Chapter 4: Early Humans and Beginning of Civilisation

Questions — Questions and activities

Q1 Do you think life became easier or more challenging after humans started farming? Give two reasons for your answer.

SOLUTION

Farming made certain aspects of life easier but introduced new challenges at the same time.

Reasons it became easier: First, farming allowed humans to produce surplus food, giving them a more reliable and steady food supply compared to the uncertainty of hunting and gathering. Second, settled agricultural life enabled the building of permanent villages, the storage of food in granaries, and the development of crafts and trade, raising overall standards of living.

Reasons it became more challenging: First, farming required sustained, organised labour — clearing fields, planting, irrigating, and harvesting — which was more demanding than the flexible schedule of foragers. Second, dependence on specific crops made communities vulnerable to crop failures caused by drought, floods, or pests, which hunter-gatherers could avoid by moving to new areas.

Answer: Farming provided a more reliable food supply and enabled permanent settlements, making life more stable. However, it also introduced new challenges such as intensive organised labour, vulnerability to crop failure, and the need for irrigation and storage — burdens that hunter-gatherers avoided by remaining mobile.

Q2 The environment offers human societies both opportunities as well as challenges. Explain with reference to early farming communities and river-valley civilisations.

SOLUTION

The environment shaped early societies in dual ways — it provided resources that enabled growth while also posing obstacles that demanded innovation.

For early farming communities, fertile soil and a predictable climate were opportunities: Mehrgarh's people in the northwest cultivated wheat and barley and raised livestock because the Bolan River valley offered water and productive land. However, erratic rainfall and flooding forced farmers to build irrigation channels, check dams ('gabarbands'), and water-storage tanks to manage water supply.

For river-valley civilisations, the opportunity was even greater: the annual floods of the Nile deposited rich black silt ('kemet') that made Egyptian agriculture extremely productive, while the Euphrates and Tigris fed Mesopotamia's fertile crescent. Similarly, the Sindhu and Sarasvatī rivers sustained the Harappan civilisation. Yet rivers also challenged these societies — unpredictable floods threatened settlements, requiring collective efforts like dam-building and canal digging. In Egypt, coordinating such projects gave rise to local government and administrative classes. Thus, environmental challenges pushed civilisations toward greater

social organisation and technological innovation.

Answer: Rivers like the Nile, Euphrates, Indus, and Huang He provided fertile soil, water, and trade routes — enabling agriculture and urban growth. But seasonal floods, droughts, and difficult terrain forced early communities to build irrigation systems, dams, and administrative structures, driving social and technological progress. The environment was both a resource and a test of human ingenuity.

Q3 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?

SOLUTION

Historians divide early human history into technological ages because, before writing was invented, the tools and materials humans used are the primary evidence available to reconstruct how people lived. Since written records are absent for over 99 per cent of human history, material objects — especially tools made of stone, copper, bronze, and iron — serve as the main markers of time and progress.

The Stone Age (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic) covers the period when humans relied on stone tools; each sub-stage reflects increasingly sophisticated toolmaking and shifting ways of life, from hunting-gathering to settled farming. The Bronze Age marks the ability to smelt and mix metals (copper and tin to make bronze), which enabled stronger tools, expanded trade, and the rise of urban civilisations. The Iron Age reflects the mastery of iron smelting, which produced stronger and cheaper tools and weapons, enabling more complex and widespread societies.

This classification tells us that human progress is closely linked to the mastery of materials and technology. Each new age represents not just a change in tools but broader social, economic, and cultural transformations — from nomadic bands to villages to cities and empires.

Answer: Historians use technological ages as markers because tools are the main surviving evidence from preliterate periods. Stone Age → Bronze Age → Iron Age traces humanity's growing mastery over materials. Each transition reflects deeper changes: from hunting-gathering to farming, then to urban civilisations and empires. The classification reveals that technological innovation drives social, economic, and cultural progress.

Q4 Imagine you are a Neolithic farmer. Describe one day of your life. What challenges would you face that a hunter-gatherer would not?

