

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Pre-history and Proto-history

Paper 1 · Unit 2

Palaeolithic to Chalcolithic, and the single highest-yield unit for the compulsory map question, where Stone Age sites are 40 per cent of every hint list.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Pre-history and Proto-history: geographical factors; hunting and gathering, palaeolithic and mesolithic; beginning of agriculture, neolithic and chalcolithic.

Why this unit is worth more than its textual marks

On the weightage table this unit shows 50 marks. That figure badly understates it, and the reason is the map question.

- Across the 2023 to 2026 papers, **32 of 80 map hints** were Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Chalcolithic or Megalithic sites, which is 40 per cent of a compulsory 50-mark question.
- Adding that share of the map to the unit's textual marks makes prehistory the **highest-yielding preparation per page** anywhere in Paper 1, and almost nobody treats it that way.
- Hints have grown more specific over the four years, moving from a bare Neolithic site in 2023 to a **Neolithic ash mound site** and a **Chalcolithic and early historic site with five occupational phases** in 2026.
- That shift means a memorised list of site names is now useless, and what pays is knowing **what each site is famous for**, which is exactly what this unit teaches.
- Geographical factors named in the syllabus matter directly, since prehistoric settlement follows **river valleys, rock shelter availability, raw material sources for stone tools and ecological transition zones**.
- **Robert Bruce Foote**, a geologist of the Geological Survey, found the first Indian Palaeolithic tool at Pallavaram near Madras in 1863, and he is conventionally called the father of Indian prehistory.
- Chronology should be given as broad ranges rather than false precision, since dating in this field rests on stratigraphy, typology and a limited number of radiocarbon and luminescence dates.

KEY TERMS

Microlith — A small stone blade or geometric tool, typically under five centimetres, hafted into composite implements; the defining Mesolithic technology.

The Palaeolithic

Three phases distinguished by tool technology rather than by date, since the transitions happened at different times in different regions.

- **Lower Palaeolithic**, running from perhaps two million to about 100,000 years ago, is characterised by **handaxes and cleavers** of the Acheulian tradition, made by core reduction.
- **Soan valley** in the Potwar plateau gave its name to a chopper-chopping tool tradition, and the old distinction between a Soanian north and an Acheulian peninsula has been softened by later finds.
- **Attirampakkam** near Chennai is the most important recent site, with excavations by Shanti Pappu and colleagues pushing Acheulian occupation back to roughly 1.5 million years and reporting a Middle Palaeolithic transition around 385,000 years ago.
- **Bhimbetka** in Madhya Pradesh has occupation from the Lower Palaeolithic onward and is a UNESCO World Heritage site, and its rock shelters carry paintings from the Mesolithic into the historic period.

- **Middle Palaeolithic** is defined by **flake tools**, scrapers, points and borers made on flakes struck from prepared cores, and Nevasa on the Pravara river is the type site.
- **Upper Palaeolithic** brought **blade and burin industries**, bone tools, and the first evidence of art, with the ostrich eggshell beads and engraved fragments from Patne and the bone objects from Kurnool caves.
- **Baghor** in Madhya Pradesh produced a triangular stone in a stone platform interpreted as a shrine, and if that reading holds it is among the earliest evidence of ritual in the subcontinent.
- **Raw material** determined tool form as much as skill did, since quartzite dominates the peninsula, chert and jasper the west, and the availability of good stone explains why certain valleys were revisited for hundreds of millennia.
- Hominin fossil evidence is thin, and the **Narmada skull** from Hathnora, found by Arun Sonakia in 1982, remains the principal Indian find, variously classified as Homo erectus or archaic Homo sapiens.

The Mesolithic

The transitional period, defined by microliths and by the beginnings of a settled relationship with particular places. It also gives us the first Indian burials and most of the rock art.

- Microlithic technology defines the period, producing **geometric forms including trapezes, triangles and lunates** hafted into composite tools such as arrows, sickles and harpoons.
- **Climatic change** underlies it, since the end of the last glacial around 10,000 years ago brought warmer wetter conditions, changing plant and animal distributions and favouring smaller game and broad-spectrum foraging.
- **Bagor** in Rajasthan is the largest Indian Mesolithic site and shows a long sequence with evidence of animal domestication, and **Adamgarh** in Madhya Pradesh similarly yields domesticated animal bones.
- **Sarai Nahar Rai, Mahadaha and Damdama** in the Ganga plain of Uttar Pradesh produced human burials with grave goods, ornaments and in some cases animal bone, giving direct evidence of ritual and of population health.
- Skeletal evidence from these sites indicates a **tall, robust population** with heavy dental wear and some healed injuries, and it is among the best prehistoric human samples from the subcontinent.
- **Rock art** at Bhimbetka, Adamgarh, Pachmarhi and Lakhajuar depicts hunting, dancing, animals, and later riders and battles, and the Mesolithic layers are dominated by wild animals and hunting scenes.
- **Burial orientation and grave goods** at the Ganga plain sites suggest belief in an afterlife, and double burials at Damdama complicate any simple account of social organisation.
- **Ecological transition** explains Mesolithic site placement, since the richest camps sit where two habitats meet, at the edge of a lake, a forest margin or a river confluence, where a forager could exploit several food sources from one base.
- **Langhnaj** in Gujarat and **Birbhanpur** in West Bengal extend the geographic spread, and the period's characteristic settlement is seasonal and repeatedly revisited rather than permanent.

