

# The domestication of wild animals history essay



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The Fertile Crescent has been called the “Cradle of Civilization” for many years. The Cradle of Civilization is the key to understanding when the human population began to thrive and create villages, cities, and ultimately states. Without the domestication and cultivation of the land there would have never been enough food to support such a dense population of people. Hunting and collecting entirely from the wild could not possibly support even a tiny fraction of the world’s current population (Bellwood, 1). There were seven core domesticates in the Fertile Crescent, they include sheep, goats, pigs, cattle, emmer wheat, einkorn wheat and barley. All of these species were domesticated and had an important role in the Fertile Crescent throughout the two millennia emergence of agrarian societies between 10000 and 8000 B. P. We can best understand the events of this period by first focusing on the developmental history of the individual species of animals and plants that were brought under domestication, and then combining those individual histories into the more complex overall story in the emergence of the agriculture in the region (Smith, 51). However due to the confines of this paper we will take an in depth look at the animals domesticated in the Fertile Crescent.

The story of the Fertile Crescent starts before the emergence of the hunter-gatherers, who were ravaging the forests and grass lands. “By 10000 B. P. the beginning of the 2000 year period that would witness the development of agriculture, human societies had taken advantage of the post-Pleistocene proliferation of plant and animal resources, and the Fertile Crescent was inhabited by a diverse array of hunter-gatherer societies (Smith, 51).” The Pleistocene era had ended with a much warmer climate that also brought a

much moister climate to the area. This climate change was one that favored the wild annual cereal grasses (Sagan, 249). Also it allowed the sparse movement of hunter-gatherer groups to move in to the area. It was there that they discovered that a more sedentary lifestyle produced more of a surplus of food and then that of foraging.

The Fertile Crescent's environmental zones are keys to understanding the development of the domestications of the animals (and plants). There are three main environmental zones involved in the origin of cultivation in the Fertile Crescent. The eastern section of which comprises the foothills and margins of the Zagros Mountains (Maisels 133). The central or the north is mostly made up of the broad rolling grasslands. And lastly, the western section whose central axis is the important Levantine corridor and Jordan Valley (Smith, 51).

There were many changes that occurred due to the domestication of animals (and plants). These changes were many times become genetic due to the consistent selection of the more adequately produced products. In wild grains, the axis or rachis is brittle, which allows the grain to reseed itself easily. Selection of the grains was at first an accidental by-product of harvesting, and later intentionally, the people selected grains in which the axis was tougher, allowing less grain to fall to the ground, thus raising yields (Sagan 247). They also selected plants that were more easily husked. The people used the same natural selection process when choosing livestock. They selected woolly animals from among wild sheep, which are not normally woolly, thus acquiring sheep better suited to lowland heat and from

which to obtain wool. Fossil remains indicate that the domestication of the sheep and goat was accompanied by a decrease in the size of the animal.

The animals domesticated in the Fertile Crescent were a key to the development of the humans in the area. The readily available source of meat aided in the functions of the brain, which led to the ability to think more complexly and creatively. The brain is fueled by protein therefore with more protein in the diet the mind began to develop more completely. Thus the importance of the domestication of the animals to the human race, without having to hunt for the meat they were getting a more readily available source of protein (Wilkinson 139).

The Persian wild goat has been recognized as the ancestor to the first domesticated goat. The Persian wild goat tends to be found in the more rugged terrain. It is in the eastern section of the Fertile Crescent that we find the most evidence of goats being hunted for their meat. Specifically at the site of Ganj Dareh, which was excavated in 1970s, which found at the lowest level, which dates back to 9000 B. P. contained approximately 5000 identifiable goat bones (Old Goats). Brian Hesse of the University of Alabama at Birmingham studied these bones. He used a new analytical technique to try to piece together evidence of the domestication of goats. Hesse theorized that a domesticated herd should have two clear distinguishing characteristics: "(1) a large percentage of animals slaughtered for meat late in their immaturity, when they had attained much of their adult size; (2) an adult breeding population in which females far outnumbered males" (Smith, 60). Through complex measurements of the bones discovered at Ganj Dareh, Hesse discovered that the males were being killed before they reached adult

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hood and the females overwhelmingly stood for most of the population. This stunning breakthrough specifies that an age and sex profile that closely agrees with that of a herd of domesticated goats managed to provide meat (Old Goats). Clear demographic evidence appears to indicate that goats were domesticated at Ganj Dareh as early as 9000 years ago. The increase of the proportions of goat bones among the animal remains is an indicator to the shift to goat herding.

