Name:

Date:

PREHISTORY: THE WORLD'S GREATEST DETECTIVE STORY

The story of human history is the world's greatest detective story, and the final answer is us. Many people think of history as a set of unchangeable facts, and while that is mostly true, particularly in prehistory, we are still uncovering new evidence about our ancient past. Scientists often form theories based on the evidence they have, which, until recently, was surprisingly little. Archaeologist and famous fossil hunter Richard Leakey often said that, one hundred years ago, we could fit most of our evidence of prehistory on a small card table. We have discovered many more artifacts in the last century, but taken together, the physical evidence of the people before humans could read or write would still today fit into a middle school gymnasium.

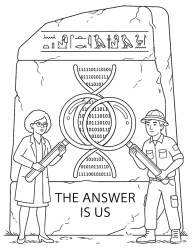
We often refer to a period of prehistory as the "Stone Age," because stone artifacts can survive for thousands of years. The ancients almost certainly created tools and objects from softer materials, such as leather and wood, which decayed over thousands of years. In some cases, bones survived because they were buried quickly and protected from decay. In rarer cases, the bones were slowly replaced with minerals, preserving their shape in stone. There is more to the story of human history, but we are missing most of the evidence.

Many familiar stories of ancient Egypt remained unknown until Jean-François Champollion deciphered Egyptian hieroglyphs using the Rosetta Stone in 1822. Technology continues to unlock mysteries of the past, and modern-day "Champollions" are still uncovering new facts that reshape what we know about history.

In the 1990s, scientists began mapping the entire human genetic code, which we call the genome. Since then, many of the 'fixed facts' we once taught in every classroom have turned out to be false. Scientists once thought that Homo sapiens—modern humans—and Neanderthals were completely separate. But the DNA evidence proved the experts were wrong. It turns out that Neanderthals left a genetic story that is shared by billions of people worldwide. While this ancient DNA isn't found in everyone, it is a permanent part of the genetic code for most people with European or Asian ancestry. Full-blooded Neanderthals may be gone, but their DNA lives on in us.

Scientists have discovered other ancient humans whose DNA lives on in us today. Many people in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands carry Denisovan DNA. These mysterious people were named after a single finger bone found in the Denisova Cave in Siberia, a remote part of Russia. This tiny bone was the only clue we had until scientists read its DNA and realized they had found a whole new branch of the human family tree.

Even more intriguing is what scientists call "Ghost DNA." Just as a detective might find a fingerprint at a crime scene without ever identifying the person it belongs to, scientists have found DNA in our genetic code that doesn't match that of humans, Neanderthals, or Denisovans. This DNA belongs to ancient ancestors we have yet to find. We know they existed because they left their mark on us, but we haven't found a single bone or tooth from them—yet.



For decades, scholars have debated what happened to the people of the Indus River civilization. They built large, carefully planned cities such as Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, complete with plumbing and toilets, but were mostly abandoned by 1700 BCE. Earlier writers sometimes suggested that the people had disappeared, but a skeleton found in 2019 and other genetic studies indicate that their descendants still live throughout the region. We still do not understand their writing, so perhaps that mystery of why they moved will one day be solved.

Television shows and podcasts sometimes promote wild theories about space aliens or other implausible ideas. The truth is actually more interesting and more inspiring. We humans are more inventive and more creative than we often imagine. It would be hubris — a word that means foolish overconfidence — to suggest that there are no surprises ahead. The greatest discoveries about the human story may still be waiting for us to find them, and that is what makes studying the human experience so rewarding.

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Name: _____

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Fill in the Blanks

History is often presented as a set of fixed f__c__s, but new d__sc__v__ri__s continue to reshape what we know about the human past. Much of prehistory remains mysterious because many ancient tools were made from materials uch as l_____ and w_____ that decayed over time. Important breakthroughs—such as Champollion's deciphering of Egypti an h__e__o__l__p__s and modern DNA r__s__a__ch —have helped scientists uncover new evidence about ancient c__v__l__z__t__o__s and human origins. Genetic studies show that modern humans share DNA with N__a__d__r__h__ls and D__n__s__v__ns, revealing unexpected *c__n__e__t__o__s in our family tree. Even so, many mysteries remain, including the fate of the Indus River civilization and the meaning of its *u__d__c__p__e__ed writing.

Answer in complete sentences

*1. Why is "stone age" a misleading term?

*2. Are you surprised by Richard Leakey's statement? Explain why or why not.

*3. What is Ghost DNA? How does Ghost DNA suggest that there are others versions of humans besides Neanderthals and Denisovans?

4. Why do we still now know much about the ancient Indus River civilization?

*A higher order learning question. An reasonable answer will be accepted.

*This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.