The Agricultural Revolution

**Directions:** Read the following article on the Agricultural Revolution. Answer the questions which follow in one or more complete sentences on a separate sheet of paper. Then, construct a timeline from what you have read. You should find five events within the text for your timeline.

Throughout history, humans have gone through a series of technological revolutions. These brought humanity new inventions which changed us to our very core, changing the way we live, the way we think, and the way we interact with one another.

At the time of George Washington’s death at the close of the 18th century, for example, most of America’s people lived on farms raising food while only a very few lived in the cities. It took people days of walking or riding horseback to travel from Boston to New York. Highly skilled craftsmen painstakingly made everything by hand that people used from pots and pans to pins and needles in small workshops. People toiled on the farm or in these workshops from sunup to sundown throughout the year.

Over the next 150 years, America went through the Industrial Revolution. During this time, machines largely supplanted hand labor and animal power at work and on the farm. Because of new machines like the mechanical thresher and the tractor, it took fewer people to cultivate more food. As a result, many laborers left the countryside to take up jobs in the factories. With the advent of the steam locomotive, it took less than a day for people to travel from Boston to New York and only a few days to travel from Washington D.C. to San Francisco. In huge factories, thousands of unskilled laborers toiled on assembly lines, making nearly all of the goods people used at home and on the job. And workers now punched the clock, putting in long hours on the factory floors by the light of electric lamps. Humankind had forever changed as machines became a part of their daily lives.

Thousands of years before, the world went through another time of technological change which had equally important repercussions for the human race. Over the progression of thousands of years, humans all over the world traded one way of life for another. They put down their bows and arrows as hunter-gatherers and picked up sickles and scythes to become farmers. This monumental change in human history was called the Agricultural Revolution.

**Hunter-Gatherer Societies**

Before we became a world of farmers, humans wandered the landscape, taking all the necessities of life from wild sources. They hunted for animals to supply meat for food and to furnish bones, hides and other materials to fashion clothing, weapons, and tools. They gathered wild plants from the countryside for these purposes as well. Cultures which derive their livelihood exclusively from wild sources are called hunter-gatherers.

We can deduce how these hunter-gatherer societies lived in ancient times by examining a few examples scattered across the globe today. But cultures that live like this are rapidly vanishing. A few remain in the Arctic, hunting seals, whales, and caribou. Others live in the tropical jungles of the Amazon and Papua New Guinea, while a small number of them wander the forests, deserts and plains of Africa.

The Hadza people count themselves among them. They live in one of the harshest locations imaginable—around the briny Lake Eyasi in the Great Rift Valley in Tanzania. There, sources of fresh water there are scarce and the soil is also salty. Only the hardiest desert flora can grow there; this includes the acacia, a tree that flourishes in arid places and grows finger-length thorns to discourage browsing from passing animals. During the dry season from May to October, the sun scorches the land relentlessly, and swarms of malaria-infested biting insects plague animals and humans alike.

Yet a thousand or so Hadza thrive in these conditions, living in small camps of about 30 people. They hunt wild game like giraffes, wildebeests, dik-diks, and baboons with arrows tipped with a lethal poison made from the concentrated sap of the desert rose. They also gather food from the land, with the men harvesting honey from wild hives. Likewise, the women gather edible tubers from the earth and harvest sweet fruits from the bush like that of the baobab tree. Although this land is harsh, they work only about four to six hours a day gathering enough food to survive, and the Hadza cannot remember a time when their people suffered privation.

The Hadza move their camps frequently, about once a month. They do this when hunting becomes too difficult or when no more fruit can be harvested from the surrounding countryside. When their hunters take down a large animal like a giraffe, they often move camp to the kill site rather than try to drag the heavy carcass back to their hearths.

The Hadza live a life of equality unparalleled in modern cultures anywhere in the...
world. They have few possessions, carrying only what can be slung over their backs in a cloth, like a hatchet, from camp to camp. When a hunter takes down an animal in the bush, the whole camp receives an equal share in the hunter’s fortune. The same mentality applies to every facet of Hadza life.

Finding parity in wealth, they are also equal to one another in power. In their society, no adult has authority over another, although each camp is guided by a patriarch. Although they have a clear division of labor, men and women are seen as equals, and women do not serve men from a lower position in society as they do in so many other cultures. Men and women are both free to leave camp to go to live among others if they wish. When conflicts arise and hostility brews, people simply depart for other camps.

Scholars believe that ancient hunters lived lives similar to the ones the Hadza live today. This lifestyle, however, would change with the coming of the age of agriculture.

**The Agricultural Revolution**

 Millennia ago, humans began changing the way they lived their lives, switching from hunting and gathering to a life of agriculture. That is to say, they learned how to grow crops and raise animals in captivity to provide for the necessities of life. Precisely when they entered this era depended on the culture; for the people of the Levant (a region in the Middle East that includes Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel), it began around 8000 BC, in which the humans there began to learn how to grow cereal crops like barley and wheat and pulses, a type of legume. In China, however, it came a thousand years later when the people there first cultivated rice.

This new technology changed human beings to their very core. For uncounted millennia, humans had survived by following the herds, moving from place to place in search of food just like he Hadza do today, never staying in one place for very long. When humans began farming, they had to abandon this nomadic lifestyle.

As they tended crops, humans could no longer live a nomadic lifestyle of moving from place to place, instead having to settle down and stay in one place to tend their crops. As a result, they began building permanent shelters near their fields, building substantial domiciles out of mud brick, wood, and stone.

Agriculture created an abundance of food impossible in the wild, causing the population to grow with it. As a result, the size of their settlements grew as well, with clusters of their houses growing into villages. These villages grew into towns, and the towns grew into cities that housed hundreds and thousands of people. Ancient people, for example constructed the ancient town of Çatalhöyük in what is now Turkey c. 5000 BC. This town had no exterior doorways; its occupants entered their living quarters and workshops from the roof.

With the abundance of agriculture, humans could now trade goods they made for food. This gave them time to experiment with new technologies, learning how to weave cloth from plant and animal fibers on looms, for example. They also learned how to fire pottery in kilns, examples of which were built in the ancient village of Yarim Tepe in modern Iraq c. 6000 BC. Soon, cultures which used these kilns discovered the technology of metallurgy, learning how to refine and fashion metals like copper, lead, and tin into useful objects as well.

While the ancient hunter-gatherers lived in small communities which afforded everyone equality, this was not the case after human beings discovered agriculture. Some people gained more from the land than others, and used this newfound wealth to purchase the loyalty of warriors to safeguard their lands from outsiders. They also turned these men inwardly on their own people, forcing to obey their commands with threats and acts of violence. In time, social classes began to form where farming flourished, and the first great kings began to appear to rule over them, sometimes with justice and fairness, at other times not. One of these, King Narmer, unified the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt in a campaign of conquest around 3100 BC. From these seeds, the great civilizations of the ancient world flourished.

Flesch-Kincaid Reading Level 9.7

1. Define what a hunter-gatherer society is.
2. Explain what agriculture is.
3. Write down as many facts as you can about the way the Hadza live in modern-day Africa.
4. Write down as many facts as you can about the way agricultural societies live.
5. Describe how agricultural societies are different from the way the Hadza people live.

For Further Reading