SOLUTION

Model answer (built on chapter concepts):

I wake before sunrise in my sun-dried brick house at a village like Mehrgarh. My first task is to check the wheat and barley fields — overnight rains may have damaged the furrows. After a meal of stored grain, I spend the morning ploughing the field with a stone-tipped tool, preparing

the soil for the next sowing season. By midday, I tend to the sheep and zebu cattle, making sure they are fed and healthy. In the afternoon, I work on shaping new earthenware pots to store grain — a craft that hunter-gatherers rarely needed.

Challenges I face that a hunter-gatherer would not: I cannot simply move on if resources become scarce — my crops and animals tie me to this location. If the rains fail or pests destroy the harvest, my entire community may go hungry. I must also cooperate with neighbours to maintain irrigation channels, resolve disputes over land, and organise grain storage — social responsibilities unknown to a mobile forager. The work is repetitive and physically demanding day after day, unlike the varied and flexible life of a hunter-gatherer.

Answer: A Neolithic farmer's day revolves around tending crops, caring for domesticated animals, making pottery, and maintaining irrigation. Unlike a hunter-gatherer who could move when resources ran out, the farmer is tied to one place. Key additional challenges include vulnerability to crop failure, the need for irrigation and storage, labour-intensive daily routines, and the social demands of managing communal resources.

Q5 Imagine that the Harappan script gets deciphered tomorrow. What new types of information do you think historians might learn?

SOLUTION

The Harappan script, also called Sindhu lipi, is a pictographic script found on seals and pottery that has not yet been deciphered. If it were decoded, historians could potentially unlock an enormous range of information currently inaccessible.

They might learn the names of Harappan rulers, priests, or traders, shedding light on the political structure of cities like Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, and Dholavira. Records of trade and economic activity — like those found on Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets listing potters, carpenters, and farm workers — could reveal the Harappan economy in detail. The script might also confirm or challenge the identification of Meluhha in Mesopotamian records as the Sindhu–Sarasvatī civilisation, clarifying the nature of their long-distance trade.

Religious beliefs, mythological stories, and social customs that are now unknown could emerge. It might even reveal whether the Harappans had law codes, census-like records, or literary traditions similar to Mesopotamian epics. In short, decipherment would shift Harappan history from the prehistoric into the historical, transforming our understanding of one of the world's largest early civilisations.

Answer: Deciphering the Harappan script would reveal names of rulers and officials, details of trade and economic life, religious practices, and possibly law codes or literary works. It would confirm or clarify Harappan contact with Mesopotamia, and transform our understanding of their social and political organisation — shifting Harappan history fully into the historical period.

Q6 Prepare a table with three columns—Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic—and fill in their distinctive features: tools, settlements, art, and subsistence.

SOLUTION

Guidance: Prepare a three-column table with the headings Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic. Use the following information from the chapter to fill each row:

Tools — Palaeolithic: Large stone tools — handaxes, cleavers, scrapers, borers, points; later bow and arrow, blade and microblade tools. Mesolithic: Microlithic (tiny stone) tools; used for aquatic food gathering and fishing. Neolithic: Polished stone tools for food production and processing; pottery in various shapes and sizes.

Settlements — Palaeolithic: No permanent settlements; lived in caves, rock shelters, and open camps. Mesolithic: Temporary settlements near rivers, lakes, and caves (e.g., Bhimbetka); beginning of sedentism. Neolithic: First permanent village settlements; sun-dried brick houses and granaries (e.g., Mehrgarh).

Art — Palaeolithic: Cave paintings, decorated shells and bones using burins/engravers; body decoration with pigments; production of stone, bone, and shell beads. Mesolithic: Flourishing cave and rock-shelter art (e.g., Bhimbetka). Neolithic: Earthenware pottery with diverse designs; craft production (semi-precious stone beads, copper objects).

Subsistence — Palaeolithic: Hunting and gathering; used tools to chop meat, dig tubers, scrape animal skins. Mesolithic: Hunting, gathering, and fishing; wider variety of food including small game, fish, and wild grains. Neolithic: Agriculture and animal husbandry; domestication of plants (wheat, barley, millets, rice) and animals (sheep, goat, cattle).

