THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF WESTERN ASIA

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Summary

Western Asia is defined, for purposes of this text, as the geographic area that includes the Indian subcontinent, bounded northwest along the Himalayan mountain range to the modern countries of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan of south Central Asia, across the Caspian Sea to the Caucasus mountains to and including the Anatolian peninsula. The western boundaries are the Levant (a coastal strip of land stretching from southern Turkey to the Nile River) and the Arabian peninsula to the south. The region is home to high mountain ranges, plateaus and deserts, tropical humid forests and alluvial plains. Its climate generally consists of cool rainy winters and very hot, dry summers. Western Asia is one of the richest archaeological regions of the world and is replete with world firsts. Archaeological remains dating back millions of years testify to the emergence of the first humans from Africa to populate the rest of the globe. Western Asia has produced the earliest evidence of the beginnings of food production and the domestication of animals, and it is these finds that have largely supported derivations of archaeological theories on the development of human sedentism. The area can also boast the world's first centers of complex society and the earliest civilizations of the archaeological record.

1. Earliest Human Movements and Lifeways in Western Asia

Western Asia's central location between Africa, Asia, and Europe positions it as the earliest route for human migrations out of eastern Africa to disperse and colonize other parts of the world. The generally accepted routes through Western Asia are across the Sinai, north through the Levant, then splitting approximately northwesterly through Anatolia into Europe and easterly through the Zagros Mountains to the Iranian Plateau and the northern Indian subcontinent and beyond.

Dating of these events is somewhat controversial. The earliest evidence for hominids in Western Asia is generally agreed to be the site of Ubeidiya in Israel, where over 8 000

primitive stone tools were excavated from layers dated between 1.4 and 1.0 mya (million years ago). However, there are at least nine other geographically diverse claims for older material; these include the *Homo erectus* mandible found in Dmanisi, Georgia, which was dated to 1.8 mya, and the hominid bone found at Riwat, Pakistan, dated to greater than 1.9 mya. It is thought that because the grasslands throughout Africa were supporting hominids long before this, and similar grasslands extended into Western Asia, that early hominids may well have spread into Asia as early as 3.5 mya; however no reliable artifactual evidence has been found to support this hypothesis. In fact, Western Asia during the Lower Paleolithic is generally quite poorly known.

One of the best-known Paleolithic cultures of Western Asia is that of the Soan Valley on the Potwar Plateau of Pakistan. Hand-axes found there have been reliably dated to 700 000 BP (before present), and many scrapers and chopping tools have been discovered in layers dated to between 1.2 and 1.4 mya. Other sites with extensive stone tools have been excavated in Iranian Baluchistan and near Mashhad in northeastern Iran.

At the end of the Lower Paleolithic period, around 50 000 BP, significant changes began to occur, with evidence of anatomically modern Homo sapiens occupations. The transition is marked in the archaeological record by the broad appearance of blade and microblade stone tools, which were gradually replacing the cruder pebble and chopper tools. Hunter-gatherer economies began exploiting wild plants and animals in increasingly larger territories.

The Upper Paleolithic Period, approximately 50 000 to 10 000 BP, is characterized in the Near East by caves and rock shelters like et-Tabun and Mugharet el-Wad at Mt. Carmel, Israel, and Shanidar, Iraq, which have yielded tens of thousands of retouched stone tools such as blades and scrapers. Advanced percussion flaking techniques (deftly striking a cobble with a hammer stone) were producing long parallel-sided blades, some up to 15cm long. This relatively sophisticated technological innovation marks the transition to the Upper Paleolithic. Similar blades have been recorded from the Potwar Plateau and the Punjab in Pakistan dated to at least 38 000 BP. At Pushkar, in Rajasthan, India, they are worked from particularly fine materials such as milky quartz, agate and carnelian. Significant sites of this era also include Sanghao Cave in Sri Lanka during the period 38 000 to 18 000 BP.

In much of the Saudi Arabian peninsula, the Paleolithic is identified by small communities of hunter-gathers of central Arabia who subsisted near inland lakes, and the fishers who lived on the shores of the Red Sea, the Oman Sea, and along the Persian Gulf.

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Biographical Sketch

Graham Chandler has conducted archaeological research projects in Pakistan, Turkey, Greece, Belize, and the Canadian High Arctic. He received his Ph.D. from the Institute of Archaeology, University of London, in 1996, specializing in the Early Harappan Period of Pakistan. He held the Williams Research Fellowship at the British School at Athens from 1995 to 1997. He is currently a freelance archaeologist and writer based in Calgary, Canada.