



What makes civilisation?

HPAR4010

2025-2026, Block 3



**Institute of Education and Humanities, Centre of Humanities
and Social Sciences**

University of Wales Trinity Saint David



PRIFYSGOL CYMRU
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UNIVERSITY OF WALES
Trinity Saint David

What makes civilisation?

This co-taught module explores the questions what makes civilisation and what makes a civilisation through the analysis of theoretical literature as well as primary sources of chosen examples of civilisations. It investigates, through various case studies, the indispensable features of the phenomenon “civilisation” and will enable the student for their comparative methods applied to ancient civilisations. The module looks at the relevance of social constructs such as religion, state, kingship, elite culture, literacy/orality, cultural memory etc. in theory and applied to specific cultures.

→ **Credits: 36 hours of contact time (in-person sessions) over 4 weeks – 2 before Christmas, 2 after New Year**

→ **Block 3**

Module convener: Dr Katharina Zinn k.zinn@uwtsd.ac.uk

Participating Lecturer	Initial	Culture covered	email
Katharina Zinn	KZ	Egypt	k.zinn@uwtsd.ac.uk
Xicheng Liu	XL	China	x.liu@uwtsd.ac.uk

AIM(S)

- To introduce the terms civilisation, society and culture and to explore how these are used in different subjects of the Humanities, to identify the key characteristics of civilisation and to apply the characteristics in case studies from various civilisations of the ancient world.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon the successful completion of this module, the student should be able to:

- demonstrate a basic knowledge and understanding of the terminologies;
- show an awareness of and evaluate the distinctions and similarities of particular cultures and societies.

SYLLABUS

This is a co-taught module in which we compare the same phenomenon in two different cultures each – ancient Egypt and ancient China. This will help you to apply the comparative method directly and learn to work interdisciplinary.

Date	Who	Title	Task / Reading (compulsory – to be done beforehand)
Week 1: 01/12-05/12/2025			
W1 Mo 01/12	KZ	Welcome to the course and administrative matters	
		Early civilisations and complex societies – definitions, evidence and interpretations	Wengrow. 2010. 1-16 Childe. 1950
W2 Tue 02/12	KZ	Comparatist approaches as theoretical method to explore civilisations?	Trigger. 2003. 15-39 (Chapter 3) Poo. 2024.
		Start with the material: Headrests in Ancient China and Ancient Egypt – How to compare such implements?	Zinn. 2019. Zhang. 2017.
W3 Wed 03/12	XL	Origins, Unification, Unity: (re)emergence of civilisation – China	Loewe, Shaughnessy. 1999.
Week 2: 08/12 – 12/12/2025			
W4 Mo 08/12	KZ	Origins, Unification, Unity: (re)emergence of civilisation – Egypt	Koehler. 2010. 25-47. Wilkinson. 2010. Wenke, Olszewski. 2007. 83-122.
	XL to join online	Debating Origins	Charvát. 2013. 17-72 + 203-266 – skim read these pages and compare both origins
		Discussion of infographic	
W5 Tue 09/12	KZ	State and Order: China and Tianxia	Moreno García, Pines. 2021. Lewis, Hsieh. 2017. 25-48.
W6 Wed 10/12	XL	State and Order: Egypt and Maat	Moreno García, Pines. 2021.
	XL (KZ to join last 30 min)	Seminar for State and Order: Discussing different systems – Ma'at and Tianxia: Order as social glue within societies?	Moreno García, Pines. 2021.
Fri 12/12	Submit Assessment 1 (Infographic)		
Week 3: 05/01 – 09/01/2026			
W7 Mo 05/01	XL	Communicating Between Worlds: Writing, Text, Image in China	Branner, Li. 2011. Shaughnessy. 2023b.
W8 Tue 06/01	KZ	Communicating Between Worlds: Writing, Text, Image in Egypt	Zinn 2018.
W9 Wed 07/01	XL	Enemies of civilisations – China and Egypt	Poo, M. 2005.
Fri 09/01	Submit Assessment 2 (Essay)		
Week 4: 12/01 – 16/01/2026			
W10 and 11 Mo 12/01	KZ	Fieldtrip: Ancient civilisations in museums	To be confirmed – which day
W12 Wed 14/01	XL	What makes civilization(s)? – a summary	
		Review assessment surgery	

Further compulsory and additional readings can be found on MOODLE.

ASSESSMENT

Coursework – Portfolio (100% of module mark) – equivalent of 4000 words

The portfolio needs to be passed overall irrespective if you pass or even attempt all parts or not. However, non-attempt of one part will require you to achieve very high marks in the other in order to pass the module (min of 40). I therefore very strongly recommend that all parts are attempted.

1. Create an infographic about the origins of either Ancient Egypt OR Ancient China

➔ worth 1250 words; (equivalent to 25% of overall module mark)

There will be a *How to do an infographic?* guide on MOODLE.

2. Essay: Discuss, what makes a civilisation.

Use Childe's characteristics of complex societies (Trigger. Defining Early Civilisations, 43), discuss at least one of them by giving examples from BOTH Egypt and China.

➔ 2000 words; (equivalent to 50% of overall module mark)

3. Write a 750 word review of your visit to the museum: How are past civilisations being presented at this museum?

There will be a *How to write a Museum Review?* guide on MOODLE.

Submission deadline:	1. 12/12/2025 2. 09/01/2026 3. 18/01/2026	Return date of provisional marks & written feedback:	1. 19/12/2025 2. 16/01/2026 3. 26/01/2026
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BIBLIOGRAPHY

➔ You will find more readings on MOODLE for each session / week, please check the MOODLE page regularly.

