



Communities

Communities Frame Introduction

One of the things that is distinctive about humans is that we live in communities. Communities provide us with support, assistance, and growth. Examples of communities include families, neighborhoods, states, religions, and even online forums. Throughout history, human communities have generally grown, and frequently changed. By exploring the history of communities, this video clearly reveals the role community plays in the present, and the possibilities for building and strengthening communities in the future.



0:01

*“Alone, we can do so little.
Together, we can do so
much.”
-Hellen Keller*

Nobody really lives alone. We exist together, whether it's in the same neighborhood or meeting online. We interact in community—communities, really—with other people, people with whom we share experience and identity.

00:29

*Bob Bain, PhD, University
of Michigan
Small communities
(families throughout the
world), and large ones (a
community gathered in
protest petitioning for free
education).*

Our communities help define who we are, giving us a sense of us. Living in a community is a universal, shared characteristic of all humans. But although the need for community might be a constant, how humans met that need has changed over the very long sweep of our history. A few times over the past hundreds of thousands of years, we've altered or remade the types, the nature, and the size of the communities in which we live. We've shaped those changes, and those changes have in turn shaped us and who we are.

01:04

*“Lots of stuff out” such as
family, ethnicity, class*

The Communities frame captures the biggest changes in our communities, and it will help you navigate your journey through world history.

In telling this story, we're going to focus on a few big human communities—on cities, on states, on religions. But, remember, we'll be leaving lots of stuff out, details that support, extend, or challenge this story. You'll be able fill in details as you go through the course, learning stuff that you can use to test the frame's claims, to make it more accurate and complete, or to make it more meaningful to you.

01:41

*The Communities Frame
through the Eras
Early human artworks:
handprints; a hunter with
a large steer; animals
being herded*

(music playing) The community frame begins in Era Two, with the first human communities. They were bands of foragers, not much larger than an extended family, somewhere between ten and 100 people. These small groups of hunter-gatherers lived and worked together. They likely knew and were related to everyone in their small community. Slowly, over a long period of time, some of our ancestors settled into lush areas, and the size of their communities grew. Eventually, they learned how to domesticate crops and animals and created a second type of human community: farming villages.

02:23

*Straw huts in an early
farming village; drawing
of an early city/village*

*Artwork depicting an early
community*

Over a few thousand years, in many regions across the globe, some of these farming villages grew larger as more people settled into or were born into them. With this increase in population and size, new needs emerged, including needs not directly connected to farming. Our ancestors, for example, needed to protect the village and exchange goods with other villages. Many of the farming villages became large cities, and these cities and the villages around them began to form the first complex political communities with power over people—the state.

Now, you'll have the chance to consider the growth of these large states, and their similarities and differences, as you travel through time, especially in Era Two and Era Three, beginning about, oh, 8,000 years ago.

03:15

A color-coded map shows the way smaller communities (small circles) would eventually converge with other small communities to create larger communities (larger colored areas on the map)

Some states conquered neighboring people to rule very large territories—territories with many different communities of people with different languages, customs, and religions. Historians refer to these states as empires, a form of human organization that has lasted for thousands of years. Indeed, most humans lived in empires well into the 20th century. So, after your first encounter with empires in Era Three—about 2,500 years ago—you'll be meeting up with them in all the later eras in this course.

03:50

Cultural artworks from around the world, depicting smaller communities

Even in large empires, people continued to participate in and identify with smaller, more local communities—families, villages and cities. People also created new communities that moved beyond local areas, often stretching between cities, complex societies, and empires, uniting people with shared beliefs, interests, or occupations.

04:14

Sacred place of worship

Important examples include universal philosophical systems and portable, congregational religions, many of which developed in Era Three. These belief systems—such as Hinduism, Confucianism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity—connected people in large communities of faith, belief, or ideas despite vast distances between them.

Early in Era Six, or about 300 years ago, people began to form a new kind of community—the nation-state. In this type of community, political authority was technically vested in a nation, a population of people living in a common region, who shared what they believed was a common identity. Nation-states grew, but grew slowly, and did not surpass empires until the past century, as you'll investigate in Era Seven.

People participate in communities of different types and sizes, and communities of believers continue today. However, the nation-state has become a most powerful sort of community that shapes our identities.

Paintings of wars between communities

Now, in telling this story, we might have made the transition between types of communities seem smooth, but it was not. There were tensions between and among people living in different types of communities. For example, our hunting-gathering ancestors, living in mobile communities, often warred against our settled ancestors, living in villages or cities. Over the last 200 years or so, the desire for independent nation-states exerted powerful, disrupting forces on empires, some of which had survived for hundreds of years. Importantly, this is likely not the final state of human communities.

05:52

What's next?

(music playing) Innovations like the internet and jet airlines offer ways for us to create communities of people who do not live together, and who possibly never even meet in person. New international communities, digital communities, and even virtual communities, appear to be emerging in addition to traditional community groups like families, cities, the nation-state, and religion.

06:20

*Using the Communities
Frame*

(music playing) This increasing globalization has not made the local community less relevant, but more so. In the confusion of the wider world, our identities—religions, neighborhoods, ethnicities, and nations—often seem like safe, comforting places to retreat to and find support.

The tool that we created for this course that we call the Community frame should help you remember and use this Big Story. You might use this tool to locate the details of the events you'll study in a larger story. You will see, for example, that we have threaded this story of communities through the eras we have used to structure this course.

07:00

*Timeline of the eras and
the communities within
them:*

*No People,
Families and Villages,
Cities, States, and
Empires,
Regional and Global
Connections,
Nation States,
International and Digital
Communities*

We hope that thinking about different ways to view the history of human communities, moving back and forth between our larger communities and our local ones, will help you see more clearly the role community plays in the present and might in the future.

What will happen next? What kinds of communities does the future hold? How can we learn from the communities of the past? These are the questions that make it valuable for us to study the long history, the very long history, of human communities.