**Prehistoric and Ancient Rock Art**

By: Emily Adcock

**Overview and Purpose**

Prehistoric rock art is regarded as the earliest from of human’s creative expression. The most common forms are petroglyphs and pictographs (petroglyphs being carvings in the rock panel and pictographs being paintings atop the rock surface). Rock art also goes beyond images and can depict ancient languages and writing systems. These art forms are found all over the world, but the Indian Ocean region is believed to house some of the oldest in the world.

Valuable information about ancient civilizations is uncovered by analyzing different forms of prehistoric rock art. These symbols can represent burial markers, rituals, court testimonies, trip records, material objects, and even ideas, stories, or poems. Advanced technologies allow researchers to date the images and track the evolution of art forms over time. These images in conjunction with contextual data informs our understanding of migration patterns, trade routes, religion, and the rich cultural history in the region. Learning about these drawings will enable students to imagine ancient civilizations, and trace history through art. Studying this ancient artistry will also encourage students to explore world history through an alternative lens.

At the end of the lesson students will be able to distinguish between pictographs and petroglyphs such as X-ray art, Mimi figures, and megaliths. They will also be able to identify different ancient writing systems such as hieroglyphs and cuneiform. Students will explore the reasons why civilizations in Australia, India, Mesopotamia, Turkey, Indonesia, and Egypt created rock art formations and will discover how rock art deepens our understanding of prehistoric and ancient history. Lastly, students will be challenged to think critically about rock art as a communication system across time and space as they read about the research of Joseph Bradshaw and the International Rock Art Research Team.

**Intended Age Group:**

Late middle school/early high school world history or social studies

**Learning Objectives:**

1. Be able to distinguish between pictographs, petroglyphs, and different writing systems.
2. Explore the reasons why ancient civilizations created rock art formations.
3. Discuss the role of rock art in understanding prehistoric and ancient history in the Indian Ocean.
4. Be challenged to think critically about rock art as a communication system across time and space.

**Time:**

This lesson should take 2 class periods of 50 minutes each.

**Materials Needed:**

X = number of students

1. Projector or white board
2. X copies of Reading 1: *Background*
3. Reading 2.1-2.5
   1. X/5 copies of [Reading](http://www.indianoceanhistory.org/assets/Site_18/files/Era%20Overviews/Industrial%20and%20Imperial%20Era.pdf) 2.1:*Turkey and Indonesia*
   2. X/5 copies of Reading 2.2: *Egypt*
   3. X/5 copies of Reading 2.3: *Mesopotamia*
   4. X/5 copies of Reading 2.4: *Australia*
   5. X/5 copies of Reading 2.5: *India*
4. X copies of Handout 1: *Map of the India Ocean*
5. X copies of Handout 2: *Timeline*
6. X copies of Handout 3: *Cuneiform Activity*

**Procedure:**

**Day 1**

1. (25 mins) Distribute Reading 1 and read the background information together in class. Make sure to define any new terms and concepts.
2. (25 mins) Divide students into 5 groups and distribute Readings 2.1-2.5 to each respective group. Project the following questions onto the board and tell them to discuss the answers in their groups after reading independently. Their answers should be recorded and prepared for a brief presentation next class period.
   1. Which drawing form is seen in each section: pictographs, petroglyphs, or a writing system?
   2. What materials were used?
   3. What was the purpose of the carvings? Why might they be important to preserve and study?
   4. To when are they dated and where are they found?

**Day 2**

1. (25 mins) Distribute Handouts 1 & 2 to all students. Each group will take turns presenting the information in their section to the rest of the class for 5 minutes. As the rest of the class listens, they should record details about where and when the art is located on their given timeline and map. These handouts are to demonstrate the geographic breadth of rock art and allow the students to track its evolution throughout history. Collect the handouts at the end of the class period.
2. (25 mins) Divide students into pairs and distribute Handout 3 to all students. Each student will create a message using the symbols provided. When finished, students will swap messages in their pairs and try to decipher the meaning. Repeat for each variation of cuneiform (4 times). Feel free to switch partners for each repetition.

