The Emergence of Human Societies, to 3000 B.C.E.

How did early human societies survive, develop, and adapt?

How and why did humans begin farming and herding?

What were the main aspects and impacts of the spread of farming and herding?

How did early complex societies emerge and what were their main features?

Early Human Cave Art

Fossils and cultural artifacts, such as these dramatic paintings on cave walls in southern France, provide us with insights into the lives and societies of early humans (pages 7–8).
In July 2001, in a desolate, sun-baked region of north-central Africa, a group of professional fossil-hunters made an astonishing discovery. There, in the windswept, shifting sands, they came upon a small crusty object that appeared to have teeth. At first they thought it was the fossilized jaw of a pig, but on further examination they concluded that it was the flat-faced skull of a hominid (*HAH-mih-nid*), a term scientists apply to humans and their two-legged prehuman predecessors. Later testing showed that the skull was seven million years old—the oldest hominid fossil yet discovered.

This discovery, which created great excitement, illustrates both the allure and challenge of studying the distant past. Although hominids have existed for millions of years, humans have left behind written records only for about five thousand years. The preceding ages, encompassing all human existence before the emergence of writing, are often called the prehistoric era, despite the probability that people who lived then kept track of their history by passing on oral accounts. Since these early people left no surviving written records, however, modern scholars must rely mainly on analysis of fossils and cultural artifacts, augmented by enlightened speculation subject to scholarly debate. Several scholars, for instance, challenged the 2001 discovery, claiming that the skull might belong to an ancient gorilla rather than a hominid.

Despite such disputes, the general outlines of our ancestry are reasonably clear. Hominids first emerged in Africa at least five million years ago, and for millions of years most likely survived by eating wild plants. Over many generations, they learned to communicate by spoken language, form small nomadic groups for cooperation and protection, fashion stone tools, hunt wild animals, and use fire, passing on their knowledge and skills to their young. In their quest for food, some hominid groups migrated from Africa to parts of Eurasia. Over time, most early hominid species died out, but one branch of the hominid family survived, evolving within the past half million years into modern humans like ourselves.

Equipped with greater intelligence and communication skills than their hominid forerunners, humans formed larger communities, devised better tools and weapons, learned to hunt more effectively, and occasionally fought with other groups vying for food. Some communities, seeking new food sources, migrated to Australia and the Americas. Some eventually figured out how to raise food, by growing crops and domesticating certain animals. Farming and herding made possible even larger communities, such as cities and states, which established commercial, cultural, and political connections, inaugurating the historical era.

**Our Earliest Ancestors**

Since no historical records survive from before five thousand years ago, most of what we know of the prehistoric era is based on the work of archeologists and anthropologists, who study early hominids through fossils, cultural artifacts, and genetic comparisons with other animals. Using such sources, scholars surmise that humans are descended from hominids who lived in eastern Central Africa millions of years ago (and hence that we all have African ancestry). By modern human standards, early hominids were small,
only 3 or 4 feet tall, with brains that were smaller and less complex than ours. But hominids had larger brains than other animals, and voice boxes that could make more complex sounds, enabling them to better communicate what they learned with each other and their offspring. And hominids walked on two feet rather than four, enabling them to use their arms and hands for creative purposes, such as fashioning and using tools and weapons.

About two million years ago, as hominids grew in dexterity and brainpower, some began to chip and shape pieces of stone into rough-hewn tools. Modern researchers have characterized this activity—the first indication of conscious cultural behavior—as the onset of the Old Stone Age or Paleolithic (pā-lē-ō-LITH-īk) period, the earliest and longest stage of cultural development, lasting from approximately 2,000,000 B.C.E. until about 10,000 B.C.E. During this extended period, hominids vastly improved their social and communicative skills, learned to hunt in groups that pursued prey from one region to another, and migrated to diverse regions, including northern Africa and parts of Eurasia. In the process they developed diverse ways of life.

**Hominids and Cultural Adaptation**

Beginning in the Paleolithic period, hominids diverged from other animals in a significant way. Rather than adjusting to their environment mainly through biological evolution, as most other organisms did, hominids also developed through cultural adaptation, using their intellectual and social skills to adjust to their surroundings and improve their chances for survival. Organized into small kinship groups that traveled from place to place, they developed new techniques that they shared with each other and their young, thus transmitting their knowledge and skills to future generations.

With their growing intellectual capacities, hominids increasingly found better ways to adapt to their environment. From long and sometimes bitter experience, for example, they learned which plants were digestible, which could be harmful or lethal, and which had certain medicinal or intoxicative properties. In time some hominids learned how to hunt with crude stone axes, which they used to hurl at their prey and then to strip away the hides for clothing and the meat for food. Later, they learned to use fire for cooking meats and plants to make them more digestible, for warding off wild animals, and for providing nighttime warmth and light.

Furthermore, as their memory and speech improved, hominids transmitted their discoveries to each other and their offspring. A hominid woman who learned to build a fire, for example, could share this knowledge with the rest of her group and also teach it to her children. A hominid band returning from the hunt could sit around the fire, cook their meat, share their experiences, and pass on wisdom and practices from earlier generations. One result was that hominids could build upon their knowledge from one generation to the next and thus adapt more quickly than other animals. Another result was that separate societies eventually developed their own cultures: unique combinations of customs, beliefs, and practices—including languages, arts, rituals, institutions, and technologies—that distinguished societies from each other.

