Our species emerged in Africa more than 300,000 years ago, with a migration out of the continent 60,000 to 70,000 years ago heralding the start of the global spread of Homo sapiens. But where did these pioneers go after leaving Africa?

After years of debate, a new study offers an answer. These bands of hunter-gatherers appear to have lingered for thousands of years as a homogeneous population in a geographic hub that spanned Iran, southeast Iraq and northeast Saudi Arabia before going on to settle all of Asia and Europe starting roughly 45,000 years ago.

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These people lived in small, mobile bands of hunter-gatherers, the researchers said. The hub location offered a variety of ecological settings, from forests to grasslands and savannas, fluctuating over time between arid and wet intervals.

There would have been ample resources available, with evidence showing the hunting of wild gazelle, sheep and goat, [Griffith University anthropologist and study co-author Michael] Petraglia said.

“Their diet would have been composed of edible plants and small- to large-sized game. Hunter-gatherer groups seemed to have practiced a seasonal lifestyle, living in the lowlands in the cooler months and in the mountainous regions in the warmer months,” Petraglia said.

Their eventual dispersal in different directions beyond the hub set the basis for the genetic divergence between present-day East Asians and Europeans, the researchers said.

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