

How Geography Shaped Where People Settled in Ancient Times

We will explore why ancient civilizations grew up in certain places and how the land and water around them shaped their ways of life.

Learning intentions

We are learning to understand how geography shaped where ancient people chose to live and how they adapted to their surroundings.

Success criteria

I can explain why ancient civilizations settled along rivers and coastlines.

I can describe how geographical features like water, soil, and climate supported the ways people lived.

I can identify how environmental changes affected where people lived and how they survived.

Curriculum alignment

Students examine how geographical features and environmental changes contributed to the settlement and trade of ancient civilizations ([Outcome](#), [Outcome](#)).

Students compare the locations of multiple ancient civilizations, justify settlement along river valleys and coastlines, and determine effects of environmental change on human behaviour ([Skills](#), [Skills](#)).

Ancient civilizations were complex societies in different locations around the world ([Knowledge](#)). Geographical features such as abundant water, fertile soil, and moderate climate in river valleys supported agriculture ([Knowledge](#)). Many ancient civilizations were located along river valleys or coastlines ([Knowledge](#)). Changes in the environment, including natural disasters, can cause people to adapt or move ([Knowledge](#), [PDF p.3](#)).

Materials

- Large world map or globe
- Images of the Nile River valley, the Indus River valley, and a Mediterranean coastline (one image per pair)
- Chart paper and markers
- Copies of the settlement comparison organizer (one per student)
- Index cards with descriptions of three environments (see Lesson sequence, Stage 3)

Lesson sequence

Stage 1: Hook (5 minutes)

Show students a picture of a river valley with green fields and a small settlement. Ask: "Why do you think people chose to build their homes here instead of on that rocky hill over there?" Take three or four responses. Write their ideas on the board without comment. Tell them that today they will discover the real reasons ancient people picked certain places to live, and it has everything to do with water, soil, and survival.

Stage 2: Direct instruction (10 minutes)

Explain that ancient civilizations were complex societies that existed thousands of years ago in places like Egypt, Greece, Rome, China, India, and the Arab lands ([Knowledge](#)). Point to each location on a map or globe as you name it.

Ask: "What do all these places have in common?" Guide students to notice that many are near rivers or oceans. Explain that geographical features shaped where people settled ([Understanding](#)).

Describe three reasons people chose river valleys and coastlines:

1. **Water for drinking and farming.** Rivers provided fresh water. Farmers could water their crops. Ask: "Why is water important for growing food?" (Plants need it; people need it to drink.)
2. **Fertile soil.** When rivers flooded, they left behind rich, dark soil perfect for growing wheat, barley, and vegetables. Ask: "What happens to soil when a river floods?" (It deposits nutrients; it becomes fertile.) Explain that fertile soil meant people could grow enough food to feed large communities ([Knowledge](#)).
3. **Trade and travel.** Oceans and bays along coastlines allowed people to travel by boat and trade goods with distant places ([Knowledge](#)). Ask: "How would a boat help you trade with people far away?" (You could carry more goods; you could reach places you could not walk to.)

Show images of the Nile River valley, the Indus River valley, and a Mediterranean coast. Point out the rivers, the flat land beside them, and the water routes. Ask: "Which of these three reasons for settling here do you see in this picture?"

Stage 3: Guided practice (12 minutes)

Divide the class into pairs. Give each pair one of the three images (Nile valley, Indus valley, or Mediterranean coast). Provide a chart with three columns: "Water," "Soil," and "Travel and Trade."

Ask each pair to look at their image and write or draw one thing they notice in each column that would help people survive and build a civilization. Circulate and prompt: "Where is the water in your picture? What colour is the soil? Could boats travel here?"

Circulate to check that each pair has recorded observations in all three columns before sharing. Invite one pair to share their observations for each image. Record their answers on a class chart. Affirm correct observations: "Yes, the Nile River provided water and fertile soil. That is why Egypt became a powerful civilization."

Then introduce environmental change. Explain that sometimes the environment changes in ways that force people to move or adapt ([Knowledge](#), [PDF p.3](#)). Describe a volcanic eruption or a severe drought. Ask: "If a volcano destroyed your home and buried your fields in ash, what would you do?" (Move to a safer place; find new land.) Explain that ancient people had to be clever and strong to survive these changes.

Stage 4: Independent practice (10 minutes)

Give each student a settlement comparison organizer with three rows (one for each civilization or region) and columns for: "Location," "Main geographical features," "Why people settled here," and "One challenge they might have faced."

Provide index cards with simple descriptions:

- Card A: "A river valley with flat land, abundant water, and rich soil. Floods happen every year."
- Card B: "A coastline with a good harbour for boats. Rocky hills inland. Limited flat land for farming."
- Card C: "A desert with an oasis (a small area with water and trees). Very hot and dry."

Ask students to match each description to a reason people would or would not settle there, and to fill in their organizer. Students discuss with a partner which reason best explains their choice. Circulate and ask: "What geographical feature is most important here? Why would people choose this place?"

Stage 5: Consolidation (3 minutes)

Gather the class. Ask three quick questions:

1. "Name one geographical feature that helped ancient civilizations grow." (Water, fertile soil, coastline, river.)
2. "Why did people settle along rivers instead of in deserts?" (Water, fertile soil, food.)
3. "If a volcano erupted near an ancient city, what might the people do?" (Move, adapt, find new land.)

Affirm that geography shaped the ways ancient people lived, and that understanding this helps us see why civilizations rose where they did.

Differentiation

Support

Pair students who struggle with reading or writing with a stronger partner during independent practice. Provide a word bank with key terms: water, fertile, soil, river, coast, trade, settlement, flood. Allow students to draw and label instead of writing full sentences on the organizer.

Extension

Ask students to research one ancient civilization (Egypt, Greece, Rome, China, or India) and write a short paragraph explaining how its geography helped it grow. Prompt: "What geographical features did this civilization have? How did people use them to survive and build cities?" Challenge them to imagine what would have happened if the civilization had been located in a desert instead of a river valley.

Assessment

Formative check during Stage 4 (independent practice):

Observe students as they complete the settlement comparison organizer. Look for evidence that they can:

- Identify at least one geographical feature (water, soil, coastline) in each description.
- Explain why that feature would help or hinder settlement (e.g., "Water helps people drink and farm").
- Connect geographical features to human needs (food, safety, trade).

If a student struggles to make the connection, ask a guiding question: "What do people need to survive? Does this place have that?" If a student finishes early and shows clear understanding, extend the task: "Which of these three places would be easiest to live in? Why?"