**Foraging, Family, and Gender**

Early hominids apparently were scavengers, living in small nomadic groups that survived mainly by gathering wild nuts and berries, feeding occasionally on carcasses of dead animals, and then moving on after exhausting the area’s readily accessible food resources. As they learned to hunt, they increased their consumption of meat but also killed or drove away their prey, so they still moved periodically to find new sources of game. Since these
groups survived by searching and scouring for food, they are often called foragers—
those who subsist by gathering wild plant foods and hunting wild animals.

Having no written records of early foraging societies, modern scholars study them
by examining archeological remains, comparing what they learn with the practices of the
few foraging cultures that still exist today in Siberia, South Africa, Australia, and the
Americas. These sources suggest that Paleolithic peoples traveled in foraging bands,
mobile communities of perhaps thirty to sixty people connected by kinship. While large
enough to provide their members with sustenance and protection, groups of this size,
unencumbered by material possessions, were small enough to easily pack up and relocate
to find new food sources and adjust to changing seasons. As members of the same
kinship group—an extended family comprising grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts,
uncles, cousins, and other relatives—they were also connected by familial obligations
and affections.

Compared with many other large mammals, which grow to maturity within a few
years, human children remain physically immature, and thus dependent on older
caregivers, for a dozen years or more. They therefore require a high level of protection,
nurturing, and supervision, usually provided by their parents and other relatives.
Furthermore, unlike many other animals, adult humans frequently form an enduring
emotional bond with a specific sexual companion. These traits help explain why human
parents often stay together to care for their children, and why the central institution of
most human societies has been the family.

Family concerns may also help explain why our ancestors probably divided their work
along gender lines. Evidence suggests that in foraging societies men usually did the hunting
and fighting, while women were more likely to gather plant food, tend the campsite, and
care for the young. This division of labor was not rigid: women at times helped with the
hunting or defense, while men at times assisted in tending the hearth and taking care of the
children. Nor did the gender roles imply that women were valued less than men. On the con-
trary, since a group's survival depended on women to bear children, and since gathering
plant food supplied a more reliable source of nutrition than hunting wild game, the functions
of the women may have been considered more important than those of the men. A commu-
nity, after all, could endure the loss of several adult males, but women and children were
essential to its long-term survival. Since the men thus were more expendable, it made sense
for them to perform the dangerous duties of hunting wild animals and defending the camp
against predators and outsiders, and for women to handle the safer yet more essential tasks
of minding the campfire, foraging for plant food, and nurturing the young.

Since the foraging band was relatively small and its members were mostly related, its
structure was probably simple. Some members might have greater influence due to intel-
lect, experience, or personality, but there was no real need for government officials or
class divisions such as those that later arose in larger, more diverse societies.

The absence of rank in foraging bands did not mean everyone was equal, but rather
that the adults in the group could collaborate in making decisions, securing the campsite,
procuring food, raising the young, and moving to new places. Societies whose members
cooperated—supporting one another, sharing the burdens, and passing on their knowledge
to their young—tended to be stable and enduring. Some were also able, when the need
arose, to migrate substantial distances to ensure their survival or improve their way of life.

Ice Age Migrations and Homo Sapiens

The Paleolithic period corresponded roughly with what geologists call the Pleistocene
(PLI-stuh-sen) epoch, also called the Great Ice Age, an immense stretch of time (roughly
2,000,000 B.C.E. to 8000 B.C.E.) marked by frigid glacial stages when enormous ice
Ice Age hominids migrate to Eurasia and adapt to new environments

Induced perhaps by growing populations or environmental changes that threatened their food supply, many mammals migrated during the Pleistocene epoch to new habitats. Among these mammals were foraging hominid bands, some of which left Africa and traveled to Asia, possibly following herds of wild animals, by about 1.8 million years ago. Much later, by about 800,000 years ago, other hominid groups made their way to Europe. These hominid migrants used their cultural skills to adapt to their new surroundings, employing local materials such as wood, bamboo, and rock to make shelters, hatchets, and hunting axes.

Then, by about 150,000 to 200,000 years ago, as hominid development and migrations continued, there emerged a new species now called *Homo sapiens* (*H*-Ô-*m*Ô-*S-*ä-pë-*en*-z). This term, which means “wise human,” designates the species that includes all modern people and distinguishes us from other types of hominids that no longer exist.

The complex processes by which our species developed, and the reasons why it prevailed while other hominids died out, are not fully understood. Humans, it is clear, have larger skulls, housing larger brains, than earlier hominid species. But so did the people modern scholars call Neanderthals, a group of large-brained hominids whose remains were first discovered in 1856 in Germany’s Neander Valley, who existed from roughly 200,000 to 30,000 years ago.

Even the basic outlines of what happened have been subject to dispute. Some experts, for example, formerly asserted that distinct groups of *Homo sapiens* developed
Human groups migrate to Australia and the Americas

As hunting skills improve, human populations and migrations increase

Humans develop enhanced reasoning and communicating skills

Human groups migrate to Australia and the Americas

Independently in separate parts of Africa and Eurasia, evolving from earlier hominids already there. But most experts now think Homo sapiens first appeared only in Africa, migrating later to Eurasia and thence to the rest of the world (Map 1.2). Along the way, according to genetic evidence, some may have mated with Neanderthals, so many modern humans may well have a little Neanderthal ancestry.