**Appendix:**

1. Reading 1: *Background* pg. 4
2. Reading 2.1: *Turkey and Indonesia* pg. 6
3. Reading 2.2: *Egypt* pg. 8
4. Reading 2.3: *Mesopotamia* pg. 10
5. Reading 2.4: *Australia*  pg. 11
6. Reading 2.5: *India*  pg. 13
7. Handout 1: *Map of the Indian Ocean* pg. 14
8. Handout 2: *Timeline* pg. 15
9. Handout 3: *Cuneiform Activity* pg. 16

**Reading 1: Background**

**An Introduction to Rock Art**

Often considered evidence of humanity’s first artistry, prehistoric rock art has captivated people all over the world. Associated with many different cultures, the meaning and purpose of most forms of prehistoric rock art remain shrouded in mystery. Even the most experienced archaeologists continue to ask basic questions about rock art. What does it depict? What does it mean? Who produced it? When was it produced? What function did it serve?

Petroglyphs contain all rock art that is considered to be rock engravings or carvings. For this type, a rock’s surface is carved or removed in specific patterns using a hammer stone. This tool is used to peck or hammer artistic details into the surface of a boulder, cave wall, or another natural stone surface. Another form of petroglyph is created through incision or scratching rather than carving or chiseling, with tools like lithic obsidian blades. Given that obsidian blades have fine edges, smaller fine-grained details can be made upon rock surfaces using this method. That said, because such carvings are not very deep and rock surfaces erode over time, this form is often difficult for archaeologists to identify.

Pictographs, painted artwork on stone surfaces, are often regarded as the most beautiful rock art. Like the other forms of rock art, pictographs are found worldwide and date deep into the human past. The pigments used to make pictograph paints are ochres, charcoal, ground minerals, natural chalk, kaolinite clays, and even diatomaceous earth. Usually, these substances are mixed with liquids like water, eggs, and blood to make red, black, and white paints. Brushes, stamps, hands and fingers were used to apply these paints to rock surfaces.

<https://hraf.yale.edu/rock-art/>

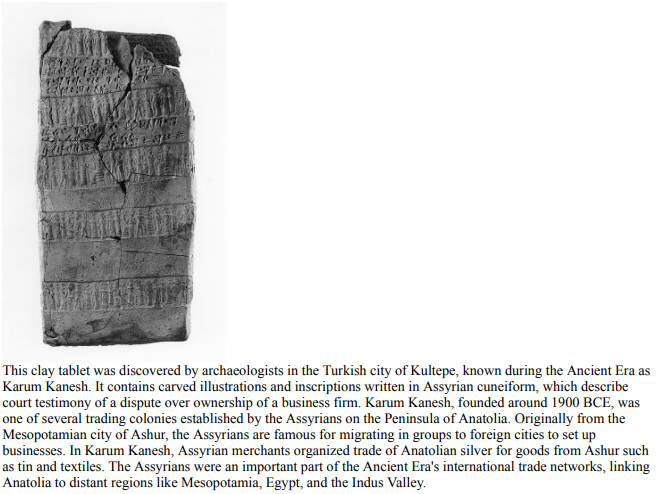
**Human Migration and Trade around the Indian Ocean**

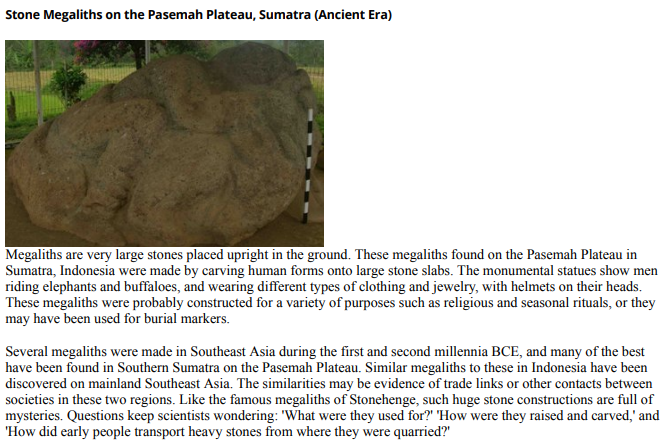
The major event of the prehistoric era is the spread of human population to all of the continents. Between 90,000 and 85,000 years ago, a group of people migrated from Africa into the Arabian Peninsula through the Bab al-Mandeb, which means “Gate of Grief.” All present-day humans are thought to descend from this group. These people—identified today by the traces of their genetic relationships to current people—made their way along the Red Sea and crossed onto the Arabian Peninsula. From there, they moved across the Strait of Hormuz to Asia, tracing the shores of the Indian Ocean. Leaving behind shell middens (places where the debris from eating shellfish and other food has accumulated over time), they moved slowly, generation after generation, until their descendants reached Southeast Asia and China. Sea level was lower then, and where the Indonesian islands are today was mostly dry land. By 65,000 years ago, people had crossed over a narrow waterway to Australia and New Guinea. Farther north, the warmer climate of 60,000 to 50,000 years ago allowed people to migrate into Southwest Asia, populating the Fertile Crescent and southern Europe. The oldest dated pictographs found in Indonesia and Australia are 40,000 years old. By 25,000 years ago, people had migrated deep into Australia, and into Central and Northern Asia, as far as Siberia. By about 20,000 years ago, people migrated into North America, across a land bridge that connected it with Asia at that time.

