



Introduction to Agrarian Societies

By Cynthia Stokes Brown

About 5000 years ago, cities, states, and societies began forming around the world. Though they knew little or nothing of humans outside their own regions, these developments happened during the same narrow sliver of cosmic time.

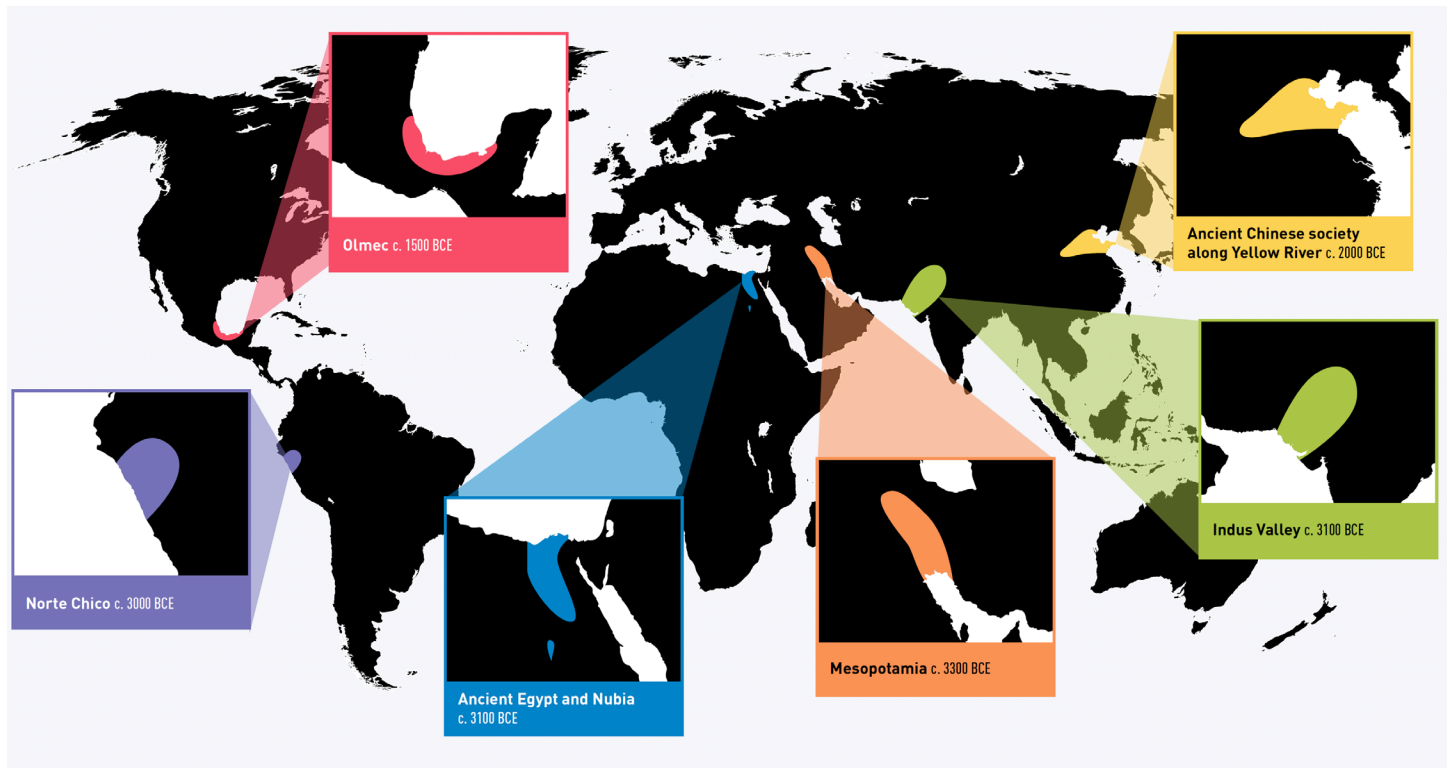
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Definitions

The first agrarian societies began to develop about 3300 BCE. These early farming societies started in four areas:

1) Mesopotamia, 2) Egypt and Nubia, 3) the Indus Valley, and 4) the Andes Mountains of South America. More appeared in China around 2000 BCE and in modern-day Mexico and Central America c. 1500 BCE. Why did societies form in these places?



First agrarian societies around the world. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.

First, let's clarify the definitions of the words city, state, and society.

A "city" contains tens of thousands of people. It's larger than a town, which contains usually fewer than ten thousand people. A village usually has fewer than a thousand people. In towns and villages, farming was the most common occupation. People in cities had a wider variety of occupations, but farmers lived there as well.

