

## **1. What was the Bronze Age?**

When people think of prehistoric times, they often think of the Stone Age. The Stone Age began more than 3.4 million years ago, and lasted until about 3,300 BCE. This era is scientifically known as the Paleolithic era. We refer to it as the Stone Age because nomadic cavemen made weapons out of stones and bones during this time. The Stone Age spanned the evolution of humanity all the way up to the extinction of species like woolly mammoths, saber tooth tigers, and mastodons after the last Ice Age. Although there have been several ice ages throughout history, the last official Ice Age began around 2.6 million years ago and did not end until around 11,700 BCE.

Even then, civilization as we know it did not begin for many centuries. After the Ice Age came a period called the Neolithic era. This period is followed by a time called the Bronze Age, from 3,300 to 1,200 BCE. Can you guess how it got that name?

Like the Stone Age, the Bronze Age gets its name from the types of tools humans used during that time. The main material used during the Bronze Age was metal made from a mixture of copper and tin: bronze.

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## **2. The Beginning of Modern Civilization**

Human species have been in existence for more than 2,000,000 years. Around 35,000 years ago, humans began gathering in groups. They lived as nomadic hunter gatherers, and they had to fight to survive. However, life began to change for mankind around 9,500 BCE. Nomadic groups began to settle down in the Fertile Crescent, which was located in modern-day Iraq. They began to harvest wheat and barley, make pottery, weave cloth, and establish cities. These cities were part of a larger civilization known as Mesopotamia. This is also the name used to describe the region in which civilizations like Sumer, Babylonia, Assyria, and Anatolia, or the Hittites, developed.

Eventually, people began migrating across the globe. Groups headed toward China, the Mediterranean, northern Africa, and into Europe, towards modern-day Spain, France, and the United Kingdom. These periods of migration are the original source of our different languages, cultures, and customs today. By 3,000 BCE, human beings had domesticated horses, cattle, and sheep. They had developed a number system and a written code known as cuneiform and hieroglyphics. They had even invented the wheel and built giant pyramids!

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## **3. Leading Up to the Bronze Age: The New Stone Age**

Although groups of people began gathering in cities around 9,500 BCE, the Bronze Age did not begin for another 6,000 years. This period is known as the Neolithic era, or the New Stone Age. Throughout this time, humanity made great advancements that allowed them to lead safer and stabler lives. With inventions and developments like a written script, agricultural tools, irrigation systems, and pottery, humans could farm more easily, store excess food, and keep written records. The invention of the wheel around 3650 was monumental as well. The wheel allowed people to travel greater distances with heavy loads pulled by oxen. Eventually, they began to trade with other city-states in Mesopotamia and around

the world. These changes gave rise to several civilizations that formed the foundation for modern societies. Some of these groups include the Sumerians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Hittites, Greeks, and people in China and the British Isles.

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#### **4. Agriculture and Bronze: From Nomads to Farmers**

One of the most important transitions in human history was our evolution from hunter gatherers to farmers and agriculturalists. Humans began to permanently settle in the Fertile Crescent around 9500 BCE. They grew wheat and barley and began to sustain themselves without having to scavenge for food. The practice of agriculture involved plowing the land using teams of oxen. Tools like the plow and sickle - often made of stone, metal, and wood - allowed farmers to cover larger amounts of land in less time. Then, around 5500 BCE, the Sumerians invented irrigation systems. They figured out how to control the flow of water from the Nile River, so that they could grow more crops in high season. They would store these crops in the winter and trade them for other goods. This allowed people to focus on aspects of life other than survival, such as artistry, learning, and science. Having excess food also provided Sumerians with the stability to build an army and eventually an entire empire.

#### **5. The First Use of Bronze**

Copper was first used to make tools around 6,500 BCE in Anatolia, or modern-day Turkey. They invented a practice called copper metallurgy, where they cast tools and weapons in molten metal. First, they had to melt the copper down, and then make the mold for the weapon. Then, they poured the mixture into the mold, let it harden, and shaped it. This advancement allowed the people of Asia Minor to make much stronger weapons.

