Chapter 4

Early Humans and Beginning of Civilisation

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The Big Questions

1. *How did humans live on Earth before the beginning of civilisation?*
2. *How did humans communicate before writing was invented?*
3. *How is archaeology helpful in understanding our past?*
4. *How did early civilisations interact with each other?*

In previous grades, we have studied the history of various kingdoms and empires, and also learned about the Sindhu–Sarasvatī civilisation. However, the history of humanity goes back much further. In this chapter, we will explore who our earliest ancestors were, when and where they evolved, what kinds of food they ate, how they lived, and how they became what we are today.

The period before the development of writing is understood mainly through archaeological evidence, as written languages emerged at different times in different parts of the world.

One of the earliest known writing systems is associated with the Sindhu–Sarasvatī, also known as the Indus Valley Civilisation or the Harappan Civilisation. Writings and engravings found on objects such as seals and pottery, indicate that the Harappans used a pictographic script for writing. However, it has not yet been deciphered. As a result, we still do not understand the Harappan script, also referred to as *Sindhu lipi.*

Other early writing systems include the cuneiform script of the Sumerians in Mesopotamia and the hieroglyphic script of ancient Egypt, both of which flourished around the same time as the Harappan Civilisation. Unlike the Harappan script, these scripts have been deciphered and mark the beginning of the historical period, about 5000 years ago. You will learn more about them later in the chapter.

LET'S EXPLORE

Fig. 4.1: Harappan script on a seal

You have studied about the Harappan script in your previous grades. Observe this seal carefully and discuss why the script has not yet been deciphered. Also, find out what efforts have been made to decipher it. You can use your textbook, consult your teacher, or refer to online sources.

From about 400 BCE, a script known as *Brahmi* was used in parts of southern India and in the Ganga Valley (northern India). It was later formalised by the Emperor Aśhoka (3rd century BCE) and contemporary Iron Age people all over southern India. You will learn more about the journey of scripts in higher grades.

Fig. 4.2. Brahmi inscription on a railing around the stupa at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh

The Invention of Writing: Before and After

	Before	After
Human History	More than 99 per cent of human history falls under this period (from about 3 million years ago to 5000 years ago).	Less than 1 per cent of human history falls under this period, the last 5000 years, including the present.
Main Source for Reconstruction	Tools, implements, and other material objects made by humans (artefacts) are the major sources for reconstructing people's ways of living.	Both material remains and written documents are sources for reconstructing the lives of people and society.
Lives of the People	It is generally difficult to understand the thoughts and ideas of people.	Literature (written documents) provides information about names; events; and social, political, and cultural life.
Measurement of Time	Measurement of time is approximate, that is, dating events and cultures is only approximate.	Dating of cultures and events becomes relatively accurate because written documents mention specific dates of events such as coronation, wars, etc.

Fig. 4.3

Why Should We Study Early Human History?

The study of early human history helps us understand the long process of humankind's biological and cultural evolution in relation to changes in climate and the environment.

Biological evolution refers to the gradual physical and genetic changes through which our early ancestors, known as *australopithecines* (*australis* means southern and *pithecus* is primates), evolved into modern human beings, called *Homo sapiens*.

Cultural evolution explains how humans adapted to their surroundings during the Quaternary Period (the last 26 lakh years, including the present). To survive the changing climatic and

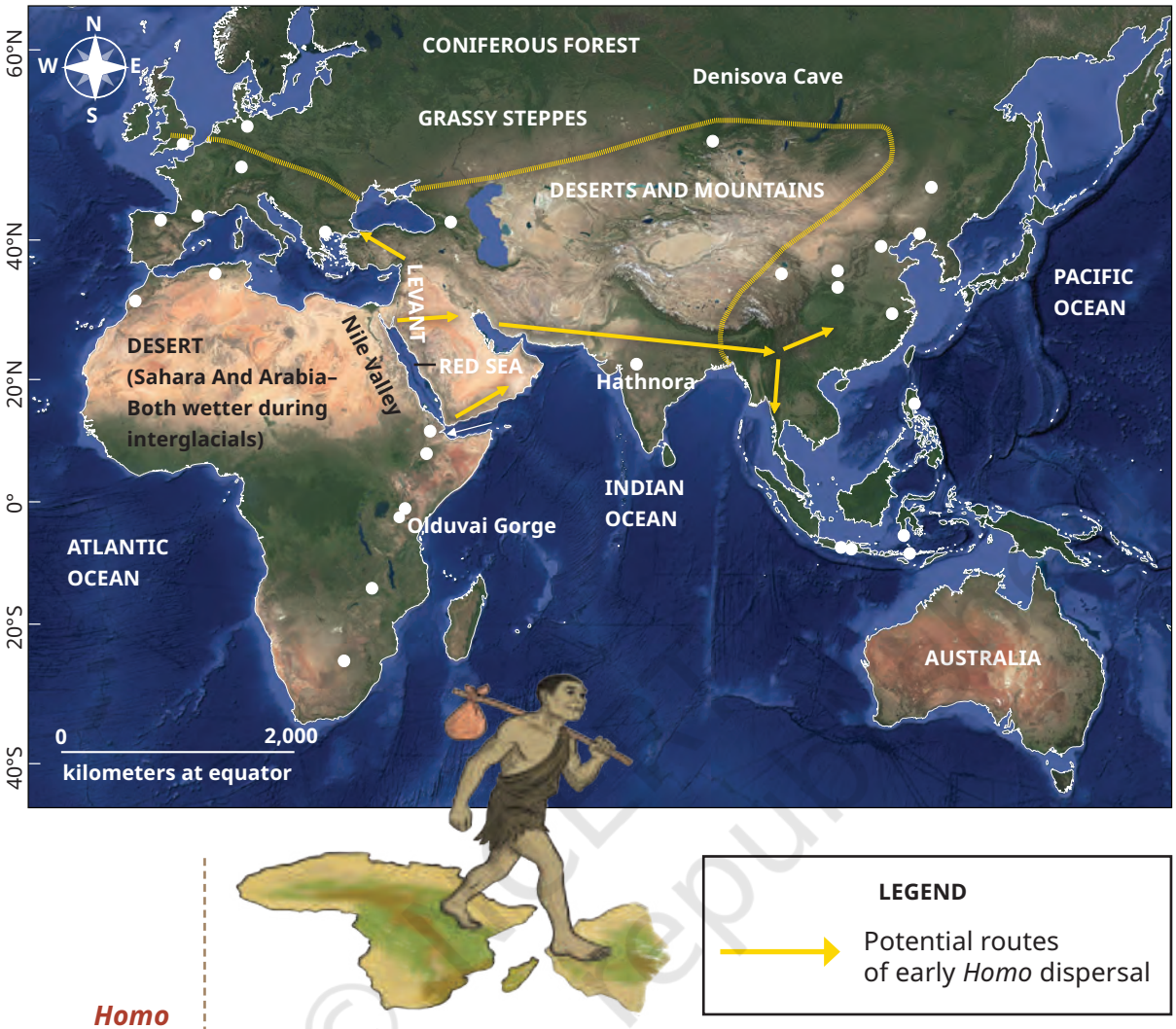


Fig. 4.4. Early dispersal of Homo erectus out of Africa (around 2 million years ago)

Homo erectus: *Homo erectus* refers to an upright or bipedal human ancestor.

Hominin: Hominins are a group that includes modern humans and our early human-like ancestors.

environmental conditions, humans developed tools, techniques, and other forms of technology to make use of natural resources.

Over time, human ways of life changed from hunting and gathering to agriculture and food production. The ability to produce surplus food and material goods laid the foundation for the emergence of civilisation.

It is generally agreed that our earliest ancestors evolved and lived in Africa and began to move out of the continent around 2 million years ago. ***Homo erectus,*** an early human ancestor with stone tools, such as hand axes and cleavers, was the first **hominin** to exit Africa. These tools have been found in other parts of Asia and Europe, indicating their origin in Africa and their dispersion beyond the continent between 2 and 0.5 million years ago. Another major wave of movement out of Africa took place around 125,000 years ago. This

exit was associated with the early *Homo sapiens*, ourselves (modern humans), who also evolved in Africa around 300,000 years ago and are now spread all over the earth.

THINK ABOUT IT

Why do you think early humans left Africa to migrate to other regions?

How do we know about our ancestors?

Archaeologists explore early human sites to uncover clues such as tools, bones, and other objects left behind by our early ancestors. Each clue helps them build a picture of how people lived long ago.

To better understand these clues, archaeologists also experiment by making and using similar tools. This helps them learn how early humans created, used, and depended on these objects in their daily lives.

Fig. 4.5. An archaeological excavation in process

Who Were Our Human Ancestors?

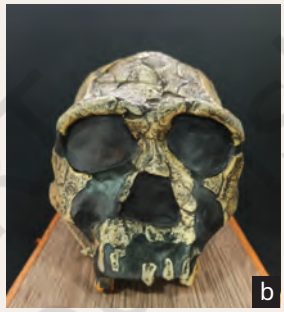
The earliest human settlements were found in Africa, Asia, and Europe, and together they constitute what we today call the '**Old World**'. Different kinds of human ancestors co-existed at this time (see Fig. 4.6), and it was around 3.3 million years ago, that one of these ancestors made the earliest stone tools. This marked the beginning of the so-called 'human behaviour', as opposed to the behaviour of animals, who do not possess the cognitive ability to make such tools. Thus, human beings came to be known as 'hominins', or tool makers. The tools they created are sometimes called extra-corporal limbs because they functioned as extensions of the human body, helping people perform tasks they could not accomplish with their hands alone. Humans made these tools, used them, and discarded them when they wore out. Over time, these discarded tools got

Old World: Geographical area of the oldest human settlements of the earliest palaeolithic period.

