources** are documents created later, typically by scholars or other experts. A modern history of the Silk Road would be a secondary source.

Buildings created by people in the past that have survived to the present day can provide valuable evidence for historians. This picture shows the ruins of an ancient town in Mystras, Greece. What other types of nonwritten evidence do historians use?



Historians evaluate sources critically to assess their worth. Among other things, they examine sources for their **point of view**—the perspective or opinions a creator brings to a work. Point of view is not necessarily a bad thing, but historians must be aware of it when weighing the value of a source. If the point of view expressed in a source shows **bias**—a strong preference that might color the information—historians may reject the source as distorted and inaccurate.

Once evidence is gathered and evaluated, historians use it to reconstruct the past. They often begin by establishing a **chronology**, or sequence of events. Placing events in sequence helps determine cause and effect and reveals patterns over time. Historians also use evidence to analyze and interpret history. They seek to explain how and why things happened and to assess the significance of past events. Historians may bring their own point of view to their analysis of history. But careful historians try to ensure that the weight of the evidence supports their interpretation.

**Key Concepts** Historians also rely on certain concepts to organize information and make sense of history. Two of the most important concepts concern perspectives on time and space.

Historians often divide history into periods of time. They may base these periods on a major turning point, such as the development of agriculture. Or they may base them on a unifying principle or theme, such as revolution. Dividing history into periods allows historians to present events in order. It also helps them make connections among events and highlight patterns in history. This process of dividing history into periods is known as **periodization**.

Three long periods often appear in world history courses. They are:

- ancient,
- medieval,
- and modern.

These periods generally reflect turning points in the history of Western civilization, such as the fall of Rome, the Renaissance, and the Industrial Revolution. They are less useful for other parts of the world, however.

In this text, historical periods are based on major eras in global history. Certain lessons reflect this “big picture” focus. For example, Lesson 4 looks at growing interactions among world regions after 300 C.E. Lesson 10 covers global expansion between 1400 and 1800. Lesson 14 examines revolutions in the 18th and 19th centuries.

A second key concept, known as **spatial frames**, concerns the different geographic perspectives that historians apply to world events.



These ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics are an example of a primary source which might be used by historians. They present a written record of the past produced by people who lived at the time. Writings from the past survive in many forms—on clay tablets, scrolls, or printed books, among others.

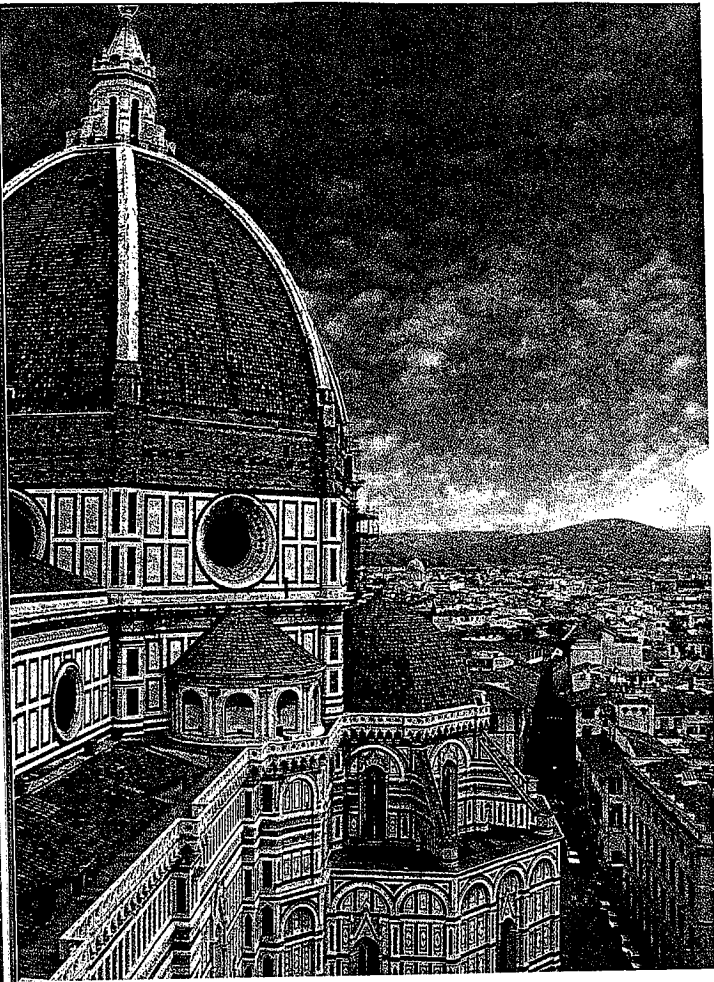
**point of view** a person's way of thinking about a subject

**bias** a personal preference or prejudice

**chronology** a sequence of events in time

**periodization** the division of history into periods of time

**spatial frames** different geographic perspectives that historians apply to world events



This is a Renaissance-era cathedral located in Florence, Italy. Historians can look at an event such as the Renaissance through different spatial frames. For example, a historian might study the beginnings of the Renaissance within the city of Florence. Or, they might zoom out to an interregional perspective to examine how Renaissance ideas spread throughout Europe.

