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Major Eras in World History

The term *era*, or *age*, refers to a broad period of time characterized by a shared pattern of life. Eras and ages typically do not have exact starting and ending points. Because the historical development of different regions of the world is varied, no single listing of eras applies to all of world history. This chart applies primarily to Western civilization.

Era and Dates	Description
Stone Age (2.5 million–3000 B.C.)	This long prehistoric period is often divided into two parts: the Old Stone Age, or Paleolithic Age, and the New Stone Age, or Neolithic Age. The Paleolithic Age lasted from about 2.5 million to 8000 B.C. During this time, hominids made and used stone tools and learned to control fire. The Neolithic Age began about 8000 B.C.) and ended about 3000 B.C.) in some areas. In this period, people learned to polish stone tools, make pottery, grow crops, and raise animals. The introduction of agriculture, a major turning point in human history, is called the Neolithic Revolution.
Bronze Age (3000–1200 B.C.)	People began using bronze, rather than stone and copper, to make tools and weapons. The Bronze Age began in Sumer about 3000 B.C.) when Sumerian metalworkers found that they could melt together certain amounts of copper and tin to make bronze. The first civilizations emerged during the Bronze Age.
Iron Age (1500–1000 B.C. to the present day)	The use of iron to make tools and weapons became widespread. The Iron Age is the last technological stage in the Stone Bronze Iron ages sequence.
Classical Greece (2000 B.C.–300 B.C.)	Greek culture developed, rose to new heights, and spread to other lands. The Greek city-states established the first democratic governments. Greek scientists made advances in mathematics, medicine, and other fields. The Greeks produced great works of drama, poetry, sculpture, architecture, and philosophy that still influence people today.
Roman Empire (500 B.C.–A.D. 500)	At its height, the Roman Empire united much of Europe, the north coast of Africa, and a large part of the Middle East. The Romans admired Greek art, literature, architecture, and science, and so they adopted and preserved much of Greek culture. The Romans also created their own legacy with outstanding achievements in engineering, architecture, the arts, and law. The Romans spread Christianity throughout Europe, and their official language—Latin—gave rise to French, Italian, Spanish, and other Romance languages. Western civilization has its roots in Greco-Roman culture.
Middle Ages (500–1200)	The West Roman Empire fell to Germanic conquerors who formed kingdoms out of former Roman provinces. A new political and military system called feudalism became established. Nobles were granted the use of lands that belonged to their king in exchange for their loyalty, military service, and protection of the peasants who worked the land. Western Europe became divided into feudal states. The Middle Ages was the time of castles and knights.
Renaissance and Reformation (1300–1600)	The Renaissance was a period of rebirth of learning and the arts based on a revival of classical study. The study of Greek classics gave rise to an intellectual movement called humanism, which emphasized human potential and achievements rather than religious concerns. The works of the Italian artists Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo and the English dramatist William Shakespeare represent the cultural height of the Renaissance. The Reformation was a movement for religious reform that led to the founding of Protestant churches. These churches rejected the authority of the pope, and the power of the Roman Catholic Church declined.
Exploration and Colonization 1400–1800	The monarchs of Europe financed voyages around the world, motivated by the desire for riches and the hope of spreading Christianity. Seeking spices and converts, European explorers made long sea journeys to the East. Searching for a shorter sea route to Asia, Christopher Columbus landed in the Caribbean islands and opened up the New World to European colonization. The establishment of colonies and trading networks led to a great worldwide cultural exchange, the devastation of Native American cultures in the New World, and the enslavement of millions of Africans.
Revolution and Independence 1700–1900	Movements toward democracy and nationalism affected most countries in the Western world. These movements sparked the Revolutionary War in America, which resulted in the independence of the British colonies and the birth of the United States. They also sparked the ten-year French Revolution. Many Latin American nations fought colonial rule and gained their independence. In Europe, great empires fell and a system of nation-states became established.