Fossil: The preserved remains, traces, or impressions of plants, animals, or humans from the distant past. Fossils form when these remains get buried under layers of earth and slowly turn into stone over thousands or millions of years.

buried in the upper layers of the earth and were later discovered by archaeologists. In the same way, the remains of some of our early ancestors were buried deep underground, and over thousands or even millions of years, turned into **fossils**. The discovery of such tools and fossils are major sources of evidence that helps archaeologists reconstruct human history and understand how our ancestors lived. It is through such findings that we know that the *Homo habilis* (handy man) lived in Africa, especially in the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania and Kenya. As noted earlier, their successors *Homo erectus*, the inventors of handaxes and cleavers, were among the first to migrate out of Africa and gradually spread into Europe and Asia. While all human ancestors were tool makers, it was the *Homo sapiens* that developed complex technologies.

a. *Homo habilis* lived in Olduvai Gorge, Tanzania and Kenya, 2-6 million years ago; made chopper stone tools



b. *Homo erectus* lived in the Eastern African Rift Valley 2 million years ago; made handaxes and cleavers.

c. *Homo neanderthalensis* lived in Europe and Southwest Asia till about 40000 years ago; made Middle Palaeolithic flake tools.

d. Living humans, or the *Homo sapiens*, are the only human species living today on earth.

Fig. 4.6. Skulls of early humans and modern humans showing the evolutionary sequence from Homo habilis to Homo sapiens

LET'S EXPLORE

Let us observe the images given above and answer the following questions.

→ Do you notice any changes in the shape or features of the skulls across different ancestors?

→ Can you observe a gradual straightening of the face?

Early human history is divided into distinct periods based on technological progress, such as the development and use of tools, the beginning of agriculture, and changes in human lifestyle and settlement patterns. We will explore these stages in this chapter.

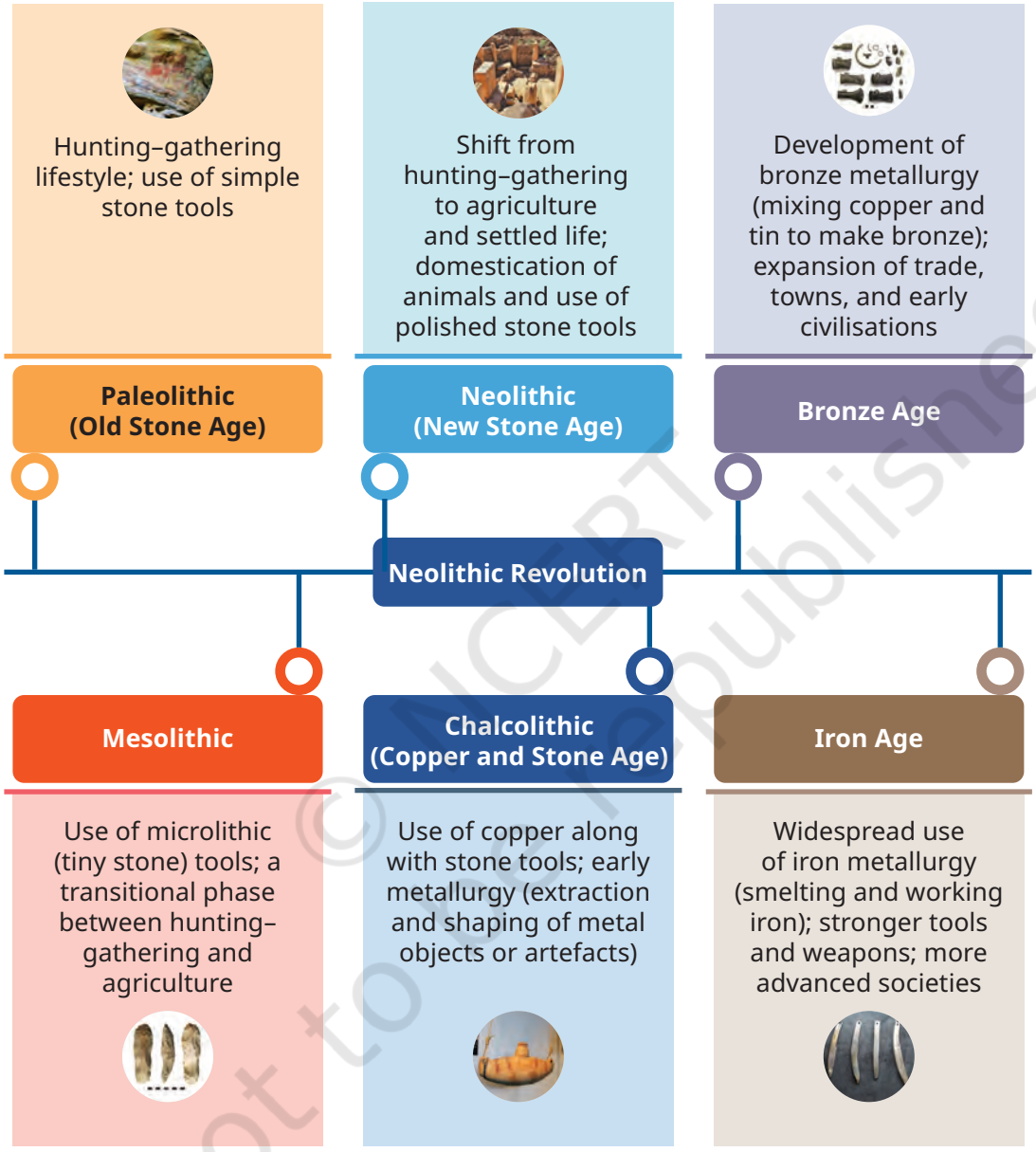


Fig. 4.7. Periods in Early Human History

THINK ABOUT IT

Why do you think the shift to farming during the Neolithic period is called a **revolution** rather than a simple change? Discuss with your classmates.

Palaeolithic Hunter–Gatherers

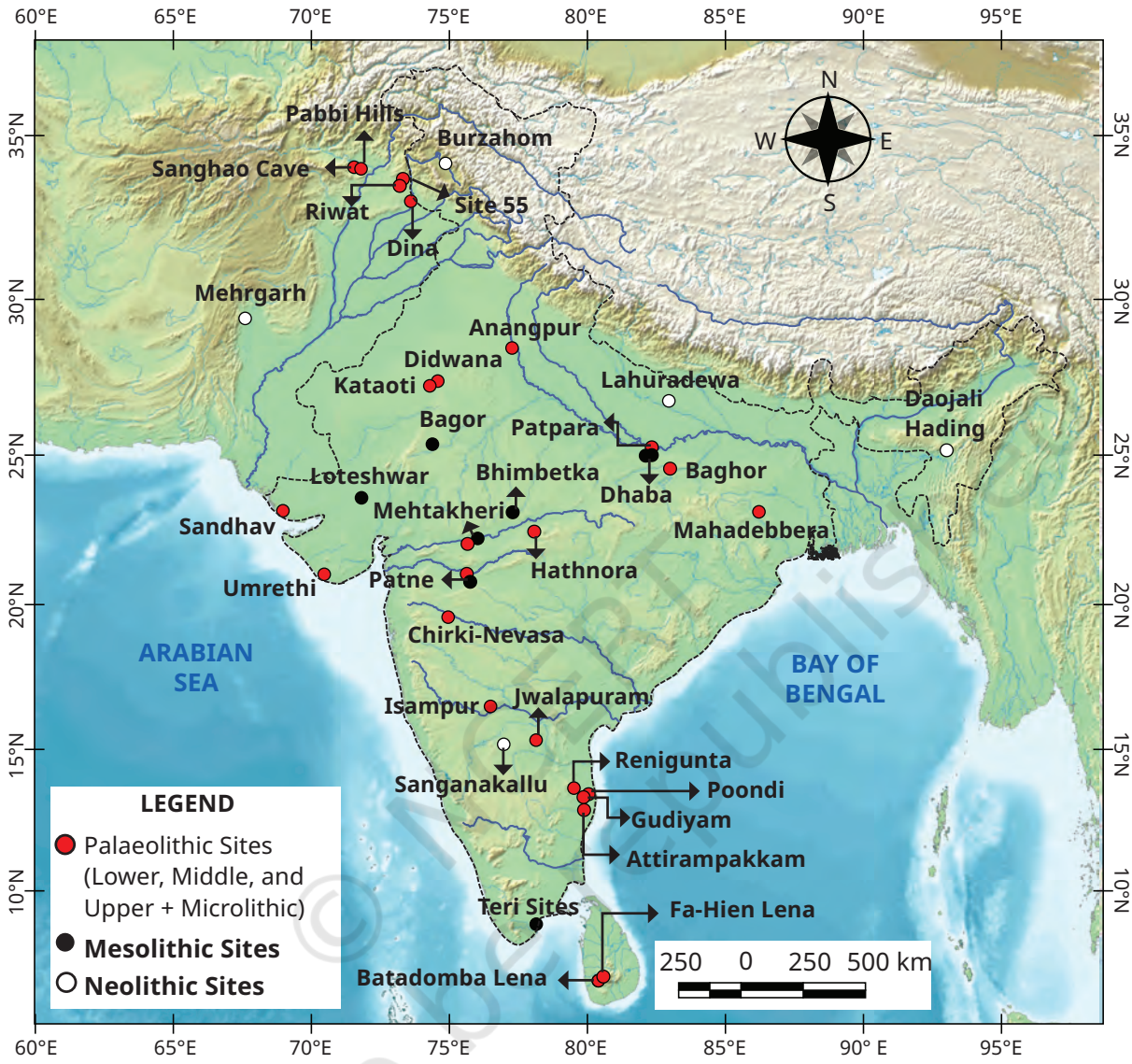


Fig. 4.8. Major early human sites in the Indian subcontinent

The Stone Age is broadly divided into three stages—Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic. The word *palaeo* means 'old', and *lithic* means 'stone', so the Palaeolithic period is also known as the Old Stone Age.

