

The Shang Dynasty

Learning Objective:

To find out what ordinary life was like for people during the Shang Dynasty.



How do you think ordinary people lived during the Shang Dynasty?

Where do you think they lived?

What did they do to earn a living?

What do you think they ate?



Shang society was organised in a pyramid system with the king at the top, followed by nobles, priests, merchants, craftsmen and farmers. Below everyone were the slaves.

The king had absolute power over all his subjects. If you disagreed with the king you would immediately be killed by his soldiers.

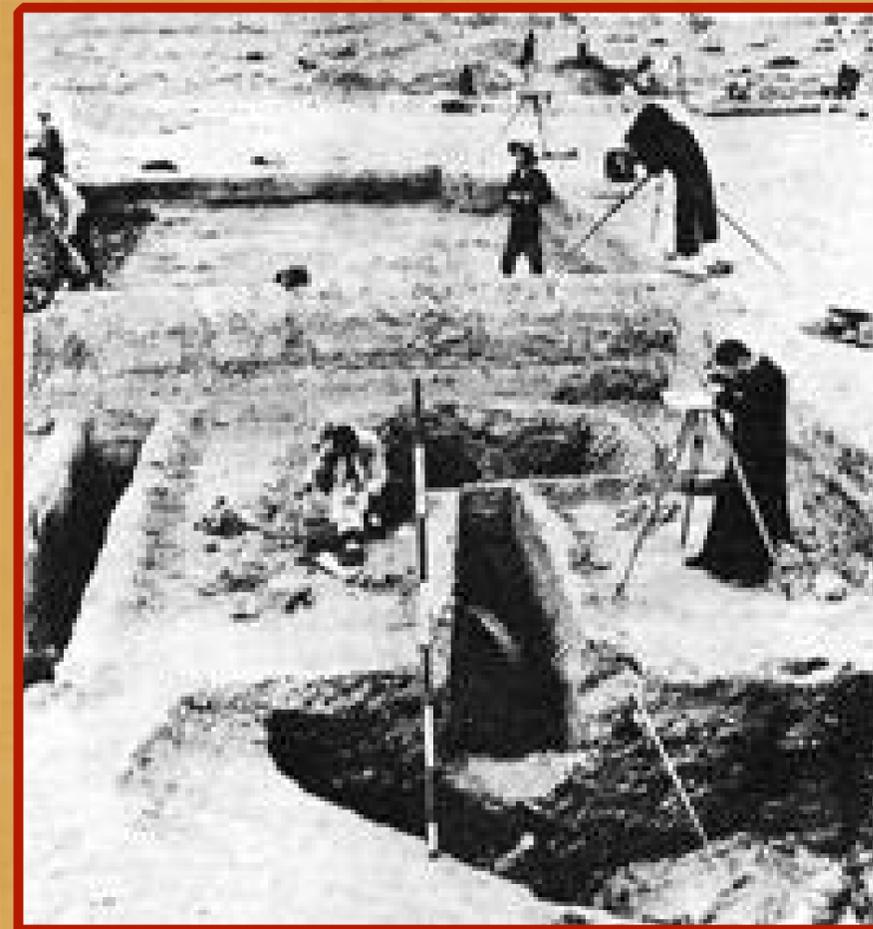
Nobles usually owned farmland which farmers farmed for them. In return, the nobles let the farmers keep some of the food they grew.