In any case, Homo sapiens eventually developed greater intellectual and linguistic skills than other hominids and thus could more effectively reason, communicate, and cooperate. Early humans thereby developed more effective tools and weapons, including needles and fishhooks carved from antlers and tusks and spears to hurl at large animals from a safe distance. Using sturdy plant fibers, humans also fashioned ropes and lines that were tied to hooks and harpoons, used to make nets and traps, and eventually strung onto bows from which to shoot arrows at prey.

These innovations helped early humans hunt more effectively, and thus acquire warmer clothes and larger amounts of meat, fish, and fowl. Modern scholars speculate that, with access to more and better food, people could live longer and support more children. Increasing population probably brought growing competition for food, inducing some groups to migrate to new regions searching for new food sources. As their hunting skills improved, human societies spread across Africa and Eurasia, depleting the numbers of bears, deer, and lions and destroying the herds of fur-covered mammoths that once roamed Eurasia.

In their search for sustenance, some societies migrated even farther. By 50,000 B.C.E., according to archeological evidence, people made their way from Southeast Asia to Australia, an impressive feat that meant traveling in boats on the open seas. Others apparently migrated from northeast Asia to the Americas by 12,000 B.C.E., during the
Our Earliest Ancestors 7

last ice age, when the huge glaciers absorbed so much water that sea levels dropped hundreds of feet, exposing a broad land bridge that connected Siberia with Alaska (Map 1.1). From Alaska the migrants spread throughout the Americas, where they found pristine lands still teeming with mammoths, bears, and deer. By the end of the Paleolithic period, in almost every region of the globe fit for human habitation, there were human societies.

**Physical and Cultural Diversity**

As humans moved to various lands and latitudes, their bodies adjusted to differing climates and conditions. Over time this adaptation apparently produced some modest physical differences. People who lived in northern regions, for example, eventually developed lighter skin, which was better able to produce nutrients from the scarcer sunlight, and sometimes hairier bodies to protect them from the cold. Those in hotter regions typically had darker pigmentation, which could better protect them from the sun’s harmful rays.

Despite such outward differences, however, all humans belong to the same species (Homo sapiens) and can readily mate and produce healthy offspring with those of different skin color and other features. Thus, the concept of race, which divides human beings into categories based on external characteristics, relies on relatively insignificant distinctions. Indeed, in mapping the human genome, modern scientists have found that genetic variability among humans is remarkably small, providing no scientific basis for racial categorization.

Far more important than physical diversity has been cultural diversity, resulting from the variety of ways in which separate human societies have adapted to their separate conditions. In a number of ingenious ways, people have adjusted their habits and lifestyles to take advantage of the terrain, vegetation, climate, and wildlife of the regions they inhabit.

Even in Paleolithic times, differences emerged among cultures in various parts of the world. People who lived on warm prairies, including Africa’s great grasslands, wore lightweight clothes made from skins and fibers and dwelt in easily assembled structures made of grasses or skins. Those in colder regions, such as northern Eurasia and North America, needing more protection from the elements, wore rugged hides and furs and resided in warmer, sturdier shelters. Where terrain was rocky or mountainous, people lived in stone structures and caves; where it was wooded they built lodgings from branches, boughs, and bones. Those who lived near lakes or rivers teeming with fish, having little need to travel far for food, built durable dwellings made of wood and stone.

These early distinctions gradually developed into different ways of life, with societies diverging not only in clothing and shelter, but also in customs, institutions, languages, and beliefs. Consequently, the great diversity among humans has not been physical but cultural. The study of world history thus focuses mainly on the development of diverse cultures, their similarities and differences, and on the connections among them.

**Paleolithic Cultural and Spiritual Perspectives**

As Paleolithic peoples pondered their world and thought about life and death, they developed new forms of expression. Paintings, carvings, and burial sites surviving from the Stone Age display the arts and rituals of early peoples, doubtless seeking to understand and influence the forces shaping their lives.

In southern Africa, for example, researchers have found rocks adorned with geometric symbols, suggesting that more than 100,000 years ago humans may have used symbols to express ideas. Other discoveries, on inner walls of caves in Australia, Northern Africa, Southern Europe, and southern South America, include illustrations dating from between
Connections and conflicts have been central to human societies. Early societies engage in conflicts for resources and survival.

Early societies form practical, familial, and commercial connections. Early humans engage in arts, rituals, and burials.

Intercultural Connections

Although separate societies created distinctive cultures, they typically did not develop in isolation from each other. At various times and places, in moving about or expanding their domains, some human groups came into contact with others. Scholars believe most foraging groups developed contacts with neighboring societies, thus creating intercultural connections.

At times these connections were no doubt practical, based on agreements to divide or share lands and other resources. At times the links may have been familial, marked by intermarriage between members of separate communities, forming family ties and mutual interests that bound the communities together. At times connections involved exchanges of goods and information, sometimes over vast areas: in southwest Australia, for example, researchers have found prehistoric artifacts produced in that continent’s northwest regions, several thousand miles away. These early connections foreshadowed more elaborate arrangements, including formal trade and diplomatic relations, which emerged later as societies grew larger.

