

Approaching the Different Cultures

The Land

It is time for children to be grounded in geography, in the land, and for them to start to be aware of the intimate connections between human culture and geography. The isolation of Egypt, the richness of the Fertile Crescent, the harsh weather on the Persian Steppes – all are factors which are inexorably tied up with the development of each culture’s worldview, technology and art. Spirit manifested in different ways in each of the four cultures we are studying and how spirit met the land is a defining characteristic of each.

Begin the study of each culture with a description, therefore, of the land. I have provided you with a narrative, but it is always best to ensure that such descriptions are living in you, the teacher. So as part of your own preparation, do have a good look in atlases or other sources of information so you have a lively picture of what you are describing inside your own imagination first. And if you do look at maps together with your child, avoid the “political” maps, those with modern boundaries of countries. Instead, look at physical maps, to get a good feel for the land itself. While looking at a map, don’t, for instance, talk about how the Nile is now dammed and how the relationship between the people and the river has thus changed. That is bringing your child into modern consciousness, modern history, modern culture. That is not what we are concerned with in this main lesson. Such things come later: for now we are creating foundations for your child to glimpse a part of the enormous and dramatic changes in human consciousness as exemplified by these four cultures. And so we must take care to keep our descriptions and lesson material firmly grounded in the appropriate cultural epoch.

As you describe the land, consider weather; terrain; bodies of water such as rivers and seas; physical barriers such as mountains; and plant and animal life.

As you move through the block, compare and contrast the geography of the four cultures. How was the Nile different from or similar to the Tigris and Euphrates? How might it have been different to live between the rugged mountains in Persia or on the flat endless sands of Egypt? Later, when you get to Ancient China, you can consider some of the differences and similarities.

Later in fifth grade you’ll also have a block on Alexander the Great. He traveled in the lands covered during this block, getting all the way to India and dying at age 33 in Babylon. If your child has a lively grasp of the geography of this part of the world, this will form a wonderful part of her ability to truly appreciate the enormity of Alexander’s travels.