BHP Unit 7 Overview | OER Project

For most of human history, our ancestors gathered, hunted, and fished for their food. But something changed about 12,000 years ago that led to groups of foragers settling down, farming, and creating complex societies. This transformation was such a big deal that historians call it the Agricultural Revolution. The causes of this revolution, and its many consequences, are what we'll explore in this video.

0:12

Hey Bob? How long before we start shooting?

Host eating a hamburger.

[Bob] Four seconds, Rachel.

Animation of fast food hieroglyphics.

I'm Rachel Hansen. And this… this hamburger is a… visual aid because we are talking about the early days of agriculture. When humans learned to raise cows for beef, and grow wheat to make hamburger buns, and lettuce, pickles, and special sauce… Uh-huh? Okay.

I'm being told the hamburger is a more modern invention. You know what else is a modern invention, Bob? The lunch break.

Hi, I'm Rachel Hansen, and this is Unit 7: Agriculture Complex Societies. I'd like you to do something for me: take a look at this.

1:05

Image of the standard of Ur.

This is the Standard of Ur. It was made about 4,500 years ago in Mesopotamia It's just a little box—about the size of a briefcase. It's pretty, but not as impressive as an i-Phone. You wouldn't think there's anything too complex here, right?

THINK AGAIN! Do you have any idea of the stunning level of complexity needed for this box to exist!

Sorry. I'm hangry. And I'm three feet from my hamburger.

Illustration of early farming.

But seriously. Farming added a lot of complexity to our lives. Just check out this box.

Image of the standard of Ur and illustration of hunter-gathers.

For this box to exist, some ancient hunter-gatherers had to eat grains and drop some on the ground.

Image of early human settlement.

Then had to decide to live in one place long enough to plant and harvest grain each year.

Image of carving of early farmers.

Then, enough people had to gather in one spot—eventually it became a village that could produce enough food so not everyone had to be farmers.

2:08

After a while, some people didn't have to farm, so they started taking on other jobs, like counting the grain, defending the grain, hoarding the grain, telling stories about why the gods gave them the grain —that's how we got all the people on here with different jobs, like farmers, workers, priests, singers, nobles, and a king.

Image of mosaics of early human jobs.

Illustration of early farming with text defining surplus.

Surplus food meant more people, larger cities, job specialization, and more opportunities for innovations.

Image of the standard of Ur.

And just look at this box, it has lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, red limestone from India, and shells from the Persian Gulf. That means that other societies had to exist with the same level of complexity and enough surplus food that they were interested in trading their blue and red rocks to the people who made this box!

3:01

Image of other side of the standard of Ur.

And I've only shown you the nice side of the box—the "peace" side. If you flip it over, you'll see the other side of agriculturalism and complex societies: "war".

Image sequence of stages of farming and craft development.

But enough about the box. In this unit, we're going to learn about how the beginning of agriculture added so much complexity that human societies could create cities, states, writing, this box, and eventually, hamburgers.

Image and clip sequence of similarities between humans and primates.

In the last unit, we explored the evolution of hominids and the similarities between us and our primate cousins. For example, we all share big brains, grasping hands, and stereoscopic vision. We also share the ability to walk upright. And we're social creatures that band together in groups and on occasion fight with each other.

3:55

Unit 6 graphic.

And while humans aren't the only species to use tools to get food or language to communicate, we are unique in our ability to collectively learn. Precise and symbolic language allows us to share ideas and improve them with each generation. This marked a giant leap in complexity, marking the sixth threshold in our Big History story.

Host caught eating hamburger.

But collective learning abilities didn't emerge overnight. They evolved over hundreds of thousands of years. And for most of that time, humans were foragers. We moved around in small groups to gather, hunt, and fish. We created origin stories to explain natural phenomena and to answer the question, "Why are we here?"

World map charting early human migration.

As we foraged, we spread across the Earth, adapting to new environments and innovating new tools and methods.

4:52

Image of a pack of dogs.

As early humans adapted to new places, they also transformed their new environments. Population and group sizes grew. Some foragers began to innovate by cultivating plants and domesticating animals such as dogs—humans' best friends and first alarm system.

Unit 7 graphic and image of fertile river valley.

In Unit 7, we're going to explore how some particularly successful foragers became the first farmers. Sedentary foragers were those who settled around fertile river valleys.

There were a few reasons that these foragers ended up becoming the first farmers:

Since these regions had plenty of resources, populations began to grow.

These foragers really got to know their environment and the plants that grew there.

They did well in the warmer climate that began after the last ice age.

As communities in these fertile valleys became denser, competition for resources increased. So, foragers had less land to forage on.

5:55

These factors eventually led sedentary foragers to begin planting and harvesting crops and domesticating animals.

Hey, do you feel that? It's almost like the complexity is increasing! And here it is… Threshold 7: Agriculture!

World map of agricultural revolution with staple crop images.

Okay, the amazing thing about the Agricultural Revolution is that it started independently in different regions of the world at different times. Societies that adopted farming adapted it to the specifics of their environment. For example, grains such as wheat were native to an area known as the Fertile Crescent. In other places like Papua New Guinea, tubers such as sweet potatoes and taro were common and easy to grow. In East Asia, rice became a staple crop.

Illustration of early human settlement.

As more people farmed, harvests grew—so with plenty to eat, populations increased. As the food supply became more stable, people then had to figure out how to store excess crops, distribute resources, and protect their food reserves.

7:01

Some people became the organizers of building and maintenance projects. Others provided protection.

Image sequence of early job examples.

A division of labor and a social hierarchy developed over time as more people farmed and settled down in one place.

Illustration of early villages and cities.

Small villages grew into larger towns and then into even larger city-states or states.

Images of carvings.

Laws were developed.

Belief systems blended as different people shared ideas, beliefs, and rituals.

So our new complexity isn't just agriculture, it also includes complex societies, like cities, states, empires.

So how do we know all this about the transition from foraging to farming to cities?

Clip of Historian Bob Bain.

As usual, our knowledge of these changes come from a variety of disciplines including those you met in the last unit—archaeology and anthropology. In this unit, you'll add another discipline to your list of experts: history!

8:02

We've been talking about history since Unit 1, but in this unit, you'll learn about how historians research and write about human history. It's not as easy as it looks. But that's okay because you've been training for this moment since the start of the course!

What I've just told you sounds like a pretty simple progression from foraging to farming to complex societies. Do you think it's that simple? Or do you think that this pattern of increasing complexity may have been true for some regions and different for others? These are the types of questions you'll have to consider as you ponder over the evidence and develop questions to challenge that evidence. This is how you'll begin to sharpen your skills as a historian in training. And who knows? Maybe get a job as a professional historian. A job where they give lunch breaks.

Host eats hamburger.

[Bob] Rachel, it's 11:00 a.m.!

Animation of fries and a milkshake.

Hey, can anyone forage me some French fries and a chocolate shake?

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