
Graduate Certificate in Prehistoric Cultures

Evolution of Human Society

Evolution of Human Society: Key Terms and Vocabulary

Human society has evolved significantly over millennia, shaping the way we live, interact, and organize ourselves. In the Graduate Certificate in Prehistoric Cultures, understanding the key terms and vocabulary related to the evolution of human society is crucial. Let's delve into some essential concepts that form the backbone of this field of study.

1. Prehistoric

Prehistoric refers to a period in human history before written records existed. It encompasses the time before the development of writing systems, which varies across different regions. Studying prehistoric cultures involves analyzing archaeological evidence to understand how early human societies lived and interacted.

Example: The discovery of cave paintings in Lascaux, France, provides valuable insights into the prehistoric art and culture of early humans.

2. Hunter-Gatherers

Hunter-gatherers were early human societies that relied on hunting wild animals and gathering plants for sustenance. This lifestyle characterized much of human history before the advent of agriculture. Hunter-gatherer societies were nomadic, moving to follow food sources.

Example: The !Kung people of the Kalahari Desert in Africa are a contemporary hunter-gatherer society that maintains traditional practices.

3. Agricultural Revolution

The Agricultural Revolution marked a significant turning point in human history when societies transitioned from hunting and gathering to farming. This shift allowed for the development of permanent settlements, surplus food production, and the specialization of labor.

Example: The domestication of crops like wheat and rice played a crucial role in the Agricultural Revolution, leading to the growth of early civilizations.

4. Civilization

A civilization refers to a complex society with a high level of cultural and technological development. Characteristics of civilizations include urban centers, social stratification, writing systems, and organized religion. Civilizations often emerge after the adoption of agriculture.

Example: Ancient Mesopotamia is considered one of the earliest cradles of civilization, known for its cities like Ur and Babylon.

5. Social Stratification

Social stratification refers to the division of society into different social classes based on factors like wealth, power, and prestige. This hierarchical structure is common in complex societies and can impact individuals' opportunities and status.

Example: In ancient Egypt, social stratification was evident in the pharaoh's divine status at the top of the social hierarchy, followed by priests, nobles, and commoners.

6. Cultural Diffusion

is the spread of cultural beliefs, practices, and technologies between different societies through trade, migration, or conquest. This process leads to the exchange of ideas and influences the development of cultures over time.

Example: The Silk Road facilitated cultural diffusion between East and West, allowing for the exchange of goods, ideas, and religions.

7. Urbanization

Urbanization refers to the growth of cities and the migration of people from rural areas to urban centers. This phenomenon is often linked to the rise of civilizations and the concentration of population, resources, and economic activities in urban settings.

Example: The Indus Valley civilization had well-planned cities like Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, showcasing early urbanization in ancient India.

8. State Formation

is the process through which centralized political entities, known as states, emerge and exercise authority over a defined territory and population. States often have formal institutions, laws, and administrative systems.

Example: The development of city-states like Sumer in Mesopotamia marked a significant step towards state formation in the ancient world.

9. Bronze Age

The Bronze Age was a period characterized by the widespread use of bronze for tools, weapons, and ornaments. This era followed the Stone Age and preceded the Iron Age, marking technological advancements in metalworking and trade.

Example: The Minoan civilization on the island of Crete thrived during the Bronze Age, known for its intricate bronze artifacts and maritime trade.

10. Megalithic Structures

are large stone monuments built by ancient societies for various purposes, such as burial sites, religious ceremonies, or astronomical observations. These structures are found worldwide and reflect the technological and cultural achievements of prehistoric communities.

Example: Stonehenge in England is a famous megalithic structure constructed during the Neolithic period, raising questions about its purpose and construction methods.

11. Cultural Evolution

refers to the process of cultural change and development over time, influenced by factors like technology, environment, and interactions between societies. This concept explores how cultures adapt and transform in response to internal and external pressures.

Example: The spread of agriculture led to significant cultural evolution in early societies, impacting social organization, settlement patterns, and economic systems.

12. Neolithic Revolution

The Neolithic Revolution was a period when human societies transitioned from hunting and gathering to agriculture and settled life. This shift enabled the development of permanent settlements, the domestication of plants and animals, and the rise of complex societies.

Example: The emergence of agriculture in the Fertile Crescent around 10,000 years ago marked the beginning of the Neolithic Revolution in the Near East.

13. Subsistence Strategies

Subsistence strategies are methods used by societies to obtain food and resources for survival. These strategies include hunting and gathering, pastoralism, agriculture, and industrial production, shaping the economic and social organization of communities.

Example: The Inuit of the Arctic practice a subsistence strategy based on hunting marine mammals and fishing, adapted to their harsh environment.

14. Cultural Anthropology

is a subfield of anthropology that studies human societies and cultures, focusing on social norms, beliefs, practices, and material culture. Cultural anthropologists conduct fieldwork to understand diverse cultural expressions and worldviews.

Example: Margaret Mead's research on the Samoan culture influenced the field of cultural anthropology, challenging Western assumptions about gender and adolescence.

15. Ethnography

is a research method used in anthropology to study and document cultures through participant observation, interviews, and analysis of cultural practices. Ethnographic studies provide detailed insights into the daily lives and beliefs of different societies.

Example: Bronisław Malinowski's ethnographic work in the Trobriand Islands laid the foundation for modern anthropological fieldwork methods.

16. Cultural Relativism

is the principle that a culture must be understood on its terms, without imposing external values or judgments. This approach acknowledges the diversity of human beliefs and practices, promoting respect for cultural differences.

Example: Cultural relativism challenges ethnocentrism by encouraging anthropologists to interpret cultural practices within their specific cultural contexts.

17. Archaeology

is the study of past human societies through the analysis of material remains, such as artifacts, structures, and ecofacts. Archaeologists use excavation, survey, and scientific methods to reconstruct ancient lifeways and interpret cultural changes over time.

Example: The discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb by Howard Carter in Egypt revolutionized the field of archaeology, revealing rich artifacts from the ancient Egyptian civilization.

18. Radiocarbon Dating

is a method used by archaeologists to determine the age of organic materials, such as bones or wood, based on the decay of radioactive carbon isotopes. This technique helps establish chronological sequences and dates archaeological sites.

Example: The radiocarbon dating of Ötzi the Iceman, a well-preserved mummy found in the Alps, provided valuable insights into Neolithic life around 3,300 BCE.

19. Stratigraphy

is a principle in archaeology that studies the layering of soil deposits, known as strata, to determine the relative chronology of archaeological finds. By analyzing the vertical sequence of strata, archaeologists can date artifacts and reconstruct site histories.

Example: Excavations at Pompeii revealed well-preserved Roman artifacts in distinct stratigraphic layers, shedding light on daily life before the city's destruction.

20. Cultural Resource Management

is a practice that aims to protect and preserve archaeological sites, artifacts, and cultural heritage from destruction or looting. This field combines archaeological research with public outreach, conservation

efforts, and regulatory compliance.

Example: The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 in the United States established guidelines for cultural resource management and the preservation of historic sites.

In conclusion, mastering the key terms and vocabulary related to the evolution of human society is essential for students in the Graduate Certificate in Prehistoric Cultures. By understanding concepts like hunter-gatherers, state formation, cultural evolution, and archaeology, learners can delve deeper into the complexities of ancient civilizations and the development of human societies over time. These foundational terms provide a framework for exploring the rich tapestry of prehistoric cultures and the diverse ways in which humans have adapted and thrived throughout history.