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Pre-History



Stonehenge, neolithic structure dating to perhaps 2500 BCE

First a definition; pre-history is basically the time "before history" or "before civilization" emerged. In other words, it was the time before the emergence of cities and the time before the use of writing, which makes it roughly everything before 3000 BCE, prior to the development of cities in Mesopotamia.

Considering the very long time period before 3000 BCE, we might divide that period into two stages: the Paleolithic (old stone age) and the Neolithic (new stone age) eras.

Humans, and their hominid ancestors, have seemingly inhabited the earth for a very long time now--but still not nearly as long as the dinosaurs--but consider that the period of time studied in this course, that is, the history of world civilizations, occupies only a comparably small fraction of that existence, the last five thousand years. Scientists, such as [Mary Leakey](#), have worked to fill in the missing information about the evolution of early humans and hominids (the human-ape family), although much still remains unknown or is just fragmentary. What is now somewhat certain is that the earliest hominid fossils have been dated to four million years ago, while the emergence of Homo sapiens dates to only forty-to-fifty thousand years ago. ([This date is still being discussed.](#))

Two of the key precursor conditions to the successful emergence of civilization (life in cities) were the domestication of certain animals and the development of settled, systematic agriculture (the Agricultural Revolution). When those occurred, we have the transition from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic--that did not happen all at once--and that transition was traditionally dated as 3000 BCE. But in recent years, archaeologists and anthropologists have made a number of discoveries at various sites around the world that have pushed back the date of the Agricultural Revolution that led to the Neolithic period to perhaps between 4000 and 10000 BCE. Scholars also now think that the Agricultural Revolution happened in far more places around the world than once thought possible (not just Mesopotamia).

Further, in the last decade or so, scientists and researchers have been making important discoveries about human society in the Paleolithic. One of the most recent discoveries has been the site of Gobekli Tepe in southeastern Turkey (see the article in [Smithsonian magazine](#) or check the [Wikipedia entry](#)). Scientists and scholars are not quite unanimous yet in how exactly to interpret the site, but it certainly appears to have been some kind of religious shrine/site/temple, and that would push back the dating of how early mankind was engaged in any kind of formal, ritualistic religious observations. Note that the construction of such a temple, if it is a temple, would have required a far greater degree of community organization and mobilization than previously thought possible from a hunter-gatherer society. It is also clear to me that as we study these early sites, often with the use of better and more advanced technology, we are amazed at how skilled our earliest ancestors were. See, for example, recent revelations about the construction and purpose of megaliths at Stonehenge (Because the URL often changes, try searching "secrets of Stonehenge" on YouTube.) and [Secrets of Easter Island](#). (Note that it is worth watching on PBS!) There is also a [National Geographic video](#) (Actually there are several.) on the Secrets of Stonehenge.

Now there are important discoveries being made in North and South America which may change the previously-accepted timing of the arrival of humans and their migration through the Western hemisphere. See Simon Romero, [Discoveries Challenge Beliefs on Humans' Arrival in the Americas](#).

If you are interested, check out the [Genographic Project](#), administered by National Geographic, which focuses on ancient human ancestors and migrations. The project also allows you to check your own ancient ancestors via a DNA test. ([Catherine Damer](#) has shared her experiences with the project; Catherine has also shared some pictures and information on [petroglyphs of the Taino Indians](#) that can be seen in Puerto Rico.)

Some recommended online lectures and websites:

- [Precursors to Civilization](#) (fairly extensive notes)
- Frank Thadeusz, [Brewing Up a Civilization](#) ("Did our Neolithic ancestors turn to agriculture so that they could be sure of a tipple?")
- Ewen Callaway, [Oldest Homo sapiens fossil claim rewrites our species' history](#) (2017)
- The [Journey of Humankind: The Peopling of the Earth](#) is a website that uses an animated video to explain the origins of mankind and the spread of the human population around the world.
- [Neolithic vs. Paleolithic](#)
- Michael Lemonick and Andrea Dorfman, [Who Were The First Americans](#)
- The [Smithsonian Institution Human Origins Program](#) has a good explanation of the evolutionary steps from one species to another and also has an ancestor tree format that is particularly useful.
- The BBC's [The Evolution of Man](#) has some great materials on the different phases in the evolution of early man (and also some good links).
- [History of the Man in Ice](#)
- [Mother of Man - 3.2 Million Years Ago](#) from BBC Science
- [Becoming Human](#), journey through the story of human evolution
- John Noble Wilford, [Stone Tools From Kenya Are Oldest Yet Discovered](#), 20 May 2015, **The New York Times**
- [The Cave of Chauvet](#) and also [Lascaux](#).
- Chelsea Constantine (spring 2016) has created an excellent timeline of [Neolithic Period Sites](#).
- Andrew Curry, [Gobekli Tepe: The World's First Temple](#), an article from Smithsonian magazine that examines an 11,000-year-old site.
- [Art of the First Cities in the Third Millenium B.C.](#), an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum from 2003.
- Dr. Francis Pryor, [Overview: From Neolithic to Bronze Age, 8000 - 800 BC](#) (BBC site)
- [Çatalhöyük Research Portal](#) (one of the earliest inhabited sites). See also Robert L. Strauss, [What Happened Here? A Stone Age city thrived for more than a millennium, then vanished. Ian Hodder is leading a 25-year investigation](#).
- Some scholars have argued that the development of settled agriculture, and the resulting and ensuing movement into cities, was not a step forward for humans. See, for example, [Jared Diamond "The Worst Mistake" in the History of the Human Race](#) or Sanjida O'Connell, [Is Farming the Root of All Evil](#), which is a critique of Diamond's ideas.
- "Neolithic Agriculture: The Slow Birth of Agriculture" by Heather Pringle (Search in one of the online library databases.) Stephen Westerfield writes that "In this essay, the two different lifestyles are blended over the course of thousands of years until eventually, most likely due to the increasing population, humans were forced to rely on farming to survive. I found it interesting because as the text book seems to herald agriculture as a revolutionary technology that changed the course of our history, this essay paints a much different picture. Here, agriculture is seen as a much older technology that became a necessity as its negative effects forced humans to accept the lifestyle in order to survive."
- [History Stories](#)
- [Prehistoric Ages](#) (short, clear and nicely done)
- Here is a [list](#) of some of the better websites dealing with prehistory.
- For extra credit please suggest to your instructor a relevant website for this unit of the course. Send the title of the site, the URL and a brief explanation why you find the information interesting and applicable to the material being studied in this unit.

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