



Transition to Farming: Differing Perspectives

By Eman M. Elshaikh

Farming was adopted in many places, but there's a fierce debate on how and why it happened and whether it was a good thing.

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Introduction

Have you heard of the “Paleo” diet? Paleo dieters only eat foods that hunters and foragers ate many thousands of years ago. The diet is based on the belief that our ancestors were healthier before the spread of agriculture.

Health experts still debate the value of the Paleo diet. Historians are asking an even bigger question, though. Why *did* humans begin farming? If the foods people ate during the Stone Age were so great, then why did humans everywhere adopt farming and begin eating new foods?

Well...they didn't. Farming actually spread slowly and unevenly. Experts are still trying to understand the when, where, how, and why of the so-called agricultural revolution, and they're debating its costs and benefits.

When, where, and how did farming happen?

There's no rule that said farming had to happen. It was one of many different possibilities. Yet, at some point, in many different areas, humans started collecting plants and raising animals. We aren't even sure that farming began on purpose. Many scholars think that farming was an accident, as people dropped pieces of wild grains near their homes while preparing food. When these grains produced more grains, people got the idea to keep it going. It is likely that farming happened slowly and in stages.

It's commonly thought that southwest Asia was the first place where farming developed. However, some scholars think it developed independently in a few different places. Either way, it began about 10,000 to 6,000 years ago.

Agriculture then spread when farmers moved around the world and traded across networks. Tools, plants, animals, and agricultural knowledge were exchanged along these networks.



So what did farming change?

The adoption of farming was revolutionary. It changed the way humans organized their communities, networks, health, and population.

Farming meant people could settle into fixed communities. People could live in one place with members of their families, instead of moving often with a much larger group. Family homes became the center of daily life. The home was where the things people needed were made, traded, and used.

Area of the fertile crescent, circa 7500 BC, with many farming villages from Neolithic period. By GFDL, CC BY-SA 3.0.



Foundation of a family dwelling in Jericho. By A. Sobkowski, public domain.

Over time, farmers could produce enough food to feed their families and to feed others in their community. When people could buy or trade for their food, they no longer had to work to produce their own. Instead they became soldiers, merchants, craftspeople, priests, or kings. Dividing up work based on what a person did for a living led to a social hierarchy. In a hierarchy, different groups of people are ranked above or below one another based on what they do. This system sparked conflict and inequality. Women increasingly worked raising children and in the home.

The shift to settled farming communities also caused diseases to spread more easily. Diseases moved from animals to humans more often because they lived so close together.

People moved into villages, some of which joined networks or grew into large cities. This made networks both shrink and expand. For instance, the network of a farmer in a small village might grow in number of people that he met, like neighbors and people at the markets, but it would shrink as he stayed only within a small area. Traders, by contrast, would have more connections from different places like the next farming community, village, or empire. So a trader's network would grow.

Why farm?

Farming seems to have been both good and bad. So why was it adopted so far and wide? Why work more and have worse health? Why live in a crowded community where people are unequal?

Well, it's not as though early farmers listed out all the good and bad things about it. It's easy for us to look back at history and give reasons why the switch to farming was good or bad. In almost all cases, though, farming wasn't a choice people made on purpose.

Historians think there are many possible reasons why farming was adopted. The main one is that people started farming in response to things that happened in their environment. For example, naturally-occurring climate change dried up many previously fertile areas. People stopped going to those areas and instead settled in less dry river valleys where farming made sense.

Was it better?

We now have a better sense of the when, where, how, why, and so what of farming. Was farming better than foraging? What were some good changes and bad changes from the switch to farming?

Before the mid-1900s, historians thought the shift to agriculture was purely good. Farming, for them, was the way out of the miserable life of hunting and gathering. Recent studies have found new proof to challenge that story, though.

Some studies suggest that foragers actually had an easy life. They worked less and were relatively healthy. They treated one another as equals. They had fewer diseases and more free time. Meanwhile, settled farmers worked more, had less healthy diets, and lived in dirty, polluted cities without much space.

These are conflicting points of view. It's just not a simple question. Some experts point out that even with things like inequality and disease, farming was a good thing overall. It allowed for shared learning among groups. Without it, we wouldn't have things like writing, for example. We also wouldn't have stable, predictable lives. We wouldn't get to enjoy things like literature, laws, or religions.

Others point out that life really wasn't that happy or healthy for foragers. They may have had fewer diseases, but they were also more likely to die early.

We do not have a clear answer, but we now have a more complete picture. It's not that foragers were entirely miserable, but they weren't totally happy, healthy and carefree, either. Farmers had cities and culture, they also had diseases and hierarchy. The switch to farming completely changed communities, networks, and how things were made. It had its good and bad sides. What people thought of as work and what people considered needs and wants totally changed. It was a very big change, and a very important one.



Petra, in modern-day Jordan, is a city from c. 4th century BCE. By Randall Wallace, CC BY-NC 4.0.

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