



# Prehistory and the Agricultural Revolution

Neolithic artifact



## Reader

Paleolithic cave painting



Neolithic jewelry



Stonehenge



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# Prehistory and the Agricultural Revolution

Reader



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ISBN: 979-8-88970-027-2

# Prehistory and the Agricultural Revolution

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1	<b>Early Humans and the Paleolithic World</b> .....	2
Chapter 2	<b>The Agricultural Revolution</b> .....	12
Chapter 3	<b>The Characteristics of Civilization</b> .....	22
Glossary	.....	30

# Chapter 1

## Early Humans and the Paleolithic World

**A New Discovery** In 1997, scientists discovered new additions to the prehistorical human record. Three **fossilized** human skulls were found in

Ethiopia, a country on the continent of Africa. They are referred to as Herto Man. These skulls are the earliest remains of modern ***Homo sapiens*** ever found. Many

scientists believe that the skulls date back 160,000 years. The finding filled a gap that existed in the human record. The discovery of Herto Man supports the theory that modern humans first lived in Africa and then migrated to other parts of the world.

### The Framing Question

Why did early humans migrate out of Africa?

### Vocabulary

**fossilized**, adj. having been preserved in a hard form

***Homo sapiens***, n. the species to which humans belong



People living in northern Ethiopia today still live a nomadic life and practice cattle farming.

Along with the three skulls, scientists found stone tools and some scratched-up bones nearby. The bones belonged to a hippopotamus. These hippo bones informed scientists that the stone tools had been used to butcher the animal. Scientists concluded that Herto Man were **hunter-gatherers** who knew how to hunt large animals and had the tools to do it. In addition to hippos, buffalo and crocodiles are believed to have lived in the same area in Ethiopia. They were probably also hunted by Herto Man.

### Vocabulary

**hunter-gatherers**, n. people who travel from place to place and live by hunting and foraging

## Hunter-Gatherers

Peoples throughout history have lived hunter-gatherer lifestyles. For example, many Native American groups in North America were hunter-gatherers. However, early humans in Africa are believed to have been the first people to live this way. Hunter-gatherer culture spanned **millennia**. It was still humans' dominant lifestyle until about twelve thousand years ago.

In a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, humans actively hunt animals as a food source. The earliest hunter-gatherers did not have the necessary tools to hunt large animals, so they ate smaller animals or **scavenged**. They picked wild **vegetation** to eat rather than planting fruits or vegetables. The vegetation they ate may have included grains and berries. Because they had to follow the animals that they hunted,

### Vocabulary

**millennia**, n. a period of time lasting thousands of years

**scavenge**, v. to collect food by searching through what has been left behind

**vegetation**, n. plant life found in a particular area

hunter-gatherers were **nomadic**. They moved across large areas of land, hundreds of miles wide, to find the food and other resources they needed for survival.

Over a long period of time, hunter-gatherers developed many tools and

weapons. Sharp stones and bones used for cutting were some of the earliest tools. These were followed by simple axes. Later, early *Homo sapiens* are believed to have carved wooden spears. This allowed humans like Herto Man to hunt large animals. Eventually, humans began using spears with tips made of sharp stone. The invention of fishhooks, some made from bone, allowed fish to become an important part of the nomadic diet. Bows and arrows and even tools such as needles were also made of bone or ivory. Needles were used to stitch pieces of animal skin together to make clothing.

Hunter-gatherers knew the habits and patterns of the animals they hunted. These patterns dictated where and when humans moved. As humans moved, they knew where to find grains and berries to eat. They also knew where to find plants that could be used as dyes and medicines. They usually made their homes in natural shelters such as shallow caves that provided protection from the weather and animals.

Fire was important for both practical and societal reasons. Many scientists believe that early humans' first interaction with fire may have been with natural wildfires. They believe that humans learned to use fire in a controlled way beginning about four hundred thousand years ago. Fire was used to cook meat and fish.

### Vocabulary

**nomadic**, adj.  
moving around often, usually in search of food and water; not settled in one place



These arrowheads were found in the Sahara desert and are thought to be about six thousand years old. They are similar to the stone arrowheads that the Herto Man would have used.

It also gave groups warmth and protection, as it scared off wild animals. There is evidence of nomads gathering close to hearths in a **communal** setting around the time when fire was first used for cooking.