**interregional** referring to a land area covering two or more regions

**universal standards** ideas or values, such as human rights, that are said to apply to all people

One way to understand this concept is to imagine that you are looking down on Earth from high above, watching human events with a powerful zoom lens. If you focus on a small area, you can see events taking place in a single nation. Zoom out a little and you will see events in the region where the nation is located. Zoom out a little more and you will get a larger, **interregional** view of events in two or more regions. If you keep zooming out, you will eventually get a global view. These different perspectives—national, regional, interregional, and global—are spatial frames.

By applying spatial frames to the study of history, historians can make comparisons and see larger patterns. For example, they might see that trade in a particular nation reflects economic trends in a larger regional, interregional, and global context.

**Habits of Mind** When studying history, it can be useful to adopt certain ways of thinking. Historians refer to ways of thinking as “habits of mind.” Three habits are particularly helpful in the study of world history.

The first habit is to look for global patterns over time and space. This means examining events at different times and in different places to see how they might be connected. It also means connecting local events to global trends. An example of this might be looking at how a war in one part of the world caused migration that influenced life in another place years later. Or it might be looking at how a development in one place, such as an invention, changed life around the world.

The second habit is to make comparisons within and among societies. An event or historical process may or may not have the same effect on all members of a society. It may also have similar or varying effects on other societies. Careful students of history look for similarities and differences in the ways societies respond to change. An example of this is comparing how societies around the world have adapted to industrialization.

The third habit is to assess **universal standards** in light of cultural differences. Examples of universal standards include the principles of democracy and human rights. Although claims for such standards may seem reasonable to many people, they may not be accepted everywhere. Careful students of history examine such claims in historical context, not suspending judgment but developing cultural awareness and understanding.

### 1.3 A Thematic Approach

Historians use themes to identify patterns in history. Many possible themes can apply to historical events. Two broad themes are continuity and change, that is, the way things have stayed the same or changed over time. Two other broad themes are integration and difference. *Integration* refers to ways in which the peoples of the world have been drawn together by historical factors. *Difference* concerns how they have remained distinct and diverse.

*History Alive! World Connections* highlights five themes in world history: cultural interaction, political structures, economic structures, social structures, and human-environment interaction. Studying history with these themes in mind will help you make connections among events and interpret the past.

**Cultural Interaction** The way cultures interact is a key theme in world history. Throughout history, people of different cultures have exchanged ideas and adopted new beliefs and customs. This spread of cultural influences is known as **cultural diffusion**. At the same time, people have also rejected outside influences and come into conflict over new ideas. The study of how cultures have interacted and developed over time is crucial to our understanding of the world.

Various topics fit under the theme of cultural interaction. Some examples are:

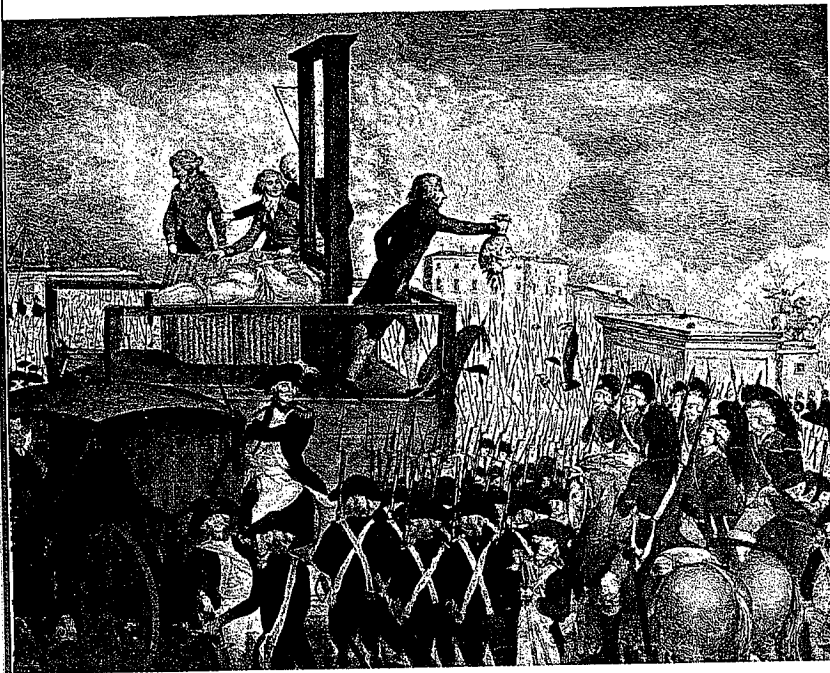
- the growth and development of religions
- the formation and spread of other belief systems and philosophies
- the ideas of science and technology and how they move across cultures
- artistic influences in painting, music, architecture, literature, and other arts

