

SAPIENS I: HUMANITY BEFORE AGRICULTURE

Part 1 of 4 • OLLI Course Syllabus
VERSION A — Three-Point Topic Titles

THE FOUR-PART SERIES

Part 1 — Sapiens I: Humanity Before Agriculture ← **this course**

Part 2 — Sapiens II: The Agricultural Revolution

Part 3 — Sapiens III: The Unification of Humankind

Part 4 — Sapiens IV: The Scientific Revolution

ABOUT THIS COURSE

Sapiens I is the first of four connected semester courses based on Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Each course covers one of Harari's four Parts. They can be taken independently, but the full four-part sequence is designed to build a cumulative understanding of human history from our origins to the present and near future.

This course covers Part One of *Sapiens* — the 300,000 years from the emergence of *Homo sapiens* to the threshold of the Agricultural Revolution. We examine the biological and cognitive foundations of our species, the forager world, the great human migrations, and the first environmental transformations caused by *Homo sapiens*.

The course ends deliberately at the Agricultural Revolution threshold. What farming made possible — and what it cost — is the subject of *Sapiens II*.

COURSE FRAMEWORK: E/I/S

Throughout all four courses we apply the E/I/S framework to the claims we examine:

- **ESTABLISHED:** well-supported by multiple independent lines of evidence. The scientific or historical consensus.
- **INFERRED:** the most defensible interpretation of available evidence, but not directly established. Reasonable people can disagree.
- **SPECULATIVE:** a plausible hypothesis or interpretive framework, but without strong evidential support. Worth considering, not asserting.

We apply E/I/S to component claims, not to theories as wholes. Most important ideas have some established parts, some inferred parts, and some speculative parts. The framework helps us distinguish between them.

COURSE FORMAT

Six sessions • 90 minutes each • Remote delivery via Zoom

Each session uses PowerPoint slides (primarily images), embedded video clips, and UN-MUTE discussion prompts. Minimal slide text — the instructor speaks the content. No required reading. Harari's *Sapiens* (Harper Collins, 2015) is recommended as a companion.

SESSION OVERVIEW

SESSION	TOPICS
1	1. Big Bang and Deep Time 2. Evolution by Natural Selection 3. Our Place in the Animal Kingdom
2	1. Ancestors of Humans 2. Overview of Genus Homo 3. Neanderthals and Denisovans
3	1. Prehistoric Tools 2. Prehistoric Use of Fire 3. Hunting and Gathering
4	1. A Day in the Life — 75,000 BP 2. The Cognitive Revolution 3. Inventing Fictions
5	1. The State of Nature 2. The Great Human Migrations 3. Megafaunal Extinctions
6	1. The Threshold of Agriculture 2. The Natufians & Göbekli Tepe 3. Harari Defends His Thesis

THE CLOSING QUESTION — INTO SAPIENS II

If forager life was rich and varied — if the skeletal evidence says farmers were shorter, sicker, and worked harder — why did anyone give foraging up?

That question is the engine of Sapiens II.

LEARNING GOALS

- **Understand** the biological and cognitive foundations that distinguish Homo sapiens from other primates and other human species.
- **Apply** the E/I/S framework to evaluate claims about prehistoric human life — separating what the evidence establishes from what it supports and what it merely allows.
- **Engage critically** with Harari's argument that forager life was not the brutish and short existence of popular imagination, and with the evidence for and against that claim.
- **Trace** the great human migrations and their ecological consequences — the first wave of human-caused extinctions.
- **Arrive** at the threshold of the Agricultural Revolution with the question in full view: why would anyone cross it?