Answer: Draw a table with columns: Palaeolithic | Mesolithic | Neolithic. Rows: Tools (stone handaxes/scrapers → microlithic tools → polished stone + pottery), Settlements (caves/open camps → temporary near water → permanent villages), Art (cave paintings, beads, engraved bones → flourishing rock art → pottery designs, craft objects), Subsistence (hunting-gathering → hunting + fishing + gathering → farming + animal husbandry).

Q7 "Bronze Age civilisations developed independently but shared common features." Examine this statement with reference to the civilisations given in the chapter.

SOLUTION

The four Bronze Age civilisations discussed in the chapter — Sindhu–Sarasvatī, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Chinese — evolved independently in their respective river valleys yet displayed striking common features, supporting this statement.

Independent development: Each civilisation arose in a distinct geographical region — the Indus and Sarasvatī rivers, the Euphrates and Tigris, the Nile, and the Huang He/Yangtze — with limited direct contact between them. The Egyptian and Chinese civilisations, for instance, had little tangible evidence of contact with the Harappans.

Shared features: All four civilisations emerged in fertile river valleys, where annual flooding

provided rich soil for agriculture, enabling surplus production. All developed urban centres with planned layouts, social hierarchies (rulers, priests, artisans, farmers, slaves/serfs), and administrative systems. Each civilisation developed its own writing system — cuneiform in Mesopotamia, hieroglyphics in Egypt, the Harappan/Sindhu lipi, and oracle-bone script in China — to record economic transactions and social activities. All practised craft production (metalworking, pottery, textiles, jewellery) and long-distance trade.

This convergence shows that when societies reach a certain level of agricultural surplus and population, similar institutional responses — writing, governance, religion, and trade — emerge independently as solutions to common human needs.

Answer: The four Bronze Age civilisations (Sindhu–Sarasvatī, Mesopotamia, Egypt, China) each arose independently in fertile river valleys with limited mutual contact. Yet all shared key features: urban planning, social hierarchy, writing systems (cuneiform, hieroglyphics, Harappan script, oracle bones), craft production, long-distance trade, and religious institutions. This parallel development shows that surplus agriculture universally drives similar social and institutional innovations.

Q8 Although rivers provided many benefits, they also created challenges for early societies. Discuss both the advantages and disadvantages of settling near rivers.

SOLUTION

Rivers were central to the rise of all major early civilisations, but settlement near them involved trade-offs between opportunity and risk.

Advantages: Rivers supplied fresh water for drinking and irrigation, enabling agriculture in otherwise arid regions. The annual flooding of the Nile deposited rich silt ('kemet') that fertilised Egyptian fields naturally. Rivers also served as highways for trade — the Harappans used the Indus system for interregional trade, and Mesopotamian cities traded along the Euphrates. The Huang He and Yangtze sustained Chinese Neolithic cultures from about 7000 BCE. Rivers also supported fishing, providing an additional food source during the Mesolithic period.

Disadvantages: Unpredictable floods destroyed crops, homes, and infrastructure. To manage floods and divert water for irrigation, large-scale collective efforts were needed — building dams, canals, and reservoirs — which required organised governance and labour. Settling permanently near rivers also meant communities could not simply move away when floods struck, unlike mobile hunter-gatherers. Over time, intensive agriculture in river valleys led to soil exhaustion and environmental degradation, which the chapter identifies as a factor in Babylonia's decline.

Answer: Rivers provided fertile soil (Nile's silt, Indus alluvium), fresh water for irrigation, and trade routes — enabling agricultural surplus and urban growth. However, seasonal flooding threatened settlements, requiring dams and canals, which demanded organised governance. Permanent riverside communities also could not relocate to escape disasters, and long-term agriculture caused environmental degradation. Both benefits and burdens spurred social organisation and technological innovation.

Q9 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.

SOLUTION

The Code of Hammurabi was compiled by the Babylonian king Hammurabi (who ascended around 1792 BCE) as a set of rules and regulations for civil and social conduct throughout his empire. The chapter describes it as serving as a foundational model for many future legal systems.

Why it was important: It was one of the earliest written legal codes in history, establishing the principle that a ruler's authority should be governed by codified laws applicable to all subjects. By inscribing laws in cuneiform on a public stone stele, Hammurabi made governance more systematic and transparent. It covered a wide range of matters including trade, property, wages, family life, and criminal penalties. Its influence is seen in many later legal traditions.

