EARLY HUMANS AND BEGINNING OF CIVILISATION

Class 9 Social Science • Part 1 • Chapter 4
Exam Preparation Notes

1. Understanding Early Human History

Early human history: The long period of human history before the development of writing. It is reconstructed mainly through archaeological evidence.

Archaeology: The study of past human life through material remains such as tools, bones, fossils, pottery, buildings, seals and other objects.

Why study early human history?: It helps us understand biological and cultural evolution, how humans adapted to changing climates and environments, how food production began, and how settled communities and civilisations emerged.

Biological evolution: Gradual physical and genetic changes through which early ancestors evolved into modern humans, Homo sapiens.

Cultural evolution: Changes in human ways of living, including tools, technology, food habits, settlement, farming, art and social organisation.

Fossils: Preserved remains, traces or impressions of plants, animals or humans from the distant past. Fossils and tools help archaeologists reconstruct early human history.

Hominins: A group that includes modern humans and our early human-like ancestors. Early tool-making is an important part of the story of human behaviour.

2. How We Know About the Past

Archaeological evidence: Tools, bones, fossils, cave paintings, pottery, seals, buildings and excavated settlement remains.

Experimental archaeology: Archaeologists make or use replicas of tools to understand how similar objects may have been produced and used in the past.

Before writing: Material objects are the major sources for reconstructing people's lives. Dating is often approximate, and people's thoughts and names are harder to know.

After writing: Written documents add information about names, events, administration, and social, political and cultural life. They can make the dating of some events more precise.

Important point: The Harappan/Sindhu–Sarasvatī script remains undeciphered, while Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphic writing have been deciphered.

3. Human Origins and Migration

Origins: The chapter explains that our earliest ancestors evolved in Africa.

Homo habilis: Known as 'handy man'; lived in Africa, including the Olduvai Gorge region, and made chopper stone tools.

Homo erectus: An early human ancestor associated with handaxes and cleavers; among the first hominins to move out of Africa and spread into parts of Asia and Europe.

Homo sapiens: Modern humans, who evolved in Africa around 300,000 years ago and gradually spread across the world.

Why migrate?: Changing climate, access to food and water, and the search for suitable habitats are reasonable explanations for movement. These are explanatory inferences rather than a single cause stated for every migration in the textbook.

4. Periods of Early Human History

Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age): Hunter-gatherer way of life; simple and later more specialised stone tools such as choppers, handaxes, cleavers, scrapers, borers and points. People obtained food by hunting and gathering.

Mesolithic: A transitional phase associated with microlithic (very small stone) tools. As climates warmed around 12,000 years ago, forests and grasslands expanded; people used diverse resources, including fish, small game and wild grains. Cave and rock-shelter art flourished.

Neolithic (New Stone Age): The shift towards food production, domestication of plants and animals, polished stone tools, pottery and village settlements. This transformation is called the Neolithic Revolution.

Chalcolithic (Copper and Stone Age): People used copper along with stone tools. Early metalworking and farming communities developed.

Bronze Age: Bronze, made by combining copper and tin, was used for tools and objects. Towns, long-distance trade and early civilisations expanded.

Iron Age: Wider use of iron metallurgy produced stronger tools and weapons and supported more complex societies.

5. The Neolithic Revolution

Meaning: A gradual transition from hunting and gathering to a food-producing way of life.

Main features: Domestication of selected plants and animals; cultivation and animal husbandry; tools for food production and processing; pottery; and permanent village settlements.

Why a revolution?: It changed how people obtained food, where they lived, how they used resources and how communities organised work. The change happened at different times in different regions.

Mehrgarh: Located near the Bolan River in present-day Pakistan, Mehrgarh is described in the chapter as the oldest Neolithic site in the north-west of the Indian subcontinent and an early agricultural village dating to about 7000 BCE.

Mehrgarh life: People cultivated wheat and barley, raised sheep, goats and Indian cattle, built handmade sun-dried brick houses and granaries, buried their dead, and made ornaments from semi-precious stones and shells.

Early farming in the subcontinent: By about 2500 BCE, Neolithic agricultural communities occupied much of the Indian subcontinent. Cattle, sheep and goat herding, and cultivation of cereals, millets and pulses were important.

