

From Hunter-Foragers to Settled Societies

"Civilizations take ages to be born, to settle, and to grow."
—Fernand Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*

Achieving an understanding of early human history is difficult. But even though prehistoric peoples did not have a written language, they left evidence of how they lived in their bones and in their *artifacts*, objects made by people in the past. For example, the size and composition of skeletons can suggest how well nourished people were. Chipped stones indicate they made tools with sharp edges. The remains of burnt logs show they used fire. And since prehistoric people often buried their dead with jewelry and religious tokens, they left clues about what they considered valuable. By studying these physical remains, people today can trace the movements of the earliest humans across the globe, understand how they traded with each other, and learn about the new technologies they developed.

Migrating Across the Globe

Modern humans, the group *Homo sapiens sapiens*, first appeared in East Africa between 200,000 and 100,000 years ago. They survived by hunting animals and foraging for seeds, nuts, fruits, and edible roots, so they are labeled as *hunter-foragers* or hunter-gatherers. Always on the search for food, they migrated from place to place, gradually expanding the region of human settlement. If the population became too dense in one area or if the climate shifted, they might be pushed to move. Other times, they might be pulled to a new region by new sources of food or fresh water. As people encountered new climates and environments, they developed new cultural patterns and new forms of technology.

One force pushing migration was climate change. As the climate warmed and cooled, animal and plant habitats shifted. People adjusted by following the animals and plants. Each time the climate cooled—a dip in the average daily temperature of several degrees—habitats would shift toward the equator and glaciers would grow, covering up land. As the climate warmed, habitats would shift away from the equator and more land would open up for occupation. As the animals and plants moved, so did people.

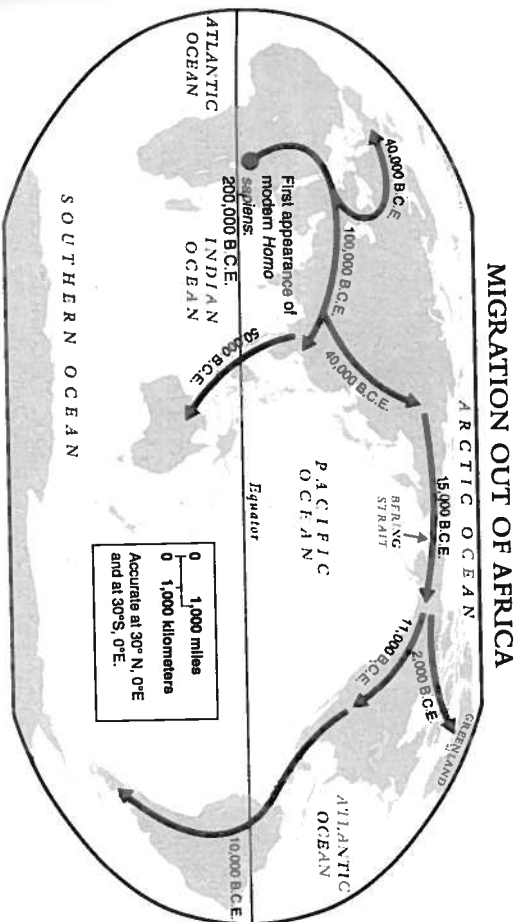
During one cooler period, so much water froze into ice that the ocean levels fell as much as 400 feet below today's level. The level was low enough that land connected northeastern Asia and what is now Alaska. This land, now submerged under the Bering Strait, provided a bridge between Asia and the Americas. Nomadic hunters followed herds of animals that wandered across this land. When temperatures increased and ocean levels rose, these people, the first Americans, were cut off from their Asian ancestors. Over time, they slowly moved farther south along the coast.

By 10,000 B.C.E., possibly far earlier, humans lived on every continent except Antarctica. In each region, people developed distinctive cultures.

