

Introduction to the Asia–Pacific world

The period between about 700 CE and 1800 CE marks the end of the ancient world and the beginning of the modern world in the Asia–Pacific region. It was a period of great change. Across the Asia–Pacific world new societies and civilisations were established and huge empires were forged. The history of the Asia–Pacific world is important to all Australians – not just because it’s the part of the world in which we live, but because it is a region with a rich history.

In this chapter you will learn how different beliefs and religions, social structures, laws, and governments influenced societies across the Asia–Pacific world.



chapter 12

12A

1 Where and when did civilisations in the Asia–Pacific world develop?

12B

2 What were the key features of societies in the Asia–Pacific world?

Source 1 One of the most important changes across the Asia–Pacific world was the spread of religions. Across Asia, religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism spread quickly and became an important part of daily life. This statue near the city of Kamakura in Japan shows the significance of Buddhism in Japanese society.

Unit 2 The Asia–Pacific World

This unit offers a choice of two topics:

- The Khmer Empire (obook only)
- Mongol expansion (obook only)
- Japan under the shoguns
- The Polynesian expansion across the Pacific (obook only)

You must choose AT LEAST ONE of these topics for study.

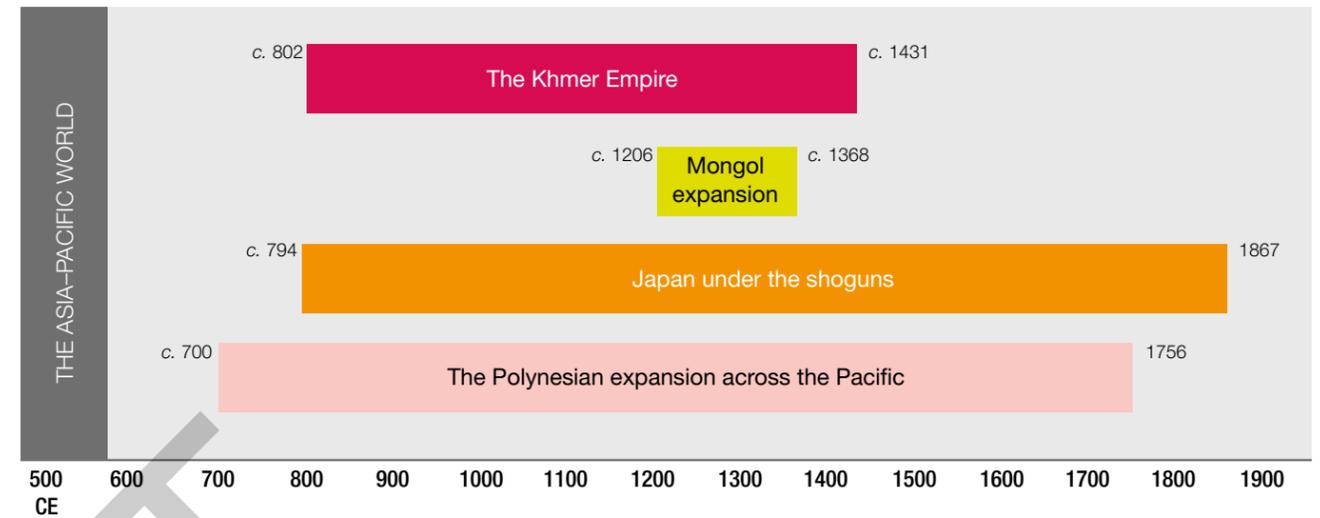
12.1 The where and when of the Asia–Pacific world

In this unit you will be learning about different civilisations and events that took place across the Asia–Pacific world. To help you get a better understanding of these civilisations and events, it helps to look briefly at some of the common factors that influenced each civilisation and think about how their development was linked.

