

# COMPARISON – LIFE IN 1200 AND TODAY

## Purpose

Comparison is a key process that historians use to help them better understand the past. While comparing and contrasting is something that you’ve likely engaged in prior to this course, in this activity you’re introduced to a systematic way of conducting historical comparison. The ultimate goal is for you to be able to describe and explain the relevant similarities and differences between specific historical developments and processes, as well as to be able to explain the relative historical significance of similarities and differences between topics of study. In addition, you’ll learn to use the Comparison Tool (which you’ll see an example of in this activity’s worksheet) to conduct and generate historical comparisons.

## Practices

### *Reading*

You’ll conduct historical comparison both as part of reading historical accounts and as part of generating your own historical interpretations. This comparison activity has you look at two points of time and place (temporal and spatial scale). Try to use the language of spatial scale when describing your comparison (for example: local, regional, national, or global).

## Process

Although comparing and contrasting may sound simple, it actually gets really complicated when what you’re comparing is multidimensional, as is the case with historical topics. Because comparison is harder than it looks, your teacher will show you a tool you can use to conduct historical comparisons using the themes you learned about earlier in this unit.

First, your teacher will either hand out or have you download the Comparison—Life in 1200 and Today worksheet. Review the questions associated with each of the themes. The questions in the left-hand column of the worksheet have been selected because they are most relevant to this particular comparison. As this is the first comparison activity of the course, you’ll complete this one together as a class. Your teacher will guide you through the process of using these questions to fill in the top few rows of the worksheet.

Before you read the synopsis of life in 1200, decide which time period you’d rather live in—today or 1200. Be sure to explain your choice.

Next, read the synopsis of life in 1200. This is a general story of what life was like in the thirteenth century, so the specifics would change depending on geographic location, ethnicity, age, gender, and social class. Your teacher may also have you read one or more of the region-specific paragraphs for what life was like in 1200.



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Then, as a class, work to fill out the first part of the worksheet using the synopsis for 1200. Next, do the same thing to complete the sections for life today, using your own knowledge of today to fill out those columns. Remember, the *social* theme refers to how people organize into groups and how they interact in those groups. *Political* is about governance, leadership, and order. *Economy* is really about the ways in which humans produce, exchange, and distribute goods and services. Once you have filled out the Today section with the class, discuss the following questions:

- How are these stories similar?
- How are they different?
- What's important about those similarities and differences?

Now that you've learned more about life in 1200 versus today, would you change the answer you gave at the start of this activity about which period you'd rather live in? Be prepared to share your reasoning with the class.

Once everyone has completed the rows relating to the themes, you'll review the answers together, and then work in small groups to identify similarities and differences between life in 1200 and today, which you'll then add to the similarities and differences sections on the Comparison Tool.

Finally, you'll come back together as a class to share the similarities and differences your group came up with.

Your teacher may also discuss how to use these similarities and differences to develop two thesis statements, one about the similarities between 1200 and today, and another about the differences between 1200 and today.

Don't worry—if your teacher chooses to have you do this activity extension, they'll walk you through the definition of a thesis statement and show you how to create a thesis statement that answers a comparison prompt.

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## LIFE IN 1200 AND TODAY

Note that these are general stories of life in major geographic regions—details of everyday life might be quite different depending on one's gender, class, age, ethnicity, and geographic region.

### ***SYNOPSIS OF LIFE IN 1200 – GENERAL OVERVIEW***

The vast majority of people were farmers living in rural areas. Only a small portion of the total population lived in urban areas, but cities had begun to grow larger. Some communities, especially those of Indigenous peoples in the Americas and Australasia, were foragers or pastoralists. For those belonging to the lower classes, life consisted of work, usually on a farm where they grew and raised their own food. Daily interactions were with other members of the same community, some of whom may have lived quite far from each other. Members of the same family may have gone to market once or twice a month to sell goods they'd raised or made. Both men and women worked to support the family, but their jobs could be different, depending on the region or society in which you lived. In some regions of the world, women sewed, tended to the house, and helped with farming duties including planting and harvesting. Men were generally farmers, who tended to the crops and animals. However, in agro-pastoralist communities (places where people both farmed and raised livestock) such as those in sub-Saharan Africa, women were the ones who did a large portion of the farming duties while men were often in charge of the animals. For those in the middle to upper classes, who usually had more wealth than those of the lower class, life could be very different. In certain regions, some children were educated, particularly boys. Most children started working at a young age, either helping with the farm, family business, or learning a trade as an apprentice. Those living in urban areas worked in a variety of professions as merchants, smiths (working with metals), carpenters, or inn keepers. People living in cities had many interactions in the course of their day and therefore may have belonged to different networks including those associated with their job, their faith, and their government. Most people didn't travel very far from their homes but some, such as merchants or traders, ventured out farther than most.