### Vocabulary

**communal**, adj.  
shared by all the members of a group or community

## Early Migration

While there is ongoing debate about the first **migration** from Africa, it is likely that modern humans began to migrate from Africa between sixty thousand and ninety thousand years ago. This migration likely began because of changes in nature. Most scientists believe that around sixty thousand to seventy thousand years ago, northern

### Vocabulary

**migration**, n.  
movement of a group of people to live in a new place

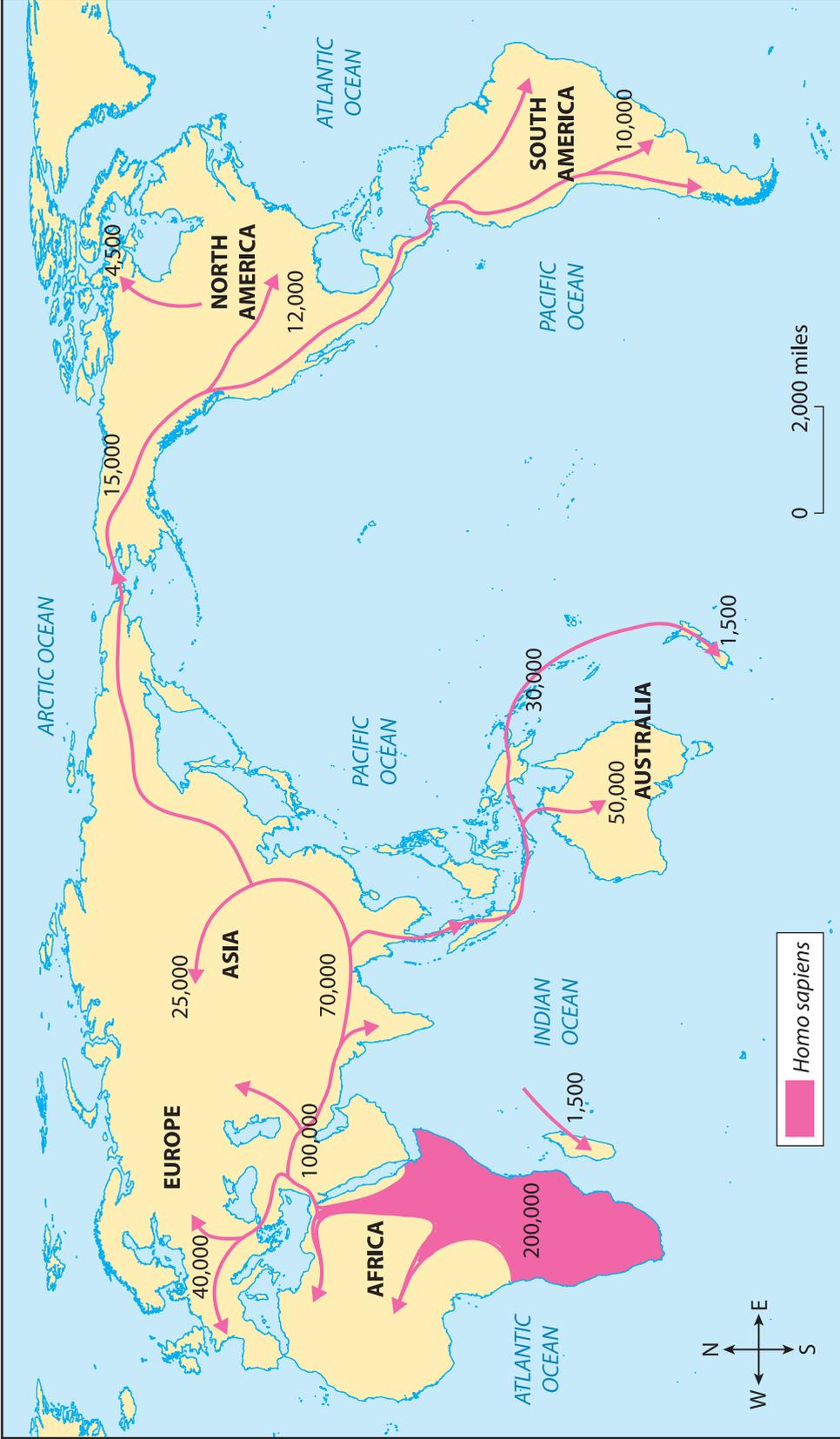
Africa had a very long drought. They think such a drought would have led to the death of animals and a lack of plant growth. These harsh conditions threatened the survival of the hunter-gatherers.

