



# 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.

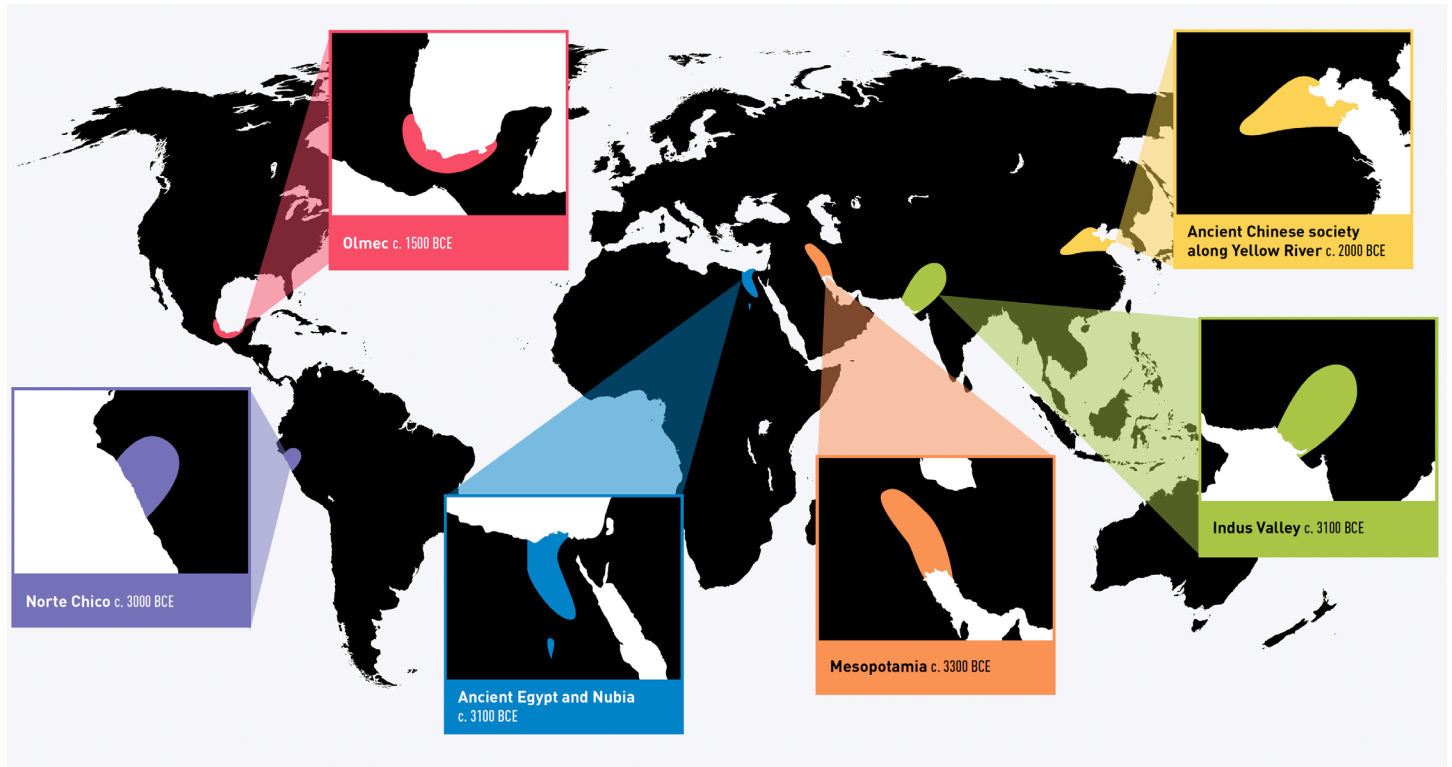
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## Definitions

The first agrarian, or agricultural, 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 understand the definitions of the words city, state, and society.

A "city" contains tens of thousands of people. It's large 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 job. People in cities had a variety of occupations, but farmers lived there as well.

A "state" is a city, or many cities. A state can include villages and farms around the cities. A state could include hundreds of thousands of people, even millions. People living in a state had social rank.

From states, empires formed. They usually had a single ruler who controlled a large territory. These are often called "societies or "civilizations."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 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 America and South America are simply organized differently rather than being superior to others.



