

From Human Prehistory to the Early Civilizations

Archeological studies and other scientific methods have provided us with a view of human development that begins millions of years ago. Most of the 2 million-plus years of our existence as a species has been described as the Paleolithic, or Old Stone, Age. This lengthy phase, during which both *Homo erectus* and then *Homo sapiens sapiens* made their appearances, ran until about 14,000 years ago. Our immediate ancestors were *Homo sapiens sapiens*. All current races are descended from this subspecies.

Human Life Before Agriculture

- Humans learned simple tool use, tamed fire, and developed bigger brains and a more erect posture during the **Paleolithic (Old Stone) Age**, which lasted from about 2.5 million years to about 12,000 B.C.E.
- Over time, the **hunting and gathering** species *Homo sapiens sapiens*, which originated in Africa and from which all modern humans are descended, **came to dominate other human types**.
- **Stone tool use** gradually improved, and humans developed **speech, rituals, and culture** as they gradually spread across the globe.
- In the **Mesolithic (Middle Stone) Age**, from about 12,000–8,000 B.C.E., humans made more advanced tools, fought in more wars, and increased their population considerably.

The Neolithic Revolution

- In the **Neolithic (New Stone) Age**, between roughly 8,000 and 3,500 B.C.E., some human societies experienced one of the most dramatic developments in human history.
- These groups mastered **sedentary agriculture** (this is often called the “**Neolithic Revolution**”) and **domesticated animals**. These innovations produced the **food surpluses** and **rising populations** that made possible the founding of **cities** and the increasing **specialization of occupations** within human societies.
- At the same time, **pastoral nomadism** developed, but these nomads remained on the periphery of civilizations and sedentary agricultural zones.
- Soon after the introduction of agriculture, societies in the Middle East began **replacing stone tools with those made of metal**—first copper, then bronze. These new tools improved agriculture, aided in warfare, and benefited manufacturing artisans.

Civilization

- The **emergence of civilization** occurred in many agricultural societies. It often built on additional changes in technology including the introduction of metal tools.
- Most civilizations had common features including **cities, writing, formal institutions** (especially government and religion), **stratified classes**, and **trade**. **Çatal Hüyük** is an excellent example of an important town in an early Neolithic civilization.
- Early civilizations included those in **Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus River Valley, and northern China**.

The Heritage of the River Valley Civilizations

- River valley civilizations left a number of **durable innovations**, but **most declined after about 1,200 B.C.E.** This decline was often due to nomadic migrations across Eurasia by pastoral nomadic chariot peoples from the central Asian steppe.
- A number of small population centers emerged in the Middle East. These civilizations introduced further innovations including the religion of **Judaism**, the **alphabet, iron tools**, and extensive **trade connections** across the Mediterranean basin.

The First Civilizations

- The river valley civilizations created a basic set of **tools, intellectual concepts** such as writing and mathematics, and **political forms** that persisted across three continents.
- The rise of civilizations **reduced local autonomy**, as kings and priests tried to spread trade contacts and cultural forms and warred to gain new territory.
- Despite wars and trade, civilizations had **little contact with each other** and thus developed **separate cultural patterns**.