The Paleolithic Period

The early years of human history are part of the *Paleolithic Period*, which began 2.5 million years ago and ended about 10,000 years ago (8000 B.C.E.). Because humans used stone tools and weapons in this period, it is often called the Stone Age. In addition to stone, people made tools from wood, animal bones, and antlers. Many of their tools included a sharp point or blade. For example, they had digging sticks for uncovering roots they could eat, and they had spears, harpoons, and arrows for killing animals.

Adapting to the Environment As people migrated in search of animals and edible plants, they found certain tools to be particularly useful in the new environment they encountered. For example, as they moved into cooler climates as far north as the tundra, they needed scrapers for cleaning the flesh off of animals' skins they wore for warmth. In the warmer regions such as the tropics, nets for catching fish were particularly valuable. As they reached the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea and the Pacific Ocean, they built strong rafts to venture out onto the water. In forested areas, they used axes to cut down trees to make shelters. People adapted technology to new conditions.



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Control of Fire One of the greatest accomplishments of people in the Paleolithic Period was to learn to control fire. It changed their lives by providing

- light to allow them to see better after the sun went down
- heat so they could live in colder climates than before
- protection against wild animals
- smoke to pacify bees, which made obtaining honey easier
- help in hunting by scaring animals to race to their death over a cliff

Possibly the most influential use of fire was to prepare food. Cooking made protein-rich and starchy foods (both hunted and foraged) easier to digest and, hence, more nutritious.

Hunter-Forager Society As early humans developed new technology, they also established more complex social structures. At the center of society was the nuclear family, which then expanded outward to include ties between related families. Several related families that moved together in search of food were called a *kinship group*. A typical group might include 20 to 40 people. Smaller groups might have difficulty finding enough food. Larger groups would use up the food supply of an area more quickly, which would require more frequent moving. Kinship groups were often nearly self-sufficient. They could make most or all of what they needed to survive.

Though kinship groups traveled on their own and were close to self-sufficient, they were not isolated. They were often part of a larger group of relatives called a *clan*. And sometimes multiple clans combined into still larger units called a *tribe*. An individual did not have to be related to other members to be considered part of a tribe. The tribes were formed for purposes of group hunting or mutual defense from enemies and were usually led by chiefs and priests.

Between groups at each level of organization—kinship group, clan, and tribe—people were also tied together by trade. Besides trading goods such as tools and clothing, they also traded people. A person from one group might join another group to help balance out the size of each group. Through these trades in goods and people, ideas spread. People learned new methods for making tools, new thoughts about religion, and new information about the world.

Roles in Society Since early people did not leave written records, most modern knowledge of them comes from the study of artifacts. However, in modern times, anthropologists have also studied hunter-forager groups whose way of life probably resembles that of earlier nomads. From these modern studies, scholars have inferred that Paleolithic groups probably were relatively egalitarian. They did not have many layers of leaders, and only small differences separated the poorest and the wealthiest individuals in a kinship group.

Functions in hunter-forager societies were often divided by gender. These societies were *patriarchal*, ones dominated by men. Paleolithic males took charge of hunts, warfare, and heavy labor. Paleolithic women gathered and



Source: *Sisicophonio*
The oldest known paintings were created about 40,000 years ago..

prepared food and looked after the children. Anthropologists believe that the women breast-fed their children for as long as five years, a practice that provided high nutrition for the children as well as a very rudimentary form of family planning. (Test Prep: Write a paragraph connecting early hunter-forager groups with such groups in Russia. Read about the Slavic peoples on page 137)

Religion and Art Paleolithic people developed a system of religious beliefs centered around the worship of gods they associated with the forces of nature. The belief that animals, rivers, and other elements of nature embody spirits is called *animism*. The first religious leaders were probably *shamans*, people believed to have special abilities to cure the sick and influence the future. Ritual sacrifices to these gods and evidence of burial practices suggest a belief in the afterlife that dates back 100,000 years. Evidence of artistic expression has been found in the form of cave paintings, which date back to 32,000 years ago, and musical instruments, such as flutes, dating to 30,000 years ago. Paleolithic art may have been connected to religious ceremonies.