Wild Sheep were the second animal to be domesticated in the Fertile Crescent. The wild ancestor of domesticated sheep ranged throughout much of the Fertile Crescent. A large amount of evidence of wild sheep can be found in the central region (Sagon, 245). There is much data to indicate that the wild sheep was not an important prey in the areas of Levant. There is, however, evidence showing that the sheep were a prey in Jericho that date wild sheep back to 10000 to 9500 years ago (Wilkinson 149). The degree to which the hunter-gatherer societies in different parts of the Fertile Crescent relied on wild sheep for food parallels the animal's abundance in their local environments 10000 to 8000 years ago. The wild sheep were most were most abundantly discovered in the central region. This is probably why around 8500 B. P. sheep were first domesticated in the central area of the Fertile Crescent. There, the land is better suited to the wild sheep thus they were a more common target for hunters in that area, leading to the domestication of the sheep. With the change from being wild to being domesticated, the sheep, according to the fossil record, got smaller due to the selection process of the humans tending to the animals. It is in the apex

of the Fertile Crescent that sheep herding first became an important component of agricultural economies (Smith, 57).

The pig was, as far as we know the third animal to be domesticated. Wild pigs were greatly hunted in the northern part of the central region. Facts have lead archeologist to date the bones of the wild pigs to 9000 B. P. The pigs continued to be a substantial part of the diet of the people in this northern area of the Fertile Crescent, even after the shift to the herding of sheep and goats (Sagan, 243). The site of Cayönü tends to be the marker for the earliest domesticated pig, in the vicinity of 8500 years ago. There have been some tentative theories that approximate the domestication of pigs to be closer to the date of 10000 B. P. (Smith, 67). It is Richard Redding who proposed this theory, which the bones of the pigs at Hallan Cemi, strongly represent the ages of bones of a possible herding community of pigs. However since we know nothing about the ages of the pigs that the hunters targeted we have no basis for making the claim that the pigs at Hallan Cemi were indeed domesticated and herded. For now it remains unverified but the alluring prospect that pigs were domesticated much before the evidence now shows.

Cattle were probably the last and least important of the four main animals that were domesticated in the Fertile Crescent. The ancestors of domesticate cattle were probably considered to be a dangerous pay due to the size of the animal. However, it was also a significantly large package of meat. The area in the Levant and Jordan Valley has dated wild cattle bones to approximately 9000 to 8000 years ago. Like the pigs the cattle had an exceptionally large geographical range and extended far beyond the Fertile Crescent. There has

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been clear documentation of a pattern that shows the reduction of size in the cattle between 8000 and 7000 B. P. While cattle may show to be of little importance to the region between 10000 and 8000 B. P. it later became the dominant species of the market (Smith, 56).

Now that we have looked at the individual histories of the animals of four of the seven core domesticates of the Fertile Crescent we see many patterns are emerging. The four species share common lines of evidence that include; “ geographical range, increase in abundance, reduction in size and change in age/sex profiles (Smith, 67).” This evidence has led to the indication that these histories were distinct and still follows the same indication of domestication. The goats were domesticated in the earliest portion of the period, at around 9000 B. P. Then the sheep, pigs and cattle soon followed after approximately 300 years after the domestication of the goats.

After the domestication of animals (and plants) the small villages began becoming states, they were becoming more and more like a modern day civilization. The early stages of food production in the Middle East were marked by gradual transition from foraging to producing economies. Many changes were caused by the production and cultivation of food. Such changes include population increase, which caused the resulting migration and forced other areas to respond and begin their own cultivation of their resources. Also, there had been a gradual population increase; this was based on the native richness of the environment, which helped spur the spread of food production (Maisels, 140). On the other hand, in the Tigris-Euphrates alluvial plain, cultivation required irrigation, which began around 7000 B. P. and changed the world of farming. Irrigation allowed farming to

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spread away from the normal areas that were close to the riverbanks, by bringing the water away from the riverbanks the cultivation began to thrive. By 6000 B. P., irrigation systems had become far larger and more complex, and were associated with a new political system. This new establishment was based on central government, extreme contrasts of wealth, and social classes, the beginnings of the state (Wilkinson, 141). The written and archaeological record indicates that the early Mesopotamian states were city states (Sumer and Elam), ruled by a literate theocracy that managed virtually all major aspects of the economy, which was overwhelmingly agrarian. The theocracy was replaced by 4, 500 B. P.; it was replaced by a secular, military monarchy, based upon an elaborate class system (Sagan, 300). Thus ended the revolution of modern humans in the world of cultivation we now know use the animals (and plants) to our advantage. As time continues to slip by we find more and more ways to maximize the products we get from the domestication of animals (and cultivation of plants) (Sagan, 248).

To sum everything up Southwest Asia was inhabited by small groups of hunter-gatherers. These groups, due to the climatic change, became more and more sedentary and begin to develop a source of food production. This production of food came from the domestication and cultivation of plants and animals. The herded animals provided a constant source of protein in their diet and allowed for the hunters to expend their energy in other areas of life. The cultivation of the plants allows for a reliable supply of grains in their diet. This made the people of this time able to support larger families, which turned into villages, cities, and ultimately states.