Was it fair to all sections? Based on general knowledge appropriate for this grade: The Code was not equally fair to all. It operated on the principle of 'lex talionis' (an eye for an eye), but punishments differed based on social class — nobles, free persons, and slaves received different treatment for the same offence. Women and enslaved people had fewer rights and protections than free men. While it provided a degree of order and predictability, it also reinforced existing social inequalities rather than challenging them.

(Research with your teacher using additional sources to verify specific provisions and form your own reasoned view.)

Answer: The Code of Hammurabi (c. 1792 BCE) was a landmark written legal system that made governance systematic and created predictable rules for trade, property, family, and crime. It was important as a model for later legal traditions. However, it was not equally fair — punishments varied by social class, with harsher penalties for lower-class offenders and fewer rights for women and slaves, reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than promoting equality.

Q10 If you had to choose one major innovation from early civilisations that changed the world permanently, what would it be and why?

SOLUTION

Model answer (the question invites a personal reasoned choice; the following is grounded in chapter content):

The invention of writing stands out as the single most transformative innovation from early

civilisations. The Sumerians developed cuneiform around 3200 BCE, followed by Egyptian hieroglyphics and other scripts. The chapter itself draws a sharp distinction between all of human prehistory (over 99 per cent of our past) and recorded history — a distinction created entirely by writing.

Writing permanently changed the world because it allowed knowledge to be stored and transmitted across time and space without relying on memory. Economic transactions could be recorded accurately, enabling complex long-distance trade (as seen in Mesopotamian tablets listing merchants and craft workers). Laws could be codified and made public, as in the Code of Hammurabi. Literature, myths, scientific observations, and administrative records could accumulate and build upon each other across generations. Almost every subsequent civilisational achievement — science, law, philosophy, religion — depends on the ability to write and preserve knowledge.

Without writing, each generation would have to rediscover what the previous one knew.

Answer: Writing is the most transformative innovation — developed by the Sumerians (cuneiform, c. 3200 BCE) and independently in Egypt and China. It enabled permanent recording of trade, laws (Code of Hammurabi), literature, and knowledge across generations. The chapter itself marks the invention of writing as the dividing line between prehistory and history. Without it, accumulated knowledge, law, science, and governance as we know them would not exist.

Q11 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?

SOLUTION

Comparing Egypt and Mesopotamia (with reference to China):

Social hierarchy — Similarities: All three civilisations had a pyramid-shaped social structure. In Egypt, the Pharaoh sat at the top, followed by government officials, nobles and priests, then free landholders, artisans and merchants, with serfs and slaves at the bottom. In Mesopotamia, kings in grand palaces ruled, with high priests and priestesses forming a privileged class, followed by merchants, craftspeople, and farmers, with slaves at the base. In China (by 1500 BCE), the ruling class, nobles, and aristocrats were at the top, followed by farmers and labourers. All three societies had clear class-based divisions with rulers wielding religious authority.

Differences: Egyptian pharaohs were considered divine and had absolute authority; their burial in monumental pyramids reflected their god-like status. Mesopotamian kings wielded power through temple-city authority (ziggurats were centres of economic and religious life). Chinese Zhou rulers were seen as 'appointees of heaven' but could be dismissed if their people did not prosper, suggesting a more conditional form of authority. Egyptian women enjoyed relatively more rights than in Greece or Rome and could own property and run businesses, a feature not prominently noted for Mesopotamia or China in the chapter.

Daily life — Similarities: Farming was central to all three societies; crafts like metalworking,

pottery, and textiles were widespread. Festivals, religion, and communal rituals played important roles. Differences: Egyptians enjoyed leisure activities like swimming, board games, and music festivals dedicated to gods and the pharaoh. Mesopotamian daily life was closely tied to the temple economy. In China, public officials were selected through examination in archery, horsemanship, calculations, writing, and music, reflecting a more meritocratic official class.

Answer: All three civilisations shared a pyramid-shaped social hierarchy — rulers and priests at the top, artisans and merchants in the middle, and slaves/serfs at the bottom. Daily life centred on agriculture and crafts everywhere. Key differences: Egyptian pharaohs were considered divine, and Egyptian women had more rights than their Mesopotamian or Chinese counterparts. Mesopotamian life revolved around the temple economy; Chinese officials were chosen by examination. Egypt uniquely emphasised leisure, festivals, and mummification as expressions of religious belief.

