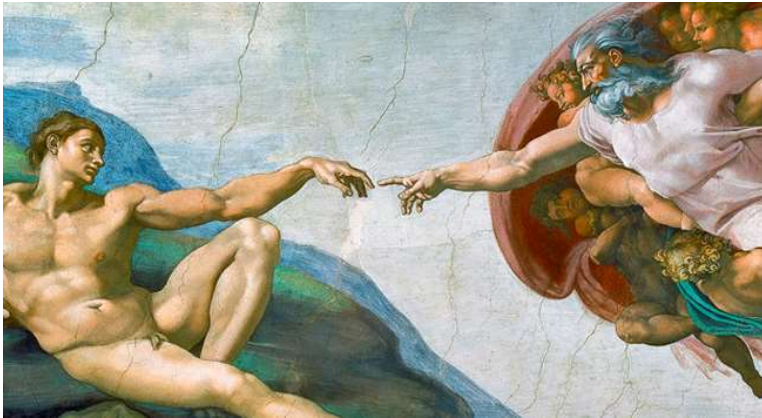


The Prehistoric Era

Human Origins and the Stone Ages



The Hebrew Bible begins with the story of creation. An all-powerful god speaks the universe into existence with the phrase 'let there be.' The first man and woman are Adam and Eve and they eat a forbidden fruit which forces them out of paradise. The story of Adam and Eve is one of the many stories that try to explain the origin of the universe. Such theories exist across the globe for one simple reason: humanity wants to know where it came from hoping that it might help them discover where they must go.

Before exploring prehistory, it is critical to put out a few fires before they can be sparked. **Fire #1:** Science and religion are not fundamentally opposed to each other. Science is defined as the study of the natural world through experimentation and observation. Religion is the worship or submission to a superhuman power – to the supernatural. Note the difference between the two. Science focuses on the natural, religion on the supernatural. Religion is focused on things that can't be studied in the realm of science due to their supernatural tendency. There is a belief on both sides of this equation that claim that science and religion can't mix. According to their definitions, this is objectively false. Many of the greatest scientists were religious and many of the greatest scientific discoveries have wound up supporting many religious views. Both science and religion provide benefits and answers to society. Likewise, both science and religion fall short in what they can offer society.

Fire #2: Prehistory is purely theoretical. **Prehistory** refers to the period of time before the invention of writing. Without written records of human activity or events, it is impossible to describe humanity with perfect accuracy. The most prominent theories – no matter how widely accepted – are still just theories. This includes the Big Bang theory, the theory of evolution, and the many theories of supernatural creation. A wealth of observations, experiments, and other forms of evidence exist that support the various theories but even these proofs are just fragments of information. Critical thinkers must take all theories with a grain of salt. Be skeptical about people who try to push a certain belief upon others. Our beliefs about our origins have a massive impact on our world view so it's up to individuals to make a decision for themselves on what they believe about questions of prehistory.

I. The Paleolithic

In prehistoric times, groups of early humans travelled together in search of food, water, and shelter. Even in these primitive times, it is believed that these groups began to form distinct cultures. While no evidence exists that might suggest this until much later, groups may have developed common ways to dress, shared hunting practices, and favorite foods.

Human Culture

In 1940, an 18-year old French boy's dog was trapped in a hole. After rescuing his pup, the boy decides to investigate the origin of this oddly wide hole. He discovered that it was not just a hole but the entrance to a cave. Thinking that he found a secret tunnel connected to a nearby manor, the boy gathered a group of friends to explore. Once inside the boys found that the walls of the cave were covered in prehistoric cave paintings.





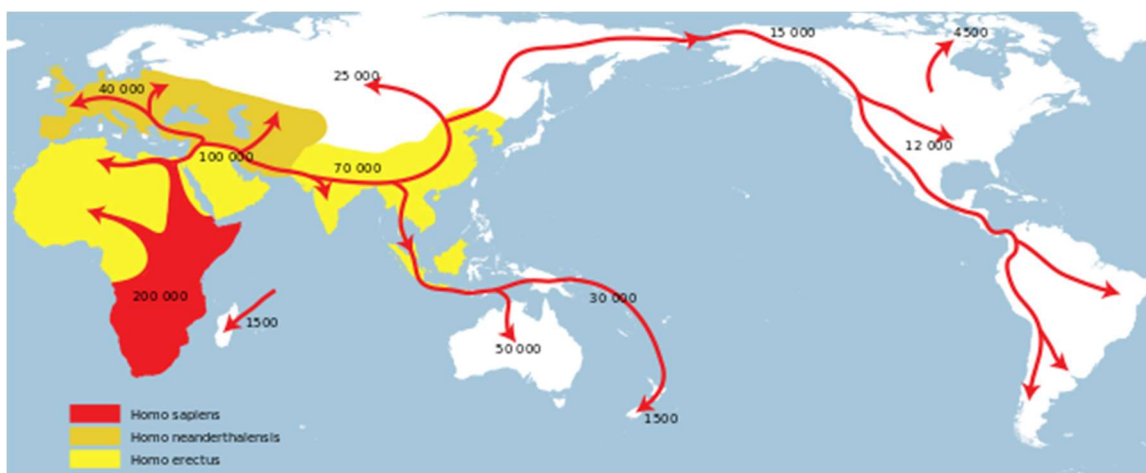
A local archaeologist was contacted and the cave in southwestern France, now known as the Lascaux Cave, became one of the first confirmed locations of human artistic creativity. The paintings may have been used to tell stories, glorify communal activities (hunting), or to make sense of the world around them. It is believed that cultural expressions like those found in Lascaux began around 2 million years ago. Expressions like these began the **Stone Age**, so called because the most notable artifacts found from this age are stone tools. It is more than likely that tools made from degradable materials like bone, wood, and skin were also common in the period.