Many scientists think that other conditions created by changes to the climate may have caused migrations out of Africa. There were several ice ages during the Paleolithic period. This era began about 2.5 million years ago and ended around twelve thousand years ago. During the most recent ice age, which began about one hundred thousand years ago and ended twenty-five thousand years ago, the Northern Hemisphere experienced occasional warm summers. The warmer weather created food sources in the form of areas of abundant vegetation. Because of this, it became easier for people to migrate.

Migration out of Africa did not consist of one long parade of people leaving. Instead, there were several waves of migration over thousands of years. These long journeys were dangerous, and the migrants had no idea what awaited them. Early people were able to **collectively** tackle the problems that they faced because they had developed language to allow them to communicate with one another. If prehistoric humans had faced severe drought and lack of food thousands of years earlier, they might have become extinct. Instead, they were able to come together and solve problems. Not all the groups that left Africa survived, but many eventually settled all over the world.

**Vocabulary**  
.....  
**collectively**, adv. as part of a group

The first groups that left Africa headed north and east. They arrived in both Europe and China around the same time. From Southeast Asia, they traveled to Australia thousands of years later.



This map shows paths of migration taken by early humans and the number of years ago they reached different places around the world. The only continent that early humans did not migrate to was Antarctica.

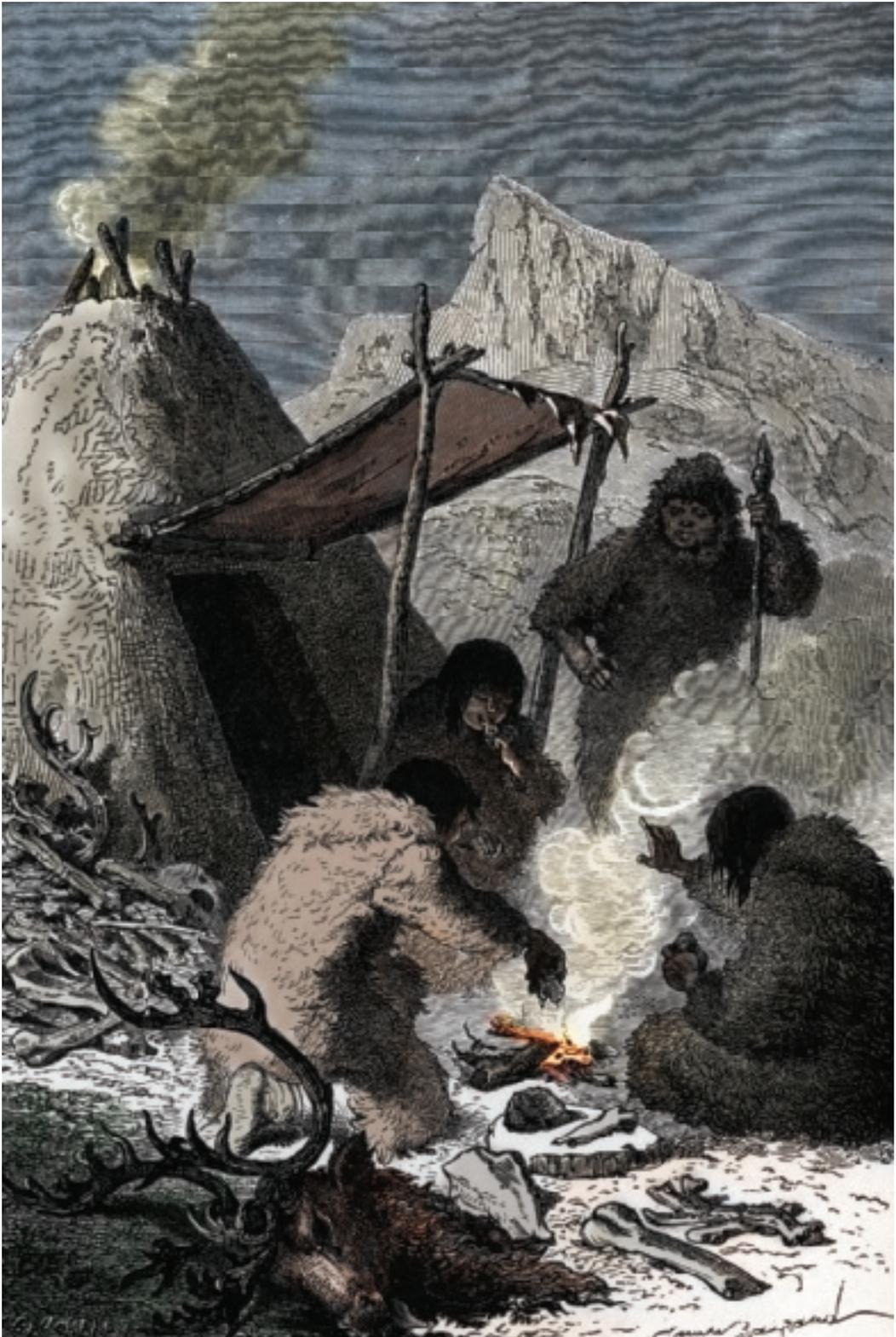
There is no land route from Asia to Australia, and archaeologists have never found evidence of prehistoric boats. It is possible that people made the trips to Australia with rafts made of bamboo, a type of wood found in Asia. A land bridge that no longer exists, sometimes called Beringia, may have been used to cross from Asia to North America about fifteen thousand years ago. There is also some evidence showing that early humans may have arrived in North America from Asia by boat. They most likely followed the North American shoreline of the Pacific Ocean. The first humans then moved across North America and into Central and South America. As they traveled, these courageous migrants would have stayed close to the coastline.