In the Indian subcontinent, the oldest human settlement dates back to about 2 million years ago. Attirampakkam in Tamil Nadu is dated to about 1.5–1.7 million years ago, and Isampur in Karnataka is dated to 1.2 million years ago. At these sites, animal fossils and large cutting tools, including handaxes and cleavers, and other tools, such as stone scrapers and choppers made of quartzite and limestone,

respectively, have been found. These tools were used to chop animal meat, dig out tubers, scrape animal skin, and cleave animal bones to extract protein-rich marrow.

Fig. 4.9. Cleavers and handaxe dating to about 1–5 million years in India

Further progress in hunting and gathering was reflected in the making of smaller stone tools. The main types of stone tools included scrapers, borers, and points. These indicate improved efficiency in hunting by developing projectiles which were tipped with sharp points.

Fig. 4.10. Middle Palaeolithic tools

Later, humans invented the bow and arrow, as well as parallel-sided blade and microblade tools made from rocks with glassy texture (very sharp when freshly made). They also hunted small game animals. Moreover, they developed symbolic communication, decorated the walls of caves and rock shelters with paintings, and used pigments to decorate their bodies. In addition, they were the first to produce beads of stone, bone, and shell.

Fig. 4.11a. and Fig. 4.11b. Microlithic tools and bone points

A distinctive type of stone tool, known as a burin or engraver, was also used to engrave symbolic features on bones and shells (such as ostrich eggs). The microblades were fixed in a handle for ease of use. These developments are associated with our immediate ancestors, *Homo sapiens*, who gradually spread all over the world, including Australia and the Americas, between 50000 and 12000 years ago.

Mesolithic Hunter–Gatherers

Fig. 4.12. Cave art from Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh

Around 12000 years ago, Earth's climate became warmer, leading to significant changes in the environment. Forests and grasslands expanded into areas that were previously covered by ice sheets. The new landscapes offered a wider variety of resources, including small game animals, fish, and edible wild grains. Thus, the world witnessed the first-ever population explosion in human history. A variety of microlithic tools enabled the people to gather aquatic food—both marine and freshwater—and fishing was the mainstay of their subsistence economy. Art activity also flourished during this time, and new habitats such as caves and rock shelters were frequently occupied. The World Heritage Site of Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh contains hundreds of painted rock shelters with Mesolithic and earlier human occupation.

The Neolithic Revolution

As hunter–gatherers gained adequate familiarity with seasons and different types of food resources, there was a gradual transition to a food-producing way of life, also known as the Neolithic revolution. The hallmark of this revolution was the domestication of select animals and plants, bringing them under human control, and the development of new breeds through cultivation and husbandry. While hunter–gatherers produced tools for procuring food, Neolithic farmers made tools for food production and processing (Fig. 4.13) and developed a variety of earthenware pottery in various shapes and sizes. They utilised several raw materials and resources and established the first village settlements, laying the foundations for the urban revolution.

Fig. 4.13. Neolithic stone tools

The chart (Fig. 4.14) illustrates the gradual shift from hunting and gathering to agricultural ways of life across different regions of the world. It also highlights that this transition did not occur at the same time everywhere, but took place at different periods in different areas.

THINK ABOUT IT

Observe the chart (Fig. 4.14) and identify the animals that were domesticated. Also try and identify the types of human habitats and objects that were used. Are any of these still used in present times?

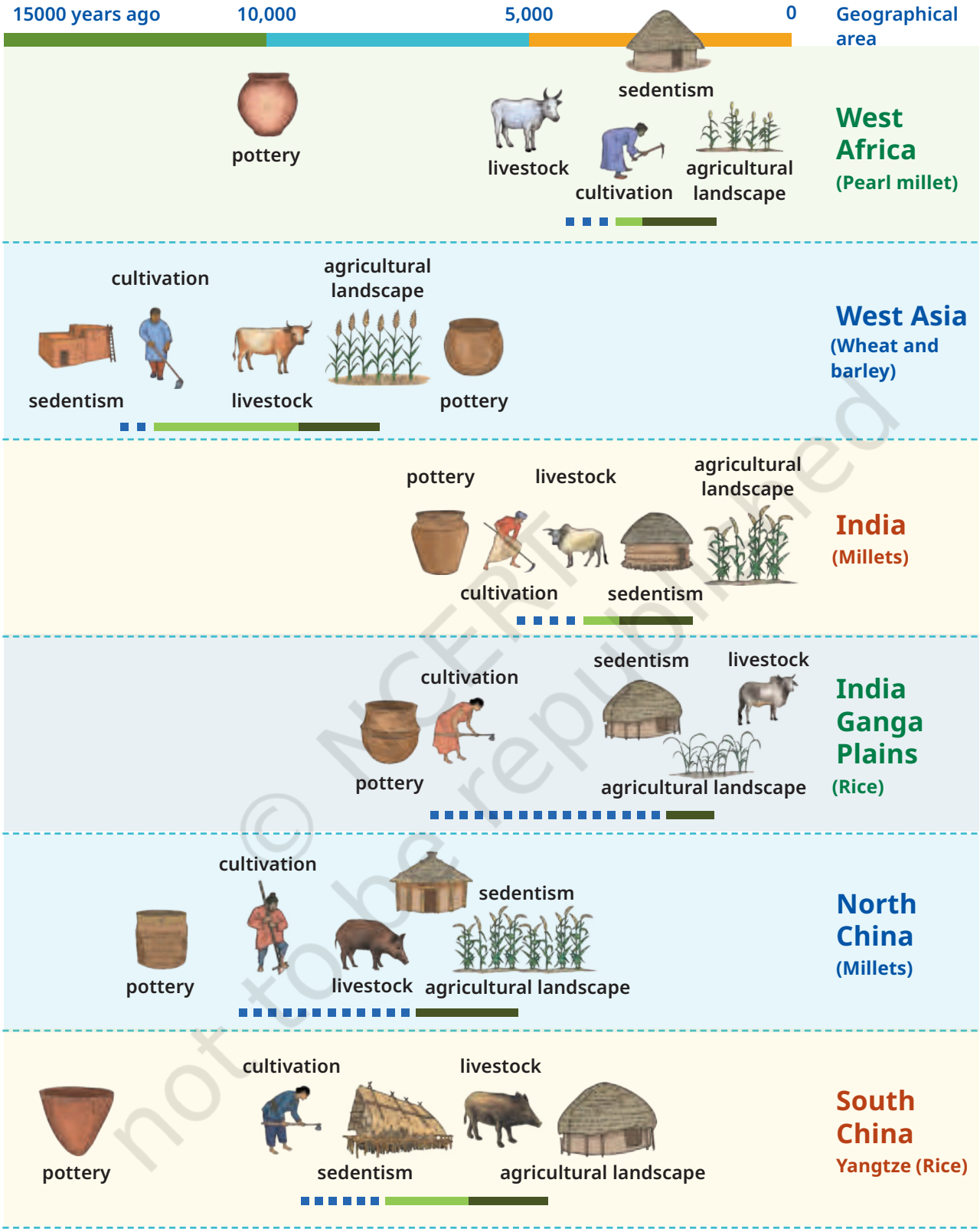


Fig. 4.14. Transition to the agricultural way of life in different parts of the world

Neolithic Period in Indian Subcontinent

In the Indian subcontinent, we find regional variation in the initiation of agricultural ways of life. In the northwest, the site of Mehrgarh on the Bolan River (in present-day Pakistan) is the oldest Neolithic site. It was also the earliest agricultural village, dating back to about 7000 BCE. Its people built handmade sun-dried brick houses and granaries, buried their dead in graves, and made a variety of ornaments from semi-precious stones, such as lapis lazuli, carnelian, and shells. They cultivated wheat and barley, and raised sheep, goats, and Indian cattle—the zebu humped bull in particular. They were also the first to make copper objects, thus entering the metal age and becoming popularly known as the Chalcolithic people by about 4000 BCE. This laid the basis for the Bronze Age Sindhu–Sarasvatī civilisation around 3500 BCE.

Fig. 4.15. Sanganakallu Neolithic site on top of a granite hill, dating 2000 BCE

Fig. 4.16. Mehrgarh on the Bolan river; layout and house structures

By 2500 BCE, most of the Indian subcontinent was occupied by Neolithic agricultural communities. Cattle, sheep, and goat herding, along with the cultivation of cereals, millets and pulses characterised the Neolithic way of life, sometimes interacting with the contemporary chalcolithic cultures in some parts of the country.

Sindhu–Sarasvatī Civilisation

In the previous section, you have seen how the Neolithic way of life that emerged around 7000 BCE at Mehrgarh in the foothills of Baluchistan, spread in the middle and upper Indus valley and further east. Some of these settlements mastered the extraction of copper from its ores around 4000 BCE, and became the earliest Chalcolithic sites in the subcontinent marking the beginning of the Bronze Age.