Connections at times also resulted in conflicts, especially when sharing or trading arrangements failed to meet the needs of all involved. If hunting depleted a region’s wild game, for example, groups that had earlier shared hunting grounds might clash, compelling the losers to move elsewhere, where they might forge connections or conflict with other groups. With resources scarce and survival at stake, human societies had to protect their habitats and hunting grounds against outside intrusions, or move to a new region if the outsiders proved stronger. People thus often feared outsiders as potentially dangerous foes.

Because the Paleolithic period covered most of the duration of human existence, behavior patterns evolving in that era influenced later societies. Hence throughout
history humans have identified with their own cultures, connected with societies having similar interests, united with others facing common threats, and struggled for resources such as land and food against competing societies. Connections among cultures have thus been central to the human experience.

The Origins and Impact of Agriculture

By the end of the last ice age, about 10,000 B.C.E., people in some regions, prompted perhaps by environmental changes, were turning from nomadic foraging toward a more settled life. Especially in West Asia, as the warming climate expanded the area covered by grasses and grains, people developed new techniques to gather and process them for food. They made sickles out of flint stone to cut grain, for example, and grinding stones to pulverize the kernels. Archeologists who first found evidence of such tools dating from this era called it the New Stone Age. But something far more important was happening than the use of new stone tools. People were beginning to grow their own food.

In the New Stone Age, or Neolithic (nē-ō-līth-ik) period, lasting roughly from 10,000 to 3000 B.C.E., people not only developed better tools but also domesticated plants and animals, cultivated crops, herded livestock, and established permanent settlements. This transition from foraging to farming, one of history’s most momentous developments, has been called the Neolithic or Agricultural Revolution. Although it took several thousand years, when compared with the many millennia of foraging that preceded it, and when measured by its immense long-range impact, agriculture’s onset was revolutionary indeed.

The Origins of Farming and Herding

Based on archeological evidence, including the remains of early farm settlements and tools, scholars have surmised that farming first began in West Asia, between 9000 and 8000 B.C.E., in a crescent-shaped region (sometimes called the “Fertile Crescent”) that today encompasses Israel, Syria, and Iraq (Map 1.3). Although experts disagree about specific dates and events, they have provided a general outline of what probably took place.

Scholars believe that by 12,000 B.C.E., as the last ice age ended, a warming climate and melting glaciers had left much of this region—today mostly desert—covered with forests and grasslands. Over the next few millennia, some people there began subsisting mainly by harvesting wild wheat and barley grains that grew in abundance in the grasslands. No longer having to move about in search of wild game and plant food, these people
East Asians and Africans develop distinct forms of farming and herding.

Domesticated animals furnish clothing, food, fertilizer, labor, and transport.

Settlements and food surplus foster population growth.

As populations grow, settlers cultivate grain to enhance yield.

West Asians start raising, not just hunting, animals.

Cultural connections spread farming and herding practices.

As climate changes increase wild grains, some people settle in one place often settled in a single place for many years. Unlike nomads, whose need to move precluded having too many children and possessions, the West Asian settlers had little need to limit their families or belongings. With less need to move and more food to feed their offspring, these settlers could sustain larger families, build more permanent shelters, and accumulate a wider variety of tools, clothes, and other belongings. Their numbers thus began to grow as their mobility declined.

Eventually, however, as the region's population increased, and perhaps as drier weather reduced the abundance of wild wheat and barley, the supply of wild plant food was no longer sufficient to feed all the inhabitants. Some no doubt responded to this challenge by resuming their nomadic ways. But others, encumbered by large families and numerous possessions, opted instead to stay put.

Those who stayed put, in order to survive, found ways to produce more food. They learned to enhance the yield of wild grains by pulling out the weeds that grew among them. They discovered that if they took seeds from productive plants and sprinkled them in bare spots elsewhere, new plants would eventually grow there. In time some people found they could save the seeds and sow them the next year, enabling them to plant and raise their own crops. These first farmers were probably women, as they were the usual plant food gatherers. Although they could scarcely have foreseen the immense long-term impact of their efforts, the resourceful people who first developed farming rank among history's most influential innovators.

West Asian hunters developed an equally momentous food production process. They discovered that certain game animals, such as wild sheep and goats, could be captured and kept alive in captivity rather than killed in the hunt. At first this practice merely provided a useful standby food source: by keeping a few live animals, a family or community could kill them and eat their meat when other food ran out. Eventually, however, people learned that sheep and goats—as well as cattle, pigs, and horses—would mate and reproduce in captivity. These animals thus were domesticable: they could be bred and adapted by people to meet human needs. People could raise their own herds and produce their own meat.

Eventually other uses were found for domesticable animals. Their fleeces and hides, for example, were used to make blankets and clothes. Their manure served to fertilize the soil and prolong its productivity. The milk of cows, mares, and ewes supplied an ongoing food source, readily available without killing the creature that provided it. In time people also used large animals to pull plows and carts, imparting enormous advantages for farming, transport, and travel.

