

FIGURE 7

Sea level changes since the last glacial maximum

During the last glacial maximum 20,000 years ago, sea level had fallen by as much as 350 feet, exposing extensive portions of the continental shelf, especially where these have broad, shallow slopes, as in the Arctic, and the archipelagoes of East Asia. Beginning about 14,000 years ago, as the glaciers began to retreat, sea levels began to rise, a process which accelerated circa 10,000-9,000 B.C., reaching a conclusion in the 6,000-5,000 B.C. period, at which point today's coastlines were established.* This entire process, therefore, took place when human habitation of various parts of the world was well established—habitation of which we have only fragmentary knowledge today.

One reason our knowledge of this period is so limited, is because much of the archeological record is no doubt buried beneath the sea, on the once-exposed continental shelves,

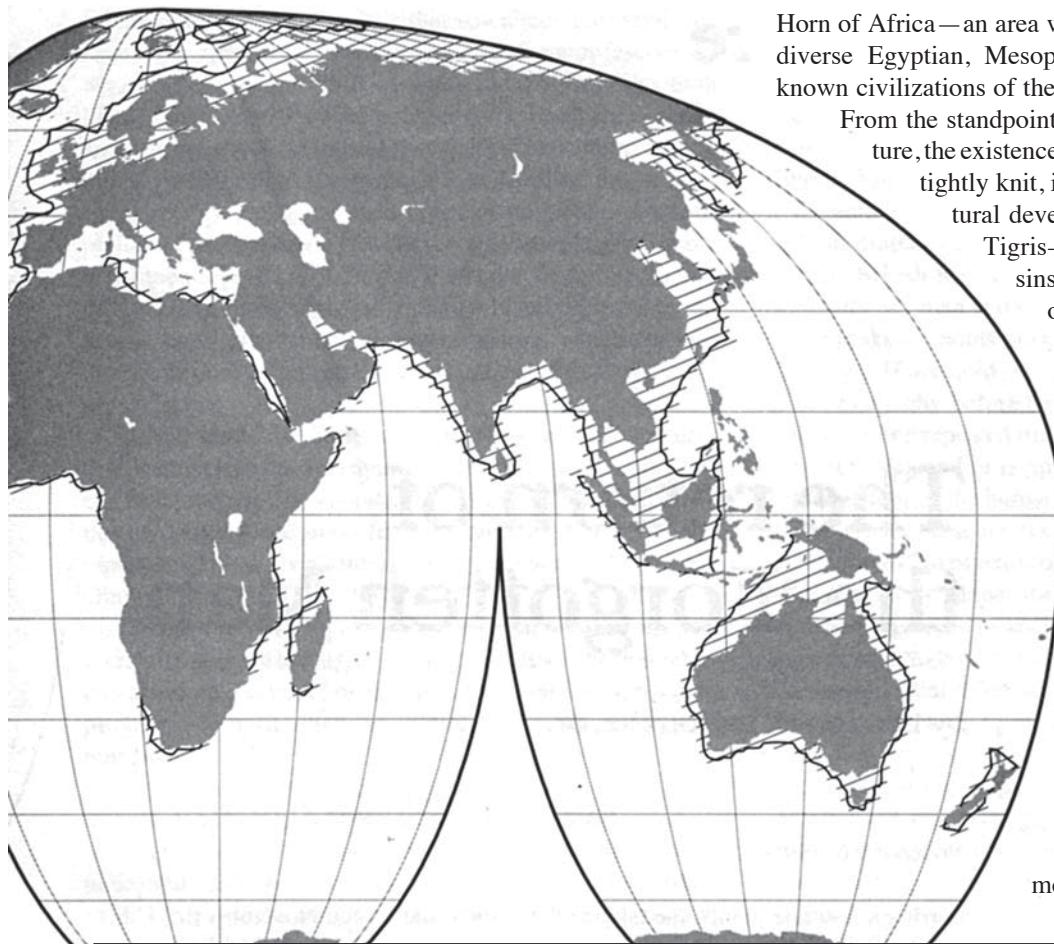
* Other contributing, and in some cases countervailing, factors, such as the rise of continental land masses as the enormous glacial weight subsided, have been omitted from this simplified description of what is, in fact, a multiply-connected astrophysical, geological, and climatic process.

especially insofar as the most probable hypothesis for the early development of human prehistoric society would be as a sea-going, maritime culture, located near the mouths of rivers, and based upon an economy whose foodstuffs derived largely from fishing and shellfish cultivation.

a) Coastlines of the continents today, showing the 200-foot depth line of the continental shelf. Hatching indicates the approximate 350-foot depth exposed during the glacial maximum.

b) Arctic region. One of the most dramatic aspects of lowered sea levels during the glacial maximum, was the extensive area of exposed continental shelf in the Arctic region, including the 1,000-mile-wide Bering "Land Bridge," certainly one pathway of early man's settlement of the Americas. Note that the northern shelf of Siberia was not covered by the spread of glaciers, owing to the extreme aridity of this region (see **Figure 6**).

c) Indian Ocean littoral. A crucial area for the study of man's recent prehistory is the Indian Ocean littoral, from the western coast of India, to the regions of the Persian Gulf and



Horn of Africa—an area which encompasses the seemingly diverse Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Dravidian (Indus) known civilizations of the Fourth and Third Millennia B.C.

From the standpoint of an ocean-going maritime culture, the existence of this area as an earlier, relatively tightly knit, integrated region of trade and cultural development incorporating the Indus, Tigris-Euphrates, and Nile River basins—especially given the potential of semi-annual monsoon navigation—points a direction for significant breakthroughs in our knowledge of the early origins of human civilization in this region. The development of Mesopotamian Sumeria out of the Dravidian language group, as well as the extensive exposed coastal regions—including, for example, the entire Persian Gulf—are indicative of the sorts of evidence available for further hypotheses and study. Similar directions exist for tracing the impact of Dravidian culture, travelling by way of the Indian Ocean, on the development of East Asia. — Ken Kronberg