## Adapting to New Places

Most scientists think that the first migrants most likely ended up in new places with climates similar to Africa's. These similar climates would have provided them with similar types of food. It is believed that early humans were skilled at adapting to new conditions. This ability to adapt enabled them to survive in new places as they migrated over generations. Because there was an abundance of animals in many places, humans were eventually able to construct more **permanent** homes and build settlements. These settlements would grow into the first agricultural communities.

### Vocabulary

**permanent**, adj.  
lasting for a long  
time and staying  
unchanged



For thousands of years, humans were hunter-gatherers. They hunted animals and picked wild vegetation.

**PRIMARY SOURCE: PALEOLITHIC CAVE PAINTING**



# Chapter 2

# The Agricultural Revolution

## **New Settlements Form**

Around 10,000 BCE, a major transition began in the way humans lived. As you have read, the first humans lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers.

Eventually, they slowly began to stay in one place and grow food for themselves. The first settlements formed in Mesopotamia, where a warming climate allowed wild wheat to grow. This area in present-day Iraq is located between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Mesopotamia and the land to the west of it is often referred to as the Fertile Crescent because of its rich soil and the shape of the area.

### **The Framing Question**

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How did the Agricultural Revolution change the way people lived?



Stonehenge, located in England, was assembled around 3000 BCE, during the Neolithic period. It was the most complex structure to be built in Europe at the time and is a symbol of the cultural advances of the era.

Some scientists have suggested that early humans first learned about agriculture by observing what happened around the fields of wild wheat in Mesopotamia. As hunter-gatherers, early humans collected grains and then returned to their temporary camps. On the way back to their camps, they dropped seeds of the freshly cut grains. When the groups returned the following year, they found grains growing wherever they had camped the previous year. As time passed, more grains grew in the areas surrounding the annual camps. People eventually began to intentionally plant grain seeds. In order to look after and expand these crops, some early humans began to build more permanent homes nearby. They did not move around as much. Over generations, a sustainable food source grew, and there was no longer a need for groups to always move.

Humans had been using stone tools to cut up animals they hunted for thousands of years. Now, they needed tools to use for agriculture. The first farmers would have developed these tools and also pottery as different needs arose. Growing food meant that people could live together in larger groups. Instead of moving around in small hunting groups, people began to socialize and exchange ideas. As new inventions were created, these small settlements grew into the first farming villages. Eventually, small, agriculturally centered villages evolved into large societies. This change in how humans lived is called the Neolithic or Agricultural Revolution. After beginning in Mesopotamia, this revolution spread to Africa, Europe, and elsewhere in Asia.

