

Prehistoric Asia and Earliest Civilizations

Speaker: Bruce Dickerson

This lecture focuses upon the Paleolithic and Neolithic cultures of Asia. More than one million years ago the hominid species *Homo erectus* migrated out of Africa and spread across Asia and Europe. Over the next few hundred thousand years numerous hominid species evolved out of this early migration, including *Homo Heidelbergensis*, *Homo Neanderthal*, and *Homo Denisovan*. These populations were displaced and replaced by *Homo Sapiens* beginning around 200,000 years ago. Intermixing of populations occurred, and many modern humans retain a small percentage of Neanderthal or Denisovan genetic heritage.

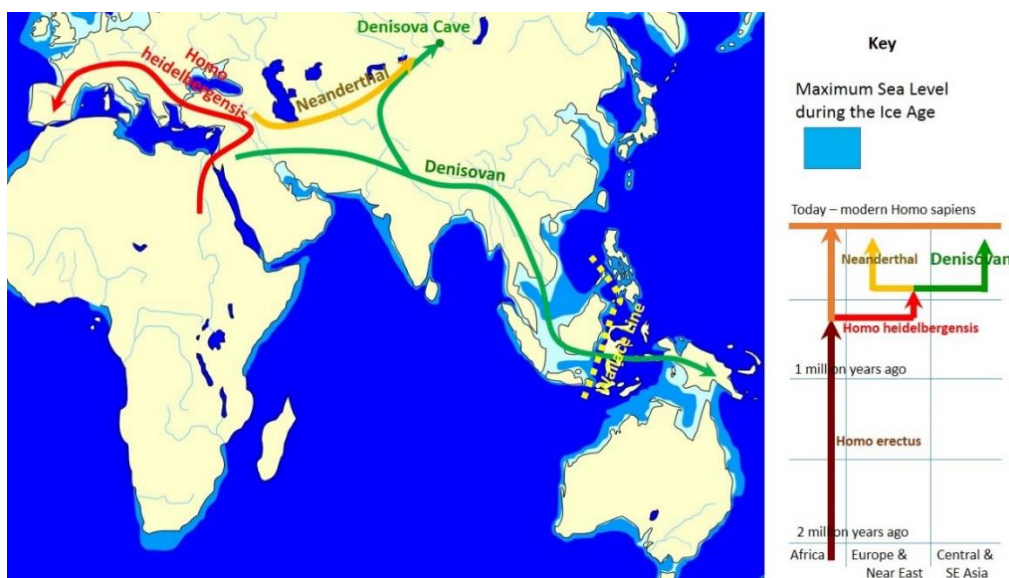


Figure 1.1 The spread of Denisovans, Neanderthals, *Homo heidelbergensis* and *Homo erectus*.

Regional physical differences was a common characteristic within all of these subspecies. The process of development and the exact connections between these different groups is uncertain. Recent discoveries in the extraction of DNA from prehistoric bones, and other anthropological finds are constantly adding new scientific information regarding the early evolution of *Homo Sapiens* and our ancestors.

Evidence of early cultures comes from a variety of artifacts, such as stone tools and weapons. The use of fire and cave paintings add to the story of early man's adaptation to the environment during the Paleolithic, or Old Stone Age period. Environmental changes following the end of the last ice age influenced further human adaptation. Around 11 to 12 thousand years ago, the domestication of plants revolutionized human societies. This transformation is called the Neolithic Revolution.

Along with plants, animals were also domesticated. The earliest domestication of plants took place in the Middle East, in what is now northern Iraq and southern Turkey. Domestication of plants and animals soon developed in other regions, such as East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia. Were these episodes

of domestication independent discoveries, did the ideas spread from one region to another, or was it perhaps a bit of both. Archeologists, anthropologists and other scientists continue to work this issue.

During the Neolithic era, additional elements of civilization began to develop. The Middle East is considered the earliest “cradles of civilization.” Along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and the Nile River in Egypt, agricultural production expanded with the use of irrigation, people began to build cities, sophisticated systems of government arose, and new belief systems were adopted. Along with these developments, new discoveries and inventions, in particular the ability to make tools and weapons out of bronze and the creation of a system of writing, cultures began to transition into what is called the Bronze Age.