Era and Dates	Description
Industrial Revolution 1700–1900	The spread of power-driven machines sparked the rapid growth of industry in Great Britain, the United States, and continental Europe. People began working in large factories, rather than homes and small workshops, to produce goods. Industrialization made possible a great increase in the production of manufactured goods. A worldwide system of markets developed as industrial nations imported raw materials and exported manufactured goods. Industrialization dramatically transformed people's lives. People moved from rural areas to cities, and the middle class increased in size. European nations divided up most of Africa, acquiring colonies to feed their factories with raw materials.
Warring World 1900–1945	The first half of the 1900s was marked by warfare on a larger scale than ever before. Rivalries among European powers led to a system of military alliances that drew Europe and other regions into World War I (1914–1918). The Allies, which included France, Britain, Russia, Italy, and the United States, defeated the Central Powers, which included Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. The victorious Allies dictated harsh peace terms that left hard feelings and set the stage for World War II. World War I also helped ignite the Russian Revolutions of 1917, which replaced czarist rule with the world's first communist government. The expansionism of Germany and Japan led to World War II (1939–1945). Germany, Japan, Italy, and other Axis powers were defeated by Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States, and the other Allies. The war cost millions of lives and left Europe and Japan economically and socially devastated.
Cold War 1946–1991	After World War II, countries with two conflicting economic systems—capitalism and communism—competed for worldwide influence and power. The major players in this struggle, the United States and the Soviet Union, each tried to win other nations to its side. They used military, economic, and humanitarian aid to extend their control over other countries. Each sought to prevent the other superpower from gaining influence. The rivalry was mainly diplomatic and strategic and hence was called the Cold War. However, it led both the United States and the Soviet Union to become involved in military actions around the world. The rivalry dominated world politics for four decades, until the Soviet Union broke up in 1991.

Major Explorations

Area Explored	Dates	Explorer(s)	Nationality
Newfoundland	about 1000	Leif Ericson	Norse
China, Southeast Asia, India	1270s–1290s	Marco Polo	Venetian
West Indies, South and Central America	1492–1502	Christopher Columbus	Italian
Newfoundland	1497	John and Sebastian Cabot	Italian
Cape of Good Hope, Africa; India	1497–1498	Vasco da Gama	Portuguese
East and north coast of South America	1497–1499	Vespucci	Italian
Brazil	1500	Pedro Alvarez Cabral	Portuguese
Panama, Pacific Ocean	1513	Vasco Nunez de Balboa	Spanish
Florida, Yucatán Peninsula	1513	Juan Ponce de Leon	Spanish
Mexico	1519	Hernando Cortés	Spanish
Straits of Magellan, Tierra del Fuego	1519–1520	Ferdinand Magellan	Portuguese
New York harbor	1524	Giovanni da Verrazano	Italian
Texas	1528	Cabeza de Vaca	Spanish
Peru	1532	Francisco Pizarro	Spanish
Canada, Gulf of St. Lawrence	1534	Jacques Cartier	French
Buenos Aires	1536	Pedro de Mendoza	Spanish
Mississippi River, near Memphis	1539–1541	Hernando de Soto	Spanish
Southwestern United States	1540	Francisco de Coronado	Spanish
Colorado River	1540	Hernando Alarcon	Spanish
Colorado, Grand Canyon	1540	Garcia de Lopez Cardenas	Spanish
Amazon River	1541	Francisco de Orellana	Spanish
Western Mexico, San Diego harbor	1542	Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo	Portuguese
California coast	1577–1580	Sir Francis Drake	English
Orinoco river	1595	Sir Walter Raleigh	English
Canadian interior, Lake Champlain	1603–1609	Samuel de Champlain	French
Hudson River, Hudson Bay	1609–1610	Henry Hudson	English
Tasmania	1642	Abel Janszoon	Dutch
Mississippi River, south to Arkansas	1673	Jacques Marquette, Louis Joliet	French
Mississippi River, south to Gulf of Mexico	1682	Robert Cavalier, sieur de La Salle	French
Bering Strait and Alaska	1727–1729	Vitus Bering	Danish
South Pacific	1768–1775	James Cook	English
Northwestern Canada	1789	Sir Alexander Mackenzie	Canadian
Missouri River, Rocky Mountains, Columbia River	1804–1805	Meriwether Lewis, William Clark	American
Arabia, East Africa, Lake Tanganyika	1853–1858	Sir Richard Burton	English
Upper course of Zambezi River, Victoria Falls, Lake Ngami	1849–1873	David Livingstone	Scottish
Congo River	1874–1889	Sir Henry Stanley	Welsh
North Pole	1909	Robert E. Peary, Matthew Henson	American
South Pole	1911	Roald Amundsen	Norwegian
Moon	1969	Neil Armstrong, Edwin Aldrin	American
Mars	1975–2005	Space probes Viking 1 and 2; Mars Rover robots Spirit and Opportunity	American