The Stone Age is split in two parts, the **Paleolithic** (Old Stone Age) and the **Neolithic** (New Stone Age). The highlights of the Paleolithic are the invention of tools, human mastery over fire, the spread of humans, and the first expressions of human culture. Another major development was the rise of the first modern humans, called **homo sapiens** (literally meaning “wise men”). Scholars believe that homo sapiens existed alongside a number of other human species, such as Neanderthals, but they outlasted their cousins. How homo sapiens managed to be the only surviving human species is still unclear and is a strong point of contention made by scholars who disagree with this particular theory.

“Out of Africa” Theory

The “Out of Africa” theory states that homo sapiens first appeared in East Africa around 200,000 years ago. From here, they migrated outwards in what is commonly referred to as the “peopling of the earth”. The migrations began 100,000 years ago with the first reached area being the Middle East. Scholars believe that human populations spread as far as modern India, China, and Southeast Asia around 70,000 years ago. Movement into Europe, Central Asia, and Siberia was considerably difficult due to the colder climate caused by the occasional ice ages of these regions. Advances in tools and warmer clothing eventually allowed some clans to survive in colder climates, and these regions soon became home to numerous communities around 40,000 years ago.

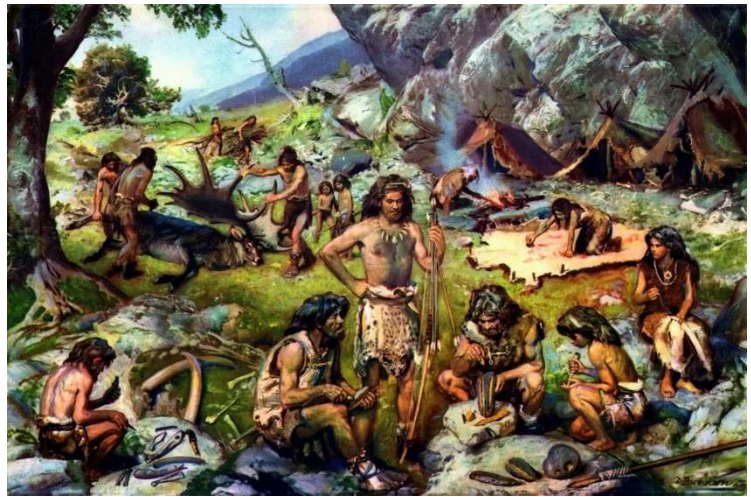
Oceania (Australia and its neighboring islands) was settled around 50,000 years ago. The Americas were the last continent to be settled by humans about 15,000 years ago. The prevailing theory is that the ice ages caused immense glaciation and lowered sea levels globally. The lowered sea levels exposed what is known as the **Bering Land Bridge** that spanned Siberia and Alaska and it allowed humans to cross into the otherwise unreachable land. By the time of the Neolithic Revolution (c. 8000 BC; almost 10,000 years ago) humans successfully settled all but the harshest and most isolated parts of the world.



Paleolithic Life

Living in the paleolithic was a fight for survival. Humans lived in small familial clans and were **hunter-gatherers** (sometimes called hunter-foragers), which means they got their food by hunting game and gathering wild plants like nuts, berries, herbs, and roots. These small kinship societies were exclusively nomadic as they followed herds for hunting. **Nomads** are people who are constantly on the move and have no permanent home. They tended to travel along bodies of water for fresh water and fishing as it often proved to be a much more efficient way of hunting. Tools were first developed using what was immediately available and were designed to make hunting and gathering more efficient. Some tools, like primitive needles, were even used to make clothes.

