Unit 1
Maps, Time, and World History

Introduction to Unit
This unit specifically focuses on the spatial and temporal frameworks world historians use to organize their discipline. Through an exploration of historical map projections, it illustrates how spatial constructs influence the ways we understand, interpret, and portray the past. In addition, it demonstrates how the units of analysis historians choose to investigate the past—whether civilizations, area studies, cities, water regions, or nation-states—influence the stories told about history as well as the questions that are asked. Finally, this unit discusses how world historians organize their study through temporal frameworks like periodization, chronology, and sequencing. This temporal dimension allows historians to interpret how things change over time; it also illustrates how a society’s worldview might be affected by a linear or cyclical understanding of time.

Learning Objectives
- Identify the kinds of geographical and chronological frameworks world historians use.
- Compare these units of analysis with those used in other fields of history.
- Analyze why many historians became interested in studying world history in the late twentieth century.
- Discuss the purpose of studying world history.

Preparing for This Session
Read Unit 1 in the Bridging World History online text. You may also want to refer to some of the Suggested Readings and Materials. If you feel you need more background knowledge, refer to a college-level world history textbook on this subject (look under the index for Mercator, Maps, Mapmaking, Time).
Unit Activities

Before You Begin—40 minutes

- Draw a map of the world on a flat surface or on a sphere like a balloon.
- Compare your map with other students’ Discuss the differences. Do the differences reflect your educational backgrounds and life experiences?
- Create a timeline of the 10 events you think are most important in world history.
- Compare your timeline with other students’ Discuss the differences. Do the differences reflect your educational backgrounds and life experiences?
- Divide your timeline into three or four time periods, and give the time periods names that reflect the major events.
- Compare your periodization with other students’. Discuss the differences. Do the differences reflect your educational backgrounds and life experiences?
- Now, compare your map, timeline, and periodization with those in your textbook. Discuss the similarities and differences. How might your educational background and life experiences be similar or different from those of the textbook author(s)? How do cartography and historical units of analysis reflect the person(s) who created them?

Watch the Video for “Unit 1: Maps, Time, and World History” —30 minutes

While you watch the video, take notes on the units of analysis the producers of the video use.

Activity 1: Reading Maps—50 minutes

Read and discuss the following about maps.

Maps are useful tools for historians to explain their ideas as well as primary sources in themselves. All historians use maps to show where events took place, and to display their scholarly interpretations of the events. The problem with world maps is that their shape or relative size can be given, but not both. The Mercator map helped mariners find their positions. The parallel lines allowed navigators to use a compass to plot a course by drawing a straight line between the point of departure and the destination. Arno Peters came up with a solution to the Mercator map.

Peters writes, “Mercator had however sacrificed one cartographical quality in his map which rendered it unsuitable as a totally realistic geographical world concept: fidelity of area. Its particularly advantageous use as a navigational aid matched the needs of the Age of Discovery which became an age of European world control and of worldwide colonial exploitation.” (Arno Peters, The New Cartography [USA: Friendship Press, 1983], 61, 56-57) Though the Peters projection accurately reflected size, it also distorted shape.
Unit Activities, cont’d.

How to read a map: Use the following questions to help you read the following maps.

- What areas of the world does the map show?
- When was the map made?
- Who made the map? Why?
- What does the map feature? For example, do you see land, water, trade routes, political systems, and/or ideas that the cartographer had about the flora or fauna of an area?
- What is the orientation of the map? Where are the directions (north, south, east, west) indicated?
- How is the culture of the cartographer evident in the map?
- What other information do you need to interpret the map?

Unit Activities, cont’d.

Item #2831. Juan de la Cosa, MAP OF ATLANTIC BY JUAN DE LA COSA, COLUMBUS’S PILOT (c. 1500). Courtesy of the Northwind Picture Archive.

Item #2983. Giacomo Gastaldi, ITALIAN MAP OF AFRICA (1553). Courtesy of the Parliamentary Millenium Project.

Winter counts were pictorial histories recorded by Native Americans that documented the major events of each year. Each symbol represented an event that happened in the life of a tribe or individual. The symbols were recorded in the winter, when the tribe had free time.

Unit Activities, cont’d.

Item #2984. Anonymous, KOREAN KANGNIDO MAP (1402). Courtesy of Ryukoku University Library.

Activity 2: Units of Analysis—60 minutes

The class will break into four groups to work; each on one of the four units of analysis analyzed in the video. Information on each unit of analysis is given below. The class groups should create ways to present the information, and then provide their own interpretations of the reasons why their units of analysis are important for world history.

Nation-states, Civilizations, Regions, and Systems

Historians use names for political systems, cultural areas, or large-scale processes in order to analyze patterns within and between societies.

- Nation-states: Canada or Ghana
- Civilizations: Egypt or China
- Regions: Latin America or Middle East
- Sea and Ocean Basins: Mediterranean Sea or Indian Ocean
- Systems: Communications, Networks, Plantation Labor, Global Economy

The problem with using the nation-state as a unit of analysis is that nations arose at the same time as history as an academic discipline in Europe. Thus, it is difficult to distinguish between the nation-state as a unit of analysis and as a celebration of national achievements in the nineteenth century.

Seas and Ocean Basins

One rim land might be the 13 colonies that eventually became the United States. So, to focus an analysis on that rim land naturally draws one toward the history of the United States and its development. But another kind of rim land might be all of the land facing the Atlantic Ocean. If that land is used as a unit of analysis, then it would be necessary to focus on the processes of migration and exchange along with the various kinds of links and flows that linked all of those rim lands together. Historian Fernand Braudel writes,

> I contemplated the Mediterranean, tete a tete, for years on end ... and my vision of history took its definitive form without my being entirely aware of it, partly as a direct intellectual response to a spectacle—the Mediterranean—which no traditional historical account seemed to be capable of encompassing. (Fernand Braudel, “Personal Testimony,” *Journal of Modern History* 44 [Dec. 1972], 453–4.)

Chronology

The Judeo-Christian tradition emphasizes linear time—a concept of time that progresses from a beginning toward an end. The Confucian tradition, on the other hand, presents a more cyclical view of time. In this tradition, the rises and falls of dynasties provide the chronological basis of dividing history into distinct, identifiable periods. Moreover, in many Native American cultures an experience is significant not because of when it happens, but because of what it means. The nineteenth-century Yanktonai Lakota used what they called “winter counts” as a system for measuring the past, rather than using strict chronology. Problems arise for historians whose sources have different views of time.

Periodization

History is about the understanding of change and continuity through time. So periodization is simply the business of identifying and recognizing patterns of change and continuity through time. Since the nineteenth century, Western historians have used the designations of “ancient, medieval, and modern.” In the twentieth century, the influential French historian Fernand Braudel used geological time, social time, and eventful time. In the late twentieth century, the British historian David Christian devised the idea of “Big History” while he was teaching in an Australian university. Periodization is not universal and has changed several times for world historians just in the last hundred years.
Read Unit 1 in the online text, Section 3, Reading 3: David Christian, “World History in Context,” *Journal of World History* 14, no. 4 (December 2003): 437–52 and answer the following questions.

**Reading Questions**
- What temporal and spatial scales does Christian suggest?
- How does he explain complexity as a characteristic of human societies?
- How does he fit world history into the science of cosmology? Physics?

**Optional: Visit the Web Site**
Explore this topic further on the *Bridging World History* Web site. Browse the Archive, look up terms in the Audio Glossary, review related units, or use the World History Traveler to examine different thematic perspectives.