

Unit 8

Early Economies

Section 1

Unit Materials

Questions To Consider

Question 1.

How did early economies work to meet the basic needs of people?

Question 2.

What kinds of circumstances caused economic growth and change in early economies?

Question 3.

The term “political economy” refers to the relationship between political structures and the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. How did the early histories of England, Japan, China, and the Andean highlands shape the types of political economies that developed in each place?

Question 4.

How did the differing political structures of early economies such as empires and feudal systems shape economic life?

The Big Picture

How is this topic related to Increasing Integration?

Early economic systems were able to integrate smaller local and household economies into larger units.

How is this topic related to Proliferating Difference?

Early economic systems were built on difference, as goods and services were allocated unequally according to different levels of political power and social status.

Unit Purpose

- Political structures such as empires and feudal systems shape the ways that goods and services are produced, distributed, and consumed. This relationship between political structures and the management of economies is referred to as “political economy,” and is important for understanding how early economies developed.
- Economic systems were not static or stable. Instead, they evolved over time in response to historical events and changes in political organization.

- The concepts of money and of economic value were not uniform over time or across space. Different locations placed economic value on different things — whether it was on coins, silver, paper certificates, agricultural products, or human labor. Also, concepts of money and economic value changed over time, even within the same societies.

Unit Content Overview

As early peoples built communities and ordered their spiritual and political worlds, how did they meet the fundamental needs of food and shelter? After the spread of agriculture throughout much of the world, many people settled in villages and became farmers. Other peoples did not adopt a sedentary life and instead continued to live as nomads, following animal herds as they moved across steppes, grasslands, and tundra. Like their sedentary farmer counterparts, these nomadic, pastoral peoples often fished and hunted. They also frequently combined horticulture — and even agriculture — with herding. Whether through pastoralism or agriculture, the ways people met their needs for food and shelter were fundamentally shaped by the landscapes they inhabited, by the technologies they employed, and by the political orders that structured their lives.

This unit explores the basic problem of how people made a living in the past. How did people distribute the goods they produced, and how did they gain access to what they needed to survive? How did societies establish systems of exchange based on differing concepts of value? What kinds of things were considered valuable: land, labor, or commodities such as gold and salt? How did some people accumulate wealth? How did different political systems structure the distribution of goods and services through taxation and tribute? How was money used? And finally, how did markets work? The answers to these questions illustrate the diverse ways and means people secured food and shelter and accumulated wealth — however that wealth was defined. They also show how ways of making a living were embedded in political structures and were shaped by historical forces of change.

Unit References

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- Terence D’Altroy and Timothy K. Earle, “Staple Finance, Wealth Finance, and Storage in the Inka Political Economy,” *Current Anthropology* 26, no. 2 (April 1985): 187–206.
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- Thomas Keirstead, *The Geography of Power in Medieval Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
- Kenneth Morgan, ed., *Oxford Illustrated History of Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).
- Yama Ky_wei, “Medieval Sh_en,” trans. Martin Collcutt, in *The Cambridge History of Japan, Volume 3: Medieval Japan*, ed. Kozo Yamamura (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

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Global Historical Context

- Time Period: 1000–1500 CE
- The half-millennium between 1000 and 1500 CE was marked by political centralization and increasing interaction between distant societies. In Afro-Eurasia, nomadic Mongol and Turkish peoples spurred these developments by creating vast empires. By the middle of the fourteenth century, these empires had facilitated trade and communication across wide-ranging areas. During this same period, increased trading activities in the Indian Ocean region also encouraged cross-cultural connections between South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Africa. Political centralization also increased in Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. Although far removed from the trading and political networks of Afro-Eurasia, societies in the Americas also grew more centralized, as both the Aztec and Inkan empires facilitated trade and communication between distant peoples.

AP Themes

- Examines technology, demography, and environment by exploring the ways that population growth and agricultural productivity facilitated changes in Japan, England, and China; and the ways the environment of the Andes shaped the economic structure of the Inkan empire.
- Explores systems of social structure by comparing the economic organization of Japan, England, the Inkan Empire, and China.
- Discusses the changing functions of states by focusing on the ways that states in Europe, the Americas, and East Asia organized themselves — at least in part — according to economic imperatives.

Related Units

- Unit 6. Order and Early Societies: How do diverse political structures and relationships distribute power and material resources? Through the rise of the Chinese Empire, Mayan regional kingdoms, and the complex society of Igbo-Ukwu, this unit considers the origins of centralized states and alternative political and social orders. It is related to Unit 8 because economic needs help determine the political and social order of societies.
- Unit 11. Early Empires: What makes an “empire”? Through the Mongol, Mali, and Inka empires, this unit examines the construction of empires, their administrative structures, legitimating ideologies, and the environmental and technological conditions that shaped them. It is related to Unit 8 because empires, through tribute and taxes, were critical to constructing early economic systems in diverse areas of the world.
- Unit 15. Early Global Commodities: What is globalization and when did it begin? Before the sixteenth century, the world’s four main monetary substances were silver, gold, copper, and shells. It was China’s demand for silver and Spain’s newly discovered mines in the Americas that finally created an all-encompassing network of global trade. This unit is related to Unit 8 because it documents the importance of global trade in the early

modern era — trade that was made possible by the economic organization provided by early economies.

