

ARCHAEOLOGY ADMISSIONS ASSESSMENT

Time allowed: one hour

Please choose ONE of the two texts below and answer two related questions from the four provided.

Answers should be typed, preferably in a format readable in MS Word, and the use of word-processing apps is permitted. There is no word limit but markers will reward quality over quantity.

While no restriction is placed upon you as to the resources you may use, it is important to note that we are not looking for prior or acquired knowledge in your answer. The task is designed to assess comprehension and the ability to read closely, deploy arguments effectively, and write clearly – all skills which archaeologists will need to use continuously throughout their undergraduate studies. You should remember that the more time you spend using other resources will mean less time for planning and writing your answer.

We will be looking in answers for

- the ability to think analytically
- the ability to produce a coherent argument
- the ability to select and use evidence appropriately
- the ability to address the question directly and clearly
- precision, clarity and facility of writing under time pressure

Not all answers will demonstrate these qualities equally but the best answers will show signs of all, or nearly all, of them.

The assessment does not presume that you have encountered this material or these topics before; it is simply a self-contained exercise in reading comprehension, thinking and writing.

The answer you provide must be your own. Papers may be checked using anti-plagiarism software, and you should not discuss your answers or the paper with anyone else.

Adapted from Boesch, C. 2003. *Is culture a golden barrier between human and chimpanzee?* *Evolutionary Anthropology* 12(2): 82-91.

Stephen Jay Gould said once that humanity has an unfortunate tendency to erect “golden barriers” to set us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. Is culture becoming one of those golden barriers? For many of us, material culture constitutes most of the external world we encounter in our daily lives. In the western world, material culture is so pervasive that for some of us it is the main goal of life. If, however, we were Bwa pygmies living in a tropical rainforest or Aborigines living in the open plains of Australia, our material belongings would be much more limited. This comparison indicates the extreme variability that exists in human material culture. However, human cultures are not only material, but also include beliefs, social rules, knowledge, and language. As a result of the incredible complexity of human cultures, we praise ourselves as distinct from other living beings for our uniquely rich and complex beliefs, thoughts, and knowledge. Indeed, all humans on earth are cultural animals, living in societies with specific cultural rules and traditions that infiltrate all aspects of our life. This fact has been elevated to a dogma, making humans the only living beings on earth with culture. Culture frees us from the natural world, whereas all other living animals are mainly influenced by nature. But is that dogma really so?

Recently this golden barrier has come under question, as increasing evidence from primates, birds, and even marine mammals supports the existence of repeated population differences in behavior patterns, the acquisition of new behavior patterns learned from group members, and the presence of flexible material cultures. Primatologists first became receptive to the notion of culture in animals when they observed the invention of potato-washing behavior by the young macaque, Imo, and saw it acquired by her playmates. Imo’s actions shook a golden barrier and opened the way to examining cultural differences in a variety of species. Since that time, research on wild chimpanzees has reached the stage where it is now possible to compare behaviors of different well-known populations living in different places throughout the African range of this species.

To compare chimpanzee and human cultures, we first need to decide what is meant when speaking of culture. Anthropologists have argued over this concept since the beginning of their discipline and agreement remains minimal. Many definitions include the word “[hu]man,” and thereby exclude any other species *a priori* and make any studies about the emergence of cultural phenomenon in any other species impossible or illegitimate. However, culture is not the exclusive property of anthropologists; other fields of science have, in the meantime, started to examine various aspects of culture.

As early as 1973, Jane Goodall listed thirteen differences in tool use as well as eight differences in social behaviors between the Gombe chimpanzees and other chimpanzee populations. She proposed that some of them were cultural in origin. The most conspicuous one was nut cracking, which is absent in the Gombe chimpanzees, in spite of the presence of oil palm nuts. Observations of this behavior were first reported in the 1840s in Liberian chimpanzees. With increasing observation time, the discovery of additional behavior differences between chimpanzee populations made it feasible to begin drawing up charts of cultural variations. In the last attempt to categorize chimpanzee cultural variation, no less than thirty-nine behavior patterns were proposed as cultural variants, including various forms of tool

use, grooming techniques, and courtship gambits. This cultural richness in chimpanzees far exceeds anything known for any other species of animal except humans.