### Agricultural Innovation and Expansion

Although West Asians were probably the first ones to develop agriculture, they were not the only ones. In places far from West Asia, adapting to their own environments, inhabitants developed different forms of farming and herding, using plants and animals native to their locales (Map 1.4). In the north-central African region called the Sudan, where grasslands then covered much of what is now the Sahara desert, people herded cattle and cultivated sorghum (a starchy grain), perhaps as early as 8000 B.C.E. In China's great river valleys, settlers grew millet and rice and raised pigs by about 7000 B.C.E. By this time, too, in New Guinea, people probably grew taro, a starchy root crop, on swamplands drained by digging ditches to channel away the water.

Farming and herding also spread through connections among cultures. By 7000 B.C.E., for example, agriculture had begun in ancient India's Indus Valley, and by 6000 B.C.E. it had started in Europe and Egypt's Nile Valley. The proximity of these areas to West Asia, and the fact that people there grew plants (such as wheat and barley) and...
animals (such as sheep and goats) domesticated in West Asia, suggests that agriculture probably spread there through intercultural connections. In exchanging goods and ideas, early societies also most likely exchanged knowledge about farming and herding.

But farmers and herders in these new areas were by no means mere borrowers. They cultivated native food crops (such as oats in Europe and figs in Egypt), domesticated local animals (such as different types of cattle in the Nile and Indus Valleys), and eventually grew fibers (such as flax in Europe and cotton in Egypt and India) that could be woven into lightweight linens and clothes. But grains such as wheat and barley continued to predominate, especially as people learned to grind them into flour, bake the flour into bread, and brew the barley into a beverage like what we now call beer.

In the Western Hemisphere, where people had no connections with Africa or Eurasia, they developed different crops. In what is now southern Mexico, archeologists have found indications of farming as early as 7000 B.C.E., and evidence that, by 4000 B.C.E., farmers there grew corn, beans, and squash, cultivation of which later spread through much of North America. By 3500 B.C.E., and perhaps much earlier, people in what is now Peru grew potatoes and sweet potatoes (Map 1.4). In the Americas, however, since human hunters had earlier killed off most large domesticable animals, livestock herding was virtually unknown—except in Peru where people raised llamas and alpacas.

The spread of farming was also interwoven with population growth. As farmers and herders produced more food, the size of their societies grew, leading them to cultivate additional lands and clear away forests for farming. After all, only a small percentage of the plants in a forest were edible, while almost everything grown in a grain field could be used for human or animal consumption. An acre of crops fed far more people than an acre of woods.
Therefore, to increase the land available for farming, people cut and burned down forests. In the process they learned that burned-over forests were extremely fertile, as ashes from the burned vegetation served as superb fertilizer. After several years of nourishing crops, however, the soil was exhausted of nutrients and produced less food. So Neolithic farmers simply moved to other regions, cut and burned more forests, and repeated the process. This “slash and burn” practice, which ravaged the habitats of wild game and plants and thus undermined local foragers, enabled farmers to expand their food supplies and spread agriculture to additional places.

**Foragers, Hunter-Farmers, and Pastoral Nomads**

Not all humans took up agriculture. Since raising crops and herds typically required more time and harder work than foraging, and often left people at the mercy of the weather and dependent on a few food sources, societies were unlikely to turn to farming unless compelled to do so by population growth and/or diminished food supply. Even then, they could do so only where climate and terrain made farming feasible, where local plants and animals were suitable for domestication, and where people had developed tools and techniques for planting, harvesting, breeding, pasturing, and storing. The transition from foraging to farming thus was a long, uneven process lasting thousands of years. Clearly farming and herding were not for everyone.

Some groups never farmed and continued to live as hunters and gatherers in small mobile foraging bands. In the far northern regions of Eurasia and North America, for example, where it was too cold to grow crops, people sustained themselves largely by hunting and fishing. In the arid plains and deserts of Australia, Africa, and central North America, where there was insufficient water for farming, foraging supported relatively sparse populations.

Other groups adopted farming but not herding, especially in the Americas, where there were few large domesticable animals. In eastern and southwestern North America, for instance, even after societies took up farming, hunting and fishing continued to play a key role, providing meat and fish to supplement crops of corn, beans, and squash. In many such societies women did most of the farming, since the men were often away hunting.

Still other societies embraced herding but not farming, especially in Central Asia, where the arid climate and sparse vegetation were suitable for grazing animals but not growing crops. Mobile herders such as these are called **pastoral nomads**: people who raise livestock for subsistence and move occasionally with their herds in search of fresh grazing grounds.

Always looking for new pasturage, without which they could not endure, pastoral nomads occasionally came into contact with farming societies. Sometimes the two groups clashed, battling for use of lands both considered vital. But sometimes they traded, exchanging the herders’ hides and fleeces for the farmers’ grains and flour. Ranging across the open expanses between settled societies, the nomads created connections, conveying goods (such as carpets, cloth, and jewels) and techniques (such as horse breeding and metalworking) to distant and disparate cultures.

For many millennia, pastoral nomads coexisted uneasily with settled agricultural societies. Equipped by their harsh, itinerant existence with ruggedness and mobility, the nomads frequently prevailed in combat. In the long run, however, since agriculture could support far more people than nomadic herding or foraging, settled societies eventually gained huge advantages in population, weapons, possessions, and power—enabling them to defeat, attract, or displace almost all nomadic peoples. The future belonged mainly to societies based on farming.
Agricultural Society: Village, Family, and Land

Over time, the lives of farmers increasingly diverged from those of nomadic peoples. Although both farmers and pastoral nomads centered their societies on families and divided their duties by gender, many differences developed between them.