The Neolithic and the beginning of agriculture

The syllabus names the beginning of agriculture explicitly. India has several independent Neolithic zones with different crops, animals and dates, and that regional plurality is the examinable point.

- **Mehrgarh** in Baluchistan, occupied from about 7000 BCE and excavated by Jean-Francois Jarrige, is the earliest farming settlement in the subcontinent and shows a continuous sequence from aceramic Neolithic to the Early Harappan.
- Mehrgarh's importance is decisive for the Harappan origin question, since it demonstrates **local domestication of barley, wheat, cattle, sheep and goat** rather than wholesale diffusion from West Asia.
- Evidence from Mehrgarh includes **drilled human teeth**, which is the earliest known dentistry anywhere, and cotton fibres from the sixth millennium BCE.
- **Northwestern zone** beyond Mehrgarh includes Kili Gul Mohammad and Rana Ghundai, and it shares the West Asian crop and animal package.
- **Kashmir Neolithic** at **Burzahom and Gufkral** is distinctive for **pit dwellings**, bone and antler tools, and burials of dogs with humans, and it shows links northward towards Central Asia and China.
- **Eastern zone** at **Chirand** in Bihar and Senuwar produced rice, and the Ganga plain Neolithic at **Koldihwa and Mahagara** yielded rice husk impressions whose very early dates have been disputed on stratigraphic grounds.
- **Southern zone** in Karnataka and Andhra, at **Maski, Brahmagiri, Piklihal, Sanganakallu, Utnur and Tekkalakota**, is defined by the distinctive **ash mounds**, now generally interpreted as burnt cattle-dung accumulations from seasonal pastoral camps.
- Ash mounds are worth learning precisely because the 2026 map hint asked for a Neolithic ash mound site, and no other unit prepares you for that.
- **Definition matters** here, since the Neolithic is properly defined by food production rather than by polished stone tools, and several Indian sites have ground stone axes without agriculture while Mehrgarh has agriculture from its earliest aceramic levels.
- **Northeastern zone** at Daojali Hading in Assam has shouldered celts and cord-impressed pottery indicating Southeast Asian affinities, which extends the picture beyond the standard four zones.

Zone	Type sites	Distinctive features
Northwest	Mehrgarh, Kili Gul Mohammad	Earliest farming, barley and wheat, from about 7000 BCE
Kashmir	Burzahom, Gufkral	Pit dwellings, bone tools, dog burials with humans
Ganga plain and east	Chirand, Koldihwa, Mahagara, Senuwar	Rice, bone tools, disputed early dates
South	Maski, Brahmagiri, Piklihal, Utnur	Ash mounds, cattle pastoralism, granite hill settlements
Northeast	Daojali Hading	Shouldered celts, cord-impressed pottery, Southeast Asian links

The Neolithic zones. Different crops, animals and material culture in each, which is why India has no single Neolithic revolution.

The Chalcolithic

Copper-using farming cultures outside the Harappan zone, and the phase that supplies the most varied map hints of all.

- Chalcolithic cultures used **copper alongside stone**, practised settled agriculture, made distinctive painted pottery, and were largely village-based rather than urban.
- **Ahar-Banas** in southeastern Rajasthan, with Ahar and Balathal, is notable for **black and red ware**, substantial stone and mud-brick structures, and access to the Khetri copper belt.
- **Kayatha** in Madhya Pradesh, dated from about 2000 BCE, has a distinctive sturdy painted ware and yielded copper axes and bangles along with steatite and carnelian beads.
- **Malwa culture** at Navdatoli, Eran and Nagda produced the finest Chalcolithic painted pottery in the subcontinent, and Navdatoli's excavation by H. D. Sankalia is a landmark of Indian archaeology.
- **Jorwe culture** in Maharashtra, at **Inamgaon, Daimabad, Nevasa and Chandoli**, is the best studied of all, with Inamgaon yielding evidence of a planned settlement, an embankment for irrigation and differentiated housing.
- **Inamgaon** also produced burials in which children were interred in twin urns and adults in an extended position with the feet cut off, and a headless clay figurine interpreted as a mother goddess.
- **Daimabad** is the southernmost Harappan-related site and yielded the famous **bronze chariot, buffalo, elephant and rhinoceros** figures, whose dating remains contested between Late Harappan and later.
- Late Jorwe shows **settlement contraction and a shift towards pastoralism**, generally attributed to declining rainfall around 1000 BCE, which is a rare case of a documented climatic explanation in Indian prehistory.
- **Relationship to the Harappans** is the analytical question, since some Chalcolithic cultures precede the Harappan, some are contemporary and peripheral, and some are Late Harappan successors, so the term describes a technology rather than a period.
- **Chalcolithic burials** varied greatly by region, with urn burials in the Deccan and extended inhumation elsewhere, and the variety is itself evidence against treating the Chalcolithic as a single culture.