The discovery of fire played a huge role in the growth of humanity. Not only did fire provide warmth and protection, it also gave humans more time to create complex languages, music, and art. Communication and expression are vital components for the development of societies as they allow generations to pass on thinking skills as opposed to basic survival skills. Another significant benefit of fire was cooking. Cooking increases the nutritional value of many foods, especially meat, which sped up the development of the brain and body.



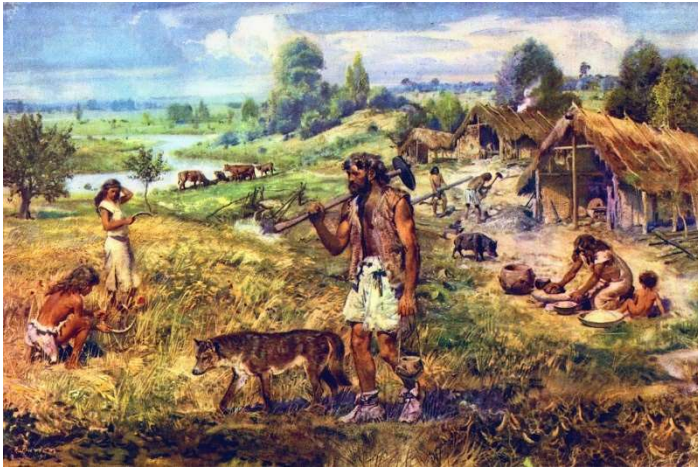
While fire allowed for further development of communication, efficient communication was necessary even before its discovery. Hunters in this age often targeted larger game that would require a team of hunters to work in unison through communication. Foragers would have also required efficient communication to teach each generation the uses of different herbs and plants beyond simply using them for food. Evidence suggests that labor was divided along gender lines: men hunted while women foraged or took care of children. Both men and women crafted tools depending on what they needed to complete their daily tasks.

II. The Neolithic

Around 10,000 years ago, the Paleolithic made way for the Neolithic. The event that separates the two Stone Ages is the development of agriculture. Up to this point humans survived by hunting and gathering for food. The idea of somehow increasing the food supply was not in itself revolutionary but when some societies figured out a way to do it the idea spread... or did it?

An Agricultural Revolution

The Neolithic began with the **Neolithic Revolution**, also known as the Agricultural Revolution. Historians use the term revolution to describe a shift in practice that alters life around the world. **Agriculture** refers to the domestication (cultivation or taming) of plants and animals for the production of food. Scientists and historians have long debated when the Neolithic Revolution began to take place, but most scholars believe that it started around 10,000 years ago (circa 8,000 BC). Just as scientists are not sure exactly when it began, scientists also are unsure as to why it occurred at all. Some theorize that rising temperatures helped facilitate consistent farming. Others believe that growing populations forced clans to find more sustainable sources of food. A few have even proposed that agriculture was born out of a human desire to consume more alcohol!



It is abundantly clear to scientists that agriculture did begin to develop across the globe at roughly the same time. This would support the argument that agriculture began due to climate change. There are two parts to agriculture that each facet of the hunter-gatherer societies was suited to develop. Farming was most likely developed by the women who made up the foragers while animal domestication was developed by the men who hunted. The first animals to be domesticated were likely hunting companions, like dogs.

Agriculture developed independently across the world, at different rates, with different crops and animals, and with different technologies arising together with them. Primitive farming tools are found in various archaeological sites that are dated back to the Neolithic Revolution such as clay vases and jars, sickle blades, digging sticks, hoes, and grindstones. Sites like those in the Zargos Mountains in modern-day Iraq give us some insight into how far development of agriculture came as archeologists found prehistoric clay jars with wine residue. This means that alcohol was already being produced almost 7,000 years ago!

Two New Societies

While hunter-gatherer societies never went extinct, two new societies emerged as a result of the Neolithic Revolution. The nomadic familial clans of the Paleolithic that developed agriculture became new **sedentary societies**. A sedentary society is one that lives in a fixed location. Farming takes time and, on a large scale, a lot of hard labor that required these societies to remain in place for extended periods of time. The other society to develop was that of **pastoral nomads**, nomads that focused on the breeding and maintenance of animals. They did not farm, but still had a sustainable food supply thanks to the animal products they had access to. They were also naturally inclined to engage in trade.

Sedentary societies tended to develop much faster than their nomadic counterparts, but pastoral nomads still benefited from their sedentary neighbors. As pastoral nomads were always on the move, searching for fresh pastures and sources of water for their herds, they came into contact with many communities. The interactions between pastoral nomads and sedentary societies was typically in the form of **trade**, the voluntary exchange of goods and services, or **raids**, attacks with the purpose of taking goods or even people.



