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The Big Questions

How did humans live on Earth before the beginning of civilisation?

Before the development of civilisation, humans lived as hunter-gatherers, relying on hunting animals and gathering plants for food. They used simple stone tools and lived in caves or open camps. Their lifestyle was nomadic, moving in search of food and shelter.

How did humans communicate before writing was invented?

Humans communicated through symbols, signs, and oral traditions before writing was invented. Early scripts like the Harappan script (Sindhu lipi) were pictographic but remain undeciphered. Other early writing systems such as the Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian

hieroglyphics have been deciphered and mark the beginning of recorded history about 5000 years ago.

How is archaeology helpful in understanding our past?

Archaeology studies material remains such as tools, bones, fossils, and ancient settlements to reconstruct human history before written records. Excavations and analysis of artifacts help us understand early human life, culture, and technological progress.

How did early civilisations interact with each other?

Early civilisations, especially those in river valleys like the Sindhu-Sarasvatī, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China, interacted through trade and cultural exchanges. For example, the Mesopotamians traded with the Harappans, exchanging goods like beads, ivory, and metals. Geographic proximity facilitated these contacts.

Early Human History and Evolution

Human history before writing is studied mainly through archaeological evidence. Our earliest ancestors evolved in Africa and gradually migrated to other parts of the world. Biological evolution transformed australopithecines into Homo sapiens, while cultural evolution involved developing tools and adapting to environmental changes.

Biological and Cultural Evolution

Biological evolution refers to physical and genetic changes over millions of years, leading to modern humans. Cultural evolution includes the development of tools, techniques, and social behaviours to survive and thrive in changing climates.

Migration and Dispersal

Homo erectus was the first hominin to migrate out of Africa around 2 million years ago, spreading into Asia and Europe. Modern humans (Homo sapiens) evolved about 300,000 years ago in Africa and migrated globally around 125,000 years ago.

How do we know about our ancestors?

Archaeologists uncover tools, fossils, and other remains at excavation sites to learn about early humans. Experimental archaeology helps understand how tools were made and used.

Stone Age Periods and Technological Progress

Early human history is divided into the Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic periods based on tool technology and lifestyle changes.

Paleolithic Hunter-Gatherers

During the Paleolithic (Old Stone Age), humans used large stone tools like handaxes and cleavers for hunting and gathering. Sites like Attirampakkam and Isampur in India show evidence of such tools dating back over a million years.

Mesolithic Hunter-Gatherers

The Mesolithic period saw the development of microlithic tools, smaller and more efficient for hunting small game and fishing. People began occupying temporary settlements near water sources. Cave paintings like those at Bhimbetka illustrate their art and culture.

Neolithic Revolution

The Neolithic period marked a major shift to food production through farming and animal domestication. People made polished stone tools, pottery, and established permanent villages. This revolution laid the foundation for urban civilisation.

Neolithic and Chalcolithic Cultures in India

In India, the Neolithic way of life began around 7000 BCE at Mehrgarh, with farming, animal domestication, and copper use. By 2500 BCE, Neolithic agricultural communities spread widely, interacting with Chalcolithic cultures that used copper and stone tools.

Sindhu-Sarasvatī Civilisation

The Sindhu-Sarasvatī civilisation, also known as the Harappan civilisation, emerged around 2600 BCE in the Indus and Ghaggar-Sarasvatī river basins. Early Harappan sites show continuity in pottery, bead making, copper working, and the use of seals and script. The civilisation was marked by urban centres, standard weights and measures, and advanced craft production.

Bronze Age Civilisations Outside India

Contemporary to the Harappans, major Bronze Age civilisations developed in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China, each flourishing in fertile river valleys and contributing to agriculture, writing, architecture, and governance.

Mesopotamian Civilisation

Located between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, Mesopotamia saw the rise of city-states like Sumer, Akkad, Assyria, and Babylonia. The Sumerians developed cuneiform writing, built ziggurats, and invented the wheel and sailboat. The Code of Hammurabi was a significant legal code from Babylonia.

Egyptian Civilisation

Egypt developed along the Nile River, known for its pyramids, mummification, and hieroglyphic writing. The society was ruled by Pharaohs and had a complex social hierarchy. The Rosetta Stone helped decipher Egyptian script.

Chinese Civilisation

China's early civilisation grew along the Huang He and Yangtze rivers. The Shang and Zhou dynasties marked the Bronze Age, with advances in metallurgy, writing (oracle bones), and social organisation. The Great Wall was built for protection against invasions.

Summary and Key Points

- Early human history is studied through archaeology as writing developed later.
- Humans evolved in Africa and migrated worldwide.
- The Stone Age is divided into Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic periods, showing technological and lifestyle changes.
- The Neolithic revolution introduced farming, animal domestication, and permanent settlements.
- The Sindhu-Sarasvatī civilisation was a major Bronze Age urban culture in South Asia.
- Other Bronze Age civilisations include Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China, each with unique contributions.

Solved Examples

Example 1: Why is the Harappan script still undeciphered?

The Harappan script remains undeciphered because it is pictographic with no bilingual texts to compare, and the language it represents is unknown. Despite many attempts, no one has conclusively decoded it.

Example 2: What marks the beginning of the historical period?

The beginning of the historical period is marked by the emergence of deciphered writing systems such as Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics around 5000 years ago.

Practice Set

Easy

- What is the significance of the Neolithic revolution?
- Where did Homo erectus first migrate from?

Moderate

- Describe the main features of the Sindhu-Sarasvatī civilisation.
- Explain the role of rivers in the growth of early civilisations.

Challenging

- Compare the writing systems of the Harappan civilisation and Mesopotamia.
- Discuss the social hierarchy of ancient Egypt and its impact on society.

Answer Key

- The Neolithic revolution introduced farming, animal domestication, and permanent settlements, leading to civilisation.
- Homo erectus first migrated from Africa around 2 million years ago.
- The Sindhu-Sarasvatī civilisation featured urban planning, standard weights, script, and craft production.

- Rivers provided water for agriculture, transportation, and supported urban growth in early civilisations.
- The Harappan script is undeciphered and pictographic, while Mesopotamian cuneiform is wedge-shaped and deciphered.
- Ancient Egypt had a social hierarchy with Pharaohs at the top, priests, artisans, and slaves, influencing governance and culture.

Quick Reference

- **Hominin:** Early human ancestors who made tools.
- **Neolithic Revolution:** Transition from hunting-gathering to farming.
- **Ziggurat:** Stepped pyramid temple in Mesopotamia.
- **Cuneiform:** Early wedge-shaped writing of Sumerians.
- **Mummification:** Preserving bodies in ancient Egypt for afterlife.
- **Chalcolithic:** Period of copper and stone tool use.

Glossary

- **Agriculture:** The practice of cultivating plants and domesticating animals for food.
- **Archaeology:** The study of human history through excavation of sites and analysis of artifacts.
- **Bronze Age:** Period marked by the use of bronze tools and urban civilisation.
- **Civilisation:** A complex society with cities, government, and culture.
- **Fossil:** Preserved remains of ancient organisms.
- **Homo sapiens:** Modern humans.
- **Mesopotamia:** Ancient civilisation between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.
- **Neolithic:** New Stone Age, marked by farming and settled life.
- **Palaeolithic:** Old Stone Age, marked by hunter-gatherer lifestyle.
- **Script:** A system of writing.
- **Urbanisation:** Growth of cities and towns.