6. The Sindhu–Sarasvatī (Harappan) Civilisation

Development: Earlier Neolithic and Chalcolithic communities developed across the Indus and Ghaggar–Sarasvatī basins. Cultural traditions and economic links contributed to the emergence of urban centres.

Timeline in the chapter: Early Harappan developments are traced back to earlier regional communities; the Mature Harappan phase is shown from about 2600 BCE, with the Late Harappan phase continuing after about 1900 BCE.

Crafts and economy: Agriculture was accompanied by pottery production, copper working, shell work and the making of semi-precious stone beads. Regional pottery styles and craft traditions are evidence of cultural continuity.

Agriculture: A ploughed field at Kalibangan shows horizontal and vertical furrows, interpreted in the textbook as evidence of double-crop cultivation.

Weights and measures: Harappans used standard weights. Smaller units followed a binary multiple sequence (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, etc.), while larger denominations used multiples of ten. Standardisation supported trade.

Water management: The chapter mentions check dams called gabarbands in some regions and the sophisticated water-harvesting system at Dholavira, including dams, channels and interconnected tanks.

Trade: Harappan contacts with Mesopotamia included exchange of goods such as semi-precious stone beads, ivory, timber, gold dust and probably copper. Meluhha is generally identified with the Sindhu–Sarasvatī civilisation.

Writing: The Harappan script appears on seals and other objects, but it has not yet been deciphered. Therefore, its written messages cannot currently be read with certainty.

7. Bronze Age Civilisations and River Valleys

Common features: Major early civilisations developed in fertile river plains. Agriculture and the use of resources supported economic growth, urban centres, trade, administration, social organisation and writing.

Why rivers mattered: River water supported farming and settlement; alluvial plains could be fertile; and rivers could assist transport and exchange. Floods and changing water conditions could also create serious challenges.

Four major civilisations: Sindhu–Sarasvatī: Sindhu/Indus and Ghaggar–Sarasvatī basins; Mesopotamian: Tigris and Euphrates; Egyptian: Nile; Chinese: Huang He (Yellow River) and Yangtze.

Contacts: The chapter highlights strong contacts and trade between Mesopotamia and the Harappan civilisation. It notes little tangible evidence of direct contact between Egypt or China and the Sindhu–Sarasvatī civilisation.

8. Mesopotamian Civilisation

Location and meaning: Mesopotamia means ‘land in between’ and refers to the region drained by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in West Asia. The region includes mainly modern Iraq and Kuwait, with parts of Turkey and south-western Iran.

Fertile Crescent: A crescent-shaped area of agriculturally productive foothills stretching from the Mediterranean region towards the Persian Gulf.

Sumerians: The earliest city-based civilisation in Mesopotamia developed at Ur and other cities in Sumer, in present-day southern Iraq. Sumerians built dams and canals for irrigation and used mud bricks and burnt bricks.

Ziggurat: A stepped, tower-like temple dedicated to a city’s chief god. Temples were important religious, economic and social centres.

Society and work: People farmed and practised crafts such as metalworking, pottery and textile production. Merchants and traders also worked in cities. Priests and priestesses held high status.

Cuneiform: A writing system made by pressing a wedge-shaped stylus into soft clay tablets. By about 3000 BCE it was widely used in Mesopotamia. Tablets recorded farming, craft activities, laws, myths, hymns and other information.

Other innovations: The textbook associates Sumerians with the wheeled cart, sailboat, calculations for construction and measuring fields, and a base-60 number system. The 60-minute hour, 60-second minute and 360-degree circle are linked to this system.

Akkadians: The Akkadian state rose to power in 2334 BCE. Akkadian and Sumerian speakers used the same cuneiform script. Records associated with King Sargon refer to trade with Dilmun, Magan and Meluhha.

Assyrians and Babylonians: The chapter identifies the Assyrian and Babylonian states as later major Mesopotamian powers. Babylonian rule is associated with the famous Code of Hammurabi in wider historical study; check the textbook’s exact treatment before using extra details beyond the chapter.