A "state" is a city, or several cities, plus the surrounding villages and farms. A state could include hundreds of thousands of people, even millions. The people living in a state had different status depending on their social rank, wealth, and power. Also, some individuals commanded great respect as religious figures when it was believed they could communicate with the gods or spirit world. A few people called "elites" were on top. Elites typically made up no more than 10 percent of the population, yet had more wealth and power than the bottom 90 percent. Most states were ruled by these elites, who kept order and collected taxes or tribute¹ through the use of force, if necessary.

¹ "Tax" and "tribute" are almost synonyms in this context, in that both are forms of payment made to some governing authority. Tax generally means money, and tribute means a required "gift" of goods.

And it doesn't end with states, because from states arose empires. Usually a single ruler, who controlled large territories of cities and farmland, maintained control over the empire. These large states are often called "societies" or "civilizations."²

Since these early societies always depended on the farming around them, we call them "agrarian societies." Most of these societies share certain characteristics. They have dense populations and are controlled by elites. Other kinds of societies were less complex, but it is important to note that complex does not mean better, just different.

Places of early societies

Four of the earliest agrarian societies developed in fertile river valleys. Since people had already tamed plants and animals in those areas, societies had a head start.

The first of these formed in Mesopotamia, now called Iraq. What made this area so fertile was the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Easy access to water helped people grow more crops in these valleys, in particular wheat and barley. Mesopotamians also grew lentils and chickpeas and herded sheep and goats.

The next three places in Afro-Eurasia where agrarian societies emerged were in the Nile River Valley in Egypt and Nubia, the Indus River Valley in modern-day Pakistan and India, and the Huang He (Yellow) River Valley in China. Each river valley had its own types of plants and animals that people had cultivated from the wild nearby. The Egyptians and Nubians had wheat, barley, cattle, fish, and birds. The Indus Valley people raised cattle and cotton, as well as wheat, barley, lentils, sheep, goats, and chickens. In China, wheat was grown in the north. Rice was cultivated later in the south. Pigs, chickens, and soybeans also formed the main crops in China.

Meanwhile in the Americas, large societies began to emerge as well. The first was at Norte-Chico in modern-day Peru about 3200 BCE, then later among the Olmec founded in modern-day Mexico about 1500 BCE. Of course, food production was still key, but the menu was pretty different. People in Central America learned to grow maize (corn), peppers, tomatoes, squash, beans, peanuts, and cotton. Their only domestic animals were dogs and turkeys. Along the Andes Mountains in South America, people used llamas and alpacas for wool and transport, and they domesticated cotton for use in clothing and tapestries. For food they depended mostly on potatoes and quinoa, a grain rich in protein. They had guinea pigs, and fish brought up from the coast.

Why and how did states emerge?

After people learned to grow plants and tame animals, they gradually learned to utilize animals for a variety of things other than food. At first, they used animals just for milk, wool, manure, and muscle power. The world's population was able to grow dramatically as humans farmed more. In 8000 BCE, it stood at approximately 5 million. By 3000 BCE, it was about 14 million.

² We've made a conscious decision at WHP to use the term societies instead of civilizations in order to make sure that the course is equitable and respectful of all types of communities. The word civilization often implies that the area we're studying is more highly evolved or better than other forms of communities such as those composed of foragers and pastoralists, which is not the case. Societies such as Mesopotamia, Egypt and Nubia, the Indus Valley, China, and those of Central and South America are simply organized differently rather than being superior to others.



Remains of pyramid at Caral, Norte Chico, Peru. By Xauxa, 2004, CC BY 2.5.

At the same time, the climate was changing dramatically. The Earth had been gradually warming since the height of the last ice age, which was about 20,000 BCE. By about 8000 BCE it had reached a stable level of warmth. After this point, the climate in the northern hemisphere generally became drier, possibly due to slight changes in the Earth's orbit. This dryness drove people from mountain areas down into river valleys to find water and resources. During floods, rich soil was deposited into the valleys. It made the land fertile and good for farming.

As more food became available and people lived closer together, the social structure changed. A handful of people became more powerful than the rest. In most societies, these groups of elite members, who usually had accumulated more wealth and possessions, became a ruling class. Why did the majority of people allow this to happen?

We can only guess that leaders were needed to manage projects like building big watering systems (irrigation) or erecting large structures like temples or dividing up extra (surplus) food. They also needed armed protection against groups nearby. At the same time, priests and rulers could take opportunities to control the extra food supply. Controlling food meant power, and gradually their power grew. They formed political or religious groups that ruled over the land and its people.