Still, it was another several thousand years before people began mixing copper with tin to make bronze. In Mesopotamia, this practice began around 3,300 BCE, also known as the beginning of the Bronze Age. It took even longer for the Bronze Age reached other parts of the world. For example, in Ancient Greece, the Cycladic people began using bronze around 3,000 BCE. The British Isles, meanwhile, did not practice the same weapon-making techniques until 1900 BCE. China entered the Bronze Age about 300 years later, in 1600 BCE.

Other civilizations existed for centuries without ever using bronze for tools. Ancient Egypt was one of the most powerful civilizations in the world, but they never used bronze.

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#### **6. Ancient Sumer**

Ancient Sumer was the first great civilization of prehistoric times. Sumer was located in a region that we now know as Iraq and Kuwait. The Sumerians had already evolved from being hunter-gatherers to cultivating land in the 6th millennium. By 3600 BCE, they had also invented the wheel, the sail boat, and a written script, cuneiform. They also forged weapons and tools with bronze.

In the years that followed their ascent to power, the Sumerians established great city-states such as Eridu, Uruk, Ur, and Larsa, among others. The Sumerians often traded with other cities and societies.

During the Ur III Period, the Sumerians made great cultural advancements. They built schools, wrote proverbs, invented aquariums, established legal precedents, and contemplated moral ideas.

Much of what we know about the Sumerians comes from the Kings List. This document was written around 2100 BCE by a scribe in the city of Lagash. The list includes all of the great kings of Sumer, as well as their achievements. Perhaps the most famous of these kings was Gilgamesh, whose heroism is the subject matter of the Epic of Gilgamesh.

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## **7. Babylonia**

Babylonia was founded around 4000 BCE between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. For many centuries, Babylonia was split between the empires of Sumer and Akkad. They were at war until Babylon finally came together as one country when the area was taken over by a group called the Amorites. The Amorites brought the Babylon to prominence under the leadership of King Hammurabi. Many people recognize Hammurabi for his famous code of law, which stated “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” They were a very harsh set of laws, but they helped the Babylonians become an extremely strong empire.

For more than a thousand years, Babylonia ruled over the regions surrounding Mesopotamia. The capital city was called Babylon, was located around 50 miles south of the present-day city of Baghdad. It was a center of great cultural and intellectual growth. Babylonian scientists developed trigonometry, figured out how to track time, and followed the movement of stars and planets. They also designed and constructed one of the great wonders of the ancient world, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

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## **8. Assyria**

Another civilization that emerged during the Bronze Age was that of Assyria. Assyria was located north of Babylon in the region of Mesopotamia. At its height, Assyria stretched all the way from modern-day Iraq to Turkey and Egypt in the south. The capital city of Assyria, Assur, was a flourishing center for trade and commerce. Many historians believe that the Assyrians named their city center after their national god, Ashur.

Much like the Babylonians, the Assyrians were great traders, but unlike their neighbors, they travelled in caravans. They were far more nomadic, and sought to conquer surrounding empires. This meant that they were constantly at war, so Assyrian boys were sent to military camps at a young age to learn to fight. Around 1200 BCE, the Assyrians conquered the Babylonians, and continued to dominate Mesopotamia for another 600 BCE. They passed these war and battle stories down through the generations.

Before the empire collapsed, the last Assyrian king founded the Great Library of Nineveh. He collected clay tablets from Sumer, Assyria, and Babylonia, and saved them all in the new capital city. When discovered, there were over 30,000 tablets still intact.

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## **9. The Hittite Empire**

The Hittite Empire was yet another civilization that developed in the region of Anatolia. The Hittite people became a separate civilization around 1700 BCE, although they frequently interacted with the Assyrians in their earliest years. Although we do not know much about the earliest Hittite people, they are mentioned frequently throughout the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, which labels them as the enemy kingdom to the Israelites. Some historians also claim that the Hittites were the first people to make steel.

