

Mapping Patterns of Cultural Diffusion

Geographers use maps to help them understand how cultures affect places, and how cultures move and change. They carefully observe the landscape looking for cultural clues, and map where the clues occur. Then they look for patterns on the maps. This process is called **spatial analysis**.

Cultural regions are based on one or more aspects of human culture. They are functional regions; that is, they are based on activities of people living in the area. Religion and language are two common cultural characteristics used to determine cultural regions. Geographers use real, observable data to locate the region. They may use census records, the locations of churches or temples, or the language used in schools or business advertising to determine *where* a language is spoken or a religion is followed. Because people move around as a part of daily life, the boundaries of cultural regions may change over time.

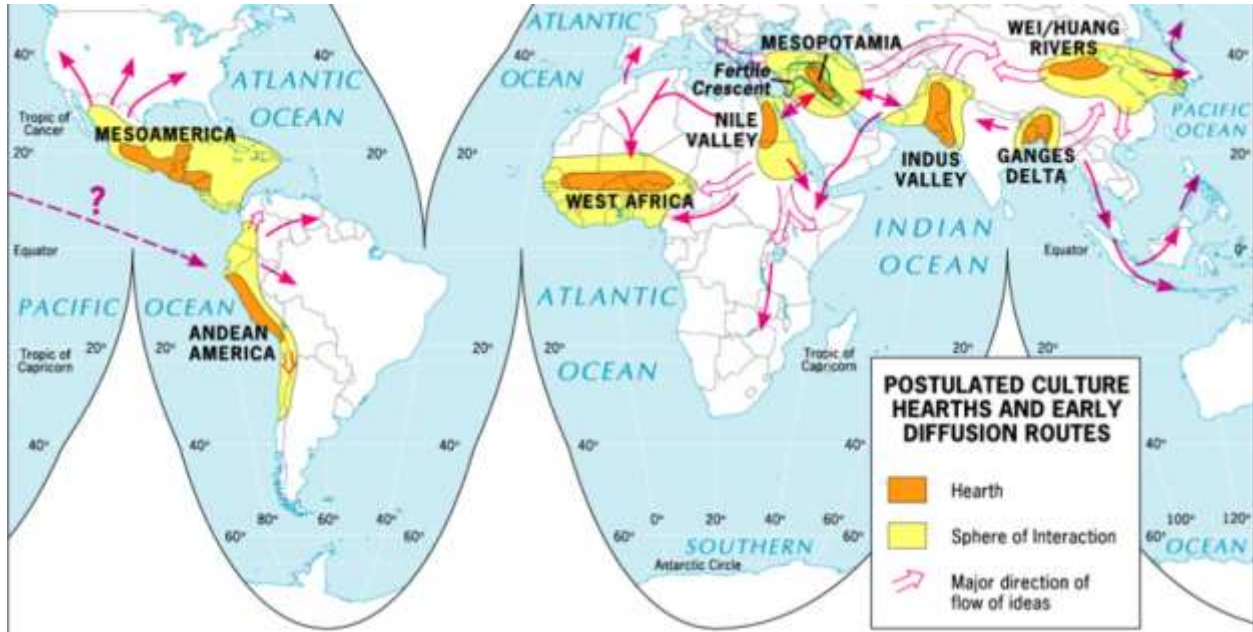
A closer look at cultural regions

- **Core:** The part of the region where the cultural traits are found most often
- **Periphery:** The part of the region where cultural traits are found less frequently



Cultural Hearths

In the ancient past, major cultures began in an area called a **cultural hearth**. From these areas, cultures spread (diffused) outward, carried by people involved in trade, travel, conquest or immigration. Geographers and historians believe that there were several cultural hearths in the ancient world. They are shown on the map below.



In each of these cultural hearths, people developed a different way of doing things like eating, building shelter, speaking, writing, and making a living, and living together. For example, in the Chinese Wei-Huang Valley, people ate rice with chopsticks, spoke Chinese language, wrote with pictographs, and developed a respect for ancestors.

