

The earliest humans: foragers and gatherers

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Image 1. A cast of the *Sahelanthropus tchadensis* holotype cranium. *Sahelanthropus tchadensis* is an extinct species of the Homininae (African apes) dated to about 7 million years ago. The species lived close to the last common ancestor between humans and apes. Photo: Didier Descouens/Wikimedia Commons.

Most of human history is the story of tiny bands of foragers, each largely made up of members of one family. These groups moved around in search of wild foods they could hunt or gather. The better-known history of farmers, cities, and empires is only the final 2 percent of the long human story. This 2 percent would not have been possible without the first 98 percent of human history. This period started 250,000 years ago and ended about 5,000 years ago. Foragers were responsible for some of the most monumental transformations in human history.

Why aren't most of us still foragers today? That's because the final transformation of the era was when people in many places began to become farmers. But the move to farming was just one of several major changes in a period that saw humans learn to communicate effectively, spread around the world, and sometimes settle down to produce their own food for the first time.

The cognitive revolution

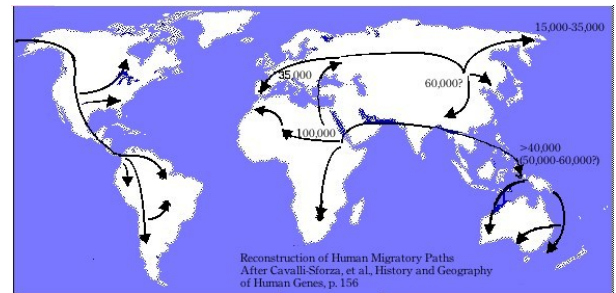
The first transformation we look at was related to how we think and communicate. Most researchers believe that the first modern humans evolved in Africa between 300,000 and 250,000 years ago. Our foraging ancestors were physically much like us, but they did not yet have the same language abilities. These abilities came about later because of a cognitive revolution that happened over a long time. This cognitive revolution allowed us to communicate better using art, music, and language.

Language might be what sets us apart from all other species. Many animals have the ability to communicate through grunts and gestures, but humans are the only species that expresses itself through written language. Written language is key to a process called collective learning, or the ability to share and preserve knowledge that builds over generations. Many animals learn survival skills from their parents and pass these skills on to their young. But only humans have a vast library of knowledge that has been written and passed down over hundreds of years. Collective knowledge is what allows us to learn about the past.

The peopling of the world

The development of language also allows us to adapt to new environments. For that reason, languages were critical to a second great transformation—the spread of humans around the world. The great migration of humans from Africa to Eurasia, the Pacific and the Americas was a dramatic, incredible story covering tens of thousands of years. Yet it was accomplished by small bands of foragers, rather than massive societies.

Scientists still disagree about when and how these humans migrated. But we are increasingly able to use three types of evidence to understand their routes. The first is linguistic evidence. We can compare words and grammar in languages from different regions to see how they are related. The second is DNA, the genetic code that all humans carry and that is unique to each one of us. By comparing DNA of people living today in different regions, scientists can determine when and how groups separated from one another.



The final type of evidence is provided by fossils and artifacts that early humans left behind. Archaeologists also use special tests to learn when and how these people lived. Most of the remains archaeologists use to understand this period are made of stone, so we call this period the Paleolithic (Old Stone Age).

The cultivation revolution

Around 12,000 years ago some humans began to actively grow crops instead of just foraging for food. Then they domesticated both plant and animal species. This means they selected the best ones and actively helped them to grow and reproduce to provide food. Because they had new daily tasks, many new stone tools were developed. These tools give us the name for these communities—Neolithic (New Stone Age). There are many debates about how this change happened, but most people in this era probably remained foragers. Even members of farming societies still probably hunted and gathered to some degree.

Arguably, the shift to farming triggered many other changes. Farming allowed foragers to build truly permanent settlements, which eventually grew into villages and cities. The cities needed more labor and more ways to control labor, which meant they needed government. They produced enough food that some people could specialize in other kinds of production or jobs. Their ideas about the world and forms of worship changed.



These changes created problems and opportunities that were shared by farming communities around the world. Many developed similar ways of dealing with them, but there were also great differences in communities in different regions. Archaeologists, who study these communities, are able to compare the similarities and differences in lifestyles all over the world.

Why do we need to understand how the people in all of these Neolithic sites are related and connected? Because early human history was not just a step along a stairway to something more complex and modern. It was a series of lived experiences.