The world map (Source 1) shows the location and size of the civilisations you will be learning about in this unit, including:

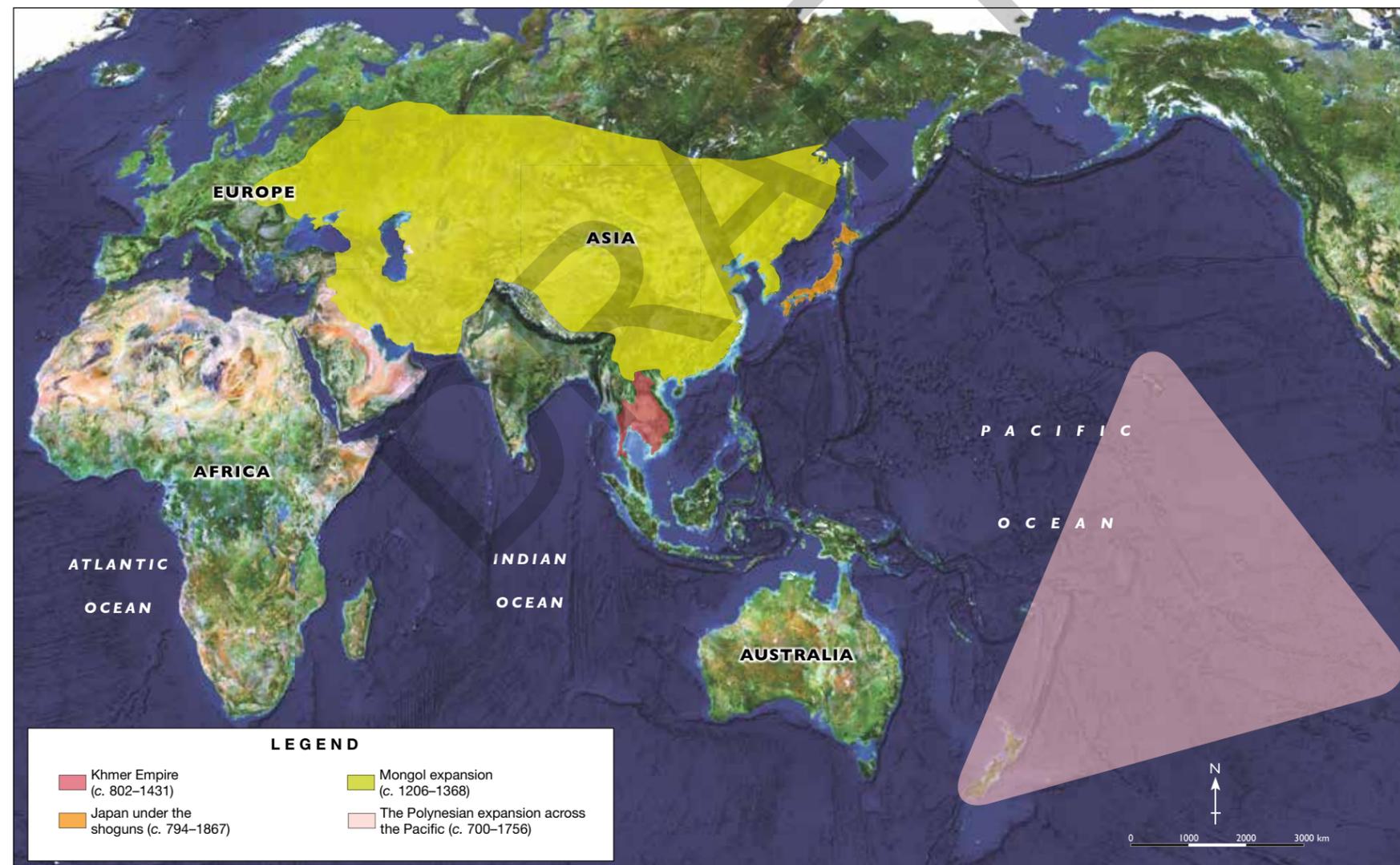
- the territories of the Khmer Empire when it was at its greatest size
- the territories of the Mongol Empire when it was at its greatest size
- the islands of Japan
- the thousands of islands in an area of the Pacific Ocean settled by Polynesian peoples (known as the Polynesian Triangle)

The dates for each civilisation are shown in the timeline (Source 2). Unlike civilisations in the European and Mediterranean world, the civilisations in the Asia–Pacific world all existed around the same time. This was possible because they all inhabited separate territories across a vast area.



Source 2 This timeline shows the rise and fall of civilisations across the Asia–Pacific world.

ASIA-PACIFIC WORLD: KEY CIVILISATIONS



Source 1 This satellite image of Earth shows the location and size of some key civilisations across the Asia–Pacific world when they were at their peak.

