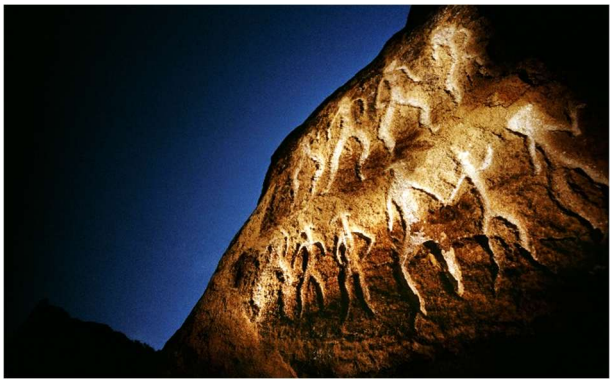
Unit 2 Introduction: The Earliest Humans

By Trevor Getz

L.P. Hartley was a writer. In 1953, he wrote, “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” Hartley was correct in many ways—when historians study the past, it’s as though they’re visiting another place. The further back you go, the more different things look, and yet sometimes we find surprising similarities with our ancestors’ way of life.



Carved into large slabs of mountain rock in a remote area of Azerbaijan are human-made drawings on an impressive scale.

The way we get our food is a great example of how much life has changed. Electric refrigeration and supermarkets were not invented until the early 1900s. You could buy fresh food before this, of course, but it had to be grown nearby.

If you went back 2,000 years to the Roman Empire or Han Dynasty China, you’d notice some familiar activities. Most people bought food from farmers and animal herders. But if you traveled back 4,000 years, life looked very different. Pretty much everyone got their food by foraging. Foragers moved around in search of food to hunt or gather. For most of human existence—between 250,000 years ago and 10,000 years ago—that’s what everyone did. Very, very few do so today.

A modern human “foraging” for food in the supermarket. Thanks to the Agricultural Revolution, most of us use money to buy food that is grown on a farm or raised on a ranch.

In this unit, we’ll ask the question, “Why aren’t most of us still foragers today?” You’ll explore how people across the world eventually became farmers. This shift was one of

many major changes in how humans learned to communicate better. This, in turn, impacted how communities developed and settled.

Humans as a divergence

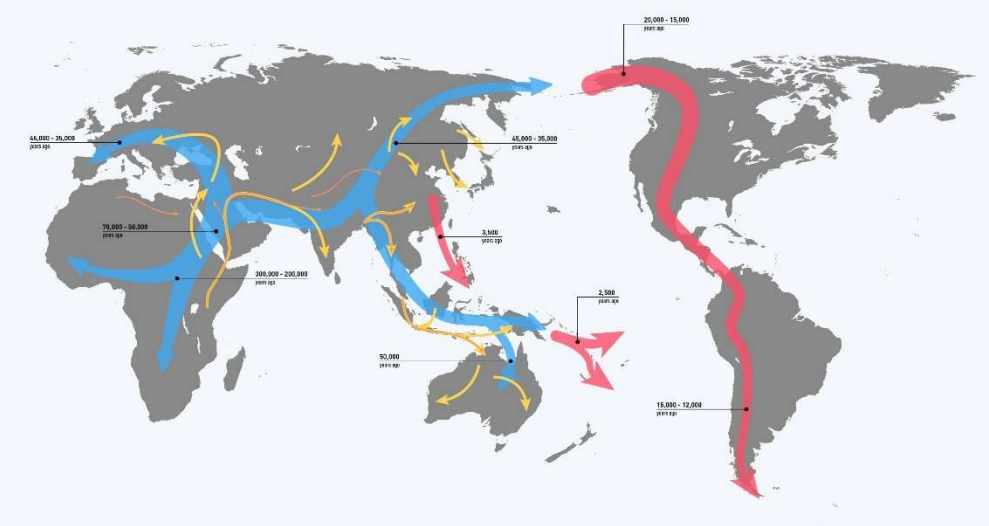
Many thousands of years ago, there were several kinds of humans. Today, there is only one known as *Homo sapiens*. Modern *Homo sapiens* evolved first in Africa, probably around 250,000 years ago. Around 70,000 years ago, our ancestors started moving to other parts of the world. They would migrate to every continent except Antarctica. On their migrations, they met other kinds of humans, including *Homo neanderthalensis* (Neanderthals).

Scientists used to think humans arrived in North America around 3,000 years ago. Today, we know that it was tens of thousands of years before that. As humans spread to new areas, they developed ways to live in new environments. These changes might have helped our ancestors develop new ways to communicate and use tools.