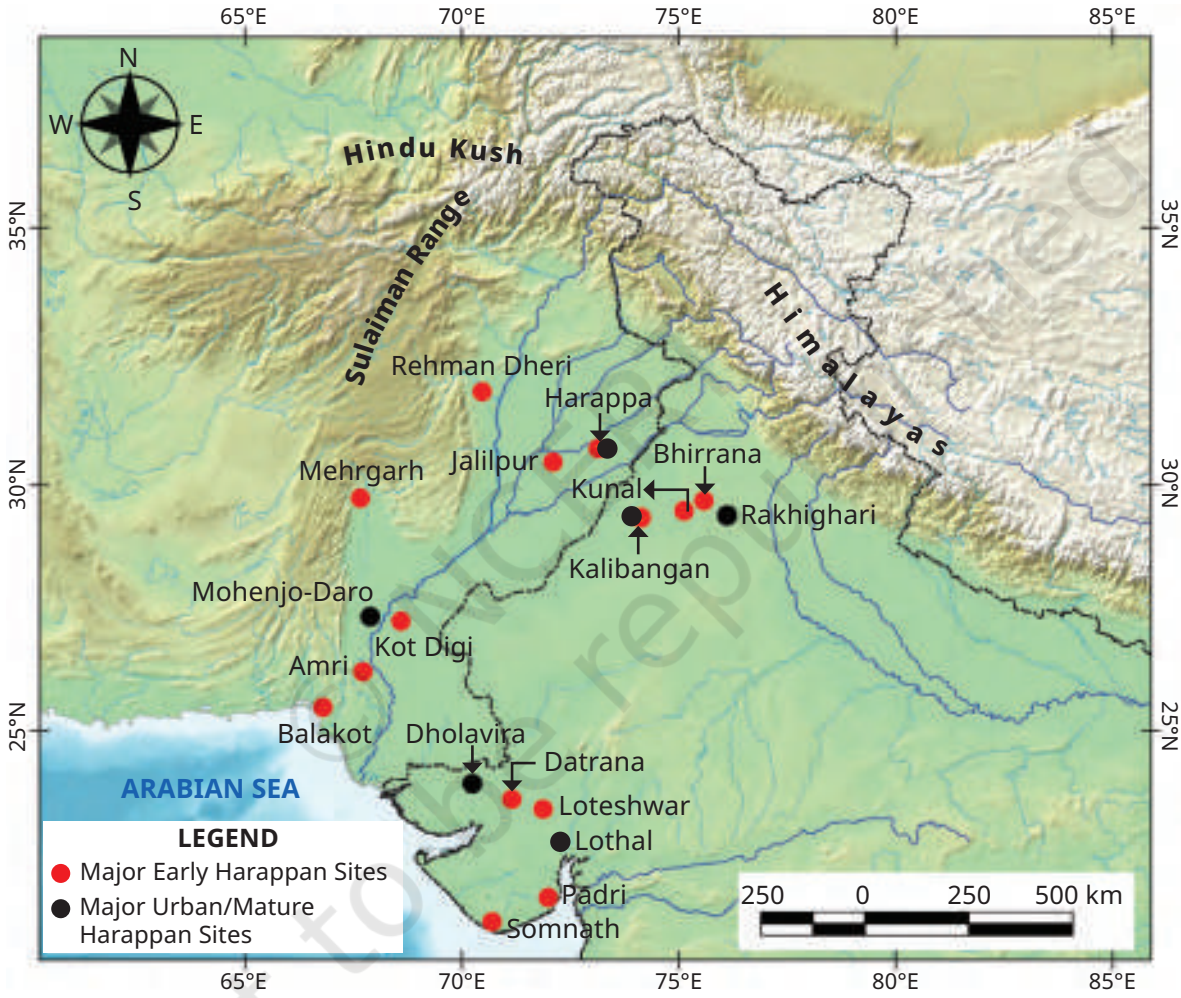


Fig. 4.17. Map showing some major early and mature Harappan sites

In this section, we will look at the early stages that led to the emergence of the civilisation by 2600 BCE.

Introduction of copper tools in the fertile alluvial plains of the Indus and the Ghaggar-Sarasvatī basins enhanced productivity, leading to increased prosperity in these communities. This is also a period of large-scale production of pottery showing diverse regional styles. The regional styles in pottery and craft production

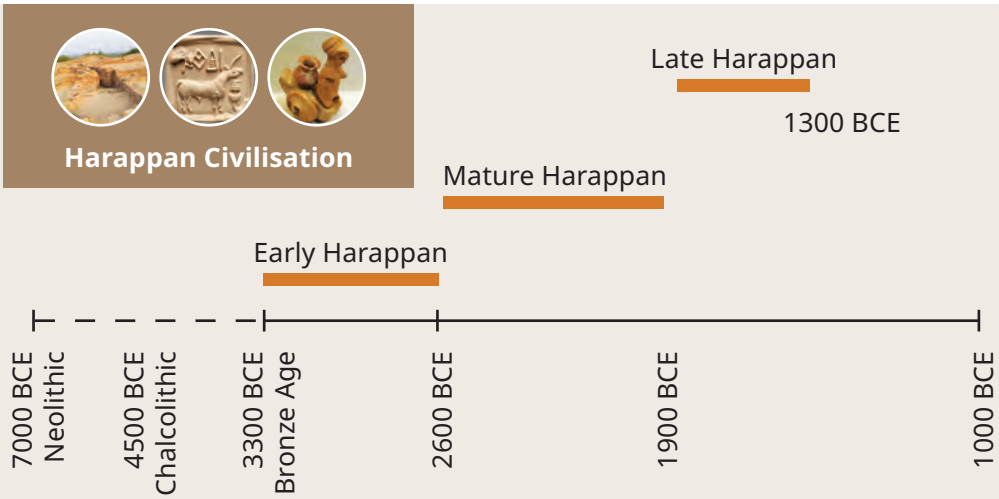


Fig. 4.18. Timeline showing Harappan Civilisation

became more evident in the early Chalcolithic sites of Baluchistan and the Indus and Ghaggar-Sarasvatī basins from 4000 BCE onwards. Some radio-carbon dates suggest that at some sites in the dried river belt of Sarasvati, such as at Bhirrana and Kunal, the Pre-Harappan phase began between 7000 and 5500 BCE. Many of these regional styles evolved over time and became standard features of the Sindhu–Sarasvatī civilisation by about 2500 BCE. Since these sites show a cultural continuity, this stage is generally described as Early Harappan. We see continuity in pottery traditions, semi-precious stone beads, shell bangles, terracotta objects, and copper working. Some other developments, such as building a perimeter wall around the settlement, the use of seals, and even the Harappan writings/script, probably had their beginnings in the Early Harappan stage.

The Harappans were not merely agriculturists; they also practised a number of arts and crafts, and pottery was one of the major craft products that boosted their economy. Pottery remains from different regions show unique styles in the shapes of vessels and their painted designs. Some other crafts that show gradual development include copper work, shell work, and the production of semi-precious stone beads. Evidence of Early Harappan bead production is found from Harappa in Pakistan as well as from Kunal in Haryana and Datrana in Gujarat.

Besides these, the extensive use of graffiti on pottery and a few seals with geometric and simple animal motifs reported from early Harappan sites like Harappa, Rehman Dheri, and Kunal could be seen as forerunners to the script and inscribed seals of the

Sindhu–Sarasvatī civilisation. It was these technological advancements and economic integration during the Early Harappan period that led to the emergence of the urban centres of the Harappan civilisation.

DON'T MISS OUT

A tradition nearly 5,000 years old

The Early Harappans ploughed fields (Fig. 4.19) at Kalibangan showing horizontal and vertical furrows indicating double crop cultivation, like the seasonal Rabi and Kharif cultivation that is practised even today.

Fig. 4.19. Ploughed field, Kalibangan

THINK ABOUT IT

Fig. 4.20. Stone weights

Harappans had their own standard systems of weight and measurement. This is evident from the meticulously planned settlements and efficient interregional trade practices of the Harappans. They followed a binary multiple (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, etc.) system for weighing smaller units and used multiples of ten for larger denominations. Such cubical stone weights have been reported from several sites. Can you imagine how long-distance trade would have been affected had the Harappans not followed a standard system of weights?

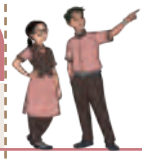
Bronze Age Civilisations Outside India

In Grade 6, you studied the major features of the Harappan/ Sindhu–Sarasvatī civilisation, such as the well-planned urban cities, water management and drainage systems, standard weights and measures, stone beads, inscribed seals, and the script. In this section, we will explore the main features of other Bronze Age civilisations that were contemporary with the Harappans. These three major civilisations were the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and the Chinese civilisations.

It is important to note that four early world civilisations emerged in river plains—the Harappan civilisation along the Sindhu and Sarasvatī rivers, the Mesopotamian civilisation in the region around the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in West Asia, the Egyptian civilisation along the Nile River, and the Chinese civilisation in the Huang He basin in northern China. Geographically, Mesopotamia and the Indus and Ghaggar-Sarasvatī valleys are closer to each other. This proximity facilitated strong contacts and trade between the Mesopotamian and Harappan civilisations. The Egyptian and the Chinese civilisations, on the other hand, have little tangible evidence of their direct contact with the Sindhu–Sarasvatī civilisation.

THINK ABOUT IT

Why were rivers important in the growth of early civilisations?



Mesopotamian Civilisation

Although the four civilisations were contemporaneous, the earliest city-based civilisation emerged in Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia, meaning the "land in between," is the Greek name for the land drained by the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in West Asia (Fig. 4.21). In modern times, this region includes mainly Iraq and Kuwait, with some parts of Turkey and southwestern Iran. The crescent-shaped foothills of the Zagros and Taurus, stretching from the Mediterranean in the west to the Persian Gulf in the east, are known as the 'fertile crescent', due to their high agricultural potential.

While farming began in this region 12000 years before present, copper tools arrived here around 4500 BCE. The arrival of copper helped improve agriculture and other economic activities, such as craft production and trade. This eventually contributed to the broader dissemination of farming across the vast plains of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers.