The Neolithic period, or New Stone Age, lasted from 10,000 BCE to 3000 BCE. This was a period of significant change for the people who lived during these times, as their entire way of life shifted.

People began to plant grains as well as herd animals. They learned from their mistakes how to properly care for animals and how to farm and harvest crops. The transition from nomadic life to established agricultural societies was a slow process that took hundreds of years. Not all societies turned to organized farming. Some continued to have a nomadic lifestyle, living the same way their ancestors had.

### What Does BCE Mean?

The calendar used in most parts of the world divides history into two parts: BCE and CE. BCE is an abbreviation for before the Common Era, and CE means Common Era. The Common Era refers to the period of history that follows the birth of Jesus Christ.

## Animal and Plant Domestication

The exact reasons why some humans gradually stopped hunting and gathering and decided to farm are not known. One reason could have been increased population. More people would have created more **competition** for food and a reason to **cultivate** crops. Another possible reason why many humans adopted a settled way of life is that they began to depend on the plants and animals that they **domesticated**.

### Vocabulary

**competition**, n.  
demand by two or more groups for a resource that is in short supply

**cultivate**, v. to help grow

**domesticate**, v. to adapt and use for agricultural or other purposes

A plant or animal was domesticated when people decided that it would be useful as a food source or as a raw material that could be used to make something. The process of plant domestication

took time. First, people would identify plants that were easy to harvest. Then they buried seeds taken from these plants in the ground. Crops that grew from these seeds could be eaten the following year. Some crops would have traits, such as better taste, that were more desired. Farmers would take seeds from these crops and plant them. Eventually, the desired qualities would appear more frequently. Over time there were differences between wild grain and domesticated grain. Besides wheat, one of the first crops grown in the Fertile Crescent was barley. These crops were followed later by protein-rich lentils and peas. In Asia, farmers were growing rice and millet around the same time.

Pigs, sheep, and cattle were among the first animals to be domesticated in Mesopotamia. These animals had previously been hunted by the nomadic people and their ancestors. Wild boars, for example, were bred to become pigs. Wild buffalo and yaks were domesticated in China. Now these animals could help with the work of farming, much like horses and donkeys would do later in history. Domesticated animals also provided a source of meat and milk. These resources improved the human diet. The downside of domesticating animals was that they carried diseases. Many humans got sick because diseases like the flu were passed from animals to people.

### **Training Ancient Crops**

The process of domesticating plants took time. First, farmers had to understand which crops would be the easiest to grow and harvest. Then they had to train the crops, or breed them, so that they grew in a way that was ideal. For example, wild wheat falls off the plant and shatters when it becomes ripe. This makes it nearly impossible to harvest. Neolithic farmers bred wheat that would stay on the stem so that it could be easily harvested.



## Growth of the First Communities

Over time, crops began to thrive. Farmers sometimes even found themselves with a **surplus** of grains. Once harvests yielded more than what was used in a season, the surplus had to be stored in one place.

This is another reason that settlements became permanent. Having a more consistent source of food caused human populations to grow. More people made it more difficult for groups to always be on the move. Instead of small families traveling together, people began settling in permanent communities. In these communities, humans interacted and began to cooperate with each other on a regular basis. Historians believe that early people shared food and other resources as a way of surviving. This kind of cooperation led to stronger social bonds. Early people strengthened the first social networks by gathering together near the fire to eat meals together.

Because there was so much extra food, not everyone living in each community had to spend their time farming.

### Vocabulary

**surplus**, n. an extra amount beyond what is needed



When specialization began during the Neolithic period, craftspeople started making beads and jewelry with the available resources.

As a result, some people began **specializing** in different tasks. Specialization means to focus on one thing and even to excel at doing one thing. Some people made artwork or wove **textiles**. Other people specialized in making stone tools, weapons, or pottery. Tools used for food preparation and serving became important as people spent more time eating together.

