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. They changed the way we lived and the way we thought. They also changed the way we interacted 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. 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 hand-crafted everything people used, from pins and needles to pots and pans. People worked from sunup to sundown throughout the year.

Over the next 150 years, America went through the Industrial Revolution. During this time, machines largely replaced hand labor and animal power at work and on the farm. It took fewer people to grow more food. As a result, many people had left the countryside to take up jobs in the factories. With the advent of the steam train, it took less than a day for people to travel from Boston to New York. In huge factories, thousands of unskilled laborers toiled on assembly lines to manufacture the goods people used. And workers now punched the clock, putting in long hours on the factory floors. Humankind had forever changed as machines became a part of our daily lives.

Thousands of years before, the world went through another time of technological change. It had an equally important impact on the human race. Over the span of thousands of years, humans all over the world traded one way of life for another. They put down their bows and arrows as hunters and picked up sickles and scythes to become farmers. This epic change in human history was called the Agricultural Revolution.

Hunter-Gatherer Societies

Before we became a world of farmers, humans wandered the earth, taking all they needed for life from wild sources. They hunted for animals to supply meat for food and to furnish bones, hides, and other materials to make clothing and tools. They gathered wild plants for those purposes as well. Such cultures which derive their livelihood solely from wild sources are called hunter-gatherers.

We can learn how these hunter-gatherer societies lived in ancient times by looking at modern examples scattered across the globe today. People who live like this are rapidly dying out. A few remain in the Arctic, hunting seals, whales, and caribou. Others live in the tropical jungles of the Amazon, Africa, and Papua New Guinea. And a number of them wander the deserts and plains of Africa.

The Hadza people count themselves among them. They live in one of the harshest places one can think of on earth—around the briny Lake Eyasi in the Great Rift Valley in Tanzania. Sources of fresh water there are scarce. The soil is also salty, in which only the hardiest desert plants can grow. Among them are the acacia, a desert tree which grows finger-long thorns to discourage browsing from passing animals. During the dry season from May to October, the sun bakes the land relentlessly. And swarms of biting insects plague animals and humans alike.

Even so, a thousand or so Hadza thrive in these conditions. They live 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. The men take honey from wild hives. The women harvest edible tubers from the earth and gather sweet fruits like that of the baobab tree. They work about four to six hours a day gathering enough food to survive. Although the land is harsh, the Hadza cannot remember a time when anyone among their people went hungry.

The Hadza move their camps often, about once a month. They do this when hunting becomes difficult or when no more fruit can be found in the surrounding countryside. When their hunters take down 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 unknown in modern cultures anywhere in the world. They have few things they call their own,
carrying only what can be slung over their backs in a cloth, like a hatchet and a pipe for smoking tobacco. When one hunter takes down an animal in the bush, the whole camp shares its bounty.

Equal in wealth, they are also equal in to one another in power. In their society, no adult has power over another, although each camp is led by a single senior male. Although they have a clear division of labor, men and women are seen as equals. Women do not serve men from a lower place in society as we see 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, people simply move to other camps.

Scholars believe that ancient hunters lived lives just as the Hadza do today. This way of life, however, would change with the coming of agriculture.

The Agricultural Revolution

Millennia ago, humans began changing the way they lived their lives. They switched from hunting and gathering to a life of agriculture. That is to say, they learned how to grow crops and raise animals to provide for their day-to-day needs. Just 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. About that time, humans began to learn how to grow cereal crops like barley and wheat. In China, however, it came a thousand years later when the people there first grew rice.

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

As they tended crops, humans could no longer live a nomadic lifestyle of moving from place to place. They had 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 houses out of mud brick, wood, and stone.

Agriculture caused food supplies to grow, causing the population to grow with them. Thus, the size of their settlements grew as well as a natural consequence. Eventually, clusters of their houses grew into villages.

These villages grew into towns, and the towns grew into cities that housed hundreds and thousands of people. Ancient people, for example, built the ancient town of Çatalhöyük in what is now Turkey c. 5000 BC. This town had no exterior doorways; its occupants entered their homes 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. For example, they learned how to weave cloth from plant and animal fibers on looms. 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 learned how to refine and work metals like copper and lead as well.

While the ancient hunter-gatherers lived in communities in which everyone was equal, this was not the case after human beings learned to farm. Some people gained more from the land than others. This newfound wealth gave them the means to hire warriors to protect their lands from outsiders. It also gave them the means to force the people they lived with to obey their commands. In time, social classes began to form where farming thrived. Soon, the first great kings began to appear to rule over them. One of these, King Narmer, unified the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt in a war of conquest around 3100 BC. From these seeds, the great civilizations of the ancient world flourished.

Flesch-Kincaid Reading Level 7.2

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