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’s 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 was in Mesopotamia, where Iraq is today. The land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers was especially fertile. Easy access to water helped people there grow more crops. Mesopotamians grew wheat, barley and lentils. They also herded sheep and goats.

The other three sites in Afro-Eurasia included the Nile River Valley in Africa; the Indus River Valley in modern-day Pakistan and India; and the Huang He (Yellow) River Valley in China. Each place had plants and animals that the people learned to grow from the wild. The Egyptians and Nubians raised wheat, barley, cattle and birds. The Indus Valley people had cattle and cotton, as well as wheat, goats and chickens. In China, wheat was grown in the north, and, later, rice in the south. They also raised pigs and chickens.

In the Americas, larger societies began to form. The first was at Norte-Chico. It began in about 3200 BCE where Peru is today. About 1,700 years later, a society took form in what became Mexico. They were the Olmec people. Farmers in Central America learned to grow corn, squash, beans 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. For food they depended mostly on potatoes and quinoa, a protein-rich grain.

## Why and how did states emerge?

After people learned to grow plants and tame animals, they gradually learned to use animals for a variety of things other than food. Improved farming practices allowed the world’s population to grow rapidly. In 8000 BCE, there were about 5 million people in the world. By 3000 BCE, the population had almost tripled to 14 million.

The climate was changing, too. The Earth had been warming since about 20,000 BCE. After 8000 BCE, the climate in the northern hemisphere generally became drier. People moved into river valleys for water and good growing areas. During spring floods, rich soil was deposited there. It made the land fertile for farms.

As communities grew, their societies changed. A handful of people took on leadership roles. In most societies, these leaders became a ruling class. Why did this pattern develop? Perhaps these leaders were wealthy and powerful. Perhaps they were needed to manage projects like irrigation systems or construction. Leadership skills would also have been useful in competition and conflict with other groups. Priests and rulers also could control the food supply.



*[Remains of pyramid at Caral](#), Norte Chico, Peru. By Xauxa, 2004, CC BY 2.5.*

Early societies were organized differently. There was not one exact way that societies were formed. Some states were ruled by elites with the most power and wealth. But other societies had leaders based on a person's 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 an advisor rather than a "boss". Even though these types of states were in the minority, it's important to know that not all societies worked in the same way.

## Areas without early societies

Some areas of the world were slow to develop cities or states. However, the practice of farming seems to have been present everywhere.

Sub-Saharan Africa is one example. People in the center of the continent were separated from the northern coast by the harsh desert. The Bantu people lived in what is Nigeria today. There, they cultivated yams and millet and herded cattle. Small regional states and kingdoms emerged. But it took longer for a big agrarian society to form there.

Small islands in the Pacific faced similar challenges. They did not have the resources or land to support large agrarian societies. In Australia, agriculture never really developed. In general, the local people there could thrive by means of hunting and gathering. In South America, archaeologists once believed that the basin of the Amazon River couldn't support large human communities. But recent evidence suggests that people here fertilized the soil by adding charcoal.



## Comparing early agrarian societies

The earliest agrarian states always had at least two things in common: 1) there was a high-ranking group in control; and 2) there was a system to force people to pay taxes or tribute.<sup>2</sup> It seems centralized state control was needed to manage large populations of people. Yet, these societies developed many other similar traits. These include:

- Storage of surplus food
- Development of a state religion
- Specialized jobs
- Social rank based on wealth and ancestry
- Systems of writing
- Armies and warfare
- Public architecture (such as temples and pyramids)
- More inequality between men and women
- Increased trade



*[Egyptian farming](#), c. 1200 BCE. Public domain.*

Interestingly, agrarian societies far from each other developed similar social systems. These systems aided their growth. At the same time, the differences between societies contributed to the variety of human culture.

But 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 shared a complex network of roads and sea routes used for the production and distribution of goods as well as for the exchange of ideas and diseases across this region.

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<sup>2</sup> “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.

In the Americas it was a different story. Many of these societies were connected. But they were not as well-connected as those in Afro-Eurasia. This was mainly because they had fewer kinds of transport animals. Also, it was more difficult to travel due to 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. 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.

Most early societies engaged in warfare—except maybe 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.

While early societies shared many common features, the differences form a rich and varied collage of human culture.

## Cynthia Stokes Brown

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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