

Rivers, Coastlines, and Clues from the Past: Ancient Settlement and Sources

Exploring how geography shaped ancient settlements and how their ideas connect to life today

Audience: Grade 5 Social Studies students in an Alberta classroom, working in a mixed-ability class with a classroom teacher leading whole-class, small-group, pair, and individual tasks.

Grades: Grade 5

Subjects: Social Studies

Time: about 60 minutes

Overview

This lesson introduces Grade 5 students to the connection between geography and settlement in ancient civilizations, while building the skill of telling primary sources apart from secondary sources ([Skills](#), [Skills](#)). Students compare fictional settlement locations, practice justifying a choice with geographic reasoning, and sort source cards into primary and secondary categories.

The lesson closes with a personal connection activity linking one ancient innovation, such as writing, agriculture, or trade, to a modern equivalent students recognize from daily life ([Knowledge](#), [PDF p.4](#)). This mirrors the curriculum's emphasis that historical study gives insight into the present ([Knowledge](#), [PDF p.4](#)), and sets up future lessons on ancient civilizations and informed citizenship. The rise of civilizations and empires depends on internal and external factors such as organized structures, strong leadership, military power, innovations, wealth, and opportunity.

Outcomes covered

- Students examine how geographical features and environmental changes contributed to the settlement and trade of ancient civilizations. ([Outcome](#), [PDF p.2](#))
Understanding why ancient people settled where they did helps students see the lasting connection between geography and how communities grow, a pattern that still shapes where towns and cities are built today.
- Students examine ancient civilizations. ([Outcome](#), [Skills](#))
Students examine how geographical features and environmental changes contributed to the settlement and trade of ancient civilizations.
- Students examine how geographical features and environmental changes contributed to the settlement and trade of ancient civilizations. ([Knowledge](#), [PDF p.4](#))
Seeing that ideas like writing, trade, and calendars started thousands of years ago and are still with us helps students understand that history is not separate from their own daily life.

Materials

- Simple outline maps showing four fictional settlement locations (river valley, mountain top, desert, coastline) - one per small group
- Sets of 6-8 primary/secondary source description cards - one set per pair
- Half-page graphic organizer with three boxes: Ancient Innovation, How It Was Used Then, How We See It Today - one per student
- Sticky notes or exit slip strips - one per student
- Board or chart paper to post the learning intention and success criteria
- Optional: images or simple sketches of an abacus and a modern calculator

Sequence of activities

1. Mystery Object Warm-Up: Clues from the Past (7 min, whole class)

1. Show students two images or descriptions: an ancient abacus and a modern calculator (or a photo of a river valley farm and a photo of a modern irrigation farm).
2. Ask: "What do these two things have in common? What changed and what stayed the same?"
3. Take three or four answers. Guide students to notice that many things we use today started as an idea from a much older civilization.
4. Explain today's learning intention: We will compare how ancient civilizations used land and water to survive, and we will connect one of their old ideas to something we still use today.
5. Post the success criteria where all can see:
 - I can name a geographic feature that helped an ancient civilization settle.
 - I can compare a primary and a secondary source.
 - I can connect one ancient innovation to a modern example.

If you do not have physical objects, sketch a simple abacus and a calculator on the board, or read a two-sentence description of each aloud. This links directly to [PDF p.4](#), which notes the abacus evolved into the computer.

Sources: [PDF p.4](#), [Knowledge](#)

2. River Valleys and Coastlines: Where Would You Settle? (13 min, small group)

1. Divide students into groups of three or four. Give each group a simple outline map showing four fictional locations: a river valley, a rocky mountain top, a desert with no water, and a coastline with a bay.
2. Ask each group to rank the four locations from best to worst for starting a new settlement about 4000 years ago, with no modern technology.
3. Groups justify their ranking using at least two geographic reasons, such as fresh water, fertile soil for farming, climate, or access to trade by boat.
4. Bring the class together. Ask a few groups to share their number one choice and reasoning.
5. Introduce real examples: Egypt along the Nile River, Greece along the Mediterranean coastline, China along the Yellow River. Ask: "Do these match your group's reasoning?"
6. Discuss briefly: what happens if the river floods too much, or if a volcano erupts nearby? Introduce the idea that people had to adapt or move when the environment changed, and sometimes built structures like aqueducts to manage water.

