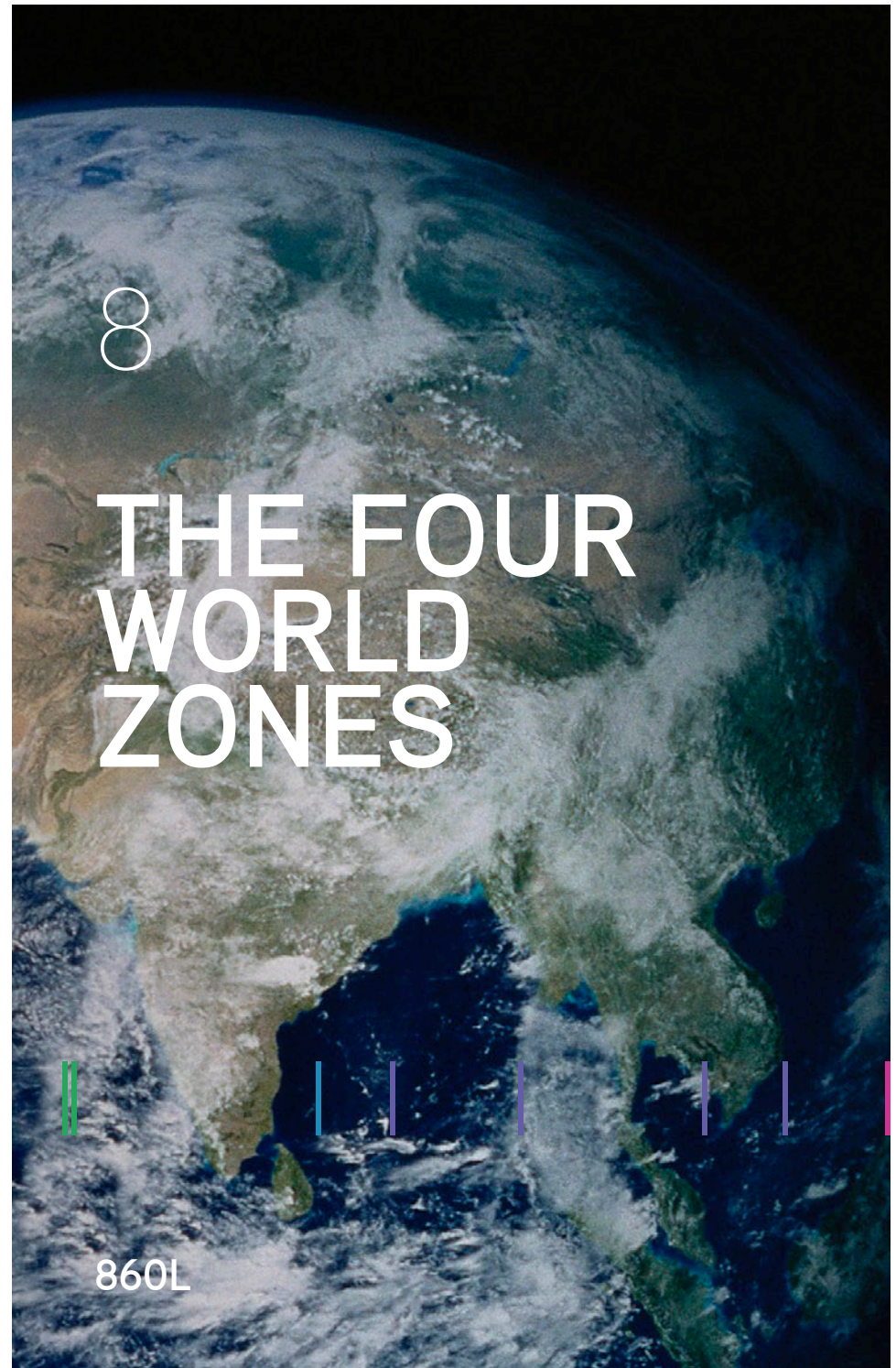




BIG HISTORY PROJECT



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THE FOUR WORLD ZONES

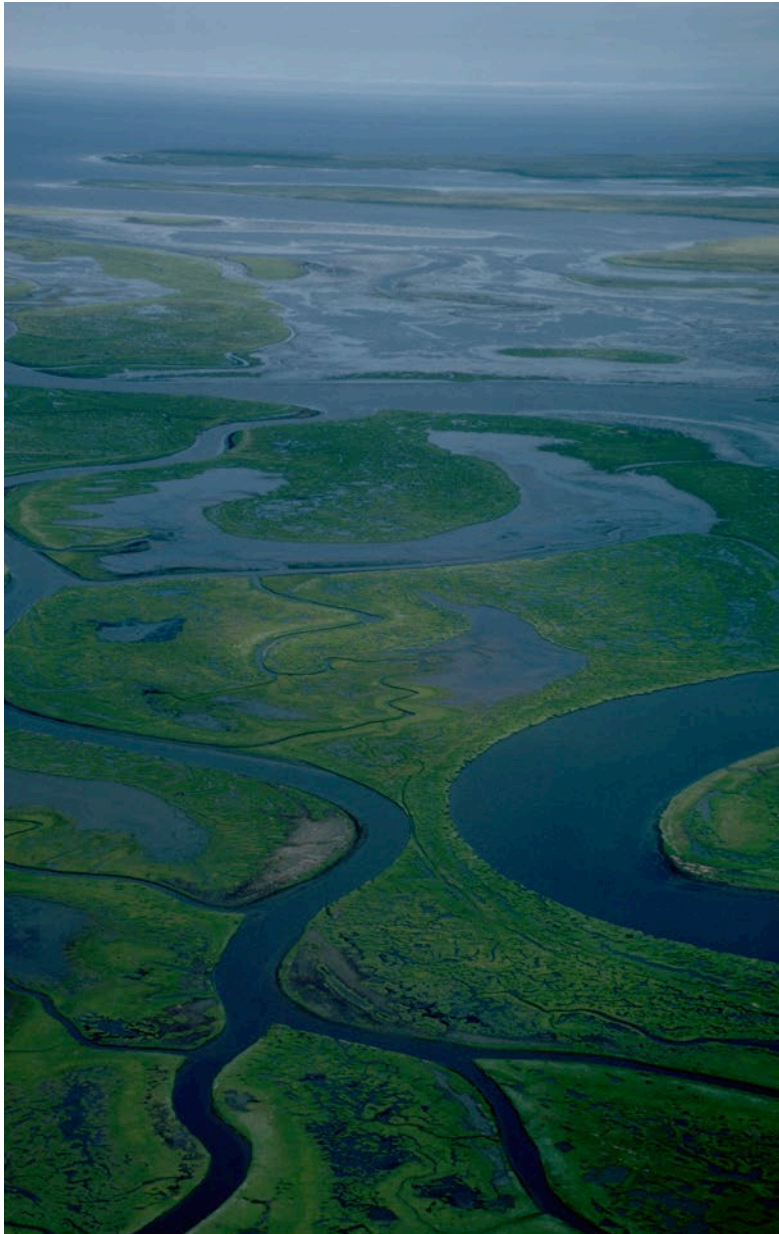
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THE FOUR WORLD ZONES

CLIMATE AND GEOGRAPHY
DIVIDE HUMAN POPULATIONS

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela

For a brief period, from about 10,000 years ago to about 500 years ago, the rising seas at the end of the last ice age divided the world. Four non-connected geographic zones formed. Isolated from one another, four groups of people developed and conducted their own experiments in human culture.