The Megalithic cultures

Formally a separate syllabus unit, but they belong in the same preparation because they appear together in the map question. Keep the typology.

- Megalithic monuments in peninsular India date broadly from about 1200 BCE to the early centuries CE, overlapping the Iron Age and the beginnings of historic settlement.
- **Types** to distinguish are the **dolmen**, a chamber of upright slabs with a capstone; the **cist**, a stone box below ground; the **menhir**, a standing stone; the **stone circle**; the **rock-cut cave** of Kerala; and the **umbrella stone or kodakkal**.
- **Port-hole slabs**, a circular opening cut in one wall of a cist, are a distinctive south Indian feature and are found at Brahmagiri and elsewhere.

- **Iron objects, black and red ware, horse bones and horse ornaments** are the characteristic grave goods, and the association with iron is close enough that megaliths are the principal Iron Age evidence for the peninsula.
- **Type sites** include **Brahmagiri and Maski in Karnataka, Adichanallur in Tamil Nadu, Junapani near Nagpur with its cup-marked stones, and Hire Benakal.**
- **Adichanallur** yielded urn burials with skeletal remains and iron objects, and more recent excavation has reported inscribed potsherds that bear on the antiquity of Tamil-Brahmi.
- **Kerala's** rock-cut caves, hood stones or kudakkal and umbrella stones form a regionally distinct group not found elsewhere in the peninsula.
- **Sangam literature** overlaps the later megalithic period in the far south, so the archaeological and the textual record briefly describe the same society, and that convergence is unusual enough in Indian prehistory to be worth noting.
- **Social interpretation** remains contested, and the labour required for large monuments implies some capacity to mobilise a community, while differential grave goods suggest emerging stratification.
- For the map question, the practical instruction is to know **at least four megalithic sites by name and by type**, because the hints distinguish between megalithic burial sites, dolmen complexes and monumental sites.

Building the site atlas

The practical output of this unit is not an essay but a working list. Build it once and it pays in every paper.

- Compile roughly **150 sites** with three pieces of information each: period, region and the single thing the site is known for, because the hints are descriptor-led.
- Group them by **period first and region second**, since a map hint gives you the period and you then need to place it geographically.
- Learn the **paired sites** that examiners like to distinguish, so Burzahom and Gufkral for Kashmir, Koldihwa and Mahagara for early rice, Inamgaon and Daimabad for Jorwe.
- Attach the **excavator's name** where it is famous, since Sankalia at Navdatoli, Jarrige at Mehrgarh, Pappu at Attirampakkam and Sonakia for the Narmada skull all appear in textual questions too.
- Practise writing the **30-word note** that Question 1 actually demands, which needs period, location, and one distinguishing feature, and nothing else.
- Revise the atlas on a fixed cycle rather than once, because this is recall-heavy material that decays faster than argument does.

Last-mile revision

- Foote found the first Indian Palaeolithic tool at Pallavaram in 1863.
- Lower Palaeolithic Acheulian handaxes; Attirampakkam to about 1.5 million years; Middle Palaeolithic flakes with Nevasa as type site; Upper Palaeolithic blades and burins, Patne ostrich eggshell.
- Narmada skull from Hathnora, Sonakia 1982.
- Mesolithic microliths; Bagor and Adamgarh for domestication; Sarai Nahar Rai, Mahadaha and Damdama for burials; Bhimbetka rock art.

- Mehrgarh from about 7000 BCE, Jarrige, drilled teeth, cotton; Burzahom and Gufkral pit dwellings; Chirand and Koldihwa rice; southern ash mounds at Utnur and Maski.
- Chalcolithic: Ahar-Banas black and red ware, Kayatha from about 2000 BCE, Malwa at Navdatoli under Sankalia, Jorwe at Inamgaon and Daimabad bronzes.
- Megalith types: dolmen, cist with port-hole, menhir, stone circle, Kerala rock-cut cave and umbrella stone; Brahmagiri, Adichanallur, Junapani.

Common errors to avoid

- Treating this as a low-value unit. Stone Age sites are 40 per cent of the compulsory map question's hints.
- Memorising site names without what each is known for. The 2026 hints named ash mounds and five occupational phases, which a bare list cannot answer.
- Giving a single Indian Neolithic revolution. There are at least five zones with different crops, animals and dates.
- Confusing Mesolithic microliths with Upper Palaeolithic blades. The defining Mesolithic form is the small geometric tool hafted into a composite implement.
- Dating the Koldihwa rice finds confidently. The very early dates are disputed on stratigraphic grounds and saying so is safer and more accurate.
- Ignoring megalith typology. The hints distinguish burial sites, dolmen complexes and monumental sites, so the words matter.

Mains Practice

“The Neolithic Age represents a revolution due to significant changes that took place during this period.” Examine.

20 marks · 250 words · 2023

Analyze the role of terrain, climate and vegetation in shaping the settlement and movement of prehistoric communities in India.

15 marks · 200 words · 2026

“The Chalcolithic people were experts in microliths and were also skilful workers in stone.” Elucidate.

15 marks · 200 words · 2025