

Student Handout 1 – Social Hierarchy and Slavery in the Ancient World

Between 1000 BCE and 500 CE, the vast majority of the world's population were farmers, herders, or foragers. They produced their own food, and they lived short lives compared to today. However, as cities developed and got bigger, some people began to gather and control more resources than others. Over time, groups of **elites** emerged, and these people had more wealth and power than everyone else. Other groups developed in cities as well, such as classes of **merchants, artisans, scholars**, and other people with special skills who could gain a limited amount of wealth and influence. **Social hierarchy**, different levels of wealth and power among people, began to develop, with some people having much less than others.

Part of **social hierarchy** involved differences in power between men and women. In the developing cities, adult males controlled political and social life, as far as we know. Men and women likely had more equal relations in daily life in forager, pastoral, or small-scale farming societies. However, in the big states and empires, women at the very top of the **social hierarchy** appear to have enjoyed more freedom and rights than other women.

War was the main source of slaves initially. When a town or city was taken by an enemy, it was common for the winner to take people from the losing side as slaves. There were also pirates who captured people and then sold them as slaves. In addition, criminals could be sentenced to slavery, unpaid debts could lead to someone being forced into slavery, and very poor families sometimes sold their children into slavery. Children born to slaves also provided a new source for future slaves. These were the conditions for slavery; every ancient civilization used slaves at some point and found different ways to force people into this unfair system.

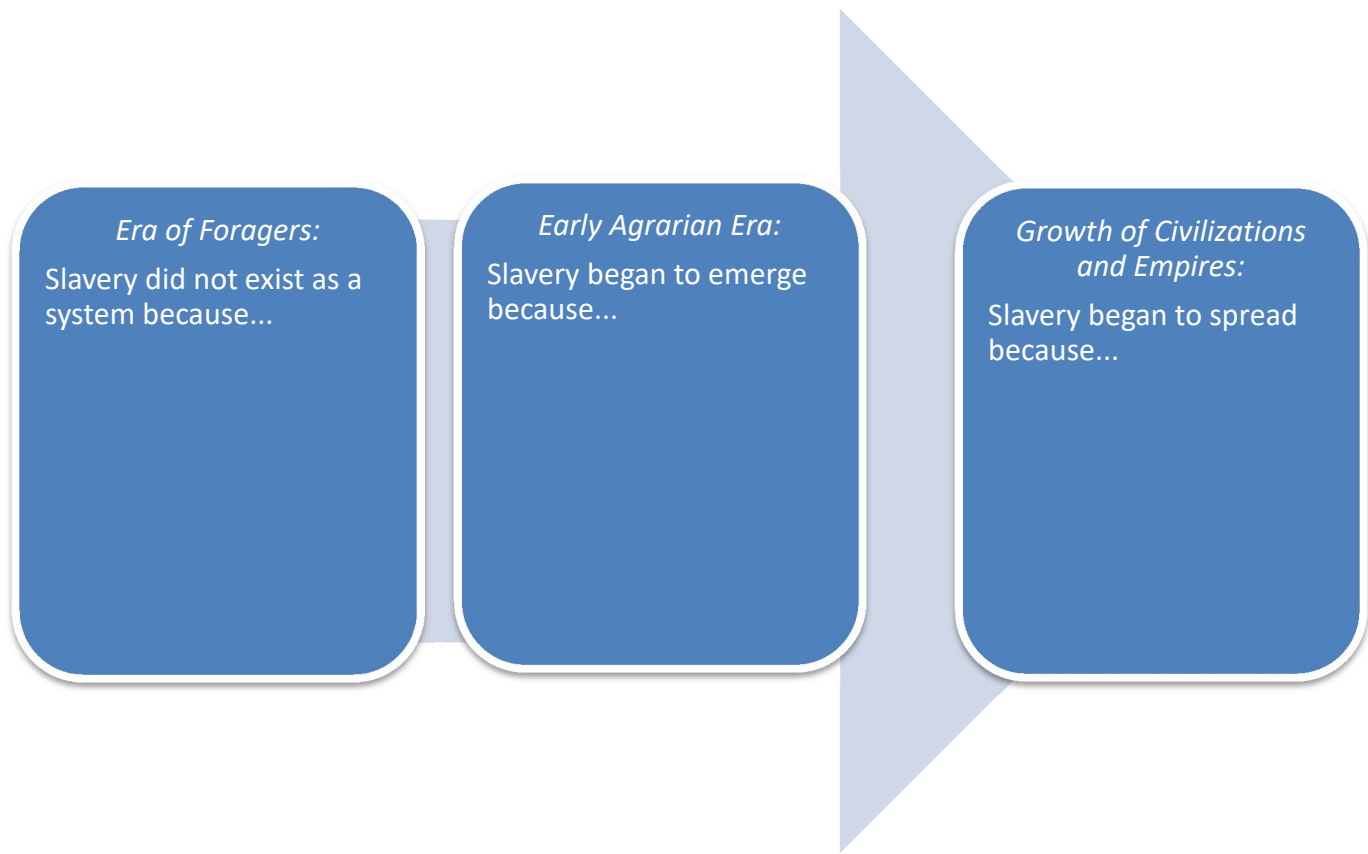
As civilizations developed **social hierarchies**, **slavery** became an integral part of societies. Before the growth of civilizations, hunter-gatherers and early farmers had no use for slaves because they produced just enough food for themselves. One more person meant one more mouth to feed, so there was no economic advantage in owning another human being. This began to change as people started to live in towns and cities, where a surplus of food created in the countryside (often on large estates) made it possible to develop a wide range of crafts in the town. On large farms or in workshops, owners wanted a steady source of cheap labor that they did not have to pay.

Information about slaves in early societies appears most often with regards to their legal status, basically as part of the owner's valuable property. The Code of Hammurabi, from Babylon in the 18th century BCE, gave chilling details of the different rewards and penalties for surgeons operating on free men or slaves, but it also revealed that slaves there had some limited rights. For example, Babylonian slaves were themselves allowed to own property.

But the first civilization in which we know a great deal about the role of slaves was that of ancient Greece. The slaves of Athens, for example, had no basic rights, but their lives varied greatly according to the work they did. The most unfortunate Athenian slaves were the miners, who were worked often to the point of death by their owners. Other categories of slaves - particularly those owned by the government, such as the 300 Scythian archers who provided the police force of Athens - could acquire a better position in society. The majority of Athenian slaves were domestic servants who worked in the households of more wealthy Greeks. Their living conditions depended entirely on the relationship they developed with their owners.

Slaves were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and during this time period (1000 BCE to 500 CE) there was a huge expansion of slavery and organized slave trade in many parts of the world, notably the Mediterranean basin. For example, slaves may have made up 40 percent of the total population of the Roman Empire at the end of the first century BCE.

Text adapted from <http://worldhistoryforall.sdsu.edu/eras/era4.php> and <http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/plaintexthistories.asp?historyid=ac41>



Turn and Talk: How were slaves obtained?

Stop and Jot:

- How were the lives of slaves different from other members of society?

- How did the lives of slaves differ from one another?