The Bering Sea separates Asia and North America, once connected by a land bridge

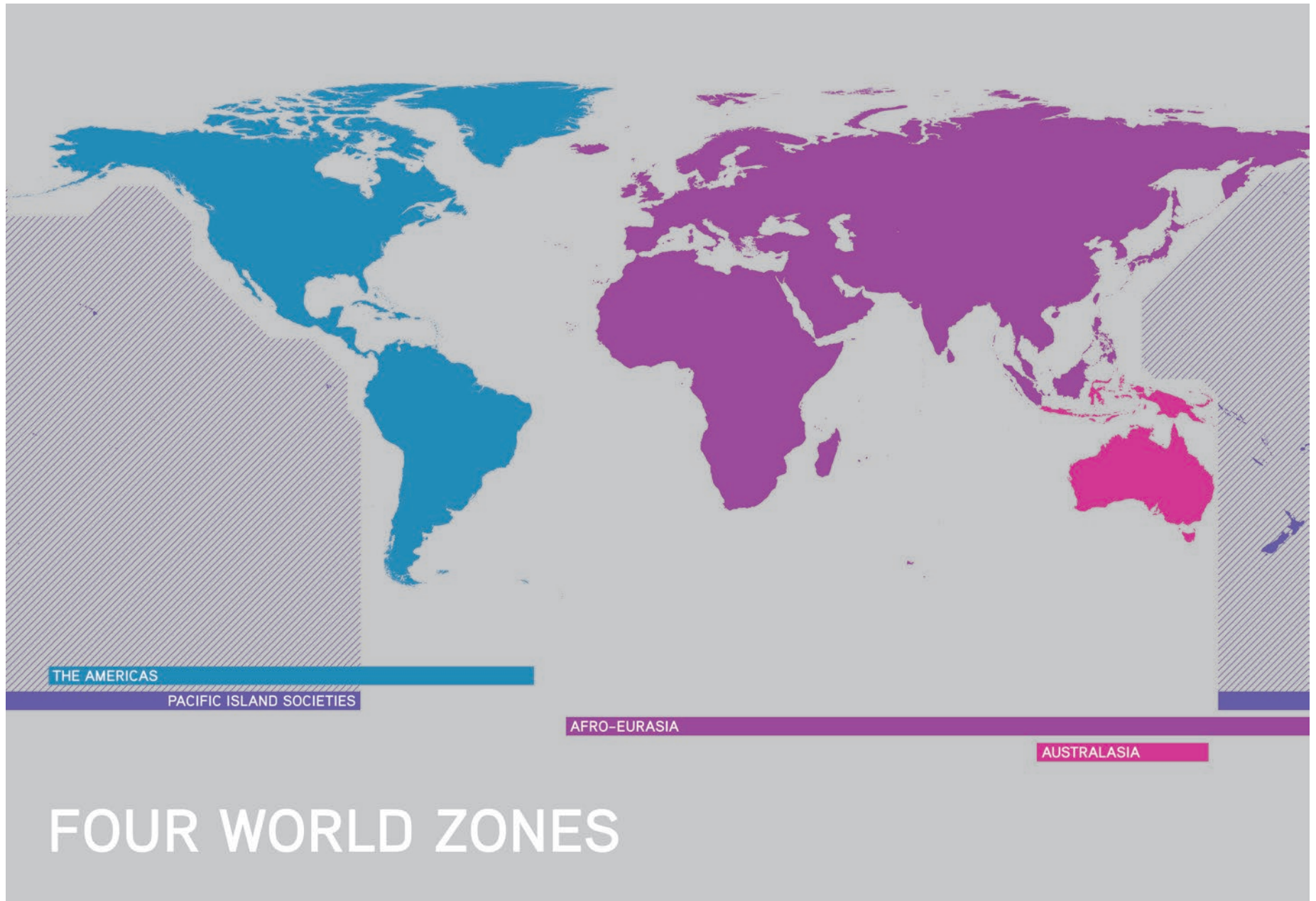
What are world zones?