Fast forward to 5,000 BCE, the development of villages and irrigation techniques during the Ubaid period (the prehistoric period of Mesopotamia) marks the beginning of early civilization. On the western end of the Indian Ocean region, the river valley civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Indus Valley began to trade by sea. Artifacts and inscriptions from 4000-3000 BCE demonstrate trade routes from Mesopotamia to the shores of the Arabian Gulf. With the rise of civilizations and division of labor, the need for different types of goods and the demand for luxuries increased. Resources such as wood, stone for carving and jewelry, metals for war and crafts, and fine ceramics attracted early traders and royal expeditions. Cotton goods and wool, copper, gold, silver and turquoise, pearls and coral from the sea were among these early trade goods. Surplus grain from Mesopotamia was an important export. From the gulf, Sumerian traders ventured along the coast into the Indian Ocean, making contact with traders in cities of the Indus Valley. Weights and seals show that trade became more organized, and with the appearance of writing systems, records of voyages, lists of goods, places and royal expeditions testify to trade.

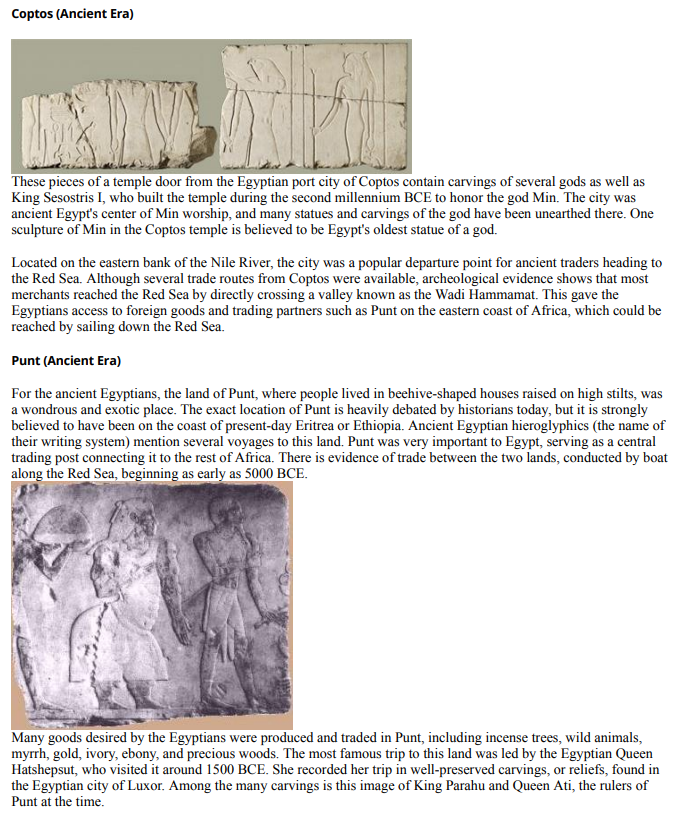
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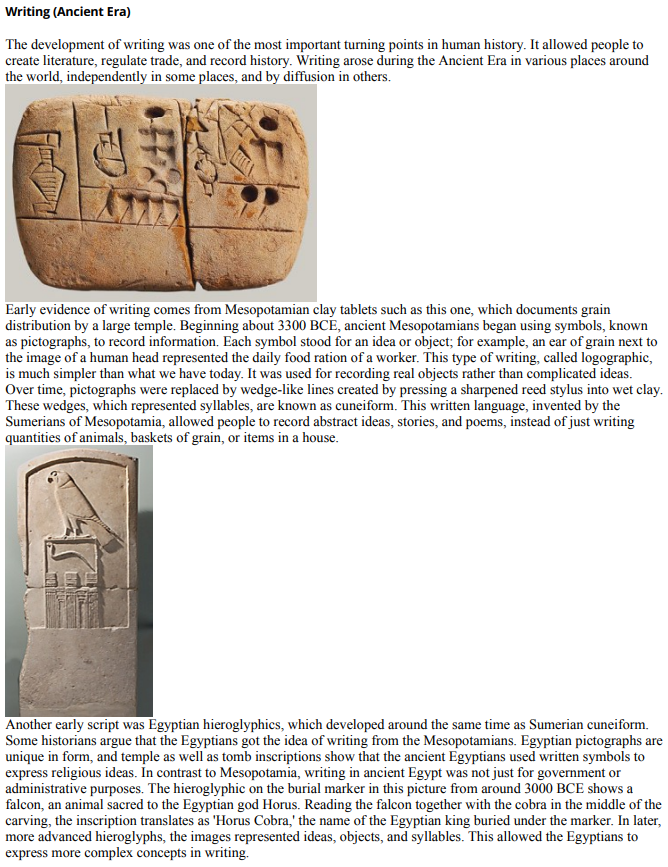
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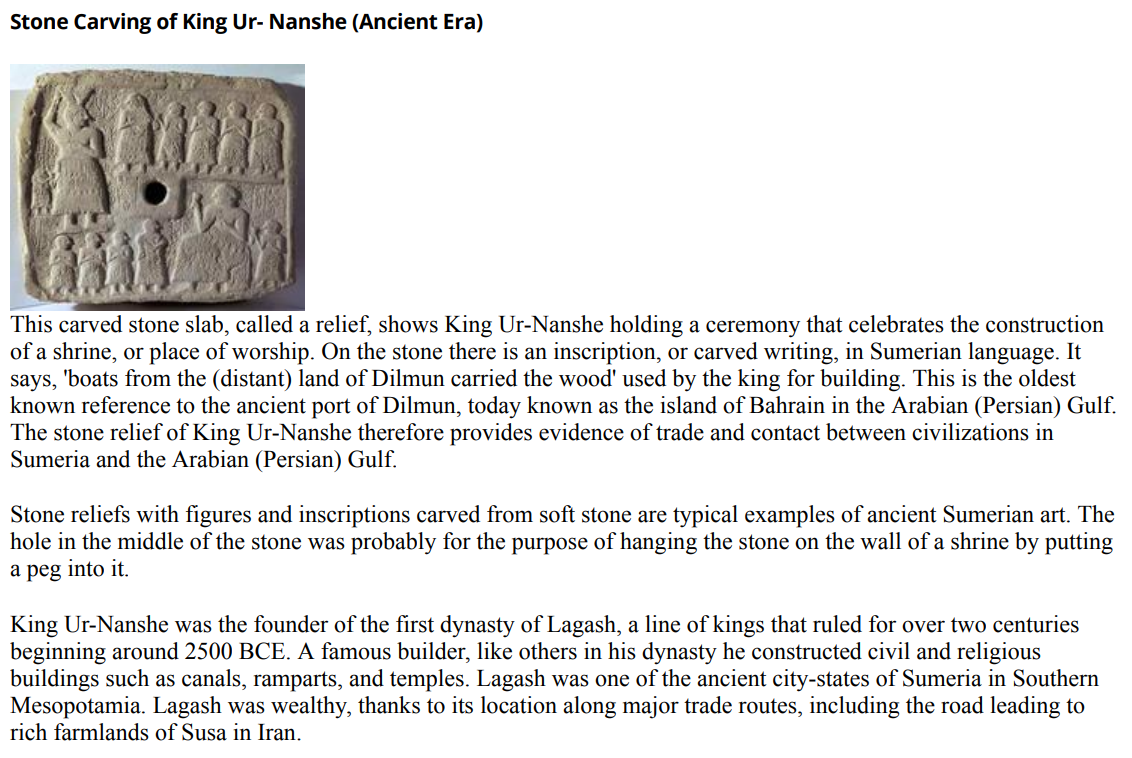
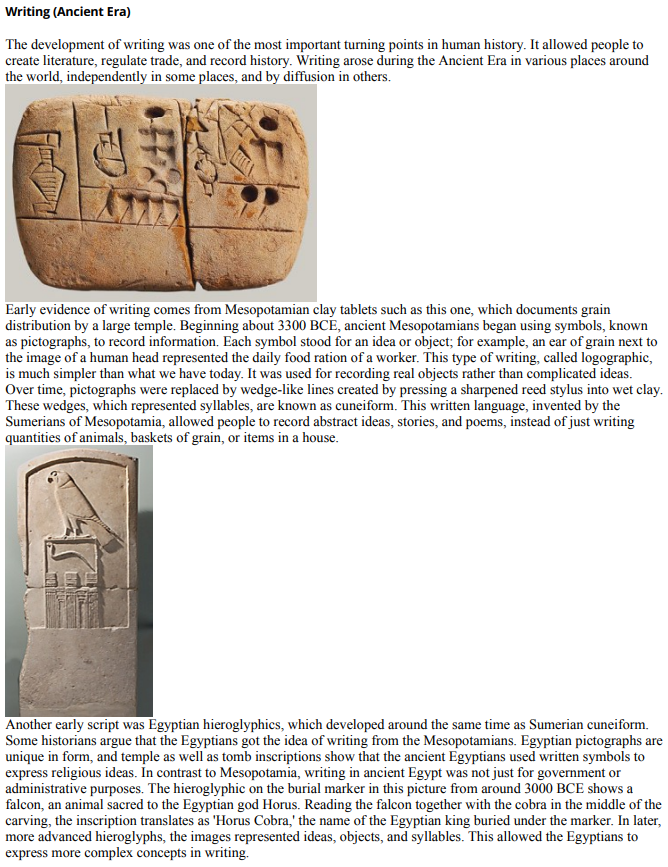
**Reading 2.1: Turkey and Indonesia**

