

## THE IMPORTANCE OF GEOGRAPHY AND THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Have you ever looked through an historical atlas of the world to study changes in civilizations and their borders? If you have, you know that change is the rule rather than the exception. The world in 4000 B.C.E. looked very similar physically to our world today. If you pick out the familiar land and water shapes you realize that geological history moves at a much slower pace than political history. On the other hand, try to trace any nation in existence today, and while some are older than others, you don't have to go very far back in history to find its origins. Yet no matter what time period you choose over the past 6000 years or so, the political imprint of human beings is there, and political change occurs much more rapidly than geological change.

Study the map on the opposite page by concentrating on the physical features of the earth's surface that it reveals. Notice the land shapes and the lakes, seas, and oceans. Larger scale maps of different regions would of course show many more physical features that are very similar to those that our ancestors in ancient times were familiar with. Before people began transforming the landscape with their cultural imprints, physical geography shaped and limited their activities. These alterations became apparent first as people settled into agricultural communities, and grew more profound with the growth of cities and eventually industry. In even the earliest civilizations, people devised and used maps that not only represented physical geography but their cultural transformations (such as cities and roads) as well.

### The Cultural Perspective

If we are to successfully travel backward through time to try to understand what life was like during this early period, it is important to focus on **perspective**, or point of view. All of us see our surroundings through the lens of our own time period and culture, even though we seldom realize it. For example, did you notice that the map on the opposite page has one cultural construct? It is divided into continents. Think objectively about this. Why does one continent begin in one place and end in another? Certainly, physical geography has something to do with the divisions, but not always. For example, look at the areas where Europe, Asia, and Africa intersect. For most of us, cultural images shape those dividing lines, so that we think of "Europeans" in one way, "Asians" in another, and "Africans" in yet another. In ancient times, people made cultural distinctions, too, but not the same ones that we do in modern times. So our task is to adjust our cultural perspectives as we go through time, realizing that cultural meanings from one era impact those of later eras and that change has been



**The Myth of Continents.** Dividing the world into basic chunks called "continents" is a cultural construction loosely based on physical geography, but more importantly on our perceptions of cultural differences.

### Demography

The study of population is called **demography**, a term derived from the ancient Greek words "demos", meaning population or people, and "graphie", meaning to describe. Demography is of interest to many social science disciplines including geography, with its special emphasis on spatial organization: the location of places, people, and events, and the connections among places and landscapes. For historians, changes in population are an important part of the human mosaic that has shaped the story of the world. Population increases and decreases have caused people to move from one place to another, bringing them in contact with other ways of life and causing many political, social, and economic changes.

**Migrations** are permanent moves to new locations that have occurred on local, regional, and global levels. There are countless reasons why people voluntarily migrate, but most of them are economic. A **push factor** encourages people to move from the region that they live in, and a **pull factor** attracts them to a new region. For example, push factors force refugees to migrate from their homes because of persecution based on religion, race, nationality, or political opinions. Pull factors for these refugees may bring them to an area that has better jobs or a more democratic government. Environmental factors influence migrations greatly, sometimes as **intervening obstacles**, or physical features that halt or slow migration from one place to another. Over time, these obstacles may have different meanings: an ocean that separated lands no longer prevents migrations once the technology to cross the ocean develops.



### PERSPECTIVES: *The Myth of Continents*

*The Myth of Continents* is a book by Martin W. Lewis and Karen E. Wigen that focuses on the unexamined spatial assumptions that we all make, starting with the idea that the world is somehow divided into “continents.” They comment on “our tendency to let a continental framework structure our perceptions of the human community...Each continent is accorded its own history, and we locate its essential nature in opposition to that of the other continents...An obsolete formulation, this framework [continents] is now wholly inadequate for the load it is routinely asked to carry.” They conclude that only by examining our commonplace notions can we develop a “sophisticated understanding of global geography.” Lewis and Wigen’s perspective is an important one to consider in the study of world history.

*Reference:* Lewis, Martin W. and Karen Wigen, *The Myth of Continents*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997.

With population movement, people spread their cultures to new areas through a process called **cultural diffusion**, including innovations, technology, religion, language, food and clothing styles, and disease. Throughout history diseases have spread as human interactions have increased. Famous examples include the 14<sup>th</sup> century plague that spread from Asia to Europe, and the contagious diseases that spread rapidly through the Native American populations that came into contact with Europeans in the New World during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. During prehistoric times, human beings migrated to many parts of the globe, setting the stage for human domination of other species on earth. Although we cannot pin these prehistoric migrations to a single “marker event” because they took place gradually over long periods of time, without them humans might not have survived those early years.

### IMPORTANT TERMS AND CONCEPTS

cultural diffusion	<i>The Myth of Continents</i>
demography	periodization
intervening obstacles	perspective
“marker events”	push and pull factors
migrations	



### THE BIG PICTURE: TECHNOLOGICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL TRANSFORMATIONS (to 600 B.C.E.)

Be sure to keep up with these broad trends and themes for the period before 600 B.C.E.:

- 1) During the Paleolithic era, hunters and gatherers gradually migrated from their origins in East Africa to Eurasia, Australia, and the Americas, adapting their technology and cultures to the new areas.
- 2) Interactions among different groups of people on the planet were usually limited to groups that were geographically nearby, but interactions increased steadily throughout the time period, both in frequency and distance.
- 3) Physical geography and the natural environment interacted with human activities to shape changes and continuities during the time period.
- 4) This period is made up of two time periods that are distinguished by big changes in human lifestyles, including these “marker events”: the development of agriculture and early agricultural communities, and the appearance of the earliest urban-based societies.