Source: Oxford University Press

Check your learning 12.1

Remember and understand

- 1 Look carefully at Source 1 and complete the following tasks:
 - a The Khmer Empire was located in an area we know refer to as South-East Asia. What country in South-East Asia was it located on?
 - b Rank the four civilisations in the Asia–Pacific world in order of geographic size.

Apply and analyse

- 2 Describe Australia’s geographic location in relation to the civilisations shown on the map.

Evaluate and create

- 3 The area of the Pacific Ocean that was explored by the Polynesians is known as the Polynesian Triangle. Use the Internet to find the groups of islands that form this triangle and create a list of them.

12.2 Key features of societies in the Asia–Pacific world

In this unit, you will study ONE of the following topics:

- The Khmer Empire
- Mongol expansion
- Japan under the shoguns
- The Polynesian expansion across the Pacific.

Before beginning a detailed study into your chosen civilisation, it helps to look briefly at some key factors that influenced all of the societies across the Asia–Pacific world. In particular, it is useful to look at the types of belief systems and religions that were important to each one, as well as the systems of government, laws and social structures that influenced their development.

Belief systems and religions

Belief systems and religions formed the foundations of all societies across the Asia–Pacific world. The principles underpinning these belief systems, and the religious teachings that went along with them, influenced almost every aspect of life. The belief systems of many societies across the Asia–Pacific region had one thing in common – they were all based around a belief in spirits of the natural world.

The Khmer Empire

More than any other single factor, religion had the greatest influence on the development of the Khmer Empire. Long before the rise of the Khmer Empire, the traditional people in this part of South-East Asia worshipped spirits of the natural world. This belief system – known as Animism – involved the worship of all living things (such as animals, humans and plants) as well as natural events (such as the wind, rain and sun). These beliefs were passed from one generation to another through word of mouth.

Later, once the Khmer Empire had been established, the Khmer people went on to worship Hindu gods. Hinduism first developed in India and was introduced to the Khmer Empire from the

9th century onwards. Hinduism had a significant influence on Khmer society. Between around 800 and 1200 CE, beautiful temples were built to honour the three most important Hindu gods – Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. At the same time, Khmer kings were also regarded as living gods.

In around 1200, a Khmer king by the name of Jayavarman VII came to power and changed the official religion of the Khmer Empire from Hinduism to Buddhism. Like Hinduism, Buddhism was a belief system that originated in India. It was founded by an Indian prince named Siddhartha Gautama – who would later become known to his followers as Buddha. Buddhism did not recognise the king as a living god. This reduced the number of temples built by kings to honour themselves and their Hindu gods. It also changed the way in which society was organised.



Source 1 Angkor Wat is the largest Hindu temple complex – and the largest religious monument – in the world. It is arguably the most significant achievement of the Khmer Empire and shows the importance of religion in Khmer society.



Source 2 A modern-day Mongolian shaman making an offering to the spirits

Mongol expansion

Before the formation of the Mongol Empire in around 1206, **nomadic** (travelling) tribes of animal herders across central Asia worshipped spirits of the earth and sky – a belief system known as shamanism.

Spiritual leaders (called shamans) were believed to be messengers between the spirit world and the human world. Shamans could be men or women of any age – even young children. In many Mongol tribes they were important members of society. Shamans were believed to be able to communicate with the spirit world, interpreting messages from dead ancestors, performing healing rituals and predicting the future. Because the Mongols were a nomadic people, in the early days of the empire there were no temples or permanent places of worship.

Although most Mongols throughout the empire believed in shamanism, this was not one of the driving forces behind the expansion of the empire – in fact, the rapid expansion of the empire was based more on a need for resources (such as grain and metals) and access to pastures for animal grazing.

The Mongols were actually very tolerant of different religions and races. Over time, religious missionaries spread the religions of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism throughout different parts of their vast empire. Under the rule of

Genghis Khan (the founder of the Mongol Empire), institutions were set up to ensure religious freedom. As new territories were conquered, religious leaders were allowed to continue practising their own beliefs. In order to win the support of the people, these religious leaders were not taxed. Confucian scholars and Tibetan Buddhist monks also acted as court advisors. As the power of the Mongol Empire reached its peak, trade and travel became more and more important. Merchants, craftsmen and missionaries of all different religions were guaranteed safe passage along busy trade routes – the most famous and important of which was known as the **Silk Road**.