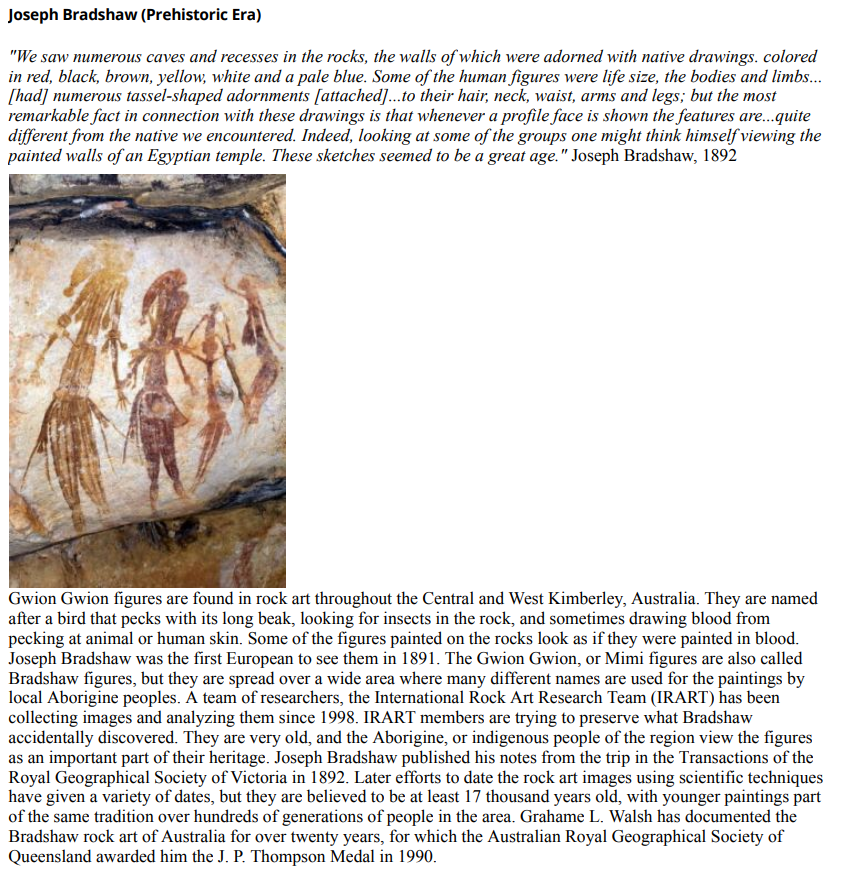


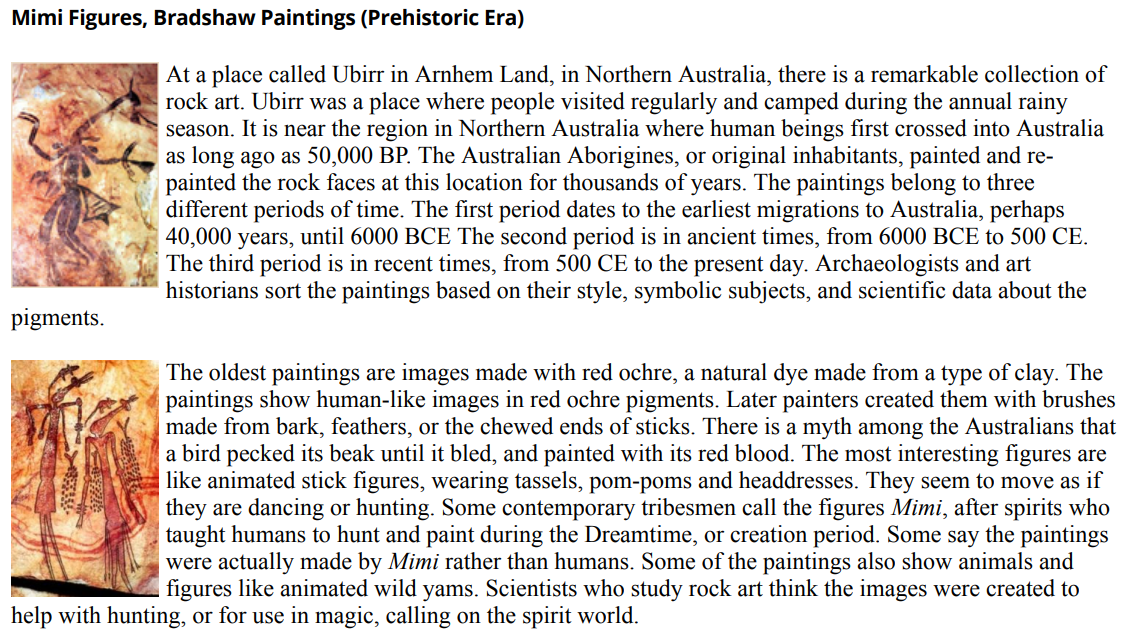
**Reading 2.2: Egypt**

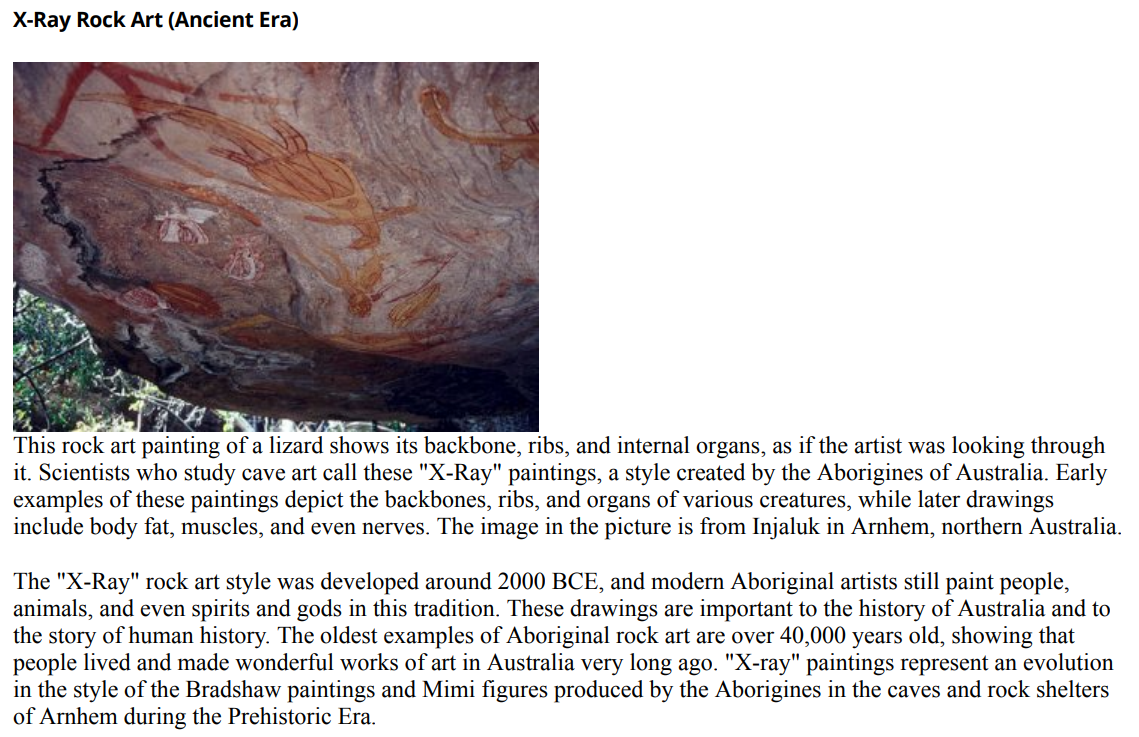


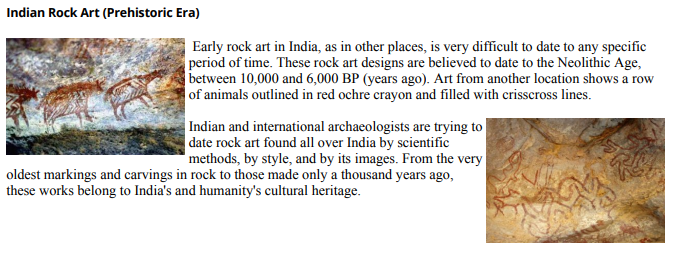


**Reading 2.3: Mesopotamia**

**Reading 2.4: Australia**





**Reading 2.5: India**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Handout 