



Pastoralists, Nomads, and Foragers

By Eman M. Elshaikh

Farming was a major development, but not all humans began farming immediately. Here, we look at the lives of the pastoralists, nomads, and foragers who did not farm.

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The switch from hunting and gathering to farming is often seen as a major stage in the growth of human civilization. However, it might not be as simple as that. Not all societies adopted agriculture at the same time. Some never did. Agriculture did not take over fully around the world. Its spread was not even.



Grains like wheat and rice form the basis of most diets around the world today but they weren't always staple components of human diets. By IRRI, CC BY 2.0.

Some communities began farming more than 12,000 years ago. Others did not farm for thousands of years after that. Today there are still communities that do very little farming.

Farming also was uneven in the sense that it was not always adopted fully. Some communities did a bit of farming but remained mostly nomadic. They wandered from place to place, and never settled down permanently. Other groups only farmed part of the year. At other times, they got what they needed through trade.

Non-agricultural societies did not disappear after farming became common. They were still found in much of the world.

Different kinds of communities

It would be wrong to think that communities that did not adopt agriculture grew nothing. Many did grow some crops. However, they never settled down permanently to farm the land. Others raised animals but did not grow plants regularly. These groups are called pastoralists. They remained mostly nomadic. Still, others mainly foraged or hunted and gathered. They continued to live as their ancestors had for thousands of years.

Animals were central to nomadic pastoralists' way of life. For pastoralist groups from the Eurasian steppe, the horse was the most important animal. A steppe is a dry, grassy plain. Horses provided food in the form of milk. At times they were also eaten. Their hides provided clothing and shelter. Horses were also the main form of transportation.

Pastoralists often moved in groups of five to twelve families. These groups worked together. They also defended each other from outsiders. Some pastoralist groups joined up with other pastoralists. Together, they formed small confederacies. Other pastoralist groups, like the Xiongnu in China, built empires.

In nomadic communities, gender roles were usually freer than in farming communities. Men usually cared for cattle or other herd animals. They made weapons and other tools. They also hunted and defended the community. Women made food and clothing. They took care of small children as well. However, when men were gone, women took on almost all responsibilities. They were also trained in riding and the bow-and-arrow. At times, they had to defend their communities from outsiders. Some nomadic women might have served as warriors.

Networks and exchange

Pastoralist societies partly relied on trade. They traded with sedentary, or settled, communities. This was true of foraging societies as well.

Pastoralists offered dairy, meat, and wool. In return, they received crops.

Pastoralist nomads supplied and handled animals along the Silk Road. The Silk Road was a major trade route. It connected Europe and Asia. In the Arabian Peninsula, Arab pastoralists supplied camels to traders. They also led caravans across the desert. A caravan is a group of people traveling together. Many caravans carried goods from around the world.

Non-agricultural communities didn't only trade with farming groups. They also battled them. Sedentary agriculturalists were often part of rich societies. They were tied to their land and possessions. By contrast, nomads could move about quickly and easily. This allowed them to attack and take what they wanted.

Of course, this angered sedentary communities. The Chinese, for example, were constantly fighting with nomadic groups. The Xiongnu were one of these groups. Chinese historian Sima Qian (who lived from around 147–87 BCE) wrote about the Xiongnu. They sometimes raided farming communities, he said. Xiongnu warriors arrived heavily armed. Then, they simply took what they wanted.

Sima Qian had a very low opinion of the Xiongnu. He considered them to be invaders and thieves. Many nomadic groups were described this way by sedentary societies. However, that was just their point of view. They were outsiders who did not fully understand nomadic life. Nomadic groups had their own ideas of right and wrong. Still, the descriptions of outsiders can be very useful. They help to show what life was like for non-agricultural communities.



A felt carpet depicting a horseman from a central Asian nomadic group, c. 300 BCE. Public domain.

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A felt carpet depicting a horseman from a central Asian nomadic group, c. 300 BCE. Public domain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pazyryk_culture#/media/File:PazyrikHorseman.JPG



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