



LESSON 1.1.3 | READ | From Foraging to Farming: The Agricultural Revolution — Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

PURPOSE

In this article, Bridgette Byrd O'Connor explains that for much of human being's existence we were roaming around gathering vegetation and hunting animals to survive. In what amounts to a blink of an eye, humans switched from foraging to farming. Historians have most often looked

upon the introduction of farming as undeniably positive. Farming meant that people didn't have to move around to follow their food and a steady source of food was available. But did farming improve people's lives?

PROCESS

Have students read the provided article. Host a discussion of themes following their completion of the reading.

Potential follow-up questions:

- In terms of early humans, what occurred between 80,000 and 12,000 years ago?
- What causes humans to settle along large river valleys?

- In what ways did humans change their environment to suit their dietary needs?
- What unintentional side effects and artifacts sprang out of large-scale agriculture?
- Did farming improve people's lives?

ATTACHMENT

- [From Foraging to Farming – The Agricultural Revolution](#)



READING | From Foraging to Farming The Agricultural Revolution – Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

For 99% of the human race's existence on Earth, we were roaming around gathering vegetation and hunting animals to survive and by all accounts, we were pretty happy about it. Then about 10,000 years ago, humans around the globe gradually decided to change the way they acquired food. In what amounts to the blink of an eye when considering how long humans had been foragers, our entire way of life changed. This poses some intriguing questions for historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists: why did these early humans make the switch from foraging to farming and did farming really improve people's life?

Historians have long referred to the change from foraging to farming as the Neolithic or Agricultural Revolution. While this shift was indeed revolutionary, it wasn't a change that happened quickly like the American Revolution did for the colonists and their government in the course of a few years. It was a change that happened over thousands of years and also one that developed independently in several areas of the world. This, of course, leads to even more questions regarding the beginning of farming including why did people in isolated parts of the world decide to move from foraging to farming and was this a conscience decision or one that was brought on by necessity?

One of the most important causes of agricultural innovation came as a result of an increase in population and migration. Homo sapiens evolved in Africa, where they remained for the vast majority of the 250,000 to 200,000 years the species has existed. Around 80,000 years ago our ancestors journeyed out of Africa and began to migrate into all areas of the world, apart from Antarctica. These early humans spent their days foraging, hunting, taking care of their family units, and enjoying leisure time. They survived on what the land

provided and kept their numbers low in order to be able to move relatively quickly and easily. By the end of the last ice age about 12,000 years ago, humans inhabited all parts of the Earth. It was also at this time that temperatures became milder and the land in areas along large river valleys produced an abundance of food for foraging. This abundance led some humans to settle in one area for extended periods of time and as a result, their populations grew because there was more food and they weren't moving around as much. As populations increased, food surpluses decreased, which meant that the sedentary foragers had two choices: move into a different area for food or innovate.

While moving seems like the natural choice in this scenario, it wasn't that easy to do. In order to forage for a large group, you need a large land area. However, as sedentary foraging populations grew and people migrated to all corners of the Earth, the available land area began to shrink. If you can't move because another group is living nearby then you have to innovate to survive. Sedentary foragers also benefitted from learning about their local areas and observed what types of plants grew in certain locations and under what conditions these plants flourished. Armed with knowledge of their local environment, warmer climates to aid in food production, and the desire to be able to feed their families, early humans made the gradual change to agriculture.

Once humans learned which plants were easiest to grow and most nutritious (and tasty) for their bodies, they began to select those plants for cultivation. Humans began to change their environment to suit their needs and artificially select the species of plants that would provide the most sustenance. ►



Humans then became reliant on these plants for food while the plants relied on the humans, who made sure they survived through harsh weather conditions. A symbiotic relationship emerged between plant and animal. Domestication of animals followed the same pattern as humans came to learn which animals would make good companions on hunts and the animals that would be docile enough to contain in fences for secondary products such as milk, fur, and power.