This activity directly targets [Skills](#), [Knowledge](#), [Understanding](#), and [PDF p.2/PDF p.3](#). Encourage justification, not just a choice, since the skill being assessed is 'justify the settlement of ancient civilizations along river valleys and coastlines' ([Skills](#)). For the aqueduct discussion, a simple explanation is enough: an aqueduct is a long channel the Romans built to carry water from far away into their cities.

Sources: [Skills](#), [Knowledge](#), [Understanding](#), [PDF p.2](#), [PDF p.3](#)

3. Primary or Secondary? Sorting Sources (10 min, pairs)

1. Explain in plain terms: a primary source is something made at the time of the event, like a piece of ancient pottery, a carved tablet, or a letter. A secondary source is something made later that explains or interprets the event, like a textbook page or a museum sign.

2. Give each pair a set of eight cards (real or invented for this lesson), each describing one item: for example, a fragment of Egyptian papyrus, a modern documentary about the pyramids, a Roman coin, a history textbook paragraph, a photograph of an archaeological dig, a museum label, a cave painting, an encyclopedia entry.
3. Pairs sort the cards into two piles: Primary and Secondary.
4. Pairs check with a neighbouring pair and discuss any card they disagreed on.
5. Whole class debrief: ask which type of source might change our understanding of the past if new technology, like better dating tools or ground-penetrating radar, finds something new. Connect to the idea that interpretations of the past can change as new evidence appears.

Covers [Skills](#) and [Knowledge](#) skills around distinguishing and comparing primary and secondary sources, and the idea that interpretations evolve with new evidence and technology. If time is short, reduce the card set to six items. Use this key when checking piles: papyrus fragment, Roman coin, and cave painting are primary sources; the documentary, textbook paragraph, and encyclopedia entry are secondary sources. Two cards need teacher guidance: the photograph of an archaeological dig is a primary source about the dig itself but a secondary-type clue about the ancient civilization, since the dig happened long after the civilization existed; sort it as secondary for this activity and explain why. The museum label counts as secondary unless it quotes an ancient text directly, in which case only the quoted words are primary while the label's explanation around them is secondary.

Sources: [Skills](#), [Knowledge](#)

4. From Then to Now: Connecting an Ancient Idea to Today (13 min, individual)

1. Give each student a half-page organizer with three boxes: Ancient Innovation, How It Was Used Then, How We See It Today.
2. Offer a bank of ancient innovations to choose from: writing systems, agriculture, calendars, trade and currency, systems of decision making, or rights and freedoms.
3. Students pick one innovation and fill in the three boxes. For example: Writing systems then (Egyptian hieroglyphs recorded harvests and laws) and now (we write text messages and store records on computers).
4. Remind students of the abacus-to-calculator and Roman Republic-to-modern democracy examples discussed earlier, so they have a model to follow.
5. Students share their completed organizer with a partner and give one piece of feedback: "One thing I understand better now is..."
6. Collect organizers as a formative check of understanding.

This activity targets [Skills](#)'s requirement to 'examine the evolution of innovations from ancient civilizations' and [Knowledge](#)'s list of innovations, plus the contemporary connection emphasized in [PDF p.4](#) and [Knowledge](#). Students who need more structure can use the abacus/calculator or Roman Republic/democracy example directly instead of choosing a new one.

Sources: [Skills](#), [Knowledge](#), [PDF p.4](#), [Knowledge](#)

5. Exit Ticket: Show What You Know (8 min, individual)

1. Students answer three short questions on a sticky note or exit slip:
2. Name one geographic feature that helped an ancient civilization settle (for example, a river, coastline, or fertile soil).
3. Give one example of a primary source and one example of a secondary source about ancient history.

4. Name one ancient innovation and describe how a modern version of it looks or works today.
5. Students hand in their exit ticket as they line up or move to the next activity.
6. Teacher scans exit tickets that evening to identify students who need a quick review of primary versus secondary sources or geographic settlement reasons before the next lesson.

This is the formative check for the lesson's three success criteria, tied to [Skills](#), [Skills](#), [Knowledge](#), and [Knowledge](#). Look for specific examples rather than vague answers, such as naming the Nile River rather than just saying 'water.'

Sources: [Skills](#), [Knowledge](#), [Skills](#), [Knowledge](#)

Differentiation

Extension

- Ask students to research one additional ancient civilization not discussed in class (such as Arab civilizations or India) and compare its geographic setting to the ones covered in the lesson.
- Challenge students to find a second modern example that connects to an ancient innovation, such as linking ancient trade routes to today's global shipping, and explain the connection in a short paragraph.
- Invite students to imagine and describe a new tool or technology, such as advanced satellite imaging, that could change how historians understand an ancient settlement, connecting to [Knowledge](#)'s idea that interpretations evolve with new technology.