A chimpanzee cracking oil palm nuts using a stone hammer and anvil © Kathelijne Koops

Answer TWO questions:

1. Do you agree that chimpanzees have culture in the same way humans do?
2. If culture is not a 'golden barrier' between humans and animals, do you think there are other possible golden barriers?
3. Why do you think Boesch places such emphasis on differences between communities (both human and chimpanzee) in his discussion of culture?
4. "Culture frees us from the natural world". Do you agree?

Adapted from McMahon, A. (2019) The sensory world of Mesopotamia

Texts suggest that Mesopotamian sensory concepts exuberantly mixed sense inputs into single indivisible ideas. All experiences are multi-sensory, but Mesopotamian texts often directly present cross-connections of sensory stimuli. For instance, light and heat merged into 'radiance' (Akkadian *melammu*), too painful to touch and too awesome for direct observation. Temples shone like metal (Epic of Gilgamesh Tablet I/Prologue), while buildings' eaves could roar like bulls (Enki's Journey to Nippur). The manipulation of space and raw materials must be viewed in light of these explicit sensory crossovers.

In the Middle East, the sun's glare can be so strong that it overpowers colour. This brightness may explain the primary decorative feature of exterior walls of Mesopotamian monumental buildings across the millennia: regular niching and buttressing. The most famous example of this feature is the late third millennium BCE ziggurat (temple tower) at Ur. Buttresses were usually shallow, less than one metre, providing little structural benefit. However, this pattern is perfectly adapted to bright sunlight; the vertical shadows created by each buttress are strengthened by sunlight.

Glaze incorporates both high shine and rare colours, such as blue and gold. The subtle ripples of glaze—whether on bricks or pottery—reflect its original liquid state and may suggest to the observer that the glazed object is still wet. This compels a touch, which is rewarded by a smooth slick feel. The best example of glaze's sensory impact is the first-millennium BCE Ishtar Gate at Babylon, which was covered with blue glazed bricks, with gold and white animal imagery in low relief (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: One of the mušḫuššu dragons from the Ishtar gate

The gate's power over the visitor may have rested in the intensity of being surrounded by exotic, shining colours as much as by its scale and depictions of wild animals referencing the gods. Whether as a backdrop to festival processions or as a corridor for daily access, the Ishtar Gate would have made entering the city into an indelible experience. On his 'Banquet Stele' inscription, the Neo-Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal notes that he used blue-glazed bricks for doorframes and gateways in his palace at Nimrud. The use of blue in the liminal space of gateways and to highlight descriptions of foreign conquests reinforces the connection between power and intensity of rare colour.

If sensory stimuli 'prompt and produce memories' (Betts, 2017, p.4), what were those memories in Mesopotamia? Deliberately manipulated sense stimuli were reminders of social concepts of hierarchy, fate, beliefs and justice. But equally important was the unconscious creation of 'moments' through the sense input from everyday activities, moments that underlined and celebrated community, productivity, progress and potential. The intensity of daily Mesopotamian sensory stimuli contrasted starkly with textual descriptions of the underworld, which was a place dim but not dark, dusty but not utterly arid, slow-moving and boring. Hell was the lack of sensory stimulation, a place where clean clothing, shoes, affection and play were all prohibited (Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld). The theme of Mesopotamia's most famous myth, the Epic of Gilgamesh, is the struggle against the inevitability of death and an eternity in a place of such limited sensory excitement.

Answer TWO questions:

1. In what ways might people's sensory experience of Mesopotamian monumental buildings contribute to maintaining social hierarchies? Reflect on examples from the reading.
2. How might ideas about the power of the king be communicated?
3. Do we need text-based evidence to fully understand what sounds and colours meant to people in Mesopotamia?
4. Is it ever possible for archaeologists to fully understand how people in the past perceived their world?