The establishment of agriculture not only brought a steady supply of food to people but it also spawned a new way of life. Large-scale agriculture meant a surplus of food, and this food had to be stored and inventoried. People began to make pottery to store and transport food, develop a writing system for recordkeeping, build more permanent structures for homes, and trade with neighboring societies. This trade allowed for goods and ideas to move between different groups of people, which substantially increased collective learning, or the passing down of information from one generation to the next. The information and goods shared between people included the exchange of seeds and plants as well as farming techniques, which allowed for an increase in food production. Once a surplus of food is generated then it means a society's entire population does not have to focus on farming. People began to specialize in different occupations with some becoming potters, metalworkers, or business owners because all members of society no longer had to spend their days making sure they had enough food to eat.

Historians have most often looked upon the introduction of farming as undeniably positive. Farming meant that people didn't have to move around to follow their food and a steady source of food was available. Once people began to settle down and specialize in a variety of jobs this naturally led to the formation of cities, government, monumental architecture, and writing: all of the common characteristics of civilizations.

In essence, farming made people "civilized". While this overly positive view of agriculture is tempting to believe, civilization did not come without costs. In order to protect your new houses in the city with the recently renovated temple and market square, an army had to be organized with a ruler to make sure that everyone was doing their jobs properly. If you were lucky then you might live in a place like Egypt that had natural barriers to protect your city from attacks and a somewhat reasonable pharaoh, who ruled benevolently. If you were unlucky then you might live somewhere like Mesopotamia, where your neighbors waged war on a regular basis and your ruler issued a number of laws designed to scare you into being a good citizen.

Life as a farmer wasn't all it was cracked up to be either. Anthropologists studying foraging societies have come to the conclusion that the average forager spent about 12-15 hours a week gathering food while the average farmer worked from sun up to sun down every day of the week. The foraging diet was also considerably healthier as they selected meals from a wide variety of plants and animals in their local area while farmers relied on carbohydrate-rich foods such as wheat, rice, and potatoes for sustenance. While farming was usually seen as a more reliable way to ensure food for your family, a bad harvest brought on by weather, natural disasters, or a plague of locusts could devastate the entire city's crop and lead to widespread famine. Finally, as if that wasn't enough, farming and the domestication of animals led to an increase in diseases. Foraging communities moved around often enough to ensure they didn't get sick from contaminating their water or food supply with refuse. However, once people settled in one area permanently and kept animals in that same area then garbage and germs accumulated and spread.

Farming also contributed to class and gender inequality. The age-old struggle of the "haves" and the "have-nots" was



amplified once people began to settle down and accumulate possessions. Foraging communities were always on the move and consequently did not own many possessions. It's hard to envy your neighbor's stuff if they don't have any. While foraging societies were probably organized around an elder or respected leader, everyone had to contribute somewhat equally to ensure survival. Once civilizations were established, class divisions emerged and rulers usually gained power through wealth or force. This meant that some people could become wealthier at the expense of others, which led to inequality and, at times, war. The same problems existed for the division of labor between the sexes. In foraging societies, births were limited because it was difficult to carry multiple children when you moved around on a regular basis. Therefore, women weren't always relegated to the home, or domestic sphere, to look after children. Foraging women had to contribute their fair share in order to survive. Once people settled permanently, they were encouraged to have

more children, who would be able to help on the farm. A woman's place then became the home and her husband became more active in the "public sphere", which led to a division of the sexes that persisted into the 20th century.

It is undeniable that agriculture issued forth a new era in the history of humanity. Complex civilizations emerged once people began to settle down. Monumental architecture was created along with great literary works, magnificent pieces of art, and scientific innovations, all of which accelerated collective learning through the exchange of ideas and innovations. Empires were built, progress accelerated, and the modern world was born. Agriculture was the stepping stone for the advancement of humanity but these amazing accomplishments were tempered with the rise of inequality, devastating warfare, and plagues. Humanity crossed a threshold from which there was no return.

Sources

Eppley, Felicia and Ellen Pike. "Big Era Three: Farming and the Emergence of Complex Societies, 10,000-1000 BCE." World History for Us All. PDF file.

Big History Project. "Unit 6: Agriculture." <https://www.bighistoryproject.com>. Web.