### Vocabulary

**specialize**, v. to develop a specific set of skills for a single purpose

**textiles**, n. cloth or fabric

## First Economies

With more abundant harvests and the ability to specialize, there was eventually a surplus of not only grains but also goods such as tools, weapons, and beads. This allowed people to begin **bartering**. This is the trading of goods without using money. People used bartering to acquire items that they needed or wanted and did not have. A valuable item traded during this time was obsidian. This is a volcanic rock that was used to make sharp blades and tools. Obsidian from Neolithic-era Turkey has been found as far away as Jerusalem. This tells us that some long-distance trade routes existed during the Neolithic period. Cloth dyes, spices, and jewelry were also bartered. It was merchants who organized this long-distance trade and transported the goods between groups. The rise of the merchant class created yet another new profession. Bartering not only provided items that people needed or wanted but also led to contact between different groups. This contact helped spread ideas and knowledge.

### Vocabulary

**barter**, v. to trade goods without using money

The Neolithic period marks a major shift in how humans lived. They moved from a nomadic way of life, which meant always consuming goods, to a life in which they produced goods and had more than they needed. Farming different crops and raising animals instead of hunting for them meant that groups of people could live safely together on large areas of land. This allowed populations to grow and thrive. As more people populated the world and different groups became connected through trade, societies became more organized. These innovations paved the way for more advances in farming, technology, and the arts. Sometimes, populations came into conflict with one another. Soon, governments and **infrastructure** would be established.

### Vocabulary

**infrastructure**, n.  
the public works system that includes roads, bridges, irrigation, public transportation, etc.



Many Neolithic tools were made from stone.

**PRIMARY SOURCE: NEOLITHIC ARTIFACT**



# Chapter 3

## The Characteristics of Civilization

**The Early Harvests** The first farmers near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in Mesopotamia not only farmed crops of wheat and barley but also had smaller gardens. On these patches of land, they grew fruits and vegetables such as melons and cucumbers. By the time larger crops and gardens were being cultivated, small farming villages had developed between the two rivers. There is a long history of harvest celebrations throughout different cultures and time periods. It is possible that these early farmers in the Fertile Crescent were the first to celebrate their bounty in this way.

### The Framing Question

What is a civilization?

As you have learned, these small villages eventually began producing surpluses of food and growing populations. These surpluses, the specialization of work, and bartering all resulted from



Cuneiform was one of the first forms of writing and enabled communication and technological advancements in the earliest civilizations.

the Agricultural Revolution. These conditions allowed **civilizations** to emerge. Civilizations are settled societies with shared customs and language. They formed when people created settlements and developed connections with other settlements. To learn more about how civilizations developed, scientists study artifacts. The first civilizations emerged around 3000 BCE in Mesopotamia. The term *civilization* is not used to mean that one society is better than another. Instead, civilizations are studied as cultures that include certain characteristics. Historians can study these characteristics to learn about a civilization.

### Vocabulary

**civilization**, n. a society, or group of people, with similar religious beliefs, customs, language, and form of government

## Characteristics of Civilizations

Some early civilizations are characterized by their settlements. These are the small villages and towns that were first built when people began to settle in one place. Over time, these settlements included increasingly complex **architecture**. Eventually, settlements included large buildings that were complicated to plan and construct. The earliest civilizations also had distinct artistic styles. Items as simple as pottery and woven cloth had unique artistic features.

Another element of civilizations is **division of labor**. This refers to how work was divided between people in a settlement. Because it was not necessary or even practical for

### Vocabulary

**architecture**, n. the style and construction of a building

**division of labor**, n. the breakdown of work into specific tasks performed by different people; often considered a way to make workers more efficient

everyone to farm, people pursued new kinds of specialized work. The ancient cities of Uruk and Mari existed in Mesopotamia about five thousand years ago. In such cities, in addition to the farmers, there were craftspeople. This group included artists, builders, and those who made tools and other items that met people's everyday needs. There were also traders and merchants. In the earliest settlements, the merchants were near the top of the social structure because they sold and traded goods. A social structure is a way of classifying levels of a civilization. Merchants were near the top of this structure because they were among the wealthiest people in the settlements. The craftspeople and artists were in the middle of the structure. They made the goods sold by merchants. The farmers were at the bottom of the social structure. Later, when rules and laws developed, a political structure emerged in the settlements.

