

Agriculture in ancient mesopotamia



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Have you ever wondered once where and when agriculture was first practiced in this world and the methods used to develop it? First of all, agriculture, a bit similar to farming, is the occupation, the business, or the science of cultivating land, producing crops, raising livestock. The birth of agriculture was preceded by hunting and gathering which was the only way of surviving for the ancient occupants of the world. Civilization started in the Middle East of the blue planet and many discoveries have been made including agriculture which is one of the most important. Indeed agricultural activities in the Mesopotamian kingdom are dated back between 8000 BC and 6000 BC. The Ancient Mesopotamia was located in the Middle East, precisely on the Asian continent. The situation of the empire was also part of the agricultural development. It consisted of two principal seas such as the Euphrates and the Tigris and was surrounded by many vast seas where they could draw water for additional supply. Despite the arid climate and scarcity of rains in Mesopotamia, they made use of irrigation as principal method to water their crops. However, the invention of agriculture came with its consequences which appeared both good and bad for the Mesopotamian kingdom. Although agriculture was a great discovery for the Ancient kingdom, helped by its location and methods, its impacts appeared to be both positive and negative.

It is clear that before the advent of agriculture, hunting and gathering was the surviving method. People were going inside bush to hunt wild animals for their meat and skin and were collecting natural consumable plants or grains. In fact agriculture intervened just between the years 8000 BC and 6000 BC with the domestication of animals such as goats and crops growing in the

Ancient Mesopotamia. According to Robert Chadwick, the author of “ First Civilizations: Ancient Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt,” three main assumptions could be the reasons of the advent of agriculture and each of them having one major reason. He said:

The three hypotheses presented all maintain that there was one major cause behind the origins of agriculture. In the case of the oasis hypothesis it was a great climatic change; for the nuclear zone hypothesis it was a certain set of conditions that created a special ecological region where agriculture could occur; for the population pressure hypothesis it was the increase in human population (Chadwick, 27).

This is to say that the real factors which started agriculture are not really determined despite the fact that researches are being made about the whole issue. As we said above, agricultural activity was actually apparent in the beginning of the years 6000 BC. The early settlement of the cultivating activity was achieved through many steps such as the “ Hassuna”, the “ Samarra” and the “ Halaf” according to the Encyclopedia AMERICANA (p. 737). These establishments took place from the North to the South of the world’s first civilization. More importantly, there was a great variation of crops that the Mesopotamian society were domesticating or cultivating in their time. In the New Encyclopedia Britannica it is said that:” ... and the wild prototypes of grains and leguminous plants, such as wheat, barley, bitter vetch, pea, and lentil were present.” This explains that there was diversity in their food production which was a good step in the development of agriculture of the Ancient Kingdom. In addition to that, Louis and Jenifer of the website best.berkeley.edu who posted an article titled “ Farming and <https://assignbuster.com/agriculture-in-ancient-mesopotamia/>

agriculture of Egypt and Mesopotamia” added that: “ Farmers raised grain, fruit, vegetables, and barn yard animals.” Without any doubt we can state that the discovery of agriculture in the ancient kingdom was being useful as the products were in abundance, varied and diverse.

For agriculture to develop, the land has to be in a good location with a fertile soil. In fact, the agricultural settlement of Mesopotamia occurred in many places from the North to the South. The ancient kingdom possessed a very fertile soil favoring the development of cultivation’s activity. Precisely, as the ancient kingdom is located in the Middle East, it appears to be the first place where agriculture began in a general way. In the plains of northern Mesopotamia, the Zagros and the Taurus foot-hills were among the first places where the cultivating activity was practiced. In the Encyclopedia AMERICANA, it is said that: “ Agriculture began in the Middle East, in the Zagros and Taurus foot-hills, home of wild cereals and wild goats and sheep. From there the earliest settlements were established on the plains of northern Mesopotamia (“ Agriculture”, 737).” Moreover, the three cultural phases listed in the Encyclopedia AMERICANA such as Hassuna and Halaf which took place in the northern part of the empire and Samarra was more a southern settlement. Also, the people called Ubaid extended their culture from north to the south before they settle along the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia to Syria where they also practiced agriculture (“ Agriculture”, 738). More importantly, along the coasts of the present day Iran, Anatolia, Syria, Iraq and Palestine were cited among the places where cultivations occurred and made the populations to settle around in order to have a good improvement of the new discovery (“ Agriculture”, 864). While talking about

the sites where there was evidence of farming, we should not forget to mention places like Zawi Chemi Shanidar, Shanidar itself, Karim Shahir, Qal'at Jarmo, Jericho, Catalhuyuk and many others appearing to be locations where agricultural settlements occurred in the Ancient kingdom of Mesopotamia.