One of the effects of Mongol expansion that no one could have foreseen was the spread of a deadly outbreak of plague known as the **Black Death**. There are many theories about how it spread, but the most widely held belief is that it originated in China or central Asia around 1334 and was carried across the Mongol Empire to Europe and Africa along land and sea trade routes. Many historians now believe that the Mongols were also responsible for unknowingly spreading the disease as they conquered new lands and peoples – most likely by transporting fleas on their animals that carried the disease. For brief periods throughout the 14th century, the plague ravaged populations across Asia, Europe and Africa, killing an estimated 75 million people.

Japan under the shoguns

Like the Polynesians, the Indigenous people of Japan worshipped nature and kami (divine spirits). The early Japanese believed that all natural things were inhabited by these natural spirits who took the form of things necessary for life, such as the sun, hills, lakes, mountains, rivers and trees.

The spirits were also responsible for things like fertility. After they died, people in Japan were believed to become kami. These people were then worshipped by their families. In many ways, this was similar to Polynesian beliefs.

Over time, these beliefs developed into a more formal Japanese religion known as Shinto. Shinto shrines were built across Japan and the emperor of Japan was worshipped as a god. Another similarity between Shinto and Polynesian beliefs was the telling of creation stories. One Shinto creation myth tells of two gods placing a spear into the ocean. When it was withdrawn, water drops fell from the spear forming the islands of Japan.

In the 5th century, Buddhism was introduced to Japan from China. From this point on, Shinto and Buddhism were both followed by Japanese people, but from the 8th century onwards Buddhism became the state religion. Buddhist temples were built all across Japan.

Between the 6th and 9th centuries, **Confucianism** was also introduced from China. Confucianism had a positive impact on ethics (morals) and politics. Finally, Christianity was brought to Japan in 1549 by Christian missionaries. At first, Christianity was tolerated, but later it was banned. It reappeared in 1859 and promoted social reform and justice in Japan.

The Polynesian expansion across the Pacific

The Polynesians are a group of people whose civilisation spread over a vast area of the Pacific Ocean and settled thousands of islands between 700 and 1756. This area of the Pacific Ocean became known as the Polynesian Triangle. The points of this triangle were formed by the islands of Hawai'i, Rapa Nui (Easter Island) and Aotearoa (New Zealand).

As Polynesians spread throughout the region, they formed many different societies on many



Source 3 Shinto shrines like as this one in the city of Kyoto can be seen all over Japan today. Shinto is a Japanese religion that developed out of a belief in spirits of the natural world. Later, Buddhism became the state religion of Japan.



Source 4 Polynesian societies across the Pacific Ocean shared many beliefs about gods and the creation of the world. Many Polynesian societies during this period made representations of these gods in the form of large wooden tikis like the ones shown here

different groups of islands. Each had its own belief system and religion, but there were some common features between them. All Polynesian cultural groups worshipped multiple gods and spirits. Each of these spirits were responsible for the Earth's natural features and processes such as the wind, rain, sun, moon and stars. Each cultural group passed down creation stories that explained how these important elements – such as the sun – came to be. Polynesians also worshipped their ancestors and created rituals to please the gods so that food was plentiful and women would give birth to healthy children.

Over time, a group of spiritual guides and priests developed in many Polynesian societies. Some priests made offerings to the gods, such as human sacrifices, to ensure protection, good fortune and healthy crops. One Polynesian cultural group that settled the islands of New Zealand were the Māori. Spirituality had a significant impact on the way Māori societies and culture developed.

Their beliefs shaped how they lived and the rituals they performed. How the Māori managed the use of their resources and the arts and crafts they produced clearly reflect the importance of spirituality in everyday life. From the early 1800s, European and American missionaries moved throughout the Polynesian Triangle, trading and converting the islanders to Christianity. These Christian missionaries transformed all aspects of Polynesian beliefs and customs to make them more 'civilised'. In many cases they destroyed traditional belief systems and replaced them with the religion of Christianity.