One key difference was permanence of place. Unlike nomads, who moved from place to place, farmers typically settled in one location. Almost everywhere they dwelt in farming villages, small settlements of homes in a compact cluster, surrounded by lands on which the villagers raised food. Village homes were mostly simple structures, fashioned from local materials such as earth, thatch, wood, or stone, and grouped together to facilitate socialization and defense. The lands around the village served as farm fields and sometimes also pasturelands for grazing livestock. A typical farming village was a permanent settlement, where people and their families often lived for generations.

Another key contrast was size. Agricultural communities frequently grew much larger than nomadic groups, whose numbers were limited by the need for mobility. A typical farming village, sustained by steady food supply and stabilized by permanence of place, might include a few hundred people, and sometimes substantially more. Furthermore, as neighboring villages formed connections with each other, creating networks based on mutual protection and support, agricultural societies grew even larger.

The growing size of these societies, and the need to parcel out farmlands among families, required a higher degree of structure than normal among nomads. Possession of land, scarcely a concern for nomads, became essential in many agricultural societies, where people’s livelihood depended largely on the land. As families grew, they often sought to maintain and expand their access to lands and to pass them on to their offspring. Thus, as village families intermarried with each other and with families from other villages, it became increasingly important to keep track of who was descended from whom, in order to determine who would control which lands.

Family relationships in farming communities therefore were more structured than the informal kinship ties existing in nomadic societies. Marriages between farming families were typically arranged by the parents of the bride and groom, and often sealed by a transfer of assets, such as land or livestock, between the two families. Marriages between members of different agricultural societies, moreover, frequently were also alliances, designed to create closer connections and strengthen mutual support.

Farmers also diverged from nomads in terms of gender roles and status. In foraging bands, the role of women was crucial, since they supplied the plant food on which the group relied and often had to manage the group while the men were off hunting. Among pastoral nomads, where women were frequently responsible for tending, breeding, birthing, and milking the livestock, their role was also essential. In many farm communities, however, the men produced most of the food, laboring daily in the fields while women often stayed in the village. Their roles, which typically involved raising children, maintaining the household, and helping in the fields when needed, came to be considered subordinate to those of men.

Family sizes further affected gender roles. In nomadic societies, where mobility was essential, large families could be a burden, so parents frequently kept families small, freeing women to assume many duties besides child-raising. In agricultural societies, however, where many hands were needed to help work the fields at sowing and...
In farming societies, women bear and raise many children.

Farming societies require hard labor and foster disease.

Gender roles and status nonetheless varied among agricultural societies. In the Americas, for example, in farming villages where there was no livestock to provide meats and hides, the men often hunted while women did most of the farming. In such societies, since women were the primary food producers and men were often absent on the hunt, women sometimes played a key role in managing village affairs. And even in Eurasia and Africa, capable women with strong personalities often played a prominent role in running their families and villages. While many agricultural societies were patriarchal (pā-trē-ARK-ul), dominated by men as heads of households and community leaders, others were matriarchal (MA-trē-ARK-ul), run by women serving similar roles.

The Impact of Agriculture

Initially, agriculture’s impact was not always advantageous. Early farmers and herders typically had to work much harder than gatherers and hunters. Farmers had to clear land, till soil, sow seeds, tend fields, pull weeds, and shield crops from insects, animals, and birds. They also had to harvest, process, and preserve what they grew, while often also tending livestock and protecting it from predators. Furthermore, judging from excavations of early farming villages, Neolithic farmers appear to have been smaller, and probably less healthy, than nomadic foragers. From living in close contact with cattle and pigs, farmers acquired new illnesses, forerunners of deadly scourges such as smallpox and influenza. By settling continuously in one place, they accumulated garbage and waste, which fouled their water and attracted disease-bearing insects and rodents. And, unlike small nomadic groups whose mobility furnished access to varied plant and animal foods, settled farm societies typically relied on a few basic crops, leaving them vulnerable to disasters such as floods, droughts, crop failures, insect infestations, and famines.

But societies based on agriculture had a crucial advantage: they could produce surplus food. In good years the farmers could grow more than they consumed, then store the surplus to meet future needs, initially in pits but later in bins and silos raised to protect against flooding.

Production of surplus food had immense implications. It provided agricultural societies with a backup food supply, helping to ensure their survival, even during deadly droughts and famines. It enabled farming families to support more children, allowing their communities to grow into settlements of hundreds or thousands of people, and contributing to an overall increase in human population. And it freed some people in settlements based on farming from the need to provide their own food, allowing them to specialize in other pursuits—including arts, crafts, commerce, religion, warfare, and governance. Agriculture thereby supported and sustained the development of large, complex, regional societies, which would increasingly dominate human history.

The Emergence of Complex Societies

Toward the end of the Neolithic period, beginning in West Asia and North Africa, several factors combined to produce complex societies—large, organized, stable communities in which farm surpluses enabled many people to specialize in occupations other than farming. These societies included towns and cities, sizable permanent settlements supported by surplus food from surrounding farms. To manage their substantial populations, they typically formed governments, engaged in trade, organized religions, and extended control
over surrounding lands, eventually creating very large and populous regional societies. The rest of this chapter discusses general features of these societies; the chapters that follow then examine their development as each was shaped by internal and external connections.