9. Egyptian Civilisation

Location: Egyptian civilisation developed along the Nile River in north-eastern Africa.

Importance of the Nile: The Nile watered land along its banks and supported agriculture and settlement. People developed ways to divert and store water, and observations of the river’s flood cycle helped them organise agricultural life.

Rulers and society: Powerful rulers known as pharaohs emerged. Egyptian society had a hierarchy, including the ruling class, religious officials, scribes, skilled workers, farmers and labourers.

Pyramids: Large pyramids were monumental structures associated with royal burials. The chapter mentions the Step Pyramid at Saqqara as an example.

Writing: Egyptians used hieroglyphic writing. Unlike the Harappan script, Egyptian hieroglyphs have been deciphered, helping historians understand aspects of Egyptian life.

10. Chinese Civilisation

Location: Early Chinese civilisation developed along the Huang He (Yellow River) and Yangtze River. Their valleys were also centres of Neolithic cultures dating to around 7000 BCE.

Bronze and urban centres: Copper/bronze metallurgy spread around 2000 BCE. Urban centres emerged around 1600 BCE with increased agricultural productivity, metallurgy and craft production.

Dynasties and dates: The Shang dynasty is dated 1600–1046 BCE and the Zhou dynasty 1046–256 BCE in the chapter. Iron became popular by about 600 BCE. The Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) unified the country, and the Han dynasty lasted from 206 BCE to 220 CE.

Great Wall: Construction and repair of sections of the Great Wall continued over a long period, with the chapter noting work extending into the 17th century CE.

Silk and trade: Silk was known from the Neolithic period and became an important craft during the Bronze Age. During the Han dynasty, around the 2nd century BCE, silk became a major item of external trade; the route associated with this trade became known as the Silk Route.

Society and innovations: Chinese Bronze Age society was stratified, with rulers and nobles above farmers and labourers. The chapter also notes the later development of a money economy, paper currency and civil services selected through public examinations.

11. Writing and the Start of the Historical Period

Why writing mattered: Writing allowed societies to record transactions, administrative activities, laws and events. Over time, writing was also used for literature, myths, hymns and other creative works.

Cuneiform: Mesopotamian wedge-shaped writing on clay tablets; deciphered.

Hieroglyphs: Ancient Egyptian writing; deciphered.

Harappan script: Found on seals and other objects; still undeciphered.

Brahmi: The chapter states that Brahmi was used in parts of southern India and the Ganga Valley from about 400 BCE and was later formalised under Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE.

12. Quick Comparison Table

Period	Distinctive features
Palaeolithic	Hunting and gathering; larger/simple stone tools; mobile lifestyle; early tool-making.
Mesolithic	Microlithic tools; use of fish, small game and wild grains; cave and rock-shelter occupation and art.

Neolithic	Farming and animal domestication; food-production tools; pottery; village settlements.
Chalcolithic	Copper used alongside stone; early metallurgy and farming communities.
Bronze Age	Bronze metallurgy; expanding towns, trade, administration and writing.
Iron Age	Wider iron use; stronger tools and weapons; increasingly complex societies.

13. Key Terms to Learn

Artefact: An object made or modified by humans and used as evidence about the past.

Hominin: A group including modern humans and their early human-like ancestors.

Fossil: Preserved remains, traces or impressions of ancient life.

Hunter-gatherer: A person or community that obtains food by hunting animals and gathering wild resources.

Domestication: The process of bringing selected plants or animals under human care and control.

Sedentism: The practice of living in a settled place rather than moving frequently.

Metallurgy: The extraction, shaping and working of metals.

City-state: A sovereign state centred on a city and the surrounding territory it controls.

Ziggurat: A stepped temple structure in Mesopotamian cities.

Cuneiform: A wedge-shaped writing system used in Mesopotamia.

Pharaoh: A ruler of ancient Egypt.

Meluhha: A region named in Mesopotamian records and generally identified with the Sindhu–Sarasvatī civilisation.

14. Important Exam Questions with Answers

Q1. How do archaeologists reconstruct early human history? They study tools, bones, fossils, pottery, cave art and other material remains. Excavations reveal where objects were found, while experiments with replica tools can help explain how they may have been made and used.