- Unit 24. Globalization and Economics: How have the forces of globalization shaped the modern world? This unit travels from the Soviet Union to Sri Lanka and Chile to study the role of technology, and the impact of economic and political changes wrought by globalization. It is related to Unit 8 because global connections came to have an important impact on political economies in diverse areas of the world.

Section 2

Video-Related Materials

Video Segment 1: English and Japanese Manor Economy

The economies of some societies were based on self-sufficient agricultural estates. This segment explores such systems by looking at England and Japan between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. In England during this period, 90 percent of the population made their living from agricultural production. The principal social and economic unit organizing this production was the manor, an estate owned by a wealthy landowner and farmed by tenants who were either free peasants or serfs (people who owed obligations of produce or labor to the landowner). By the end of the eleventh century, agricultural production was increasing within the manor system because of technological innovations. This increased productivity resulted in greater agricultural surpluses, which peasants then sold in markets. The number and size of towns and cities consequently grew, which led to an increasing number of alternatives to life on manorial estates. This slow development of a commercial economy eventually resulted in the collapse of the manorial system in England. In Japan during the same period, society was also largely based on agricultural estates known as *sh_en*. Like manors, the *sh_en* were owned by wealthy landowners and farmed mostly by peasants who rented the land. Unlike the manor system, however, Japanese landowners typically did not live on the *sh_en*, the institution of serfdom did not exist, and everyone on the *sh_en* held some legally recognized rights to the land. In spite of the differences between the English and Japanese systems, however, agricultural surpluses and the resulting growth of towns and cities also led to an increasingly commercial Japanese economy by the fourteenth century.

Video Segment 2: Commercial Revolution in China

This segment looks at eleventh-century China, where the introduction of highly productive strains of rice, along with an expansion of arable lands, gave rise to a population boom and an increase in agricultural surpluses. These surpluses encouraged the growth of new markets for agricultural products. The distribution of these products was aided by the efficient organization of the Song state, which maintained a good system of roads and provided centralized locations from which surpluses could be easily sold. The Song state further encouraged trade — especially long-distance trade — when it began to print paper bills of exchange in the eleventh century as a way of eliminating the need to carry heavy coins from place to place. The resulting expansion of trade encouraged the growth of towns and cities in China, which provided people with an increasing array of alternatives to agricultural life. In contrast to the slow development of commercial economies in England and Japan between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, China experienced such a rapid economic change by 1200 CE that historians call it a commercial revolution.

Video Segment 3: Inkan Tribute Economy

Unlike China, England, or Japan, some early economies thrived without the development of markets or money. This video segment looks at one such example: the fifteenth-century Inkan

Empire of the Andean highlands. This empire is unique in world history because of its physical terrain: Nearly 4,000 miles in length down the western coast of South America, it was bounded by ocean to the west and harsh mountains to the east, it had very little arable land, and it hosted a wide range of ecological niches from high plateaus to valleys and rainforests. The Inkan Empire integrated all of these ecological niches into one state system, assumed ownership and responsibility for all land and products, and divided it all up to benefit the common good. In return for a fair share of the empire's goods, the state demanded tribute from everyone. Kin groups (*ayllu*), ruled by local lords (*Kuraka*), determined both the tribute and distribution of goods. The form of tribute varied by locality; it generally included fish, cloth, salt, agricultural produce, and — perhaps most importantly — human labor. Such tribute kept the empire supplied with goods and services, while the distribution of goods and services to subjects by the Kuraka allowed people to meet their needs for food and shelter without the use of money or independent markets.

Perspectives on the Past: Impact of Religion on Economy

What impact did religious institutions becoming powerful landholders have on societies? As heirs to a capitalist tradition that champions individual rights to land, historians have tended to argue that landholding by religious institutions retards economic development. Yet in some cases, what might appear to be the allocation of resources to non-productive religious institutions can be misleading. In the Inkan mummy cult, for example, substantial resources of land and labor were actually allocated for the support of living members of the Inkan royal family rather than to the dead mummies.

Video Details

Who Is Interviewed

- Peter Winn
- Linda Walton
- Jerry H. Bentley

Primary Source Materials Featured in the Video

- English chronicler
- Spanish commentator on Inkas
- Chinese description of city life

Program Contents

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