Q12 Activity: Using maps, locate the major rivers and civilisations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and the Sindhu–Sarasvatī Valley. Mark the trade links between them.

SOLUTION

Map guidance: Use an outline map of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

Locate and label these rivers: Euphrates and Tigris (Mesopotamia, modern Iraq/Kuwait/Turkey/Iran); River Nile (Egypt, northeastern Africa); Huang He (Yellow River) and Yangtze (China, East Asia); Indus (Sindhu) and Ghaggar-Sarasvatī (Indian subcontinent, present-day Pakistan and northwest India).

Mark the civilisations in their approximate regions: Mesopotamia (modern Iraq); Egyptian civilisation (Nile Valley, northeast Africa); Chinese civilisation (Yellow River basin, northern China); Sindhu–Sarasvatī civilisation (Indus–Ghaggar-Sarasvatī basin).

Mark trade links: Draw a line between Mesopotamia (cities like Ur and Uruk) and the Sindhu–Sarasvatī sites (Mohenjo-Daro, Dholavira, Lothal) to show Harappan–Mesopotamian trade in semiprecious beads, ivory, timber, gold dust, and copper. Mark intermediate points Magan (Oman) and Dilmun (Bahrain) along the Persian Gulf route. Note that Egyptian and Chinese civilisations had little direct contact with the Harappans, so no direct trade arrows are needed for those links.

Add a map key distinguishing rivers, civilisation areas, and trade routes.

Answer: On an outline map: label the Euphrates/Tigris (Mesopotamia), Nile (Egypt), Huang He/Yangtze (China), and Indus/Ghaggar-Sarasvatī (Sindhu–Sarasvatī). Mark each civilisation in its river region. Draw a trade-link arrow between Mesopotamia and the Harappan sites via Magan (Oman) and Dilmun (Bahrain) along the Persian Gulf. Note that Egypt and China had little direct contact with the Harappans, so no direct trade links are marked for those pairs.

Q13 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.

SOLUTION

Guidance: Choose one civilisation and organise your scrapbook or presentation into four sections. Use the following chapter-based content as your foundation, and supplement with pictures from textbooks or reliable online sources.

Example — Mesopotamia: Tools: The Sumerians invented the wheeled cart and sailboat; they used bronze tools from around 3500 BCE. Significance: the wheel and sail revolutionised transport and trade across the ancient world. Writing: Cuneiform — wedge-shaped marks pressed into clay tablets with sharp reeds, developed around 3200 BCE. Significance: it is one of the world's earliest writing systems, used across city-states for law codes (Code of Hammurabi), trade records, myths like the Epic of Gilgamesh, and administrative purposes. Art: Decorated boxes showing scenes from Sumerian life, including wheeled carts, elaborate drapery, and ornaments. Significance: these are primary sources for understanding Sumerian society and aesthetics. Architecture: Ziggurats — stepped pyramid-shaped temples built from mud bricks and burnt bricks for each city's chief god, serving also as treasuries and centres of economic activity. Significance: this model of the temple as city-centre shaped later religious architecture.

For Egypt, highlight pyramids (burial of pharaohs, belief in ka and afterlife), hieroglyphics (deciphered via Rosetta Stone), papyrus scrolls, and the Nile-based calendar. For China, highlight oracle bones (earliest records), bronze ritual vessels, jade objects, the Great Wall, and silk production/the Silk Route.

Answer: Guidance for the activity: Divide your scrapbook into four sections — Tools, Writing, Art, Architecture. For Mesopotamia: wheeled cart + bronze tools (tools); cuneiform tablets (writing); decorated Sumerian boxes (art); ziggurats (architecture). For Egypt: irrigation and calendar (tools); hieroglyphics/Rosetta Stone (writing); papyrus illustrations (art); pyramids/mastabas (architecture). For China: bronze vessels (tools); oracle-bone script (writing); jade figurines (art); Great Wall (architecture). Add a sentence on the significance of each innovation.