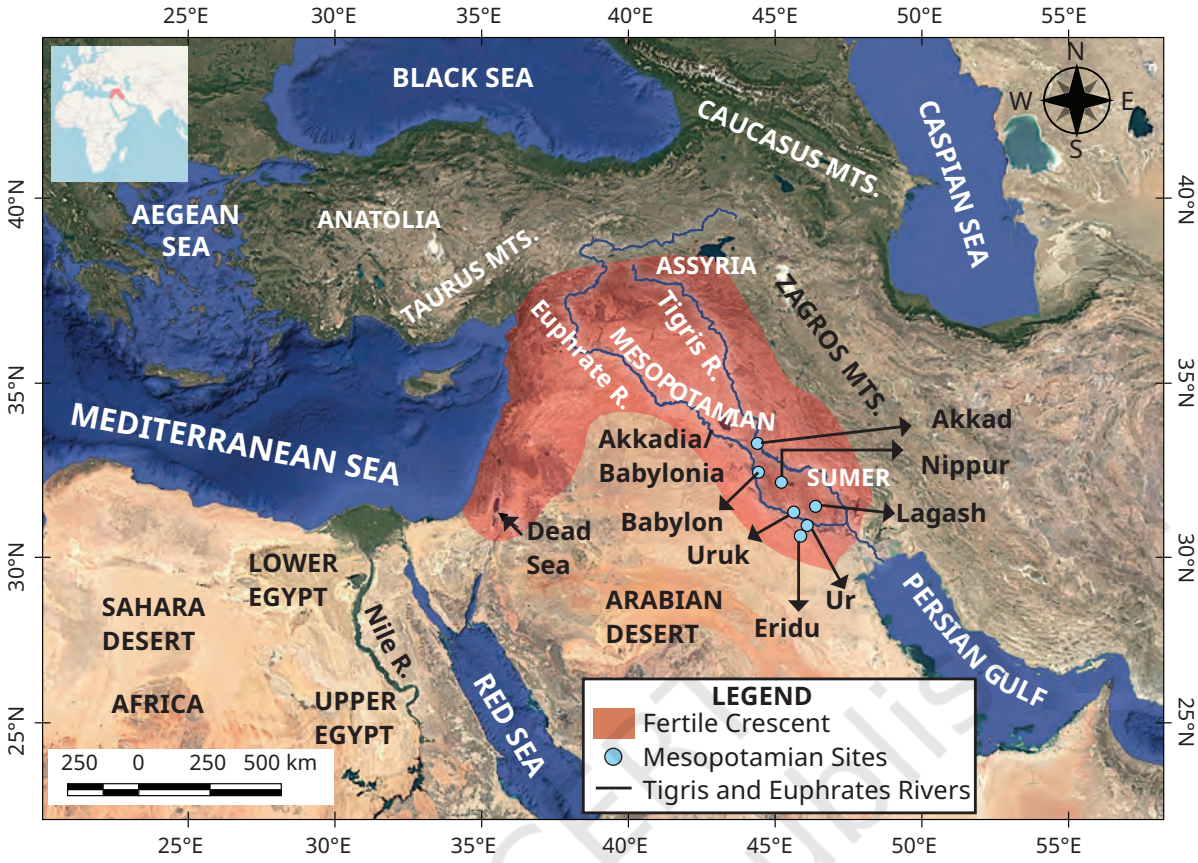


Fig. 4.21. The Fertile Crescent and the extent of the Mesopotamian civilisation

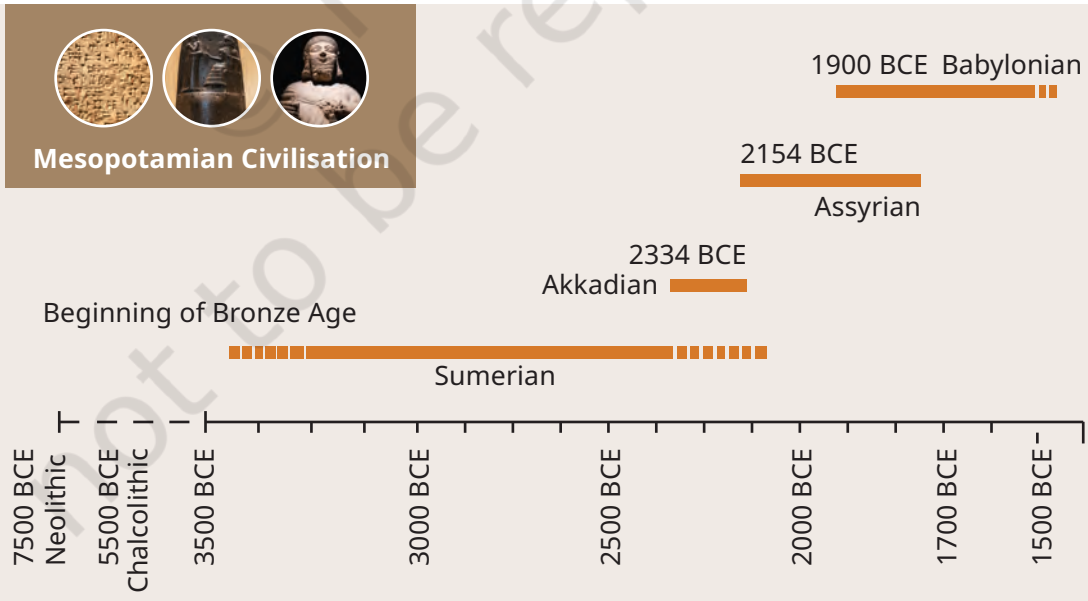


Fig. 4.22. Timeline showing the Mesopotamian civilisation

Over the next 2000 years, some large cities became **'city-states'** by developing governing systems. Among these, the four major city-based civilisations that flourished from 3500 BCE onwards in Mesopotamia are the Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, and Babylonian (Fig. 4.22).

City-State: A sovereign state centred around a city that rules the surrounding territories.

LET'S EXPLORE

Can you find out which countries constitute West Asia in present times?

a. The Sumerians

The Sumerian civilisation was the earliest to evolve into a city-based civilisation at Ur and several other cities in Sumer (present-day southern Iraq) in southern Mesopotamia. The Sumerians were the first to build a system of dams and canals for irrigation, and were also the first to use mud bricks and burnt bricks in the construction of houses, defensive walls, and other structures.

Ziggurat: A tower-like stepped pyramid-shaped temple with several floors above which the main temple was located. The top of the ziggurat was a holy place, and the area around the ziggurat contained palaces and royal storehouses. The surrounding walls had only one entrance as the ziggurat also served as the city's treasury.

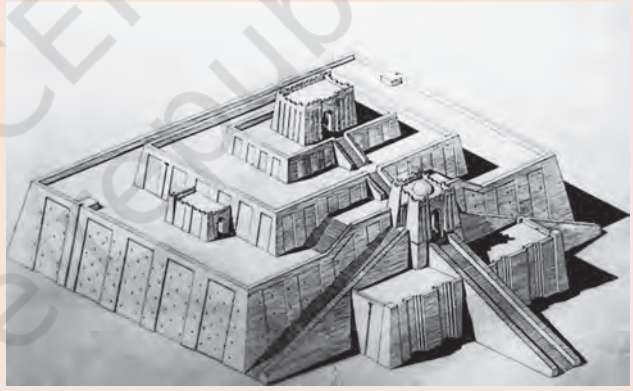


Fig. 4.23

The Sumerians worshipped multiple gods, whom they believed had power over natural forces such as floods and winds, and built temples for each of them. Temples played an important role in people's lives, and each city built a grand temple called a ziggurat for its chief god, and the city grew around this main temple (Fig. 4.23). All economic activities, such as agriculture, trade, and the transport of goods, were tied to the temple authority. Also, entry to the sacred temple was restricted to high priests and priestesses, who were probably a part of the ruling class, reflecting a clear division of social hierarchy that existed in the Mesopotamian society.

LET'S EXPLORE

Do you find any similarities between the temples in India and those of the Sumerian civilisation as centres of socio-cultural and economic activity?

Fig. 4.24. Scenes from Sumerian life on a decorated box. Note the wheeled cart and the elaborate drapery and ornaments worn by the people.

The cities were large settlements where kings lived in grand palaces, and the people lived in small brick houses. The lives of people mostly centred around farming, and in addition, several crafts, such as metalworking, pottery, and textiles, were practised. Other professionals like merchants and traders also existed.

Cuneiform: One of the earliest systems of writing that was developed by the Sumerians. It was written by pressing a wedge-shaped stylus into soft clay tablets. The word cuneiform comes from the Latin word *cuneus*, meaning 'wedge', referring to the wedge-shaped marks used in the script.

DON'T MISS OUT

While the Sumerians were developing canal irrigation, the Early Harappans in the foothills of Baluchistan and neighbouring regions were also building check dams known as 'gabarbands' across small streams to enhance irrigation. A much evolved form of these water management skills of the Harappans can be seen in the elaborate water harvesting system built at Dholavira in Kachchh. Here, water from the two nearby streams was diverted by building dams and canals into a series of deep tanks to conserve it within the site boundary. These interconnected tanks were built from stone and mud-bricks and some of the tanks were cut deeper into the bedrock. Similarly, the huge dockyard at Lothal, built entirely of burnt bricks, is another marvel of the Harappan water management and architectural skills.

The Beginning of Writing

The Sumerians were the first to start writing around 3300 BCE, and their writing system is known as cuneiform due to the wedge-shaped

tool used by the scribes. Cuneiform consists of hundreds of marks pressed onto the damp surface of clay tablets using sharp wedge-shaped reeds (Fig. 4.25). Its scribes enjoyed a high status in the society, similar to the priests and priestesses, and by 3000 BCE, cuneiform was widely used all over Mesopotamia by different city-states, even though they spoke different languages.