One famous Hittite King, Mursili I, was responsible for the downfall of Babylon and Hammurabi's dynasty. They invaded Babylon in 1595 BCE, after which they ruled over the powerful city for many years. The Babylonians called them the Kassites. The Hittite empire survived up until the end of the Bronze Age, or around 1180 BCE. Eventually, the surviving city-states fell to the Neo-Assyrian empire.

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## **10. The Mediterranean, Minoa, and Ancient Greece**

When people think of Ancient Greece, many imagine thriving city-states like Athens and Sparta. However, another group of people had already settled in the Mediterranean before the mainland was populated. This group was known as the Minoans. They Minoans fostered many of the customs that later came to define mainland Greece in the centuries afterward.

The Minoans came into being around 2900 BCE and lasted for around 1,500 years. This ancient Mediterranean civilization constructed their city on the island of Crete. Crete is located in the Aegean Sea, in between peninsular Greece and Turkey. The Minoans lived on fruitful land, and eventually were able to farm and harvest many of their natural resources. Within a few centuries, they regularly traded timber, olive oil, wine, and dyes with Egypt, Syria, Cyprus, and Greece. They also forged weapons and tools out of copper, tin, ivory, precious stones, and bronze. The Minoans even sent around 400 specialized bronze-workers to mold and hone tools on a separate island known as Phyllos.

Around 1600 BCE, another group known as the Mycenaens emerged on mainland Greece. They were the ancestors of the people who would later establish Athens, Sparta, and other powerful city-states in the area.

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## **11. The Egyptians Encounter Bronze**

Some civilizations lasted for the entirety of the Bronze Age without ever transitioning into using bronze for tools and weapons. One such civilization was Ancient Egypt. Egypt originated around 3400 BCE, which was also the same time that hieroglyphics came into being. For thousands of years, Egyptians thrived by irrigating their land with the water from the Nile River. They had several dynasties of powerful pharaohs and a highly sophisticated society. They also came into contact with the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Sumerians. However, it wasn't until around 1640 BCE when the Egyptians finally were finally exposed to large amounts of bronze. This was the year in which the Hyksos invaded the great African empire, bringing their weapons and chariots of bronze with them. The tools and weapons made out of wood, flint, and ivory that the Egyptians used were no match for their enemies, and they were defeated.

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## **12. The Indus River Valley: the Ancient East**

The Indus River Valley Civilization originated around the beginning of the Bronze Age in the 4th millennium. It was located in a region that spread across modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, and northern India. Along with Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt, the Indus Valley people made up one of the three largest civilizations of the ancient world. The two most important cities of this region were Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. Harappa was occupied by more than 23,000 people who lived in flat-roof houses made of red clay. Mohenjo-daro, which emerged shortly after Harappa, had an intricate city plan and highly developed infrastructure systems. They had drainage systems, public baths, granaries, and trash collecting systems. By its height, the Indus Valley civilization was comprised of more than 1,000 towns.

Both Harappa and Mohenjo-daro were also centers for trade. Artisans and metalworkers used bronze, copper, and tin to make weapons, tools, jewelry, and crafts that they later bartered for other goods. They were also known for their seal carving, or cutting shapes into a gemstone called Carnelian to make stamps. Archaeologists have found artifacts dating back to 2500 BCE.

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## **13. The British Isles**

Civilizations in Asia Minor, the Middle East, and Egypt began to flourish as early as 3500 BCE. They had already been making tools out of bronze for nearly 1,500 years before the strong metal was introduced to the British Isles. Bronze and the practice of metallurgy was most likely brought over by inhabitants of continental Europe. Many historians and archaeologists have called this group “the Bell Beaker people”. They got this name because of a specific type of bell-shaped drinking cup they made out of clay, which was found in burial sites.

The Bell Beaker people likely got along with those people already living on the British Isles when they arrived. They integrated into the northern society and even helped take care of important sites like Stonehenge, which had already been constructed when they arrived. They are also the genetic ancestors of Wessex Culture, in southern Britain.