In his book *Maps of Time*, David Christian describes the division of the world into four world zones. Many other historians focus on just the two largest world zones — Afro-Eurasia, the “Old World,” and the Americas, the “New World.” But Christian was living in Australia, and preferred looking at the whole world. It helps him analyze and explain human history. These are the four world zones that he uses:

- 01 Afro-Eurasia: Africa and the Eurasian landmass, including offshore islands like Britain and Japan
- 02 The Americas: North, Central, and South America, plus offshore islands like the Caribbean Islands
- 03 Australasia: Australia and the island of Papua New Guinea, plus neighboring islands in the Pacific Ocean
- 04 The Pacific Islands: societies such as New Zealand, Micronesia, Melanesia, Hawaii

(Antarctica is not considered a world zone because no people lived there.)

A world zone is simply a large region of human interaction. It is linked together geographically, culturally, economically, and sometimes politically. It may have a hundred thousand to millions of people living in different types of communities. Each of the four world zones functioned as a separate world. No regular contact with other zones existed until Europeans sailed to the Americas late in the fifteenth century. The world today no longer has four separate world zones. Our world nowadays is increasingly global and connected.



For most of human history, humans existed only in Afro-Eurasia. *Homo sapiens* migrated to Australasia about 60,000 to 50,000 BCE. Humans reached the Americas about 20,000 to 15,000 BCE. Human interaction continued among these three areas until the end of the Ice Age. Melting ice caused sea levels to rise. The land bridge that existed then between Asia and the Americas was covered in water. There never was a land bridge between Australasia and Afro-Eurasia; only a sea passage. But the sea passage became wider and harder to cross after the seas rose.

The rising of the seas occurred sometime after humans got to the Americas. Once humans arrived there, the world now had three separate zones. The fourth world zone, the Pacific Islands, did not emerge at the same time. It couldn't be reached until humans became skilled enough at sailing to get to these islands. This didn't happen until sometime in the past 4,000 years.

Hence, three of the four world zones existed from about 10,000 BCE to about 1500 CE. The fourth was only around from about 2000 BCE to 1500 CE. After 1500, all of the zones became connected through extensive sea travel. From then on, humans were one global network.

What the four world zones reveal

The rising seas cut off the four groups of humans from each other. They remained separate long enough to develop different experiments in culture and civilization. But they weren't kept separate so long that they developed into separate species. How amazing is that?

Comparing human societies is a bit like deciding whether a glass is half full or half empty. You can choose to notice how different human societies are from each other. Or, you can look at their similarities. World history and anthropology courses usually focus on the differences in human societies in the four world zones. Big History courses focus instead on the similarities.

Agrarian civilizations formed only in the two largest world zones for very specific reasons. Those two zones had more advantages than others. Afro-Eurasia was extremely large. It had better plants for food and animals better suited for transportation. These advantages allowed civilization to emerge there several thousand years earlier than in the Americas. This gave peoples from Afro-Eurasia an advantage when they arrived in the Americas. They found the civilizations there quite similar to theirs in structure, just earlier in their development.

The two smaller world zones had much smaller areas suitable for human life. They also had fewer resources and smaller populations. Because of these disadvantages, there were never enough people gathered together to form civilizations during this time period. On the larger Pacific islands, like Hawaii and New Zealand's North Island, agriculture appeared. Something very close to states appeared. Would these societies have become states/civilizations if they had not been conquered by people from the larger zones? We can never know.

In most areas of the Australasian world zone, people remained foragers until the arrival of the Europeans. Agriculture did appear in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. But they grew root crops that could not be stored in large quantities. And villages were not easily connected. That's why no form of government appeared. On the Australian mainland, widespread agriculture never developed. Soil was poor and the types of plants there weren't easy to grow. Still, archaeological sites show that the population was increasing in the 2,000 years before Europeans arrived.

When you compare the four zones, it's easy to see that people living in Afro-Eurasia had a huge head start. They had the earliest human habitation, the greatest geographic area, and the largest population. Afro-Eurasia also had the most varied resources. Perhaps most importantly, it had the largest networks of collective learning. Its networks had more information — and more types of information — than ones in the smaller zones.

Sources

Christian, David. *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*.
Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004.

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Asia from space

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Bering Land Bridge National Preserve, Alaska, USA

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Four World Zones,

The Big History Project

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