Civilizations have a form of shared communication. While not every early civilization had a form of writing, they each had a shared language. Everything in a civilization, including trade, technology, and government, depends on communication. The civilizations that did develop a form of writing have



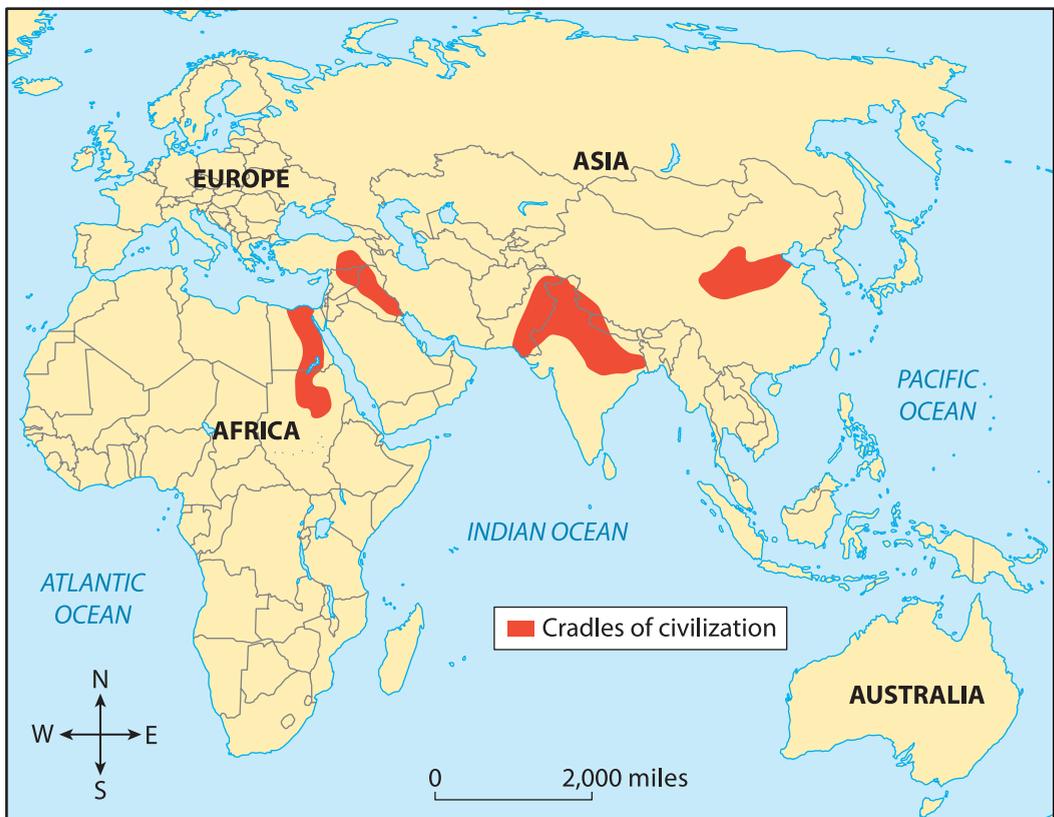
Division of labor and specialization allowed for craftspeople and artists to pursue creative tasks. This Mesopotamian figurine shows a person playing a harp.

left behind important clues for historians about how people lived long ago. The oldest written language on record is Sumerian. This language developed in Mesopotamia around 3100 BCE. Early written Sumerian consisted of many different symbols. These small symbols were used to keep track of taxes and laws.

Remember that not every civilization has all of these characteristics. Different civilizations feature different characteristics based on the needs of its members.

## The Growth of Agriculture

It is not surprising that the earliest civilizations developed in river valleys. These rivers supplied the first settlers with a food and



The first civilizations all grew near large rivers that filled with melted snow in the spring.

water source for people and water for crops. As you have learned, the first civilizations in Mesopotamia were near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. In Egypt, they were near the Nile River. In the area that would become Pakistan and India, they grew in the Indus River valley, and in eastern China, the Huang He (Yellow River) valley. In the spring, rains and snowmelt caused these rivers to flood. The water that flowed over the land carried minerals and other nutrients that were left behind when the floodwaters dried up. These minerals made the soil in the valleys good for farming.

Over time, people learned to control the floodwaters with technologies such as dams and **canals**. In Mesopotamia, these were developed into full systems of irrigation. Irrigation is an important part

### Vocabulary

**canal**, n. a channel dug by people; used by boats or for irrigation

of a civilization's infrastructure. The infrastructure includes the structures that a town or city needs to function, such as dams, roads, bridges, and irrigation. Once irrigation was developed, farmers were not restricted to small crops they had to water by hand. Other advances in technology also first appeared in Mesopotamia. The Sumerian culture in Mesopotamia is credited with developing the wheel. Along with irrigation, this invention later allowed farmers to practice larger-scale agriculture.