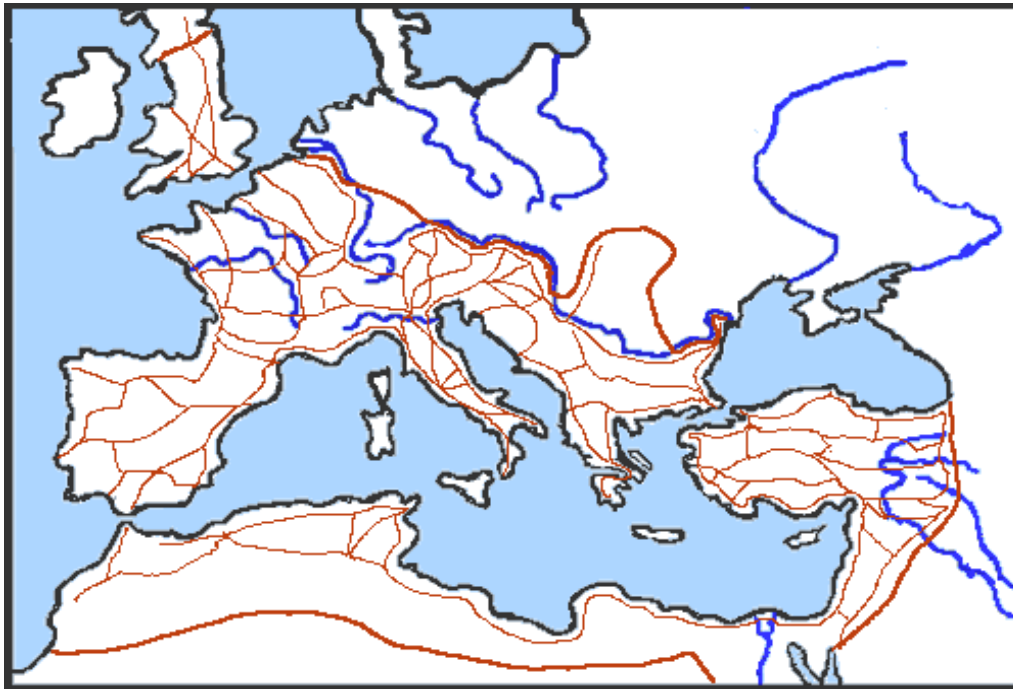
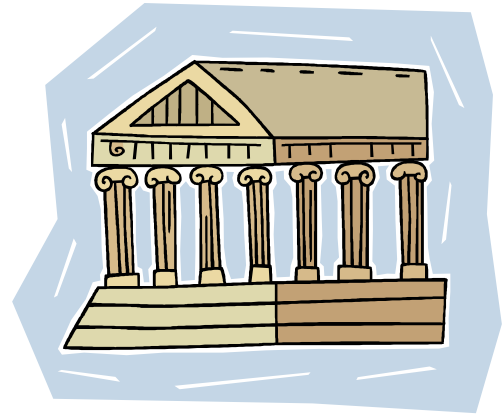
On the map above, the orange area represents the core of the cultural region. In this area, almost everyone followed all of the cultural ways of doing. The yellow area surrounding it is called the periphery. In this area, most people followed the ways of the culture at least most of the time, but other languages, belief systems, ways of eating, or making a living might also be seen there occasionally. In the area outside the region (yellow on the map) people would not follow the cultural pattern.

Cultural Hearths in History

In seven places known today, ancient people “invented” cultures, and these cultures still influence the way people live today. The seven original cultural hearths are located in: Mesopotamia, Nile Valley and the Indus Valley, Wei-Huang Valley, Ganges Valley, Mesoamerica, West Africa, Andean America. Locate each cultural hearth on the map above.

Secondary Cultural Hearths

Later in history, some other cultural hearths developed. They were influential, but they built on cultures that had developed before. The Greco-Roman cultural hearth is an example of this. Beginning in Greece, this culture developed and spread around the Mediterranean Sea and far beyond. The ideas of this cultural hearth got a start from the Nile Valley and from Mesopotamia. The Greeks added their cultural ideas to the earlier developments. The Romans borrowed Greek ideas and added their own cultural ideas. Through trade, travel and conquest, the Romans spread the culture over a wide area.



The map at the left shows roads, rivers and other waterways of the Roman Empire.

The Romans sometimes built walls on the periphery of their empire, trying to protect their culture from the attacks of barbarians.

Cultural Diffusion

Whenever people travel, they carry their culture with them. For this reason, culture spreads fastest along travel routes. Places with many connections are likely to receive visitors from many cultures, and their ideas (dress styles, language and religion, knowledge about inventions) shape the place. On the other hand, places with few connections are less affected by other cultures. They change very slowly.

On the map above, which areas have the most connections? Which areas have the least?