It's important to remember that the development of agriculture happened independently across the world. No single person or group decided to revolutionize the world with farming. Instead, it developed naturally around the world. According to scholars, the transition from took many thousands of years.

Geographic Limitations

The kinds of crops and animals available to be domesticated varied from region to region. Certain crops were more valuable for food production while some animals had more uses than merely providing food. Animals were domesticated depending on their utility, size, and nature. Consider how these geographic limitations might affect the development of civilizations differently.

Region	Crops	Animals
North/Central America	Maize, Beans, Squash	-
Andes (South America)	Tomato, Potato	Llama, alpaca
West Africa	Yams	Cattle
Eurasia, North Africa	Wheat, Barley	Cattle, Pig, Sheep, Goat, Poultry, Horses
Central Asia	-	
Southeast Asia	Rice, Millet	

In addition to limits on what people could domesticate, geography also limited how much people could practice their agriculture. The environment played a massive role in where and how people could establish themselves. Even if people settled near sources of water – vital for their survival – building permanent communities close to water was often dangerous. Rivers were usually the best candidates for agricultural societies for this reason and historians have determined that four of the first great civilizations developed along the banks of rivers: Indus Valley, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China. Known as the ancient river valley civilizations, each developed independently and created their own complex societies with unique beliefs, governments, and cultures.

Although we'll get into the details of how and why these civilizations developed differently, start to think about what geographic factors could affect the development of civilization. In general, the issues each civilization faced have remained the same throughout human history. Here are some issues typically faced by human societies even today: (1) **Famine**, (2) invasion and war, (3) natural disasters, (4) disease, (5) soil infertility, (6) leadership and organization.

Growing Societies

As time progressed, farming techniques grew increasingly complex and organized. Rather than plant just any seeds, Neolithic peoples carefully selected seeds that would **yield**, or produce, the most food. Discovering the importance of nutrient-rich soil, plant resilience, and proper field preparation also helped early farmers maximize their food production. Tools gradually became more efficient as well. Animals would also be incorporated into farming practices beyond merely providing food. Certain animals, like cattle or llamas, were excellent work and pack animals. Other animals provided useful materials, like wool and leather, that could be crafted or traded.

Agriculture brought a number of benefits to humanity. The most notable benefit was the ability to sustain large communities. Agriculture brings a steady and plentiful food supply. More food means more people. Human populations began to grow with the agricultural revolution, and this meant there was an increase in the number of workers available. This ties to the second benefit of agriculture: specialization. **Specialization** refers to training for a specific job. Farming is difficult work, but it produces enough food for the farmer and a large portion of their community. It was no longer necessary for every member of society to participate in food production and so individuals were now free to engage in other activities. With this freedom individuals were able to focus on specific jobs and soon enough a variety of new professions rose to prominence.

Thanks to the resilience of certain crops like wheat and rice, the production of a food surplus was possible. Storage of extra food became a common way to ensure that communities were prepared to handle bad growing seasons. Unfortunately, communities with large stockpiles of food can become targets for struggling or selfish neighbors. Archaeologists have determined that one of the first professions to develop was that of the warrior. For the first time ever, a class of dedicated fighters appears. The reason for this was likely the competition of resources. Other defenses, such as walls, towers, and increasingly compact settlements, are also seen in development in this time.

Due to the hard labor requirements of farming, men were typically the ones engaged in farming. They were also the ones tasked with defense. On the other hand, women were responsible for the management of the home and raising family. Both men and women could become **artisans**, skilled workers that create products with their hands, whether it be for the production of tools, clothing, or the construction buildings. Over time small communities would grow in population and complexity. Leaders would be needed to oversee the management of growing settlements and unique cultures would form. Religious beliefs and practices would pave the way for the development of religious systems – which would often play a vital role in the success or failure of communities.

The first known major city of the Neolithic is known as **Jericho**. Jericho was first established in 9600 BC in the Levant, only a few miles away from where the modern city of Jericho is located. It should not be confused with Jericho that was destroyed by the Israelites according to the Hebrew Bible. As was typical in the region, the first city of Jericho served as a foundation for later civilizations that would be built on the ruins of whoever came before them. Archaeologists have found evidence of complex religious and economic systems existing in Jericho, in addition to an extensive system of walls for defense.

Side Story: Otzi the Iceman

One of the great archeological finds from the Neolithic (c. 3300) was a body frozen in the Austrian Alps. Otzi, as he was called, was found in 1991 by hikers. His remains were preserved by the cold and dry air of the Alps and much of his belongings also survived. Otzi presented archeologists with a host of different questions: why was he travelling? What was his profession? How did he die? His remains offer few answers, but the state at which he was found gives historians lots of information on what life may have been like in 3300 BC.