When these first civilizations began to create a surplus of food, humans, for the first time in history, had a stable food supply. Before, when people lived as hunter-gatherers, they faced food shortages if they were not able to hunt or if the animal population dwindled. Food surpluses and permanent settlements provided greater stability. Even so, cities and towns were vulnerable to the

weather and changes in climate. Droughts or floods could wipe out crops or drastically alter the water supply. As time went by, people began to recognize weather patterns and were able to prepare for these events by storing food and water.

## **Early Government and Religion**

Eventually, civilizations developed to the point that they included religious and political leaders. As the communities grew, they faced bigger and more complex challenges. These required organized leadership. Religious figures like priests came to play a central role in this structure. Early people practiced polytheism, or the belief in many gods. Priests were believed to work closely with the gods and be their messengers here on Earth. As a result, they became an important part of early settlements. Priests filled the first governing roles, often working as mediators when conflicts arose. As settlements became more complex, priests began to share leadership with others. For example, when irrigation systems were being established in Mesopotamia, the priests enlisted the help of laborers who knew how to organize a large group project. Later, when the settlements grew into larger city-states, each of them was governed by a king.

Different city-states often fought over who had control of the rivers in different areas. One of the biggest conflicts faced by Mesopotamian city-states, around 2500 BCE, had to do with the irrigation system. This conflict might have been solved by kings and other members of the political classes negotiating to find a solution.

In many ways, we are connected to the people who lived long ago. These earliest civilizations are where innovation began and cultures developed. As you have read, each culture is defined by its characteristics. The earliest civilizations are unique because they did not have other, settled cultures from which to draw. They were the first to develop written forms of communication. They made technological advances that they developed because of the new challenges they faced. Their diets were dictated by what they were able to grow and the animals they could hunt and, later, domesticate. Many of their customs were new because they lived in such a different way from their ancestors.

One custom that early settlers might have carried with them from the past was gathering around the fireplace, or hearth. Farmers and their families may have ended a day of celebrating the harvest with dancing and singing around a communal fire. The coming together of families or other groups of people to celebrate an event is indeed timeless.



When the first settlements grew large enough, they became city-states ruled by kings. This carved stone from Mesopotamia records a gift of land from a king.

# Glossary

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## A

**architecture, n.** the style and construction of a building (24)

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## B

**barter, v.** to trade goods without using money (19)

---

## C

**canal, n.** a channel dug by people; used by boats or for irrigation (27)

**civilization, n.** a society, or group of people, with similar religious beliefs, customs, language, and form of government (24)

**collectively, adv.** as part of a group (7)

**communal, adj.** shared by all the members of a group or community (6)

**competition, n.** demand by two or more groups for a resource that is in short supply (15)

**cultivate, v.** to help grow (15)

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## D

**division of labor, n.** the breakdown of work into specific tasks performed by different people; often considered a way to make workers more efficient (24)

**domesticate, v.** to adapt and use for agricultural or other purposes (15)

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## F

**fossilized, adj.** having been preserved in a hard form (2)

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## H

***Homo sapiens*, n.** the species to which humans belong (2)

---

**hunter-gatherers, n.** people who travel from place to place and live by hunting and foraging (4)

---

## I

**infrastructure, n.** the public works system that includes roads, bridges, irrigation, public transportation, etc. (20)

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## M

**migration, n.** movement of a group of people to live in a new place (6)

**millennia, n.** a period of time lasting thousands of years (4)

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## N

**nomadic, adj.** moving around often, usually in search of food and water; not settled in one place (5)

---

## P

**permanent, adj.** lasting for a long time and staying unchanged (9)

---

## S

**scavenge, v.** to collect food by searching through what has been left behind (4)

**specialize, v.** to develop a specific set of skills for a single purpose (19)

**surplus, n.** an extra amount beyond what is needed (18)

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## T

**textiles, n.** cloth or fabric (19)

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## V

**vegetation, n.** plant life found in a particular area (4)

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