Eventually, the people of the British Isles found tin deposits in Cornwall, England. They began to manufacture goods that they traded with civilizations on mainland Europe, such as the Mycenaeans in Greece.

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## **14. China in the Bronze Age**

Just like Britain, it took several centuries for the Bronze Age to reach China. The first official use of bronze can be traced back to around 1600 BCE, when the Shang dynasty was in power. The people inhabited an area along the Yellow River that is now known as the Henan Province. They were conquered by the people of Zhou in 1046 BCE. The Zhou dynasty was originally from an area farther north along the Yellow River. They were the first great imperial power to conquer all of central China. They remained in power until around 256 BCE.

Ancient Chinese people used bronze to make chariots, weapons, and vessels. They forged their weapons using a different method than other Bronze Age civilizations called “piece-mold casting”. Although it was more difficult, it allowed bronze casters to carve or stamp decorative patterns directly onto the inner surface of the mold.

In 1976, archaeologist Zheng Zhenxiang discovered the burial site of Lady Hao, wife of Zhao King Wuding. She had been buried around 1200 BCE surrounded by beautifully engraved bronze items, including vessels, jewelry, bells, tools, and armor.

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### **15. Japan: The Last Civilization of the Bronze Age**

The Japanese were the last official civilization to start using bronze, although the Bronze Age had come to an end for other civilizations nearly 700 years beforehand. In Japan, the practice of smelting bronze became popular around 300 BCE, during the Yayoi Period. Many historians believe that the Japanese people were introduced to bronze by travellers from Korea. Korea had learned about bronze from the Zhou Dynasty around 1000 BCE. When they began exploring the sea to the east of them, Korean sailors eventually landed on the island of Japan, bringing their weapons and goods with them for trade.

For centuries, people in Japan fashioned swords, daggers, shields, coins, vessels, and horse bells out of the metal. Amongst the Yayoi people, bronze items were a symbol of status and wealth. Interestingly, the Japanese started using iron around the same time, so while bronze was reserved for the upper class, iron represented lower-class workers and manual laborers. For most other civilizations to the west, the Iron Age began after the collapse of the Bronze Age.

### **16. The End of the Bronze Age**

It is unknown exactly why the Bronze Age came to an end, but historians believe that the end of this era was particularly difficult for people all over the world. Many civilizations collapsed at once, including the Hittites in Turkey and the Mycenaeans in Greece. Although these societies continued to exist, they lost power rapidly and declined in their level of sophistication. The Ancient Egyptians also went through a dark age around this same time. There is evidence that this decline was the product of droughts, earthquakes, famine, and several invasions by nomadic tribes. These all seemed to hit within a period of 50 years, from 1250-1100 BCE.

The end of the Bronze Age was also marked by technological advancements, despite all of the catastrophes occurring across the globe. During this period, craftsmen learned to heat and forge a different metal called wrought iron. This ushered in the beginning of the Iron Age, which lasted for another four hundred years. The practice of smelting iron eventually led to the creation of steel, which was the main material used during the Industrial Revolution thousands of years later.

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### **17. Technology in the Bronze Age**

The Bronze Age was a period of great growth and development for humanity. Inventions like the wheel, farming tools, and irrigation systems allowed societies and cultures to emerge across Asia Minor, Europe,

Africa, and China. By making the transition from stone to bronze, people were also able to make sharper tools, stronger weapons, and crafts that they could barter for goods and services.

One of the most important inventions of this era was the process of “smelting.” This involved heating ore to a specific temperature to separate unusable parts of the rock from the metal itself. Next, they had to cast the metal by pouring it into a mold of the size and shape whatever they were trying to make.