Essential

- Barbieri-Low, A.J. 2021. *Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture*. Seattle: University of Washington Pr.
- Childe, V.G. 1950. The Urban Revolution. *The Town Planning Review* 21(1950)1. 3-17.
- Lai, Guolong. 2015. *Excavating the Afterlife: The Archaeology of Early Chinese Religion*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Poo, Mu-chou. 2024. *The Netherworld in Ancient Egypt and China: An Imagined Paradise*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Ragin, C.C. 2014. *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*. Oakland: Univ. of California Pr.
- Ross, J.C.; Steadman, S.R. 2017. *Ancient Complex Societies*. New York: Routledge.
- Scarre, C. 2018. *The Human Past: World Prehistory and the Development of Human Societies*. London: Thames & Hudson. 4th ed.
- Scarre, C.; Fagan, B.M. 2016. *Ancient Civilizations*. London: Routledge. 4th ed.
- Seyfried, F. & Jung, M. 2017a. *China und Ägypten: Wiegen der Welt*. Berlin: Prestel Verlag. (Exhibition catalogue)
- Seyfried, F. & Jung, M. 2017b. *China and Egypt. Cradles of the World*. Berlin: Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung. (This book is an abbreviated version of the exhibition catalogue edited by Seyfried, F. & Jung, M. 2017a)
- Trigger, B.G. 2003. *Understanding Early Civilizations: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Wengrow, D. 2010. *What Makes Civilization? The Ancient Near East and the Future of the West*. Oxford: OUP.
- Wenke, R.F.; Olszewski, D.J. 2007 (5th edition). *Patterns in Prehistory: Humankind's First Three Million Years*. Oxford: OUP.

Recommended (could be necessary for the understanding of the module and basics for your coursework)

- Brewer, D.J. 2012. A Cultural Transformation: Explaining or Describing the Past. In: Brewer, D.J. (ed.) *The Archaeology of Ancient Egypt beyond Pharaohs*. Cambridge: CUP. pp. 54-78.
- Chapman, R. 2003. *Archaeologies of Complexity*. London: Routledge. → especially chapters 1,3,6 and 7.
- Charvát, P. 2013. *The Birth of the State: Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and China*. Prague: Karolinum.
- Cowgill, G.L. 2004. Origins and Development of Urbanism: Archaeological Perspectives. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33(2004), 525–549.
- Johnson, M. 1999. Culture as a System. In: Johnson, M. *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell. pp. 64-84.
- Maisels, C.K. 2005 (or any other edition). *The Emergence of Civilisation: From Hunting and Gathering to Agriculture, Cities, and the State in the Near East*. London: Routledge.
- Maisels, C.K. 2003. Early Civilizations of the Old World: The Formative Histories of Egypt, The Levant, Mesopotamia, India and China. London: Routledge.
- Renfrew, C.; Bahn, P. 1991 (or any other edition). How Were Societies Organized? Social Archaeology. In: Renfrew, C.; Bahn, P. *Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practice*. New York: Thames and Hudson. pp. 153-194, chapter 5 (in this edition).

- Shaughnessy, E.L. 2023a. *A Brief History of Ancient China*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Shi, Jie. 2020. *Modelling Peace: Royal Tombs and Political Ideology in Early China*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Trigger, B.G. 2001. *Early Civilisations: Ancient Egypt in Context*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Pr.
- Wenke, R.J. 2009. The Significance and Character of Ancient Egyptian Civilization. In: Wenke, R.J. *The Ancient Egyptian State: The Origins of Egyptian Culture (c. 8000-2000BC)*. Cambridge: CUP. pp. 1-30.

Reading for some sessions

- Branner, D. P., Li, F. 2011. *Writing & literacy in early China : studies from the Columbia Early China Seminar*. University of Washington Press.
- Koehler, E.C. 2010. Prehistory. In: Lloyd, A.B. (ed.). *A Companion to Ancient Egypt*, A.B. Lloyd (Ed.). Chichester: Wiley Blackwell. 25-47.
- Lewis, M.E., Hsieh, Mei-yu. 2017. Tianxia and the Invention of Empire in East Asia. In: Ban Wang (ed.). *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics*. New York: Duke University Press. 25-48.
- Loewe, M.; Shaughnessy, E.L. 1999. *The Cambridge history of ancient China : from the origins of civilization to 221 B.C.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moreno García, J. C. & Pines, Y. 2021. Maat and Tianxia: Building World Orders in Ancient Egypt and China. *Journal of Egyptian History* 13(2021)1-2, 227-270.
- Poo, M. 2005. *Enemies Of Civilization: Attitudes Toward Foreigners In Ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, And China*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, Albany, NY.
- Poo, M., Drake, H.A. & Raphals, L. 2017. *Old Society, New Belief: Religious Transformation of China and Rome, Ca. 1st-6th Centuries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Poo, Mu-chou. 2024. *The Netherworld in Ancient Egypt and China: An Imagined Paradise*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Shaughnessy, E.L. 2023b. *Writing Early China*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Wilkinson, T. 2010. The Early Dynastic Period. In: Lloyd, A.B. (ed.). *A Companion to Ancient Egypt*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell. 48-62
- Zhang, F. J. 2017. Dreams, Spirits, and Romantic Encounters in Jin and Yuan Theatrical Pictures. In: Ebrey, P. B., Huang, S. S. (Eds.). *Visual and Material Cultures in Middle Period China*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.
- Zinn, K. 2018. Literacy in Pharaonic Egypt: Orality and Literacy between Agency and Memory. In: A. Kolb (ed.). *Literacy in Ancient Everyday Life - Schriftlichkeit im antiken Alltag*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018, 67-98.
- Zinn, K. 2019. Did you sleep well on your headrest? – Anthropological Perspectives on an Ancient Egyptian Implement. *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 17(2018), 202–219.

NOTES