**Towns, Cities, Occupations, and Religion**

By 7000 B.C.E., as food supplies increased, some West Asian settlements were starting to grow quite large. Jericho (JER-ih-kō) in Palestine and Çatal Hüyük (chab-TAHL hoo-YOOK) in what is now Turkey, for example, developed into towns—large settlements, home to several thousand people, that served not only as residential centers but also as trading hubs. Jericho, an active trading center, had many huts made of mud-dried brick surrounded by a stone defensive wall. Çatal Hüyük, an even larger trading hub, had numerous mud-brick homes, shrines to various gods and goddesses, and marketplaces for exchanging foods and goods.

By the fourth millennium B.C.E., near the Tigris (TI-gris) and Euphrates (yoo-FRÄ-ez) rivers in West Asia and the Nile in northeast Africa, some towns were growing into cities—very large, complex, densely populated settlements in which many people engaged in occupations other than farming. These early cities, housing over 10,000 people and sometimes substantially more, also featured sizable buildings, bustling marketplaces, and extensive fortifications.

Although towns and cities depended on farming, their most influential inhabitants were those who did not farm. With their food supplied by farmers, these people could specialize in other occupations. Some, for example, were artisans who specialized in tool making, basket weaving, pottery, and carpentry, as shown by remnants of their handiwork at archeological sites such as Ur (OOR) and Uruk (OO-rook) in West Asia and Naqada (nah-KAH-dah) in Northeast Africa. Others apparently were merchants, who exchanged goods in the urban marketplaces unearthed at such sites. Still others may have been artists and sculptors, as suggested by excavations of shrines and temples embellished with wall paintings and statues of goddesses and gods.

These excavations also reflect the emergence of organized religion. Early peoples, as we have seen, probably engaged in rituals, summoning spirits to help secure food and ensure fertility. As societies grew more complex, the rituals grew more elaborate: people came to worship various gods and goddesses, divine beings believed to embody and control essential forces such as sun and rain, plants and animals, storms, rivers, forests, and fertility. Hoping to please or appease them, priests and priestesses—people specializing in religious rituals—conducted ceremonies and sacrifices in urban shrines and temples. These religious structures also may have reinforced the authority of rulers, depicting them as divinities or as agents of the gods.

Other excavations add to the impression that rulers exercised great power. Fortifications and weapons found at early cities suggest that they must have had numerous laborers to build the walls and watchtowers, soldiers to defend against outsiders, and governing officials with the authority to organize and supervise large groups of workers and warriors. Also uncovered at such sites were remains of palaces, and royal tombs in which officials and servants were buried alongside the rulers, adding to the evidence that early cities were run by strong central governments.

**States and Civilizations**

Before complex societies emerged, there was little need for strong central governments. Decisions could be made and conflicts resolved in foraging bands by the whole group, and in villages by family leaders. If one villager injured another, for example, the heads
To secure food supplies, cities exert control over neighboring farm villages. Large societies develop complex governance structures. To govern sizable territories, early rulers form states. Using this system, commonly called tribute, city rulers managed to maintain their food supplies and control the surrounding countryside. By thus establishing governance over a specific territory, they effectively formed states—territorial entities ruled by a central government. After 4000 B.C.E., for example, towns and villages along the Nile River began uniting into small kingdoms that may have formed the first states. By 3500 B.C.E. some West Asian cities, including Ur and Uruk, were extending their control over nearby farming villages, thus creating small states. Several centuries later in North Africa, a legendary ruler called Narmer or Menes (MA-nāz) extended his sway over numerous Nile Valley settlements, creating history’s earliest large state, an Egyptian realm stretching hundreds of miles.

Historians have long noted that these early states, and others emerging a bit later in India and China (Map 1.5), all arose in river valleys in semiarid regions. Some scholars have held that such environments prompted the formation of states, claiming that they were probably created to organize vast numbers of people to build banks and dikes for flood control and irrigation systems to bring river water to farm fields. Others, however, citing evidence that irrigation ditches existed before states in West Asia and China, have suggested instead that societies formed states mainly to manage and control their growing populations. Whatever the case, it is clear that the rivers, by supplying plentiful water for people, crops, and livestock, and by enriching valley soils with periodic floods that left behind fertile silt, facilitated the formation of permanent settled societies.

It is also clear that, by providing ready transportation, the rivers helped connect societies up and down the river valleys. Thus, over many centuries, through trade, alliances, and conquests, cities and states along these waterways formed commercial, cultural, and political connections. The result was the emergence of large, complex regional societies along rivers in West Asia, North Africa, India, and China.

These large, complex regional societies are customarily characterized as history’s first civilizations—a term applied to very large, complex societies, or regional groups of complex societies, with widely shared or similar customs, institutions, and beliefs. At times, however, the word civilization has also been used to indicate an “advanced” level of social and cultural achievement, and hence by some peoples to claim they are superior to others. People in large, complex societies, for example, have frequently deemed...
themselves more “civilized” (that is, more culturally advanced) than outsiders, whom they have sometimes disparaged as savages and barbarians. To prevent ambiguity and elude this kind of cultural bias, we will avoid the latter usage of the word, while noting nonetheless that the emergence of the early civilizations, discussed in the next four chapters, traditionally marks the beginning of the historical era.