Support

- Provide a pre-filled example row on the river valley ranking chart so students see the format before ranking their own choices.
- Reduce the source-sorting card set to four clear, contrasting examples (two obviously primary, two obviously secondary) rather than eight.
- Offer a sentence starter for the exit ticket, such as 'One geographic feature that helped people settle was ____ because ____.'

Inclusive supports

- Use visual images alongside text on the source cards and settlement map so students who are still building reading fluency can participate fully.
- Allow students to respond to the exit ticket orally to the teacher or an educational assistant if writing is a barrier.
- Group students strategically for the small-group and pair activities so a stronger reader or communicator can support a peer without doing the thinking for them.

Assessment

Formative. During the river valley ranking activity, circulate and listen for students using at least two geographic reasons (water, soil, climate, trade access) to justify their settlement choice.

Look for: Students can name and explain a geographic feature, not just state a preference, showing they understand the link between environment and settlement described in [Understanding](#). ([Skills](#), [Understanding](#))

Formative. During the source-sorting activity, check pairs' card piles against the answer key above and listen to their debrief discussion about disagreements.

Look for: Students correctly identify most cards as primary or secondary and can explain their reasoning, such as noting a primary source was made at the time of the event. ([Skills](#))

Formative. Collect the completed exit ticket at the end of the lesson.

Look for: Each student names a specific geographic feature tied to settlement, gives one accurate example each of a primary and secondary source, and describes a plausible connection between an ancient innovation and a modern equivalent. ([Skills](#), [Knowledge](#), [Skills](#), [Knowledge](#))

Vocabulary

- **Primary source:** Something made at the time of an event, like a piece of pottery, a carved tablet, or a photograph taken on the day something happened.
- **Secondary source:** Something made later that explains or interprets an event, like a textbook page, a documentary, or a museum sign.
- **Settlement:** A place where a group of people build homes and live together, often chosen because it has resources like water and fertile land.
- **Aqueduct:** A long channel or bridge, built by the ancient Romans and other civilizations, that carried water from far away into cities and farms.
- **Innovation:** A new idea, tool, or way of doing something. Writing, calendars, and trade systems are innovations that started in ancient civilizations and are still used today.

For families

- Ask your child to explain one thing ancient people invented that we still use today, like calendars, writing, or trade. See if they can examine the evolution of innovations from ancient civilizations.
- Next time you visit a river, lake, or coastline together, ask your child why people might choose to live near water instead of far away from it.
- If your family has any old photographs, letters, or objects at home, look at one together and ask your child whether it counts as a primary source (something made at the time) and what it tells us about the past.

Sources

- [Outcome](#): "Students examine ancient civilizations."
- [Outcome](#): "Students examine how geographical features and environmental changes contributed to the settlement and trade of ancient civilizations."
- [Understanding](#): "Legacies of ancient civilizations continue."
- [Skills](#): "Distinguish between primary and secondary sources."
- [Knowledge](#): "Interpretations of the past can evolve based on new evidence and technology."
- [Skills](#): "Justify the settlement of ancient civilizations along river valleys and coastlines."
- [Knowledge](#): "Many ancient civilizations were located along river valleys or coastlines."
- [Understanding](#): "Environment and settlement of people are interrelated."
- [Skills](#): "Relate historical issues and events to contemporary issues and events."
- [Knowledge](#): "The study of historical issues and events, such as those in ancient civilizations and empires, can provide insight into contemporary issues and events"
- [Outcome](#): "Students investigate ways to learn about the world and take action for change."
- [PDF p.2](#): "Learning Outcome: Students examine how geographical features and environmental changes contributed to the settlement and trade of ancient civilizations."
- [PDF p.3](#): "Changes in the environment, including natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions, can cause people to adapt or move."
- [PDF p.4](#): "The computers we use today evolved from the abacus, which was used in ancient civilizations and empires."

- [PDF p.1](#): "The Social Studies Snapshots were created to support teachers with piloting new and unfamiliar concepts and topics"
- [PDF p.6](#): "Model for students how to read and identify perspectives in a source."

All content uses general historical and geographic examples appropriate for ages nine to eleven, with no graphic or sensitive material, and respects diverse cultures by presenting multiple ancient civilizations without ranking or stereotyping any group.