### ***SYNOPSIS OF LIFE IN 1200 – REGION-SPECIFIC SUMMARIES***

**Africa** — Life in Africa was extremely varied and depended largely on one's geographic region. Many communities had existed for thousands of years. Some were structured in large agrarian empires and kingdoms while others were semi-nomadic pastoralists. The coastal regions around the Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean traded with people from Asia and Europe. The Silk Road trade routes had existed for centuries, and many northern and eastern coastal regions participated in this trade of goods and people. However, people living in the interior of Africa also participated in this trade, just not directly but rather through the networks that connected people across the continent.

**Americas** — Life in the Americas was structured in very similar ways to that of Africa. There was great variety in the communities throughout this region. By 1200, people had lived in this region for at least 12,000 years and had developed a number of different societies. For example, some were organized into large agrarian empires such as the Aztec and Inca, others lived in confederations or city-states, while others lived in smaller communities as nomadic foragers. There were networks of interaction between certain regions and goods were traded across thousands of miles. However, there weren't any large pack animals in the Americas so networks were generally somewhat smaller than those in Afro-Eurasia, as people mainly had to carry these goods.

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**Asia** — Most people were farmers and lived in rural areas. Populations were larger in this area, so farming was essential to supply the necessary food for life. Most lived under the rule of an emperor or monarch but there were other semi-nomadic groups, one of which began taking over larger portions of this region. Soon, this group, known as the Mongols, controlled most of Asia. Those of the lower classes labored daily either on farms or in other professions, such as traders or weavers. Trade was an important profession and Asian goods were in high demand in areas such as Europe. Those of the upper classes lived quite comfortably, usually in more urban areas. These people would have been government officials, members of court, or merchants. Many urban communities were composed of a number of different ethnicities, especially those engaged in the business of trade.

**Australasia (Oceania and the Pacific)** — Indigenous peoples had lived on these islands for thousands of years. This region, while separated by thousands of miles of ocean, was interconnected into three main regions that were culturally linked. These regions included Micronesia, Melanesia along with Australia, which is sometimes included in Melanesia and sometimes separated from it, and Polynesia where communities such as the Māori, Australian Aboriginal peoples, and Pacific Islanders lived. Some of these groups farmed and fished for survival and many had complex community structures like hierarchies and rulers. There was great variety in how people lived, depending on their location. For example, those living in what is now Papua New Guinea were some of the first people to farm while those living in Australia were mainly foragers due to harsher environmental conditions. Many people in this region were skilled at navigating the seas in large canoes, using the stars and knowledge of wind and ocean currents as their guides.

**Europe** — Most people were farmers and lived in rural areas of Europe. For those living in cities, daily activities would differ depending on class (upper, middle, or lower) and gender. Many of those living in more urban areas were artisans or worked from home in a variety of professions, such as those who worked with textiles, metal, and glass, as well as carpenters and masons. Most people lived under the rule of a monarch, who controlled relatively small kingdoms when compared with large empires that existed in other regions of the world. Children of the lower and middle classes worked most of their days to help support their families or to learn the trades of their parents or other family members.

Part 1: Identifying and Describing

1.

Write the topic of comparison at the top of the chart, and then add the cases you’re comparing and their associated time periods and locations.
2.

Respond to the questions in the Part 1 chart for each case you’re comparing. Use the resources provided.
3.

After responding to the questions for each case, identify and describe the similarities and differences between these cases.

Part 2: Analyzing (Optional Extension)

1.

If you were going to write two essays about the similarities and/or differences you’ve identified for this topic, what are two thesis statements you might use? Write one thesis statement about similarities and one about differences.
2.

If required, use your thesis statements to craft a response to the comparison prompt for this activity.

Topic of Comparison

Part 1: Identifying and Describing

Cases You’re Comparing		
Time Period		
Location		

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Name:

Date:

<b>Economy</b>  <i>How were goods produced and distributed in each of these time periods?</i>		Similarities	
		Differences	
<b>Social</b>  <i>What types of social interactions and groups were people members of in each of these time periods?</i>		Similarities	
		Differences	
<b>Political</b>  <i>How were political groups structured in each of these time periods?</i>		Similarities	
		Differences	

Name:  Date:

Part 2: Analyzing (Optional Extension)

Thesis Statement 1: Similarities	
Thesis Statement 2: Differences	
Response	