Even though the Mesopotamian soil was fertile in a way that agriculture was very easy, there was a problem linked to the scarcity of rains. Nevertheless, they knew how to overcome the issue by the use of methods such as irrigation. In Fact, irrigation is the fact to bring additional water supply to a dry area in order to help crops growth. Certainly, the land consisted in its interior of wide rivers such as the Euphrates and the Tigris representing the most important ones from where water could be drawn to the cultivation's fields and surrounded by Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Aral Sea, Arabian Sea and Caspian Sea also (" Ancient Mesopotamia", Encarta). Mesopotamia was totally dependent on irrigation and its two big rivers because of the scarcity of rains and the article wrote and posted by Larry Mays on the site Water Encyclopedia says: " Irrigation was extremely vital to Mesopotamia (Mays, " Ancient Irrigation systems," waterencyclopedia. com)". The method of water flow control was first practiced in the two world's first civilizations respectively Egypt and Mesopotamia. The application of the method needed a lot of physical work, correspondingly building. Activities such as building canals, ditches, tunnels, wide gaps where the water would come and stay and the maintenance of the infrastructures were constant in the area and it took them a lot of time to realize all this. Presently, according to waterencyclopedia. com, some abandoned canals and ditches still remain in

the area but not intact, the farming activity of Mesopotamia started declining overtime caused by the accumulation of salt in the soil and in 1258, Mongols took over the empire and damaged the irrigation systems. By still dealing with Mays' article on Water Encyclopedia, we got to know that the soil of the empire was full of silt, a major factor of soil fertility but constituted a continuous agent causing problems in the irrigation systems. Therefore, as there was not enough rainfall, the soil was kept its fertility because irrigation method could not wash a soil until removing its minerals components favoring good food production. Nevertheless, the Mesopotamian agricultural activity knew many problems such as flooding of water coming from the melting of snows in summer from the Turkish mountains according to the web page historylink.com and an unpredictable water flood from its two principle rivers respectively the Euphrates and Tigris according to the article of Louis and Jenifer posted on best.berkeley.edu. However, irrigation carried many consequences on the farming activity in Mesopotamia. Irrigation maintained the fertility of soils because it did not deepen or sink the minerals as the way rainfall usually does. Minerals inside a soil are very important and help a fast and good food production at the end of an agricultural session. " The topsoil did not wash away as it does on sloping land, and minerals did not leach deep into the soil as they do under heavy rainfall. Hence, the fertility could be maintained indefinitely by the use of fairly simple soil-management practices (" Farming in Mesopotamia")" said the web site historylink.com about the impacts of irrigation. Socially, the development of irrigation was helpful to citizens in a sense that it was a physical and intellectual work helping for additional knowledge and body

welfare. A fertile soil combined with irrigation result to good and fast food production as we all know.

Meanwhile, agricultural settlement also had a great impact on the ancient empire social life. In fact, changes occurred in the population's life right after the discovery of agriculture. Agriculture is an activity which is practiced in a long period of time in such a way that it can neither be done in one day nor with a constant motion of the cultivators; sedentariness is needed in such activities. The educational web site called Mesopotamian. lib. uchicago. edu also demonstrated the same idea by saying: " The most significant change was the shift from a nomadic life-style to settled villages. In order to care for crops and herds of animals, people needed to live in one place (" First Farmers," Ancient Mesopotamia)." Moreover, as by then the population settled down in one place in order to take care of their crops and animals, there was obviously an increase in inhabitants because the rate of mortality would have probably reduced, especially infant mortality caused by the constant motion of populations. There was also increase in food production due to the determination of the population in order to have a peaceful life without starvation. Nevertheless, the settlement of population either in cities or villages created social classes and therefore there would obviously be conflict in places where there are different levels of people. This discovery of agriculture made by the early Asians and the methods they used to develop it helped them in varying food. As soon as they noticed it was working they cultivated many different types of crops such as vegetables, talk less of fruits. They knew how to domesticate animals and also even though

agriculture became the principal activity, hunting still survived. Jenifer and Louis also talked about it and said:

Some of the fruits they planted were dates, grapes, figs, melons, and apples. Their favorite vegetables that they grew were the eggplant. They planted vegetables such as onions, radishes, beans, and lettuce. Farmers irrigated land and started planting wheat, barley, millet, beans, and sesame seeds. They used spears to hunt, caught fish in nets, and killed birds with sling shots and arrows (Farming and Agriculture in Egypt and Mesopotamia).

Ultimately, we can say that the discovery of agriculture proves once more that the Ancient Mesopotamia is one of the world's first civilizations. Agriculture was a great and genius invention made by the ancient people though it was not easy to practice it because of the scarcity of the rainfall, but irrigation was used as support for water supply. The use of irrigation made at the same time good and harm to agricultural activity in Mesopotamia in a sense that there was fast and good food production, but the activity was becoming more and more complex because of salt accumulation due to irrigation. However, cultivation also had its own consequences both positive and negative. Population settlement has always had both positive and negative impacts on social life such as the coming together of population when it comes to work and class struggle between different people and that was the case with Mesopotamia before their decline.