

History of the transition to agriculture history essay



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Human achievements during the Stone Age are both fascinating and fundamental. Our knowledge of the Stone Age is limited however archeologist have been creative in their interpretation of tool remains and other evidence, such as cave paintings and burial sites, that Stone Age people produced in various parts of the world. What people accomplished during this long period of prehistory remains essential to human life today. Our ability to make and manipulate tools depends directly on what our Stone Age ancestors learned about physical matter. However it was the invention of Agriculture that moved the human species toward more elaborate social and cultural patterns that people today would recognize. With Agriculture human beings were able to settle in one place and focus on economic, political, and religious goals and activities along with increasing the number of people in the world.

On the banks of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in Mesopotamia and the Nile in Egypt emerged civilizations that were to have profound influence on the history of the eastern half of the Mediterranean. The rise of these civilizations, just before 3000 BC, was characterized by increasing urbanization, the birth of states. These civilizations did not appear out of the blue; of course their foundations had been laid over a period that spanned several hundred of thousand years. Archeologists have divided this long period which is called the Stone Age, into an Old Middle and New Stone Age on the basis of changes in the stone implements that were produced during that period. In the Old and Middle Stone Ages people lived off what they happen to come across, off the animals they hunted, and the plants they gathered. They followed their prey into new areas and were hence constantly

on the move. By the end of the Middle Stone Age man had improved his tools to such an extent that he was able to make more efficient use of the natural resources. This meant that some groups of people could remain in one area for longer periods of time, sheltered from the elements in primitive huts and caves. The next step in mans development was the transition to an entirely new way of life characterized by greater control of nature. Man started to cultivate the cereals which he had always gathered as wild plants, and domesticated the animals which they had hunted in the past.

The initial development of agriculture the deliberate planting of grains for harvest later was triggered by increased population from the improved climate from the ice age prompted people to search for new and more reliable sources of food. Secondly, the end of the ice age saw the retreat of certain big game animals. Human hunters had to turn smaller game, such as deer and wild boar. Hunting's overall yield declined. This also increased the new sources of food.

The development of agriculture was of fundamental importance for the future history of mankind. It meant that more people could remain settled in one particular are for a longer period of time and that more people could concentrate their attention on activities other than food production. People consequently started to specialize in all kinds of crafts and became carpenters tanners, scribes and metal workers. A civil service and priesthood emerged. Some of the villages that had originated at the beginning of the Neolithic period began to resemble fortified cities in Asia Minor and Syria.

The largest and most influential cities however, were those that arose on the banks of the major rivers of Egypt and Mesopotamia in the fourth millennium
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BC. It was there that the largest quantities of food could be produced and the largest number of people could live together.

The core of the Mesopotamian city was the temple, the house of the state holy being whose needs had to be provided for by the community. Those temples grew into powerful organizations that owned vast estates. They engaged in a wide range of activities including agriculture, stock breeding and various crafts.

In ancient times, the presence of cities did not lead to difference between the urban and rural populations of the kind known to us from later times. In most of the cities the majority of the inhabitants were peasants, who left the city to work on their land every morning and returned in the evening.

Agriculturists led a sedentary life, they remained settled in one area because they had to till their land and look after their crops. Herders were nomadic, they constantly moved around from one place to another in search of fresh pastures for their animals. However, there was not always a clear cut difference between the two. Primitive agriculturalists sometimes remained in one area for a short period and moved a few years later when they had exhausted the soil. Some herders moved around within a small area for example summer pastures and winter pastures. The transhumance nomads liked to remain in the vicinity of the settlements of the agriculturalists with which they could trade products. On occasion semi nomads would adopt partly or entirely sedentary way of life and take control of a city. There was also wealthy landowner who owned herds besides land and employed herders to pasture their animals sometimes at considerable distances from

their dwellings. These two opposing ways of life were constantly torn between feeling of hatred and friendship towards one another. There was hatred because the sedentary people were afraid of being plundered by the semi nomads and friendship because the two groups were dependent on one another for the exchange of goods.

The geographical conditions of Egypt and Mesopotamia were very similar in some respects. Both areas were dependent on river water due to the almost absence of rain and both were poor in various important resources, such as metals and timber.

As farming evolved, new animals were also domesticated. Particularly in the Middle East and parts of Asia pigs, sheep, goats and cattle were being raised. Farmers used their animals for meat and skins and soon discovered dairying as well.

The term Neolithic revolution was used to describe the development of agriculture. The term was misleading in that there was no sudden transformation to agriculture. Learning the new agricultural methods was difficult and many people combined a bit of agriculture with reliance on the older system of hunting and gathering. The idea of revolution is appropriate in demonstrating the magnitude of change involved. Early agriculture could support more people per square mile than hunting. Agriculture requires more work at least of men than hunting. As much as agriculture was demanding and sedentary population encouraged the spread of disease. As much as agriculture was demanding, it also was rewarding. Agriculture supported larger populations and with better food supplies and a more settled

existence agricultural people could build houses and villages. Animals provided not only hides but also wool for more varied clothing. Most evidence suggests that hunting and gathering people resisted agriculture as long as they could. Gradually agriculture gained popularity

. As farmers cleared new land from forests, they drove out or converted many hunters. Disease played a role in that settled agricultural societies suffered from more contagious diseases because of denser populations. Hunting and gathering people lacked resistance and often died when agriculturists who developed immunity carried the disease into new areas.

Agriculture was initiated in the Americas as early as 5000 B. C. E. and developed vigorously in Central America and the northern part of South America where most Indian tribes in continued a hunting and gathering existence though it was often combined with seasonal agriculture. The people of the vast plains of central Asia resisted a complete conversion to agriculture in part to harsh climate. Herding rather than growing became the economic system of this part of the world. Tough nomadic invaders and migrants from this area played a role in linking major civilizations.

Agriculture set the basis for more rapid change in human societies. Greater wealth and larger populations freed people for other specializations, from which new ideas or techniques might spring. Agriculture itself depended on control over nature that could be facilitated by newly developed techniques and objects. For example, during the Neolithic period itself, the needs of farming people for storage facilities, for grain and seeds promoted the development of basket making and pottery. Agricultural needs also

encouraged certain kinds of science, supporting the human inclination to learn more about weather and flooding.

The geographical conditions of Egypt and Mesopotamia were very similar in that both areas were dependent on river water due to the limited rain in the area and both lacked important resources, such as metals and timber. In other aspects they were completely different. Conditions for agriculture were favorable in Egypt than in Mesopotamia. The Nile flooded the land before the sowing season, the Euphrates and Tigris not until later in the year. The Egyptians could sow their crops in the fertile deposits left by the receding waters. The Mesopotamians had to get the water to their field via canals. The Nile provided better quality water whereas the Euphrates and the Tigris contained harmful salts. Another important difference between Egypt and Mesopotamia concerned the surrounding area. In Egypt the transition from arable land to desert sand was abrupt that it was possible to stand with one foot in a green field and the other in the dry desert sand. In Mesopotamia the transition from fertile to less fertile land was more gradual. Secondly, being totally surrounded by uninhabitable land Egypt was far less accessible than Mesopotamia and consequently far more isolated from the outside world. This difference had major political consequences in that the history of Egypt was fairly stable and static with little interference from the outside world. Mesopotamia was faced constant invasions from others. Many of the invaders assumed control and founded new empires. However, a considerable degree of continuity was preserved in Mesopotamia because most newcomers adapted to the current cultural traditions.