Figure 1.2 The Indus Valley city of Mohenjo-Daro.

The Indus Valley settlements achieved a similar level of development shortly after the Middle East. Known as Harappan civilization, the people living along the Indus River developed irrigation for agricultural production and were highly skilled at metalworking. In addition to

metalworking and handcraft industries, the people of the ancient Indus Valley are recognized for their sophisticated urban planning, the use of baked brick to make houses and other buildings, and the highly developed drainage and water supply systems built to serve the urban populations of cities like Harappa, Kalibangan and Mohenjo-Daro. The planned layout of the cities were centered around the water supply. Indoor bathrooms, and large bathhouses were common, and the sewer system was unparalleled – no other ancient civilization created anything quite like it.

The writing system of the Harappan civilization contained over 300 symbols. There is some evidence of trade with city-states of Sumer, who may have been using the name Meluha to describe the Harappan culture. The exact relationship of the Indus Valley culture with the eastern and southern regions of the subcontinent is uncertain, however the neighboring areas of northern India were clearly influenced by the Indus Valley culture.

In terms of technology, the Indus Valley people were quite advanced. Bronze statues were common however few weapons have been found in the sites that have been investigated. Cotton textiles were another important Indus Valley innovation.

Elements of the Harappan belief system included belief in Shiva as both a creator & destroyer god, ritual purity with an emphasis upon bathing, reincarnation and emphasis upon a Mother Earth Goddess. Phallic symbols and the worship of cattle may also be associated with the Indus Valley Civilization. Harappan beliefs, along with the belief systems of the Dravidian people living in other regions of the Indian subcontinent, were intermixed with the beliefs of invading Indo-Aryan people from Central Asia, who began migrating into the region sometime around 1900 BCE. This coincides with the collapse of the Indus Valley Civilization, however a direct correlation between the migration and collapse has not been proven. In fact, the decline of Harappan culture may have happened more as a result of a decline in agricultural production.

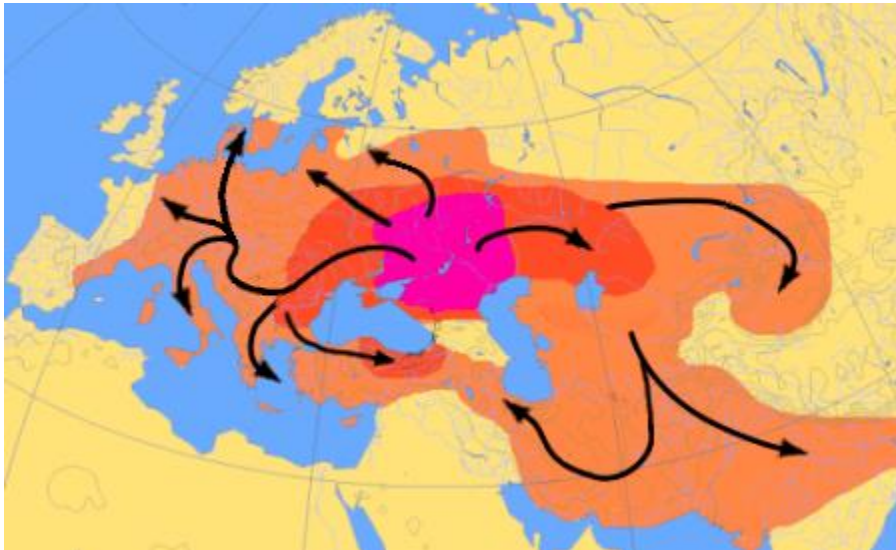


Figure 1.3 The spread of Indo-European speaking people between 4000 to 1000 BCE.

Following the series of migrations of Indo-Aryans, the Sanskrit language developed as the dominant writing system. The Hindu ritual hymns – the Vedas, and the epic poems – the Mahabharata and the Ramayana were written during the Vedic period between 1000 – 500 BCE. Of course, the essence of these stories may predate the time when they were written down. During this era the war god Indra became an essential figure within the developing Hindu belief system.