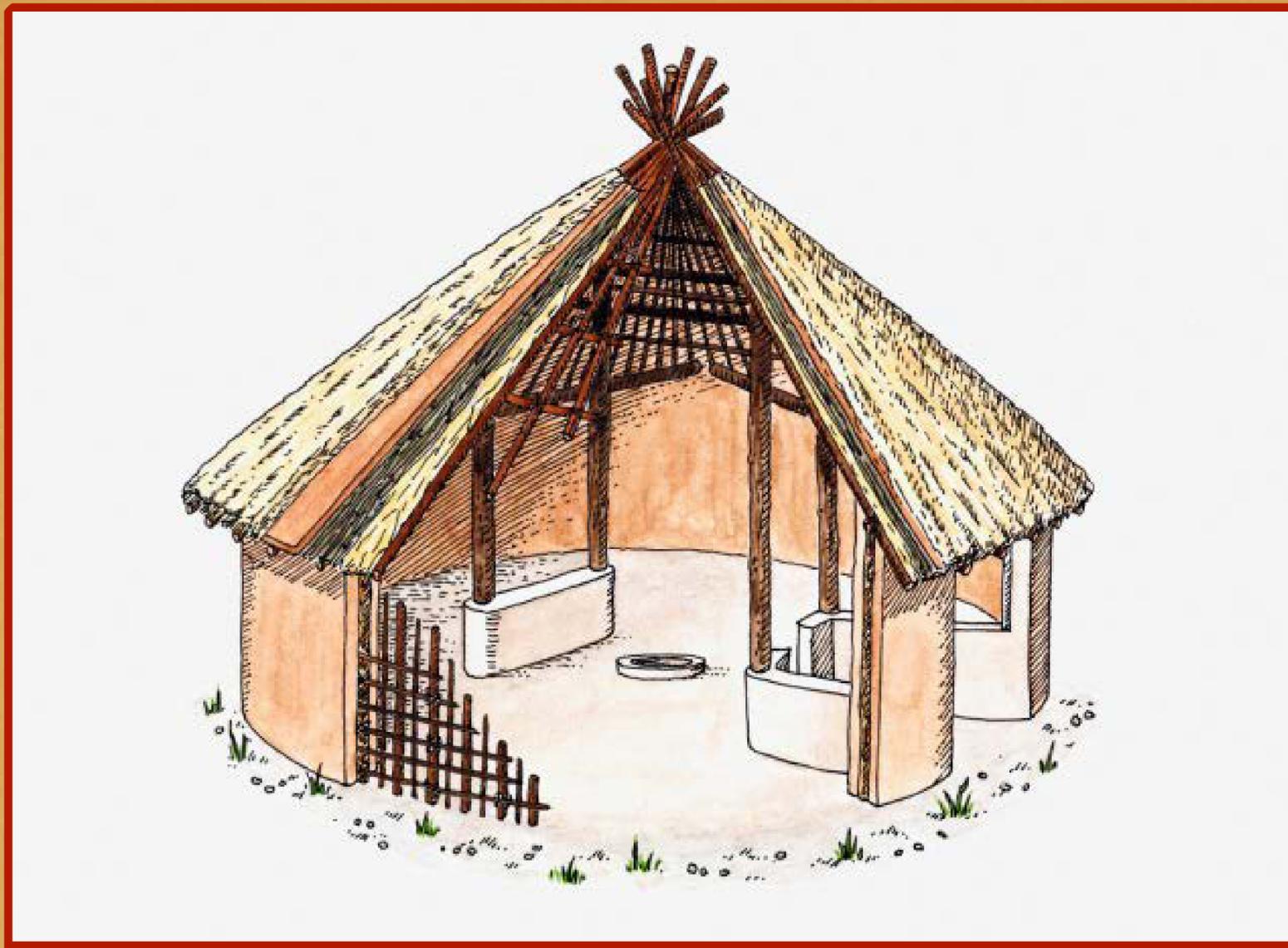
Cities were built with walls surrounding them for protection. Not everyone lived inside the city walls. Farmers and craftsmen often lived outside of the city in villages in the countryside.

Most houses were made from wood with rammed earth for floors and thatched roofs.

Cooking was done on a central hearth using metal or pottery cooking vessels.



This picture shows Chinese archaeologists excavating houses in 1930



This is what a typical peasant house of the Shang Dynasty would have looked like.

Outside of the city, farmers grew crops such as millet, wheat and barley, and only a little rice which was more commonly grown further south. The land of the Shang Dynasty was irrigated with water from the Yellow River which made it very fertile.



Map of the Yellow River

Farmers were not allowed to plant their crops until they had been told to do so by the king. The king would consult the oracle bones to find out when the best time for planting would be.