Governments, laws and social structures

Although the ways in which societies across the Asia-Pacific world were organised was quite different, there were some important similarities. Broadly speaking, all three societies were made up of a number of social groups organised according to strict **hierarchies** (social rankings). Power was often controlled by those at the top of the hierarchy, whether they were a king, tribal or military leader, or priest.

The Khmer Empire

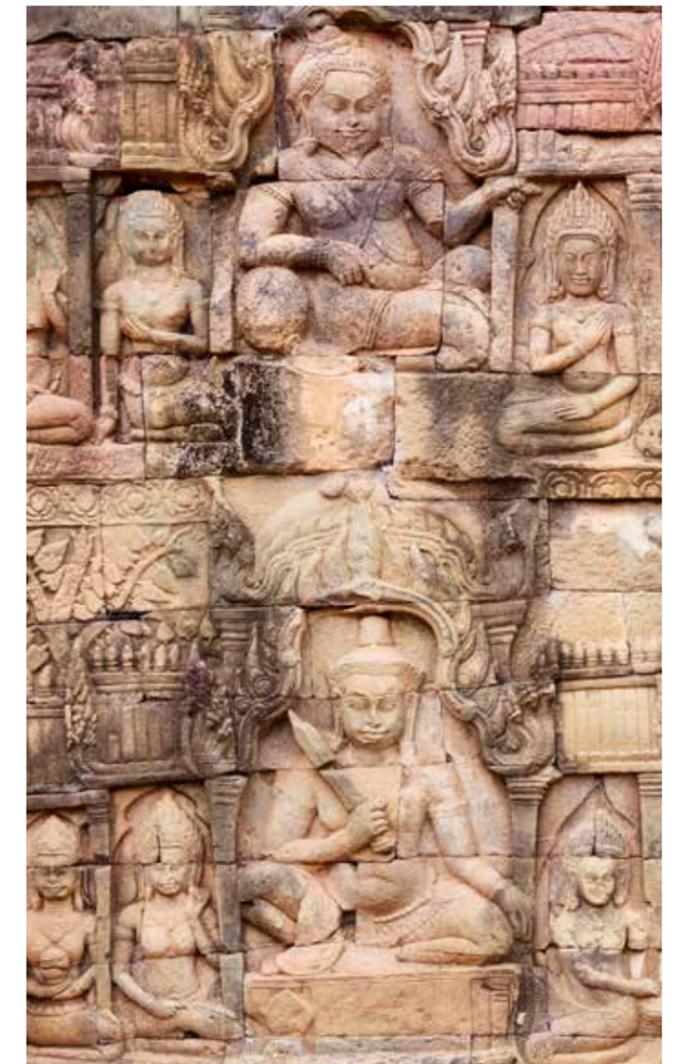
Before the rise of the Khmer Empire in 802 CE, the Khmer people lived in several small **kingdoms** in the Angkor region of modern-day Cambodia. In 802, a prince by the name of Jayavarman II declared himself Chakravartin (king of kings) and formed the Khmer Empire.

Source 5 Khmer society was organised according to strict social classes known as castes. The king was worshipped as a god and held the highest caste. This stone carving at Angkor Thom shows a king at his royal court.

Life in the Khmer Empire followed a strict social hierarchy. Roughly speaking, Khmer society was divided into five classes known as **castes**. The included:

- the king
- nobles
- military officials and priests
- common people (including peasants, architects and artists)
- slaves.

The king, at the top of the hierarchy, was the source of all legal and religious power and head of the military. He was also the main force behind the creation of public buildings (such as temples), roads and canals. The nobles and military officials were required to swear an oath of loyalty to the king and in return they were trusted to administer the king's laws and carry out tasks such as tax collection.



Mongol expansion

Before the formation of the Mongol Empire, many separate tribes of Mongol people competed for land and resources on the flat grassy plains of central Asia known as the Eurasian Steppe. The Mongol Empire was formed in 1206 by a great ruler who united the many different Mongol tribes. He was known as Temujin – and later took the title of Genghis Khan. Within 100 years, Mongol territory would grow to become the largest continuous land-based empire in human history.