These fossilized human footprints are found at White Sands National Park in New Mexico. In October 2023, researchers confirmed that these footprints were made up to 23,000 years ago. Just a couple decades ago, most researchers believed that humans arrived in Alaska only 16,000 years ago. History is constantly changing as new evidence is found.

Our foraging ancestors were physically like us. Their brains were as developed as ours, and they came up with new tools and ideas. About 70,000 years ago, a gradual but major change helped *Homo sapiens* become smarter than other species of humans. This is known as the *cognitive revolution*. Cognition refers to the way we learn and think.

HOW DID SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE GIVE *HOMO SAPIENS* AN ADVANTAGE?



A map showing early human migration. Our understanding of this process improves as we make more archaeological discoveries and incorporate new sources such as DNA evidence.

The cognitive revolution allowed *Homo sapiens* to develop **symbolic language**. Symbolic language is the use of words to represent ideas. This development greatly improved the way our ancestors communicated.

Foragers

These new cognitive developments helped in other ways, too. As humans traveled around the world, foragers encountered new foods. They were able to adapt or learn from these new environments to find food.

Symbolic language: Spoken or written communication that uses symbols to represent ideas

Foraging communities were generally small. They were also nomadic, meaning they moved regularly. Often, they moved to find food. Resources were likely shared among community members. They also may have had lots of time to relax, or so many scholars

think. We're not entirely sure how correct these characterizations are, but we do know that when some foraging societies began to farm animals, life changed dramatically.

Farmer revolution

Humans took their first steps toward farming about 12,000 years ago. First, some began **cultivating** wild plants. Then, around 10,000 years ago, humans began to **domesticate** plants and animals. This means they selected the best ones and helped them to grow. Because these groups of humans had new jobs to do, their tools changed. Different types of stone tools, such as hoes, adzes, and grinding stones were invented. An adze is a type of axe-like tool. These tools give us the name for these communities—Neolithic, meaning New Stone Age.

Cultivate: To tend and help (plants) grow; to encourage the growth and flourishing of

Domesticate: To tame (an animal), especially to keep as a pet or to use on a farm or ranch

Neolithic grindstone used to grind or process grains.

The move from foraging to farming was very difficult and took a long time. In some regions, this change happened over thousands of years. And the process was different across regions. Consider why some regional diets are based on roasting and others on boiling, or some on noodles and others on breads. It's because groups had different food resources available to them and used different tools. Farming also provided a lot more food and fed more people than foraging could.

Was farming a good idea?

But was switching from foraging to farming a good idea? Scholars have disagreements. Some say that early farmers had more food than foragers. But farmers got sick more and worked harder. There are also disagreements about how many people really became farmers during this period. Just about everyone today eats food grown on farms

and ranches. But throughout the period covered in Unit 2, most people probably remained foragers. Some only herded animals and didn't grow anything. Even some early farming societies still hunted and gathered some food.

By the end of this period, the shift to farming had allowed many huge changes. Farming communities had population growth, with some becoming villages and cities. Farming also needed more workers to do the labor. This led to the early creation of governments or ruling groups. Agricultural societies often produced enough extra food, called surplus. As a result, people could specialize in new kinds of work or jobs. Ideas about the world and forms of worship changed.

> **"DID FARMING MAKE LIFE BETTER FOR PEOPLE?**

As you learn about different agricultural and foraging societies in this unit, consider the following questions. Why did farming develop first in some places? How did the development of farming change the history of humanity? Why did societies around the world make different choices, rather than following one pattern? What can we learn about ourselves by studying the lives of our foraging ancestors? These questions help us understand the earliest humans.

A modern human "foraging" for food in the supermarket. Thanks to the Agricultural Revolution, most of us use money to buy food that food is grown on a farm or raised on a ranch. © FreshSplash/Getty Images.

These fossilized human footprints are found at White Sands National Park in New Mexico. In October 2023, researchers confirmed that these footprints were made up to 23,000 years ago. Just a couple of decades ago, most researchers believed that humans arrived in Alaska only 16,000 years ago. History is constantly changing as new evidence is found. NPS photo, public domain. https://www.nps.gov/whsa/learn/nature/fossilized-footprints.htm

A map describing the history of human migration, as far as we know it. Our understanding of this process improves as we make more archaeological discoveries and incorporate new sources such as DNA evidence. By OER Project, CC BY 4.0.

Neolithic grindstone used to grind or process grains. By José-Manuel Benito Álvarez, CC BY-SA 2.5. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Molino_neol%C3%ADtico_de_vaiv%C3%A9n.jpg