The cuneiform tablets give us a glimpse into the lives and beliefs of the Mesopotamians—their great myths and epics, their hymns, the "law codes," and educational treatises. Tablets were also used for keeping a record of farming and craft activities, especially of potters, seal cutters, shipbuilders, carpenters, farm workers, etc.

Fig. 4.25. Cuneiform was used to write several languages of Mesopotamia, but later went out of use by the end of first millennium BCE.

DON'T MISS OUT

- The Sumerians invented the wheeled cart and sailboat.
- They used calculations for building structures and measuring agricultural fields.
- Their number system was based on the number 60, and the concepts of the 60-minute hour, 60-second minute, and the 360-degree circle was invented by the Sumerians.

LET US RECALL

The cuneiform writing system was contemporary to the Harappan script, but while cuneiform has been deciphered, the Harappan script has not yet been deciphered. Do you think our understanding of a civilisation changes when its script is deciphered compared to when it is not?

b. The Akkadians

The power of the Sumerians was overshadowed in 2334 BCE by the emergence of a new city-state centred on the city of Akkad, which lay further north in Sumer, in central Mesopotamia. The people of this region spoke Akkadian, a language different from Sumerian. However, both Akkadians and Sumerians used the same cuneiform script for writing. Akkadian records document the consolidation of

power over different regions of Mesopotamia and the establishment of the world's first dynastic empire. This was also a period which saw the evolution of creative literature.

LET'S EXPLORE

The Epic of Gilgamesh, written during the Mesopotamian civilisation, is one of the earliest stories written. Try and find out more such stories and share them in class.

The cuneiform tablets of one of the most important Akkadian kings, Sargon, talk about Mesopotamian trade with the eastern territories of Dilmun, Magan and Meluhha. Among these, Meluhha is generally identified with the Sindhu–Sarasvatī civilisation, and Dilmun and Magan are today's Bahrain and Oman peninsula of the Persian Gulf (Fig. 4.26). With the Harappans, they traded semiprecious stone beads, ivory, timber, gold dust, and probably copper.

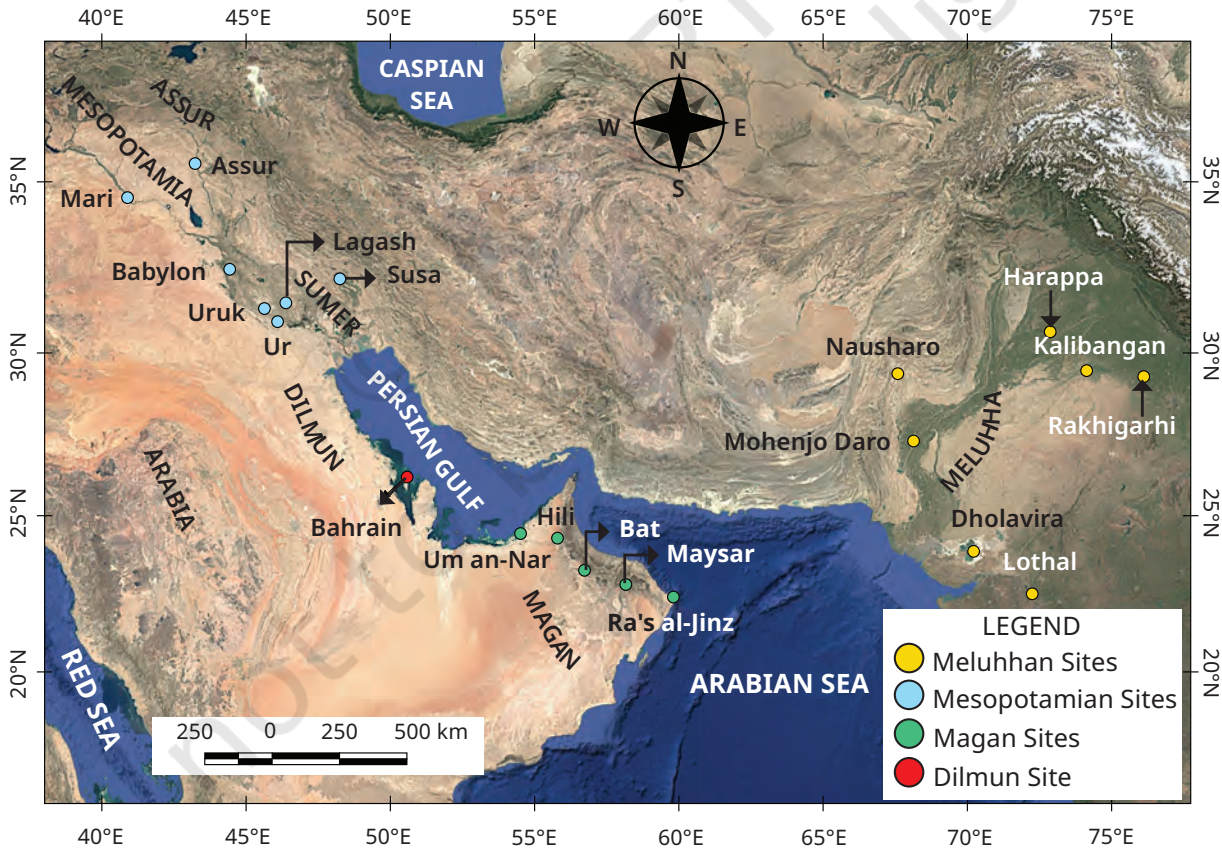


Fig. 4.26. Harappan contact with the Mesopotamian cities and contemporary Chalcolithic sites of Magan (today's Oman) and Dilmun (today's Bahrain)

c. *The Assyrians*

The Akkadian empire lost its supremacy around 2154 BCE to a new city-state, Assur, in northern Mesopotamia. The Assyrian civilisation that supplanted the Akkadians lasted till early 1700 BCE. In a short period, the Assyrian dominance spread across Mesopotamia and spread over the neighbouring regions in the west and south.

d. *The Babylonians*

While the Assyrians were dominant in the north, a new city-state, Babylonia, gained dominance in central Mesopotamia from 1900 BCE onwards. Babylonia's glory started with the ascendance of Hammurabi in 1792 BCE, who conquered the neighbouring regions and expanded the small city-state into a large empire. The most significant contribution of Hammurabi was the compilation of rules and regulations for civil and social conduct known as the *Code of Hammurabi* throughout his empire. It served as a foundational model for many future legal systems.

By the end of 1400 BCE, the Babylonians had lost their earlier prominence due to repeated attacks by the **Hittites** and other rising powers, who had gained an advantage by mastering new technologies and adopting more efficient ways of using natural resources. This, along with increasing environmental degradation, pressure on agricultural lands, and internal political and economic problems, gradually weakened Babylonian control. As a result, they were unable to maintain their dominance, and new powers emerged in West Asia.

Fig. 4.27. Top part of a stone stele showing King Hammurabi receiving the law from Shamash, the Babylonian god of justice. Note the law codes inscribed in cuneiform below the relief.

Hittites:
The Hittites were Indo-European people who established a powerful empire in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) around the second millennium BCE.

Egyptian Civilisation

Egyptian civilisation is one of the earliest civilisations of the world, known for its rich historical records and lasting influence on other civilisations. It is interesting to note that Egypt was known to the Greeks and Romans, and Greek writers like Herodotus visited and wrote about Egypt as early as the 5th century BCE. A 19th century collection of works titled *de L'Egypte* also provides fascinating details about its history.

Papyrus: Was made by cutting the inner trunk of the papyrus plant into strips, criss-crossing, pressing, drying, and polishing them into sheets. The papyrus was named after its discoverers; for example, the Papyrus Ebers, named after its discoverer, lists more than 700 cures and spells of Egyptian medicine.

Egyptian history is also reconstructed from **papyrus** or old paper records. These documents preserve both stories and practical details, offering a window into how Egyptians understood the world.

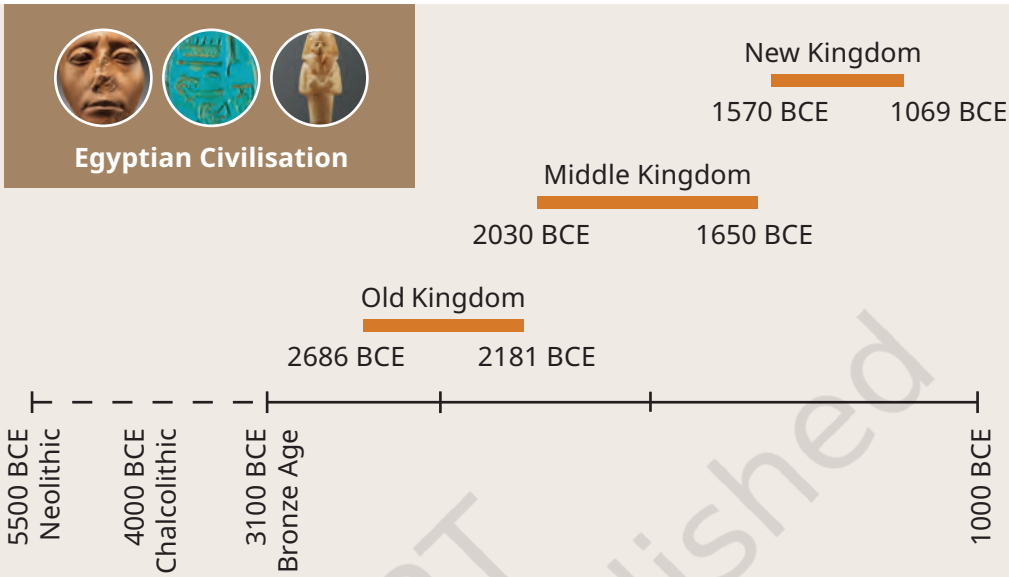


Fig. 4.28. Timeline showing the Egyptian Civilisation

Libraries, dating back to 2000 BCE, stored papyrus scrolls in labeled jars on shelves. One such jar contained the oldest version of the story of *'Sindbad the Sailor'*. Short stories from this period are diverse, including animal fables suggesting a link to *'Aesop's Fables'*, tales of ghosts, miracles, and romances, and even the oldest known form of 'Cinderella'.