1: Map of the Indian Ocean**



Egypt

Turkey

Mesopotamia (Iraq)

India

Indonesia

Australia

Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Handout 2: Timeline**

Ancient Era

Prehistoric Era

6000

BCE

(8,000 BP)

8000

BCE

(10,000 BP)

2500

BCE

2000

BCE

1900

BCE

1800

BCE

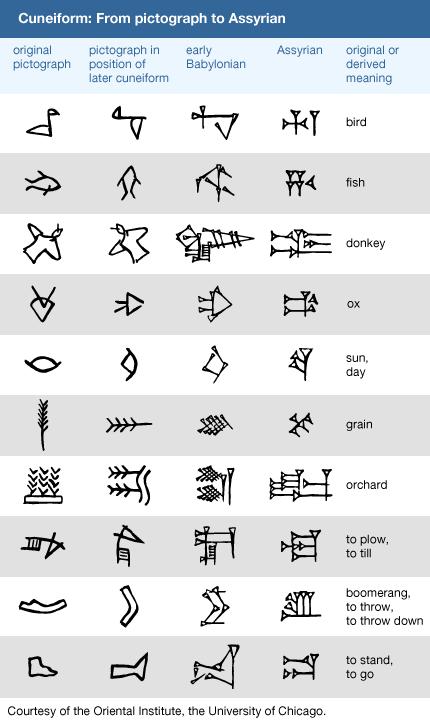
1500

BCE

1000

BCE

**Handout 3: Cuneiform**



**References**

Puhvel, Jaan. “The development of cuneiform.” Cuneiform Writing System, Encyclopedia Britannica, 13 Mar. 2019.

Vadala, Jeffrey. “An Introduction to Rock Art.” Human Relations Area Files, Yale University, 24 May 2019.