All modern humans are descended from populations of Neanderthals that lived in Africa ca. 200,000 years ago. Around 150,000 years ago a small group of humans left Africa and, over the next 120,000 years, its descendants colonized all the world’s other continents except Antarctica, in the process replacing all other human species. Those migrations were made by low sea levels during glaciations, which created land bridges linking islands and continents; humans were able to reach most parts of the world on foot. It was in this period of initial colonization of the globe that modern racial characteristics evolved.

Modern humans had first migrated out of Africa ca. 100,000 years ago, probably following the Nile valley and crossing the isthmus of Suez into the Levant. For unknown reasons, the descendants of these pioneers did not enter Europe until 40,000 years ago. At this time also, the first modern humans arrived in China, reaching Japan ca. 30,000 years ago.

Perhaps because of the harsh glacial conditions, modern humans gradually replaced Neanderthals, who became extinct ca. 30,000 years ago. The last continent to be colonized by humans was the Americas. Alaska was reached ca. 16,000 years ago from Northeast Asia via the Bering sea land bridge, but further progress was barred until the continental ice sheets began to retreat ca. 14,000 years ago. By this time, other groups had already bypassed the ice sheets by migrating along the Pacific coast, reaching South America by 14,500 years ago.