DON'T MISS OUT

How was the Egyptian script deciphered?

Pierre Bouchard, a French army engineer, while repairing a fort in Egypt in 1799, found a giant black stone covered in mysterious writing. This was the Rosetta Stone, which had three types of writing, including Greek. Since people could still read Greek, this was a huge breakthrough — like having a bilingual dictionary for a lost language. In 1822, a French linguist, Jean-François Champollion, finally deciphered the script.

The Egyptian calendar has three seasons, each consisting of four months. Inundation (autumn), Peret growing (winter) and shemu harvest (summer). It is based on the rising of Sirius (Dog Star), where, Year = 365 days (12 months × 30 days + 5 extra days). This is quite accurate, but lost time since the real year is about ¼ day longer.

Fig. 4.29. An illustration from the Papyrus of Ani

THINK ABOUT IT

Why do you think there is a scale with a heart on one side and a feather on the other (fig. 4.29)? What can this papyrus tell us about early Egyptian beliefs?

Let us now learn more about how the Egyptian civilisation grew. Egypt saw the emergence of city-states around 3000 BCE as population increased and resources became available. The river Nile watered the land along its banks, and every summer the river flooded, leading to annual inundations, with rich mud, *'kemet'*, excellent for growing crops.

DON'T MISS OUT

Egyptians referred to their land as Kemet. *Kemet* means 'the black', coming from the black river valley soil.

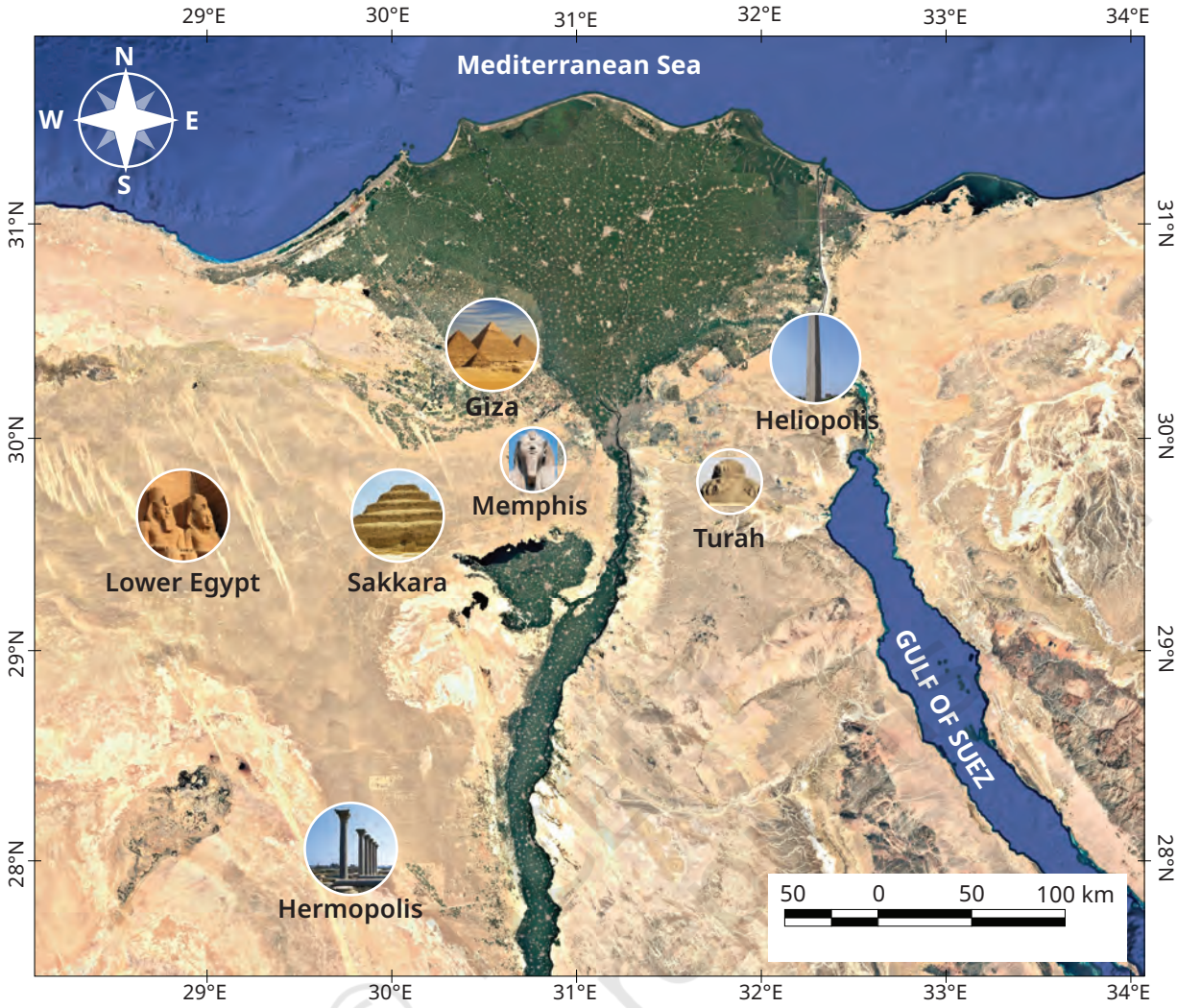


Fig. 4.30. The region in which the Egyptian civilisation flourished

LET'S MAP

Can you locate the River Nile on the given map? Why do you think the northern part is called Lower Egypt and the southern part Upper Egypt?

About 5000 years ago, farmers discovered that by digging ditches they could divert water from the Nile into their fields and store water in reservoirs for later use. By counting the days between Nile floods, the Egyptians developed a calendar.

The need to dig ditches and construct dams required collective effort. These early cooperative efforts must have led to the growth of local government, accompanied by the rise of the administrative class, probably making up the earliest form of local government in Egypt.

Fig. 4.31. The Step Pyramid at Saqqara

Over time, powerful individuals called 'Pharaohs' emerged as the rulers of Egypt. After their death, these pharaohs were buried deep underground and a rectangular structure called a *mastaba* was placed over the burial chamber. Gradually, these *mastabas* were placed one on top of the other to form a pyramid. One prominent example of such pyramids is the step pyramid at Saqqara. The pyramids were built primarily because the Egyptians believed that each person had a *ka* (a spiritual double) that lived on after death if the body was preserved through **mummification**.

Mummification: The process involved removing the internal organs (except the heart) and drying the body with natron. The body was then oiled, wrapped in linen strips, placed in a coffin, and buried with rituals.

LET'S EXPLORE

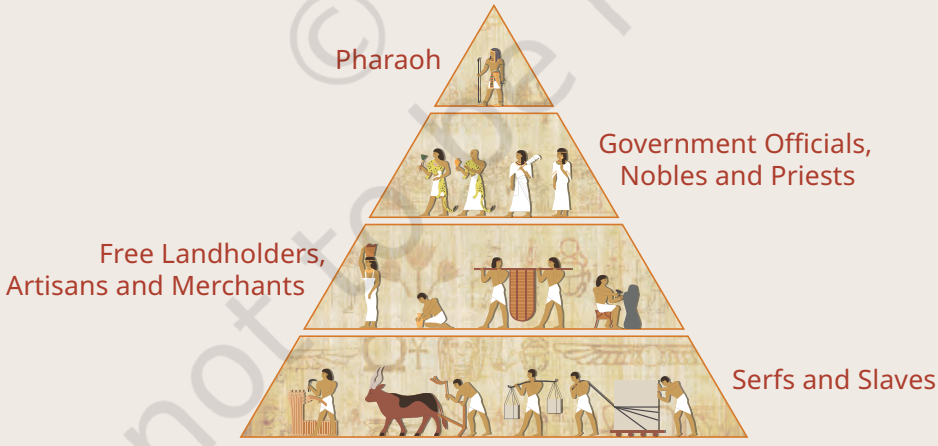


Fig. 4.32 Social hierarchy Pyramid

Look at the social hierarchy pyramid in the image. What were the social classes of early Egypt? What were the different kinds of occupations? What could have been a typical daily routine of the people from each class?

Fig. 4.33. Daily items used by the Egyptians

THINK ABOUT IT

Observe the images given above. What do they tell you about Egyptian fashion?

- Which social classes do you think used these items?
- What clues in the images help you to make this guess?

Try to explain your reasoning based on the materials, designs, or accessories shown in the pictures.

Early Egyptians enjoyed leisure activities as well. They swam, canoed, played board games and even enjoyed music and dancing. Festivals were central to early Egyptian culture, dedicated to gods and the pharaoh's rule. Each god had a festival in which their statue was paraded, accompanied by music played on instruments such as the 'sistrum'. Festivals also celebrated reign of the pharaoh. For example the Sed festival was held to mark a king's 30th year on the throne. These grand events showed the people's deep reverence for their gods and ruler.

DON'T MISS OUT

Egyptian women, in general, enjoyed more rights than their Greek or Roman counterparts, as they could own property and run businesses. For instance, Cleopatra (69-30 BCE) was trained from childhood to rule; she became queen at the age of eighteen.