It would be a mistake to assume that all early societies were organized in the same way. Certainly, many were ruled and organized by the elites with the most power and wealth. However, there were other social organizations that did not measure a person's power by wealth or military strength but rather on different aspects such as family status or belief in a person's spiritual powers. There were also states that had elders or those with some authority, but that power was limited and seen as advisory rather than authoritarian. Helpful, but not a "boss". Even though states with these types of limited power were in the minority, it is important to know that not all societies worked the same way. There were shared characteristics among societies, but each had different ways of organizing and dividing their communities. In other words, there is not one generic formula for analyzing the ways in which societies formed or were structured.

Areas without early societies

Some areas of the world did not produce full-blown cities or states early on. Even so, the trend toward agriculture seems to have been present everywhere.

In sub-Saharan Africa, people were separated from the northern coast by the harsh desert. Rain forests covered much of the land. The Bantu people, in the eastern part of modern Nigeria, cultivated yams, oil palm trees, millet, and sorghum and herded cattle. Eventually camels replaced horses and donkeys for travel across the Sahara. Arab merchants could now make their way across the desert to the west coast. Small regional states and kingdoms emerged. But in this more challenging region it took some time before a major agrarian society would form.

Small islands in the Pacific did not have the resources to create full-scale agrarian societies. But their smaller states and chiefdoms had features similar to those around the world. In Australia, agriculture never really materialized. This was mainly due to poor soil and the isolation of the island. But also there was less need for large-scale farming because the techniques used, such as controlled burns and continued foraging, provided ample resources to feed the people who lived there.

And let's not leave out South America. Archaeologists have long thought that the basin of the Amazon River didn't contain the resources to support dense human societies. But recent evidence suggests that people there found ways to fertilize the soil by adding charcoal.

Comparing early agrarian societies

The earliest agrarian states always had at least two things in common: a high-ranking group in control, and the forceful collection of taxes or tribute. It seems centralized state control was needed to bring together and support large populations of people. Yet, these societies developed many similar traits beyond those.

Common characteristics included the following:

- Storage of surplus food
- Development of a priestly class; a state religion based on gods/goddesses
- Central rule (such as a king, pharaoh, or emperor)
- Specialized jobs
- Social rank based on wealth, ancestry, and job
- Increased trade
- Systems of writing or recording information; increased collective learning
- Armies and increased warfare
- Monumental public architecture (temples, pyramids)
- More inequality between men and women; male-dominated traditions



Egyptian farming, c. 1200 BCE. Public domain.

Despite all these similarities, the differences between these early societies was just as important. For example, societies in northern Africa and Eurasia were connected with each other soon after they began. Together they formed an Afro-Eurasian zone where people traded goods and exchanged ideas and technology. A complex network of roads and sea routes used for the production and distribution of goods as well as for the transmission of ideas and diseases ran across this region.

In the Americas it was a different story. True, artifacts found in numerous locations show evidence of some connection among early societies in the Americas. But they were not as well-connected as those in Afro-Eurasia. This was mainly because they had fewer kinds of transport animals. In addition, the terrain separating the north from south was more difficult to get through and included high mountain ranges and dense rainforests.

Early states shared many traits that made them successful. But with a closer look we can see fascinating details that made them different. The vast majority of early societies developed writing—except the Inca in the Andes. They instead used a system of tying knots in different colored string, called *quipu*, to record their trade and possibly even their stories.

Most early societies engaged in warfare—except, perhaps, in the Indus Valley (Harappa) and in some areas of South America (Norte Chico and Chavín). Though some arrowheads and spears have been found in Harappa, archeologists have not turned up any swords, helmets, or shields that a warring society would have used. We have found no evidence that the Chavín had a military or rulers, apart from signs of a priestly class that conducted rituals. Of the societies that used writing, all started by using pictographs but most switched to some form of alphabet, which the exceptions of the Chinese and Central and South American cultures that existed before the arrival of Europeans. To this day the Chinese still use pictographs in their writing. Many societies sacrificed animals and sometimes humans to the gods, but some societies in Central and South America used human bloodletting and sacrifice on a much larger scale than others. While early societies shared many common features, the differences form a rich and varied collage of human culture.

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Cynthia Stokes Brown was a professor emerita of education and history at Dominican University of California. She pioneered the teaching of big history at Dominican and is the author of *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present*.

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