Q2. Differentiate between biological and cultural evolution. Biological evolution refers to gradual physical and genetic changes in human ancestors. Cultural evolution refers to changes in tools, technology, food habits, settlements, art and ways of life as humans adapted to their surroundings.

Q3. Why is the Neolithic Revolution considered a major turning point? It marked a gradual shift from hunting and gathering to farming and animal domestication. Food production encouraged permanent villages, pottery, new tools and changes in work and social organisation. The shift occurred at different times in different regions.

Q4. Distinguish between the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic periods. Palaeolithic communities mainly hunted and gathered and used stone tools such as choppers and handaxes. Mesolithic communities used microliths and exploited a wider range of resources, including fish and wild grains. Neolithic communities increasingly practised farming, domesticated animals, made pottery and established villages.

Q5. Explain the importance of Mehrgarh. Mehrgarh, near the Bolan River in present-day Pakistan, is described as an early agricultural village dating to about 7000 BCE. Its people cultivated wheat and barley, raised sheep, goats and cattle, built sun-dried brick houses and granaries, and made ornaments.

Q6. How did standard weights help the Harappans? Standard weights made measurements more consistent. This supported exchange and interregional trade by helping traders compare quantities and conduct transactions more reliably.

Q7. What evidence shows that Harappans practised different crafts? Archaeological finds include pottery, copper objects, shell work and beads made from semi-precious stones. These finds show that Harappans were not only agriculturists but also skilled craft producers.

Q8. Why were river valleys favourable for early civilisations? Rivers supplied water for people and crops, and fertile plains supported agriculture. Rivers could also help transport goods and connect settlements. However, floods and changing river conditions could damage crops and settlements.

Q9. Describe important features of Sumerian civilisation. Sumerian cities included Ur and other settlements in southern Mesopotamia. Sumerians developed irrigation dams and canals, used mud and burnt bricks, built ziggurats, practised farming and crafts, and used cuneiform writing on clay tablets.

Q10. What was cuneiform and why is it historically important? Cuneiform was a wedge-shaped writing system pressed into soft clay with a stylus. Tablets recorded economic activities, laws, myths, hymns and other information, allowing historians to study Mesopotamian society.

Q11. Compare the four major early civilisations by their river settings. Sindhu–Sarasvatī developed along the Indus and Ghaggar–Sarasvatī basins; Mesopotamia along the Tigris and Euphrates; Egypt along the Nile; and China along the Huang He and Yangtze. River water and fertile land supported farming and settlement in each region.

Q12. How did writing change the study of history? Writing allowed people to record names, events, transactions, laws and administrative activities. When scripts can be read, written sources provide information that material remains alone may not reveal. The Harappan script remains undeciphered.

Q13. What is the difference between the Harappan script and cuneiform? Both were used in early civilisations and are known from inscriptions or objects. Cuneiform has been deciphered and can be read; the Harappan script has not yet been deciphered.

Q14. Describe key features of the Chinese civilisation mentioned in the chapter. It developed along the Huang He and Yangtze rivers. Agricultural productivity, metallurgy and crafts supported urban centres. The Shang and Zhou were important Bronze Age dynasties; silk later became a major trade item, and the Silk Route connected China with wider trade networks.

Q15. Explain how technological and economic changes contributed to civilisation. Improved tools and metallurgy supported farming and craft production. Agricultural surpluses and trade encouraged

larger settlements and urban centres. Writing and administrative systems helped societies record transactions, organise activities and maintain social order.

15. Flow Charts for Fast Revision

Human history before writing: Early humans → tools and material remains → archaeological study → reconstruction of lifestyles and environments

Transition to settled life: Hunting and gathering → knowledge of seasons and resources → cultivation and domestication → food production → villages → larger settlements

Growth of early civilisations: Fertile river valleys → agriculture and surplus → craft specialisation and trade → urban centres → administration and social hierarchy → writing and records

Writing systems: Mesopotamia → cuneiform (deciphered) | Egypt → hieroglyphs (deciphered) | Harappan/Sindhu–Sarasvatī → script on seals (undeciphered)