Farmers also kept lots of domesticated animals, such as sheep, pigs and dogs for food, and oxen for pulling ploughs and carts.



As well as growing crops, people would hunt wild animals and fish for food.

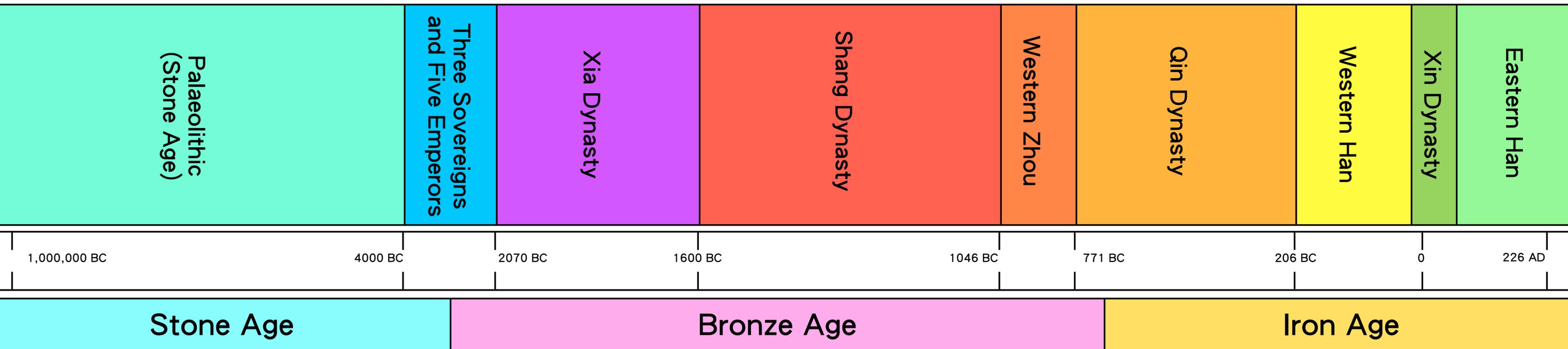
The majority of people would have lived as peasants. They would have lived simple lives, tending to their fields and caring for their animals. They would have gathered water from rivers or streams for drinking and washing.

Children would not have gone to school but would have helped their parents with chores around the home. Children of noble families probably had private tutors to teach them.

Would you rather go to school or help your parents with chores all day?



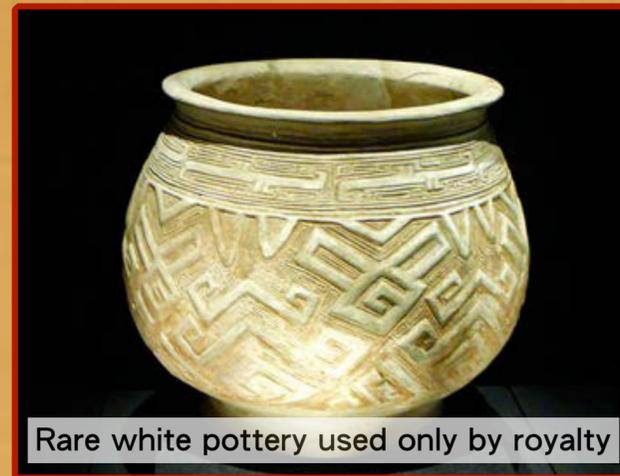
Ancient China



The Shang Dynasty happened during the Bronze Age. This means that people had worked out how to mine, extract and use bronze but they had not yet worked out how to mine and use iron which is stronger than bronze. This meant that many people worked as bronzesmiths, making weapons, tools, ornaments, cooking vessels, chariots and other objects.



Grey pottery



Rare white pottery used only by royalty



Bronze cooking pot



Bronze wine container



Bone comb

Other craftsmen included potters, bone-workers and bowyers (who made bows and arrows). Sometimes, farmers worked as craftsmen when there was a surplus harvest which meant they didn't need to plant more crops.



What do people have today that people in the Shang Dynasty would not have had?