Smelting helped people have access to better farming tools, such as the bronze plow and other instruments for digging. They used these devices to build irrigation systems, canals, and temples, like the stepped pyramids that were built in Mesopotamia for religious worship. Bronze Age societies also made bronze weapons, like knives, swords, axes, daggers, and spearheads, as well as axles so that they could attach wheels to carts and chariots. Other inventions of the Bronze Age include the cuneiform script, the wheel, cauldrons, helmets, and buckets.

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### **18. Daily Life During the Bronze Age: Mesopotamia and Ancient Greece**

Life during the Bronze Age was very different from civilization to civilization. In Mesopotamia, for example, people lived in homes made of sun-dried mud brick, all of which surrounded the city’s central temple, or ziggurat. It was quite warm in the Fertile Crescent, so people wore light fabrics like linen and cotton. In places like Uruk, Nippur, Nineveh, Eridu, and Ur, people usually ate two meals a day. They cooked with bread, beer, wheat, barley, vegetables, herbs, spices, milk, and onions. On special occasions, they might have eaten mutton or lamb. Most people worked either around the home or as weavers, potters, tavern-keepers, or bakers. Praying and religious ceremonies was also an important part of people’s day in Mesopotamia. They would make sacrifices to god and worshipped at the city temple daily.

For the Minoans on Crete, meanwhile, they lived in houses made of stone. They ate fish, grains, apples, figs, and pomegranates. They also drank a lot of wine. The ancient people of Crete loved to gather for large feasts and honor their gods with festivals and celebrations. The Minoans developed a beautiful style or art in which they painted and fired large vases and other pieces of pottery with scenes of daily life. Many people worked as farmers, fishermen, craftsmen, and traders.

### **19. Daily Life During the Bronze Age: The British Isles and China**

Life in later Bronze Age civilizations was a bit different. In Britain, because of the distinct climate, early settlers spent a lot more time trying to prepare for cold, rainy winters. Like the Mesopotamians, they worked as farmers, potters, metal workers, and craftsmen. They also made textiles out of wool from their large sheep herds. However, they had to keep themselves warm with woollen tunics, cloaks, and even woollen hats.

People on the British Isles lived in small settlements with shared houses and a few outbuildings. Each settlement had a small cemetery where its members were buried, as well as a funeral mound and stone structures arranged in a circle for worship. They also made longboats out of wood that allowed them to explore the North Sea and sail between mainland England. By the end of the Bronze Age, people had settled all throughout modern-day Scotland, Wales, England, and Ireland. A social structure and culture began to emerge that would later be known as the Celts. They were a “warrior aristocracy” society.

In China, meanwhile, the Bronze Age brought on an era of technological innovation. Under the Shang Dynasty, a system of writing emerged, as well as the use of chopsticks, oracle bones, and systemized religion. Under the Zhou rulers, people became very interested in astronomy and literature. Zhou China was feudalistic, and kings and nobles possessed all of the wealth.

## **20. The Ancient Civilizations Trade Network**

The Bronze Age saw the rise and fall of several powerful civilizations in Anatolia, Asia Minor, Africa, the Levant, and the Mediterranean. From the Egyptians to the Sumerians, Assyrians, Hittites, Minoans, Mycenaeans, and the Wessex, Beaker, and Celtic people of the British Isles, bronze changed the makeup of their societies and allowed them to make great advancements. However, the tin deposits from which ancient people mined for the minerals to make bronze were scattered all over the globe. Therefore, another extremely important element to the development of civilization was the emergence of trade.

In search of tin, people in Mesopotamia built boats and sailed on the Tigris, Euphrates, and Nile Rivers to exchange goods with other societies. Eventually, these trade routes expanded, and merchants were able to travel between the Middle East, Central Europe, Asia, and the Mediterranean. They traded spices, ivory, crafts, jewelry, and weapons, and of course, tin and copper, which they used to make more bronze. Acquiring bronze also helped civilizations on a local scale, as farmers of the Bronze Age were able to produce surplus food that they traded not only with their neighbors, but with inhabitants of other cities as well.