**Political Structures** A second key theme is the creation of political systems and forms of government. World history has often been presented as a series of one ruler or **government** after another. It is much more than that. Nevertheless, political structures are an important aspect of history and a key element in the growth of civilization. The way in which people have organized and governed themselves says a great deal about human society.

**cultural diffusion** the spread of cultural traits from one society or place to another

The triumphal arch is an example of the theme of cultural interaction in world history. The building of triumphal arches dates back to ancient Rome. Shown here is the Arc de Triomphe, the largest triumphal arch in the world.





This engraving depicts the execution by guillotine of King Louis XVI of France, during the French Revolution. The French Revolution is one example of a change in political structures, during which France transitioned from a monarchy to a republic.

**gender roles** customs relating to the position of men and women in society

**kinship** family relationship, either by birth, marriage, or adoption

Various topics fall under the theme of political structures. Here are some examples:

- forms of government
- the nature and growth of empires, large territories controlled by a single ruler or state
- the development of nations
- political revolts and revolutions
- regional or global organizations, such as the European Union and the United Nations

**Economic Structures** The way in which societies organize their economies is another important theme. Economic motives lie at the heart of many human

activities, from the quest for food to the pursuit of wealth. Economic factors have played a critical role in history, driving people and societies to innovate, explore, and expand. At the same time, economic interests have also been a source of great conflict.

This theme covers a wide range of topics. Some examples are:

- the birth of agriculture and the expansion of trade
- how labor is organized and used
- the rise of industry
- the development of economic theories that have had a major impact on people and events around the world

**Social Structures** The organization of societies is also a key theme. In prehistoric times, people formed social groups to meet their need for food, shelter, and security. Over time, social groups banded together to form societies. Each society developed its own rules and customs to govern behavior and help it function. Although these structures varied from culture to culture, they also had many things in common. By examining and comparing social structures throughout history, we can get a better understanding of human life.

Among the topics covered by this theme are:

- **gender roles** and relations, including the place of women in society
- customs relating to family and **kinship**
- racial and ethnic differences and their impact on society
- division of society into social and economic classes



**Human-Environment Interaction** The interaction between humans and the environment is the fifth theme. The environment has been a key factor in human activity throughout history. The fact that people have to operate within the limits of the natural world has helped shape their actions. It has affected how and where people live and how they support themselves. At the same time, human actions have also changed the environment in many ways.

This theme covers topics such as:

- disease
- population growth
- migration
- patterns of human settlement

These factors can reflect or influence conditions in the environment. Another topic is the environmental impact of technology, a major concern today because of energy use and climate change. Throughout history, however—from the birth of farming to the creation of factories—the use of technology has affected the environment. By changing how we interact with the natural world, technology has had a major impact on the course of history.



The spread of disease is one way in which history can be affected by the interaction between humans and their environment. This drawing depicts Aztec natives infected with smallpox which they contracted from the Spanish. Smallpox did not exist in the Americas before the arrival of the Spanish in the fifteenth century.

## Summary

**In this lesson, you learned about some of the methods, concepts, and themes used in the study of world history.**

**A “Big-Picture” Approach** World history can be approached in various ways. The traditional approach focuses on the history of Western civilization. A second approach looks at the diversity of world regions. *History Alive! World Connections* takes a “big picture” approach that seeks to make connections among cultures and regions and identify patterns in history. It examines historical events in a cross-regional and global context.

**How Historians Work** Historians seek to answer questions about the past. They gather historical evidence and use it to reconstruct and interpret past events. They make use of key concepts, such as time periods and spatial frames, to help them organize information and make connections. They also apply certain habits of mind to analyze history. They look for links between events in different times and places and make comparisons within and among societies. They also evaluate universal standards in cultural and historical context.

**A Thematic Approach** Applying themes to the study of history can help reveal patterns in historical events. This text highlights five themes. It examines the interaction of cultures around the world. It looks at political, economic, and social structures throughout history. And it considers the nature and impact of human interaction with the environment.