Under Genghis Khan's rule, the empire expanded rapidly. To thrive, it needed organisation and stability. The traditional social structures of the Mongol tribes needed to be changed to suit the new empire. Mongol tribesmen were natural warriors, so Genghis Khan built on this strength. He created an organised army that became the foundation of society. All men under 60 could be called up for military service. The army was divided into separate divisions with different functions. Each division had its own commander responsible for training and disciplining men. The ultimate command of the army rested with the khan. An elite military group known as the imperial guard was also formed. It provided Genghis Khan with the people he needed to organise and administer his empire. The imperial guard also became the training ground for the empire's new ruling class. In 1206, members of the guard numbered somewhere around 10 000. Recruits came from all tribes and membership was considered a supreme honour.



Source 6 The Mongol army formed an important part of the social structure of the Mongol Empire. It was also vital for the expansion of the empire.

Whenever a new territory was conquered, the khan introduced immediate changes. If the rulers of these territories submitted to Mongol rule they were treated as allies and left in a position of power. If they refused, their cities were destroyed and their populations were killed. Once part of the empire, the khan ordered a **census** be conducted; this helped give an idea of the size of the population and the possessions of the people. Next, taxes were imposed on the population. Finally, a legal system known as the Yasa was introduced. At its peak, the Yasa governed over 100 million people.

Japan under the shoguns

The social structure of ancient Japan was based on **clans** – groups of families related by blood or marriage. The most direct connection people had to the ancestor kami (or spirit world) was through their clan leader. In early Japan, clans often fought battles over land in order to increase the power of one clan over another.

Later, as Japan moved into the medieval period, these clan structures became more formal and led to the formation of a strict social hierarchy. Social rank was determined at birth and was strictly defined. Broadly speaking, there were six social classes. These included:

- the emperor
- the warrior class (including the **shogun**, daimyo and samurai)
- the peasant class
- the craftspeople class
- the merchant class
- the outcasts.

Over time, power became concentrated in the hands of the warrior class. The shogun (military leader) held all the power, while the emperor was only a figurehead. In many ways, this system was similar to **feudalism** in medieval Europe.

Each social class knew what was expected of them and had rights and responsibilities they had to fulfil. Unlike other Asian societies, which changed over time because of trade and contact with people from Europe, Japan became a closed society for over 200 years (from c. 1630–1860). Because of this isolation from the outside world, traditional codes of behaviour established during this period in Japan are still important today.



Source 7 During the medieval period in Japan, a warrior class evolved that was controlled by a military leader (shogun) rather than the emperor. Samurai (such as the one shown here) were an important part of this warrior class. They lived by a strict moral code that still influences elements of Japanese society to this day.

The Polynesian expansion across the Pacific

In Polynesian societies, the importance of each person within the social hierarchy was often based on their relationship with the ancestors. People who could trace their ancestors back the furthest often had the greatest power and social standing. For example, on the islands of Aotearoa (New Zealand), Māori tribes had five social classes. These included:

- rulers
- elders
- tohunga (specialists and priests)
- commoners
- slaves.



Source 8 In Polynesian societies, a person's importance and social class was generally based on their relationship with the ancestors. In New Zealand, Māori chiefs sat at the top of the social hierarchy, just as this Māori chief Tāmāti Wāka Nene (c. 1785–1871) did.

The rulers (known as rangatira) were made up of the most important families. The ariki (chief) was usually the first-born son of the most senior family that could trace its ancestry back to the founding canoes. The ariki was expected to listen to opinions of all members of the tribe and to prove their leadership in war, diplomacy and the wise treatment of the people.

At the bottom of the hierarchy were slaves who had been captured in war. They carried out all the manual tasks for the tribe, but were not prisoners. Tribal beliefs stated that once they were captured, slaves were considered dead, so it made little sense to escape. These slaves could often marry into the tribe and their children would be free.

A set of laws were central to Māori life. These were known as tapu. These were developed to protect sacred places, people and objects.

Check your learning 12.2

Remember and understand

- 1 The belief systems of most societies in the Asia-Pacific world had one thing in common. What was it?
- 2 Over its history, the Khmer Empire was influenced by three separate religions and/or belief systems. What were they and how did they change society?
- 3 What is the name of the religion that developed in Japan? How did this religion impact of the development of Japanese society?

Apply and analyse

- 4 What were the social classes of the Khmer Empire called? Do you know of any other country today that has these classes?
- 5 How were the social classes of Japan and Polynesia similar?