

### Student Handout 3 – A Guided Reading on the Bronze Age

*As you read, jot down answers to the questions in the boxes. You may Turn and Talk before you write, but each student has to write their own answers.*

#### Bronze and Iron Ages

The Neolithic Age was succeeded in Eurasia by the **Bronze Age**. In any given region, the Bronze Age is considered to begin when bronze becomes a *much-used material* for tools and weapons. The term “Bronze Age” is generally not used if only a few bronze tools are being made, or if bronze is only being used for jewelry.

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During the Neolithic period, humans began to make limited use of **copper** (small amounts of pure copper can be found in nature), which could be hammered or melted and cast. Later in the Neolithic period, **smelting** technology emerged in Southwest Asia, allowing copper to be extracted from copper ore. Smelting was later used for various other types of ore. These processes are part of the science and art of **metallurgy**, taking metal from rock ore and creating new goods out of it.

While copper can be used for tools and weapons, it is rather soft. It was eventually discovered that by blending copper with tin, one obtains a much harder metal: **bronze**. (Occasionally, other elements were used instead of tin.)

What was smelting?

Why was bronze better than copper?

The Bronze Age of Eurasia spanned 3000-1000 BC. Like the Neolithic period, it began in Southwest Asia, from where it spread in all directions. It took roughly a thousand years for the Bronze Age to cover the entire east-west span of mainland Eurasia, from the Atlantic (Western Europe) to the Pacific (China). Naturally, it also spread northward and southward along this span. Thus, by 2000 BC, most of Eurasia had transitioned (moved) to the Bronze Age.

While the Bronze Age also spread to North Africa, the Sahara Desert prevented it from ever reaching Sub-Saharan Africa.

How and why do you think knowledge about bronze spread?

### Bronze Age Transition

Eurasia ca. 3000 – 2000  
(ca is an abbreviation of “circa” which means “about” or “approximately.”)



Source: <http://www.essential-humanities.net/world-history/the-stone-bronze-and-iron-ages/>

How do you think the spread of Bronze helped to change this part of the world? Why would people want a harder metal? Make a list of possible effects.

### **The Great Bronze Age of China: An Exhibition from the People's Republic of China (Exhibition Pamphlet)**

*(Important ideas are underlined!)*

At about the same time that Stonehenge was rising in England and Abraham was framing the principles of Judaism in the Middle East, a Bronze Age culture was developing in China that in many respects was seldom equaled and never surpassed. This development seems to have occurred early in the first half of the second millennium B.C. in the fertile Central Plains of the Yellow River valley. For thousands of years this area had sustained Neolithic cultures of increasing complexity, which ultimately culminated in the first Chinese civilization. By the time of the Bronze Age, this culture was characterized by a strong centralized government, urban communities with distinct social classes, palatial architecture, a distinctive system of writing, elaborate religious rituals, sophisticated art forms, and bronze metallurgy.

Unlike other cultures, where bronze was first used chiefly for tools and weapons, in China this alloy of copper and tin was reserved for the manufacture of majestic vessels that played central roles in state ritual and ancestor worship for more than 1,000 years, even after the official beginnings of the Iron Age in the fifth century B.C. Representing the wealth and power of the rulers, these ritual utensils show the highest degree of technical and artistic accomplishment in early Chinese civilization.

How was the use of bronze in China different from how it was used in other places?



Detail of rectangular food caldron (fang ding) no. 32. Shang dynasty, 12th century B.C. From Tomb No. 5, Anyang, Henan Province. Institute of Archaeology, Beijing

Ancient bronzes were well preserved because of how they were stored. Sometimes ancient bronzes were placed in storage pits where they were hastily hidden by fleeing members of a defeated elite house. More commonly, however, they were used in burial and placed in tombs. During the Shang dynasty, members of the royalty were buried with their bronzes, ceramics, weapons, amulets, and ornaments. They were even buried with the human and animal entourage that surrounded them in life: servants,

bodyguards, horses, chariots, and charioteers. During the Zhou and Han periods, lavish burials continued, but human sacrifice was rarely practiced. Instead the custom was preserved by the substitution of figurines of wood or clay intended to resemble the entourage of the deceased.

So how do we know about ancient Chinese use of bronze?

**Turn and Talk:** Why do you think that leaders in places like China and Egypt left behind such elaborate tombs and symbols of their rule? What does that say about the nature of leadership and government in the Bronze Age?