Fig. 4.34. An image of Cleopatra at the age of eighteen on the wall of a temple

The Chinese Civilisation

You have already seen in the case of Mesopotamia and Egypt how rivers helped civilisations grow. Can you recall how they supported people's lives?

The Chinese civilisation flourished along the rivers— the Huang He (Yellow River) and the Yangtze. These two river valleys were also centres of early Chinese Neolithic cultures dating to around 7000 BCE. Around 2000 BCE, the introduction of copper/bronze metallurgy brought many of the Neolithic settlements, especially those in the Yellow River basin, to the threshold of the Bronze Age. However, it was only around 1600 BCE that urban centres began to emerge with the expansion of agricultural productivity and advancements in metallurgy and craft production. These events led to the rise of the first Chinese Bronze Age territorial empire.

The history of China is organised into various dynasties, the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BCE) and the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE) were two well-known dynasties of the Bronze Age. By 600 BCE, the use of iron became popular throughout China, and the Chinese Iron Age generally dates from this period onwards. The name 'China' probably comes from the Iron Age Qin (Ch'in) dynasty (221-206 BCE), also known as the first imperial dynasty of China, which is credited for unifying the country. Another important Chinese dynasty of the Iron Age was the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE).

Fig. 4.35. Timeline showing the Chinese civilisation

DON'T MISS OUT

- The Zhou rulers were both kings and priests, believed to be appointees of heaven, but they could be dismissed when their people did not prosper.

- Public officials were chosen with great care, after being examined in archery, horsemanship, calculations, writing, and music.

How do we know what we know about China?

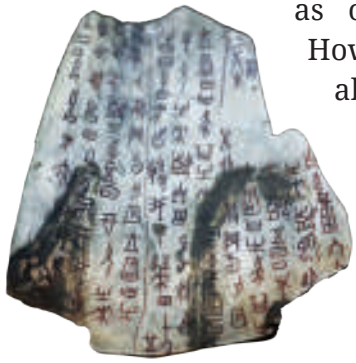


Fig. 4.36. Chinese oracle carvings on bone

China has an abundance of historical records as official historiographers recorded events. However, the earliest source of information about China are the 'oracles', which were symbols made on pieces of animal bones and tortoise shells. These bones were heated until they cracked, and interpretations were made based on the patterns of the cracks. These oracles were often used to foretell the future, and today, they tell us a lot about the hopes, desires, and fears of the early Chinese.

LET'S EXPLORE

The Chinese script is logographic, with characters representing entire words or morphemes (smallest meaningful units of language), rather than sounds. Person 人 Tree 木

Explore more examples of Chinese characters that resemble the objects or ideas they represent. Note down at least two such characters and explain how their shapes are connected to their meanings.

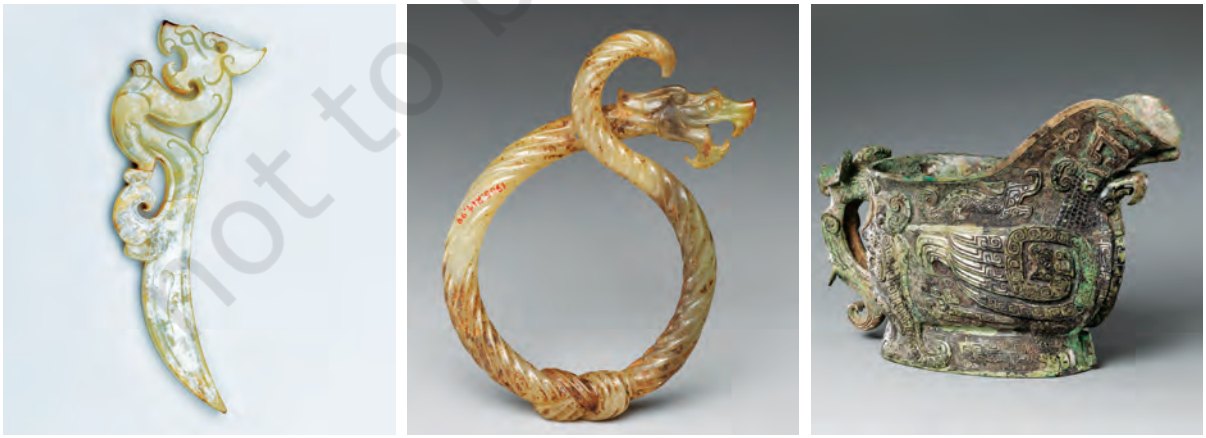


Fig. 4.37. L to R – Jade dragon from 3300–2000 BCE; Jade dragon pendant, Zhou dynasty; Bronze wine pouring vessel, Shang dynasty.

Some other craft items unique to the Chinese civilisation were the jade objects and figurines, which were either ritual or prestige objects. They probably played an important role in social transactions, as jade was not locally available and was obtained from outside China. Marble was also carved into ornaments in the form of birds and animals, and as foundations for wooden pillars. Besides these, the Chinese mastered bronze metallurgy to produce weapons, tools, and elaborate ritual vessels.

DON'T MISS OUT

Chinese artisans skilfully carved jade into shapes of objects such as fish and tied them with a cord. When struck, these jade pieces produced a clear and lasting musical sound. This practice reflects the importance of music in Chinese culture and highlights the high level of craftsmanship achieved by the Chinese people.

Fig. 4.38. The Great Wall of China

The Great Wall of China was built over a period stretching to two thousand years. Initially, several walls were built from 680 BCE onwards by the Zhou and other dynasties as protection against the violent raids of nomadic tribes. These were later joined together to make an effective defence mechanism. The expansion and repair of the wall continued till the 17th century CE.

THINK ABOUT IT

What could have been the other reasons for building the Great Wall of China? Explore and share your findings on the Great Wall through a model or presentation.

Silk was known to the Chinese from the Neolithic period (4000–3000 BCE) onwards and became an important craft during the Bronze Age. However, around the 2nd century BCE, during the time of the Han dynasty, silk became a major item of external trade, so much so that the entire route on which it was traded came to be known as the 'Silk Route'.

LET'S RECALL

Do you remember studying about the Silk Route in Grade 7? How was India connected with it? Can you recollect China's contact with India with reference to Buddhism that you studied in Grade 7?

By 1500 BCE, the Chinese Bronze Age society was highly stratified with the ruling class, nobles, and aristocrats at the top, followed by farmers and labourers, which laid the foundation of Chinese social hierarchical structure that evolved later.

DON'T MISS OUT

A metal-based medium of exchange appeared during the Zhou dynasty, and a money economy developed by the 5th century BCE. China was also the first country to introduce paper currency to the world, and the first to develop civil services through public examination.

We have seen how major Bronze Age civilisations of the world emerged independently in the fertile river plains. Harnessing agricultural productivity and the incorporation of new resources helped economic growth, leading to the emergence of urban cities in all these major centres of civilisation. They developed social and administrative systems independently to ensure and enhance economic growth. The development of writing systems enabled early societies to record economic transactions and social activities, and over time, it also led to the composition of literary and creative texts. Thus, many of our cultural ethos have their roots in the Bronze Age civilisations.

Before we move on...

- Early human history refers to the long period of human history before the invention of writing and is studied mainly through archaeological evidence such as tools, fossils, and cave art.
- Early humans evolved in Africa and gradually migrated to different parts of the world.
- During the Palaeolithic period, humans were hunter-gatherers who used stone tools like handaxes, cleavers, and scrapers, and lived in caves or open camps.
- In the Mesolithic period, humans developed microlithic tools and began occupying temporary settlements near rivers and lakes.
- The Neolithic period marked a major shift to agriculture and domestication of animals, leading to permanent villages, pottery making, and weaving.
- The Chalcolithic period witnessed the use of copper along with stone tools and the growth of early farming communities.
- These developments led to the emergence of Bronze Age civilisations, characterised by urban centres, trade, writing, administration, and social organisation.
- Major early world civilisations such as Sindhu–Sarasvatī, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China developed independently in fertile river valleys and made significant contributions in agriculture, writing, architecture, administration, and culture.

Questions and activities

1. Do you think life became easier or more challenging after humans started farming? Give two reasons for your answer.
2. The environment offers human societies both opportunities as well as challenges. Explain with reference to early farming communities and river-valley civilisations.
3. Why do historians divide early human history into different ages such as Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age? What does this classification tell us about human progress?
4. Imagine you are a Neolithic farmer. Describe one day of your life. What challenges would you face that a hunter-gatherer would not?

5. Imagine that the Harappan script gets deciphered tomorrow. What new types of information do you think historians might learn?
6. Prepare a table with three columns—Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic—and fill in their distinctive features: tools, settlements, art, and subsistence.
7. "Bronze Age civilisations developed independently but shared common features." Examine this statement with reference to the civilisations given in the chapter.
8. Although rivers provided many benefits, they also created challenges for early societies. Discuss both the advantages and disadvantages of settling near rivers.
9. With the help of your teacher, find out more about the Code of Hammurabi. Why was it important? Do you think it was fair to all sections of society? Give reasons for your answer.
10. If you had to choose one major innovation from early civilisations that changed the world permanently, what would it be and why?
11. Compare the social hierarchy and daily life of people in the Egyptian civilisation with those in Mesopotamia or China. What similarities and differences do you notice?
12. Activity: Using maps, locate the major rivers and civilisations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and the Sindhu–Sarasvatī Valley. Mark the trade links between them.
13. Activity: Choose one early civilisation (Mesopotamia, Egypt, or China) and prepare a mini-scrapbook or a presentation showing their innovations in tools, writing, art, and architecture. Include pictures, brief descriptions, and explain their significance.

Notes