- The production of *textiles*, items made of cloth, included several steps. Weavers, who were usually women, learned to spin hair from animals or fibers from plants into threads and then weave the threads into cloth. Workers would often decorate the textiles by dyeing the threads and making patterns. All of this work was usually done in the home.
- People gradually learned *metallurgy*, the science of the study of metals. They replaced their stone tools and weapons with ones made from metal, a process made easier as they learned to heat metals with fire. They first used *copper*, which they found in a pure state in the ground. Through experimentation, they learned that melting tin and copper together made a stronger metal, *bronze*. This metal marked such an advance that it gave the period a new name: the *Bronze Age*, which began at different locations at different times but generally between 3300 and 2300 B.C.E.

The First Civilizations

The seven developments of the Neolithic Revolution that began around 8000 B.C.E. created the foundation for a new form of human society to emerge over several thousand years. This new form is *civilization*, a large society with cities and powerful states. In early civilizations, many people continued to hunt and forage, often mixing those activities with farming or herding.

Trends that began to emerge in the Neolithic Revolution became even stronger in the early civilizations. For example, society became more stratified into clearly different socio-economic classes, human impact on the environment became more intense, government and religious and military institutions became larger and more complex, and trade increased. Elites grew more powerful as they became increasingly wealthy. The gap between the rich and the poor grew wider, and the relative power of men and women in society diverged more noticeably. Most societies became *patriarchies*, ones ruled by men. (Test Prep: Write a paragraph comparing the Neolithic Revolution with the Industrial Revolution. See pages 421–433.)

The first four civilizations that grew out of the Neolithic Revolution developed independently in river valleys scattered around the earth. The first one was in Southwest Asia, in the valleys of the Tigris and the Euphrates, a region called Mesopotamia. The next three were in the Nile River valley in Egypt, the Huang He (Yellow) River valley in China, and the Indus River valley in India. Two other early civilizations, in Mesoamerica and the Andes Mountains, were not tied closely to a major river valley.

All six of these civilizations developed ways of life, such as language, religious beliefs, and economic practices, that would heavily influence successor civilizations in their regions. Because of their influence, they are examples of *core and foundational* civilizations.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: WAS FARMING A MISTAKE?

Scholars who study the development of agriculture disagree about its impact of. Many see it as advance, but others note its high cost.

Criticism of Farming Evolutionary biologist Jared Diamond called the development of agriculture the “worst mistake in the history of the human race.” He argued that reducing the variety of food in people’s diets increased malnourishment. Relying on fewer food sources made people more susceptible to famine. Living in concentrated settlements increased everyone’s risk for disease. Together, Diamond concluded, these changes reduced the average life span.

Reducing Violence In contrast, evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker argued that agriculture and pastoralism reduced violence. He cited studies that suggest that hunter-forager societies had high murder rates and frequent warfare. These societies were dangerous because they lacked governments strong enough to maintain peace.

Costs and Benefits Evolutionary anthropologist Jay Stock saw both negatives and positives in the Neolithic Revolution. From a study of 9,000 skeletons from ancient Egypt, he found that hunter-foragers who lived before the agricultural revolution averaged 5 feet, 8 inches tall. However, those who lived in the first several thousand years after the development of farming averaged 4 inches shorter. Still, he noted the long-term benefits of agriculture: “Without the surplus of food you get through farming, we couldn’t have the runaway technological innovation we see today.”

KEY TERMS BY THEME

| ENVIRONMENT | STATE-BUILDING | SOCIAL STRUCTURE |
|---|---|---|
| overfarming overgrazing | Jericho Catal Huyuk | kinship group clan tribe |
| CULTURE | ECONOMICS | patriarchal artisans merchants social stratification priests priestesses |
| artifacts <i>Homo sapiens sapiens</i> Paleolithic Period Neolithic Revolution monotheism Bronze Age civilization core and foundational | textiles specialization of labor copper bronze hunter-forager agriculture surplus domestication nomadic pastoralism | |