

Early Villages and the Social Networks They Created

By Eman M. Elshaikh, Big History Project on 06.17.19

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One of the most significant moments in human history was the dawn of farming. It didn't all happen at the same time across societies, but the switch from looking for food to growing it changed everything.

Farming allowed humans to begin to store extra food, leaving more time for other activities. In this way, agriculture made it possible for humans to build complex civilizations.

As with most big changes, these civilizations didn't appear overnight. Cities and states evolved over a long period of human history. Most people from this period lived in villages and small towns, and even the Roman Empire was mostly people living in small settlements.

These early villages grew in different ways. Some eventually developed into large city centers. Others remained self-sufficient villages, exchanging with other villages in networks. We don't have written records from most villages, but archaeological excavations have revealed a lot of information. Looking at the surviving objects of early societies, archaeologists have been able to reconstruct a story about early village life.

Social life before the city

What was life like before farming gave us all this free time? Many scholars consider earlier foraging societies to be largely egalitarian. That means that all people were treated equally and no one had more power than anyone else. This continued to be the case in early farming villages where people had relatively equal social status. Most people living in villages spent the majority of their time producing food. Labor was mostly divided by gender. Women spent more time taking care of small children but also participated in food production. However, these gender divisions did not necessarily mean gender inequalities.



How do historians know this? Evidence shows that people in villages probably shared tools and workspaces. Excavations of ancient sites in Ukraine and the town of Çatalhöyük in Turkey show that homes were mostly about the same size, and the objects in homes and graves were of relatively equal value. Studies of human bones also tell us that people living in villages had similar diets. That means that no one ate better food than anyone else.

People living in farming communities had much different lives from their hunter-gatherer ancestors. They lived in smaller areas, which allowed diseases to spread much faster. Some research suggests that people worried more about diseases, too. As their food supply became increasingly dependent on favorable environmental conditions, people also worried more about the weather. The weather was so important that it influenced many spiritual beliefs and practices. Honoring the source of life and the Earth were often at the center of early religious beliefs. Some artifacts suggest that women were regarded as the source of life because they symbolized fertility.

However, that celebration of the feminine did not mean farming communities were models of gender equality. As these villages grew, they introduced things such as permanent homes and the concept of ownership. A more specific definition of the family developed, too. As a result, gender hierarchies tended to intensify. Family systems became more complicated and rigid. Hunter-gatherer societies needed full-time effort from all men and women to stay fed. The new farming communities, however, could build up stores of food, allowing women to have more children. Over time, most women's lives became more focused on children and maintaining small family homes.

Before long-distance trade

Usually, when we talk about trade, we think of ships crossing oceans. Long before any of that happened, though, villages began trading with each other in local networks. That development was also important. When farming villages started trading with other groups, they could get their hands on things like obsidian. This was a hard volcanic glass that villagers used to create sharp cutting tools. Obsidian artifacts weren't just found in Turkey. Archeologists have also traced obsidian trade among village networks in the many islands of Oceania in the Pacific Ocean. Evidence suggests that trade between islands occurred way before long-distance trade routes emerged. The Lapita culture, which existed from about 1600 to 500 BCE in the Pacific Islands, left behind plenty of obsidian artifacts, as well as ceramics, marine shells, and plants. The Lapita were the ancestors of historic cultures in Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia.

In the Americas, coastal villages traded fish, mollusks, and shells with inland villages. The inland villages cultivated corn, potatoes, and llamas.

Once you start trading potatoes and llamas, it isn't long before you're building roads and bridges. This kind of trade also contributed to specialization, meaning people had different kinds of jobs. In studying village communities, historians can see the emergence of new social roles. More people made pottery, wove baskets and cloth, and worked with leather and wood. Labor became increasingly divided, and larger projects needed to be coordinated by leaders. Greater social hierarchies emerged as people had more defined roles. Sure enough, the archeological record bears this out. Burial sites start to look very different from one another.



For example, some graves – including those of children – contained gold artifacts and jewelry, while others did not. The fact that even children had such valuable items in their graves suggests that people had begun to acquire private wealth. They transferred it between generations, providing evidence of the beginning of social classes.

Similarly, gender roles generally changed. For example, male heads of family tended to gain control over wealth, leaving women with less power. Political considerations required more defined families and strategic marriages. However, this did not happen everywhere in quite the same way. There was still plenty of variety in the way people understood gender and family in different regions of the world.

Trade helped villages to grow, but village networks also boosted trade in a big way. As trade routes grew, villages located in strategic areas were able to grow even faster. This cycle reinforced itself over time. Eventually, many villages would come together into large city centers. This produced a type of social life that looked very different from village life.

Eman M. Elshaikh is a writer and researcher. She teaches writing at the University of Chicago, where she also completed her master's degree in social sciences. She was previously a World History Fellow at Khan Academy.

Quiz

1 Which sentence from the article would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?

- (A) Farming allowed humans to begin to store extra food, leaving more time for other activities.
- (B) Cities and states evolved over a long period of human history.
- (C) They lived in smaller areas, which allowed diseases to spread much faster.
- (D) This was a hard volcanic glass that villagers used to create sharp cutting tools.

2 Read the following sentences from the article.

1. *As these villages grew, they introduced things such as permanent homes and the concept of ownership.*
2. *Labor became increasingly divided, and larger projects needed to be coordinated by leaders.*
3. *The fact that even children had such valuable items in their graves suggests that people had begun to acquire private wealth.*
4. *Political considerations required more defined families and strategic marriages.*

What CENTRAL idea does this evidence support?

- (A) The growth of farming communities meant that people lived closer together.
- (B) The development of agriculture made it possible to build larger civilizations.
- (C) The growth of early villages and cities led to less equality between men and women.
- (D) The development of wealth changed the social structure of early villages and cities.

3 Read the following selection from the introduction [paragraphs 1-4].

These early villages grew in different ways. Some eventually developed into large city centers. Others remained self-sufficient villages, exchanging with other villages in networks.

The phrase "self-sufficient" in the sentence above tells the reader that ____.

- (A) the villages were growing
- (B) the villages were independent
- (C) the villages had few people
- (D) the villages had little confidence

4 Read the following selection from the section "Social life before the city."

A more specific definition of the family developed, too. As a result, gender hierarchies tended to intensify. Family systems became more complicated and rigid.

What is the definition of "intensify" as it is used in this selection?

- (A) become stricter
- (B) become brighter
- (C) become exciting
- (D) become surprising