The civilization that emerged in India was the result of a blending of cultures, including the remnants of the Indus Valley culture, the invading Indo-Aryans, and the Dravidian people of Southern India. The physical geographic features of the sub-continent, from mountains and rivers to plateaus and deserts, contributed to significant regional variations in culture. And, a north-south cultural distinction continues to exist in India.

Transition from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age followed a similar pattern in Southeast Asia and in China. The transformation in China happened slightly later than India, and the development of the people and kingdoms of Southeast Asia followed the same pattern, only slightly later.

Development in Southeast Asia was influenced by early migrations of Malay people into the region. As China developed, the Chinese expanded southward, displacing and integrating with existing populations. During the Neolithic era the ethnic makeup of Southeast Asia also changed as populations grew and shifted from one region to another. The Malay people appear to have first developed on the island of Taiwan, and from there migrated into Southeast Asia and the islands of the Pacific and beyond.

In Southern China and Southeast Asia technology and culture spread from centers of innovation. The origins of rice growing and the domestication of root crops contributed to the transformation of how people lived and worked. The Hoabinhian culture provides one example of the important role of root crops in the transformation of hunting and gathering cultures to a more settled existence.

Early domestication of animals in East and Southeast Asia include pigs, chickens and water buffalo. The buffalo was essential to the cultivation of rice. In the more northern regions of China millet and other grains were domesticated by around 8000 BCE. The nature of agriculture in these regions were connected to the monsoonal climate, which provides abundant rainfall to this part of the world.

As societies made the transition from hunting and gathering cultures to more sedentary lifestyles, matriarchal systems of social organization survived in Southeast Asia and on islands in the Pacific, and even today cultures in these regions are not as patriarchal as India and China, where patriarchal systems prevailed.



Figure 1.4 Yangshao pottery

The climate of northern China is drier, hence the development of cereal grains. One region of China has very rich loess soils, contributing to a productive agricultural system. Irrigation of crops also facilitated high yields. By around 5000 BCE the Yangshao (Painted Pottery) culture

developed along the Yellow River in China. The Longshan (Black Pottery) culture arose in the region by around 3000 BCE and is associated with the construction of walled towns and the development of the earliest Chinese Dynasty – the Shang which arose around 1600 BCE.

Chinese civilization developed independently in the south. Interaction and influence between the rice growing regions of the south and the millet northern regions was extensive. Oracle bones used for divination are connected to the development of the Chinese system of writing, and the clear line of

succession from the Neolithic to historical era. There is little if any evidence of contact during the prehistoric era with the earliest civilizations of Southwest Asia and the Indus Valley with those of East and Southeast Asia. Later contact during the historic era brought the introduction of wheat, barley, alfalfa, donkeys, horses, chariots and other technologies and ideas to East Asia.

The transition from prehistoric Neolithic cultures to the historic era happened later in Korea and Japan. Millet-based agriculture came to Korea from northern China during the Chulmun Period sometime between 6000–1300 BCE. Later, during the Han Dynasty the Koreans were conquered by the Chinese. Debate exists over the origins of the Korean people and the connection between Koreans and Japanese. The earliest inhabitants of the Japanese islands are associated with the Jomon culture.

Jomon Culture was displaced by the Yayoi culture by around 300 BCE. The Yayoi is connected to the migration of people from the Korean Peninsula to Japan, and in terms of technology and agriculture the Yayoi was influenced by China. From this era up through today, Korean and Japanese cultures have interacted with and have been heavily influenced by China.

With the transition from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age, interregional trade routes arose, contributing to the spread of ideas from India to China, and from China to Korea and Japan. Buddhist monks and Buddhist texts were primary vehicles for spreading a synthesis of Indian and Chinese intellectual traditions. A Buddhist diplomatic network arose, contributing to the expansion of commercial, social and cultural ties to Southeast Asia as well.

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