## **21. The Class System from the Bronze Age**

When people first started to transition from nomadic hunter-gatherers to stationary farmers, there were no class systems. Although men and women fulfilled specific roles, it took many centuries before civilizations began to divide themselves according to wealth, nobility, and station. Here are two examples of how the class system looked during the Bronze Age.

By around 2000 BCE, Mesopotamia had fractured into different groups according to wealth. This was due to the high demand for bronze and tools made from hard metals. Those with access to those tools had more power. Eventually, that led to the division between kings, nobles, priests, and peasants, craftsmen, and workers. Kings were often believed to have been chosen by the gods. By the 2nd millennium, the class system was more or less rigid. It even dictated how late people stayed up at night, because being awake after dark required candles, and wax was not cheap. Mesopotamians who could afford to stay up would play games or talk with family and friends.

China, meanwhile, was broken into feudal states, meaning the king and his family, as well as nobles and priests, lived in luxurious palaces protected by a large stone wall. They wore clothing made of silk and ate rice and other spicy food. Craftsmen and merchants lived outside the wall in mud huts. They did not have much freedom and were forced to protect the city in case of attack. Farmers and peasants live even further away from the palace and had to give most of the food they produced to the nobles.

## **22. Children during the Bronze Age**

Children in the Bronze Age lived better than children during the Stone Age. During the Stone Age, life was a fight for survival. Many children spent their days seeking food, shelter, or protection from the cold. As civilizations began to develop and stabilize, families began to settle down in one place. The concept of “professions” or “trade” came into existence. By the height of the Bronze Age, children were taught to



follow in their parents' footsteps. Young girls might have woken up early to tend to the housework with their mothers, while boys would have helped their fathers in the field, or with smelting and metal casting, among other activities.

Many lower-class children were unable to attend school. In Mesopotamia, only the wealthiest children trained to become priests, scribes, or healers. They were sent to scribal schools to learn their trade, as well as to read and write cuneiform. As for entertainment, children often spent time outside, swam, or played with figurines, wooden toys, or marbles.

### **23. Art and Literature in the Bronze Age**

During the Bronze Age, many people began to carve intricate designs into the armor, shields, jewelry, and vessels that they made out of bronze. Artists and craftsmen also painted ceramics and statuettes, particularly large vases and urns. Many of these designs were mirrored after the nature that surrounded them and people's daily activities or social lives. A lot of the art that was produced during the Bronze Age was also inspired by local religions and mythologies. In Minoan Crete, people also painted stunning murals and frescoes on houses and temple walls. The Shang and Zhou people in China made beautiful animal-spirit masks or ritual vessels carved with dragons, birds, and geometric patterns. They also carved shapes and figurines out of jade.

The oldest literary text dates back to 2600 BCE. It is a Sumerian text by Abu Salabikh, titled *Instructions of Shuruppak*. This text also included the Kesh temple hymns. One of the most famous examples of Bronze Age literature is the Epic of Gilgamesh. This Sumerian epic tells the story of the famous Sumerian king, Gilgamesh, who must battle monsters and go on a quest to the afterlife to conquer his enemies.

### **24. Religions of the Bronze Age**

During the Bronze Age, religion and worship was an extremely important part of people's daily lives. Although every region worshipped a different set of gods, prehistoric religions had a lot in common. For example, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece, shared one main god, the god of the sun. He was known as Utu, Ra, and Helios respectively. All three mythologies also worshipped two gods known as the "Divine Twins," who rode horses and were often associated with the sun god.

Large cities in Sumer, Babylonia, Assyria, and Anatolia were centered around large temples called ziggurats. Priests would make sacrifices to the gods in these temples, and other people would leave burnt offerings. In Crete and mainland Greece, they also constructed palaces where they worshipped their gods.

Another important aspect of prehistoric religions were burials. People believed that they passed onto the afterlife if they were properly buried in covered graves with goods to take to the afterlife. The wealthy were buried with riches such as jewels, armor, and vessels to take with them after death. On the British Isles, people were buried in mounds, or tombs covered with earth that they built just outside of town.

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