**Putting It in Perspective**

For tens of thousands of years, early humans lived in small, nomadic bands that were based on kinship and survived by hunting and gathering. Over time, as they adapted to a growing range of challenges and environments, our ancestors migrated to distant lands, eventually spreading throughout the entire world. They devised new tools and weapons, developed distinctive cultural expressions, divided their work along gender lines, formed marriage and family connections, exchanged information and goods, and occasionally engaged in conflicts with each other. Still, as long as they had to forage for food and move periodically from place to place, their societies remained simple and small.
Then came the advent of agriculture. People in some areas started to raise crops and animals and to form permanent settlements, some of which eventually grew into larger, more complex communities. In time some villages grew into towns, and some towns became cities, with large populations of people who specialized in nonfarming pursuits such as commerce, carpentry, tool making, warfare, religion, construction work, and governance. Some of these cities expanded their control over neighboring villages and towns, thereby creating states, which in turn formed the basis of large, complex, regional societies later called civilizations.

Henceforth, although nomadic cultures would long endure in areas unfit for farming, history would largely be dominated by complex, regional societies, and by the contacts and connections among them. The first such regional societies, discussed in the next chapter, emerged in the fourth millennium B.C.E. along rivers in West Asia and North Africa.

**Reviewing Key Material**

**KEY CONCEPTS**

- hominid, 2
- Paleolithic, 3
- cultural adaptation, 3
- cultures, 3
- foragers, 4
- kinship group, 4
- Great Ice Age, 4
- *Homo sapiens*, 5
- Neanderthals, 5
- race, 7
- Neolithic, 9
- pastoral nomads, 12
- farming villages, 13
- patriarchal, 14
- matriarchal, 14
- states, 16
- civilizations, 16

**ASK YOURSELF**

1. How did hominin development differ from that of other animals? Why did hominids organize into nomadic kinship groups? Why did they divide their work along gender lines?
2. Why did some hominids, and later early humans, migrate to distant lands? Why did human societies develop diverse cultures?
3. Why did humans begin to grow their own food? What were the advantages and disadvantages of farming and herding? Why did some societies remain nomadic?
4. How did agricultural societies differ from nomadic ones? What were the major long-range impacts of agriculture?
5. Why did some people organize cities and states? What were the major features and advantages of these complex societies?

**GOING FURTHER**


Johnson, Donald C., and Blake Edgar. *From Lucy to Language*. 1996.


# Key Dates and Developments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paleolithic Period/Pleistocene Epoch</th>
<th>Neolithic Period 10,000–3,000 B.C.E.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>by 2,000,000 years ago</strong></td>
<td><strong>by 9000</strong> Farming begins in West Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early hominids use stone tools</td>
<td><strong>by 8000</strong> Farming begins in the African Sudan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>by 1,800,000 years ago</strong></td>
<td><strong>by 7000</strong> Farming begins in India, China, New Guinea, and Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early hominids migrate from Africa to Asia</td>
<td><strong>by 7000</strong> Towns emerge in West Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>by 800,000 years ago</strong></td>
<td><strong>by 6000</strong> Farming begins in Egypt and Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early hominids migrate to Europe</td>
<td><strong>by 3500</strong> Farming begins in Peru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>by 200,000–150,000 years ago</strong></td>
<td><strong>by 3000</strong> Cities and states emerge in West Asia and Egypt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern humans (<em>Homo sapiens</em>) emerge in Africa</td>
<td><strong>by 100,000 years ago</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humans in Africa fish, mine, and carve symbols</td>
<td>Towns emerge in West Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>by 100,000 years ago</strong></td>
<td><strong>by 6000</strong> Farming begins in Egypt and Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humans begin to inhabit Eurasia</td>
<td><strong>by 3500</strong> Farming begins in Peru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>by 50,000 years ago</strong></td>
<td><strong>by 3000</strong> Cities and states emerge in West Asia and Egypt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humans migrate to Australia</td>
<td><strong>by 12,000 years ago</strong> (10,000 B.C.E.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>by 35,000–10,000 years ago</strong></td>
<td>Humans migrate to the Americas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humans produce cave art in Australia, Africa, Europe, South America</td>
<td><strong>by 12,000 years ago</strong> (10,000 B.C.E.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reinforce what you learned in this chapter by studying the many documents, images, maps, review tools, and videos available at www.myhistorylab.com.

Read and Review

- **Study and Review Chapter 1**
- **Read the Document**
  - A Visitor from the Neolithic Age – The Iceman (3300 B.C.E.), p. 12
  - The Toolmaker (3300 B.C.E.), p. 12
  - Redefining Self – From Tribe to Village to City (1500 B.C.E.), p. 13
- **View the Map**
  - Prehistoric Human Migration Patterns: From 1 Million to 15,000 Years Ago, p. 5
  - The Beginnings of Food Production, p. 10
- **View the Image**
  - Chauvet Cave – Horses, p. 3
- **Listen to the Audio**
  - Behavior and Culture, p. 3
  - Plant Cultivation, p. 12
- **Watch the Video**
  - From Hunter-gatherers to Food-producers–Overcoming Obstacles, p. 9

Research and Explore

- **Watch the Video**
  - Video Lecture: Every Bite a Taste of History: How Food Transforms Our Understanding of World History, p. 16

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