



Introduction to Agrarian Societies

By Cynthia Stokes Brown

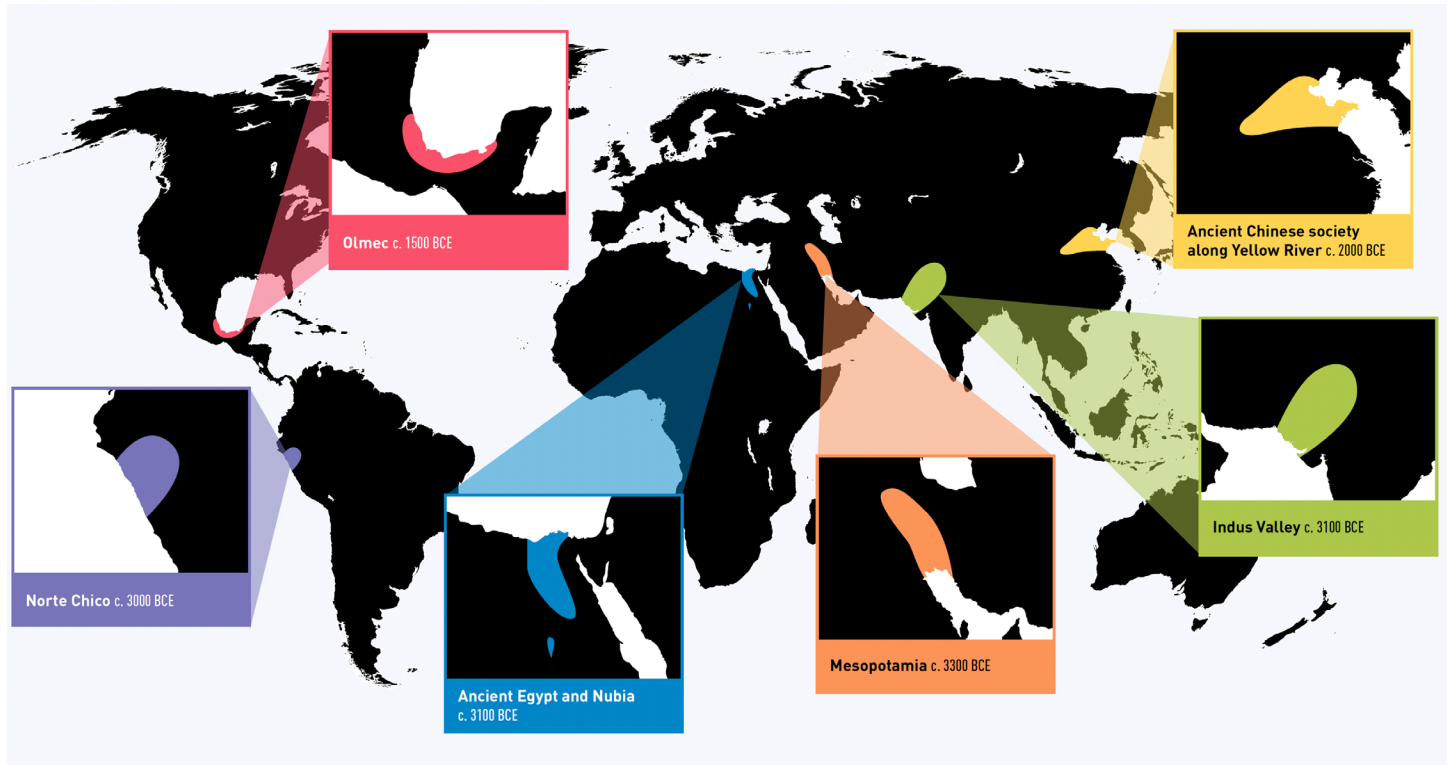
About 5000 years ago, cities, states, and societies began forming around the world. Though they knew little or nothing of humans outside their own regions, these developments happened during the same narrow sliver of cosmic time.

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Definitions

The first agrarian, or farming, 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.



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 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 tribute through the use of force if necessary.

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.”¹

¹ 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.

Since these early societies always depended on 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 there 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 included the Nile River Valley in Africa’s Egypt and Nubia; the Indus River Valley in modern-day Pakistan and India; and the Huang He (Yellow) River Valley in China. Each area had plants and animals that its people learned to cultivate 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, barley, lentils, sheep, goats and chickens. In China, wheat was grown in the north, while rice was cultivated later in the south. Pigs and chickens were domesticated as livestock.

In the Americas, larger societies began to form, as well. The first was at Norte-Chico, where Peru is today, in about 3200 BCE. About 1,700 years later, the Olmec society took form in what became Mexico. Food production was key, but the menu varied. 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 grew cotton for use in clothing and tapestries. For food they depended mostly on potatoes and quinoa, a protein-rich grain. They also ate guinea pigs and fish brought from the coast.

Why and how did states emerge?

Improved farming practices allowed the world’s population to grow dramatically. In 8000 BCE, the number of people in the world stood at approximately 5 million. By 3000 BCE, the population had almost tripled to 14 million.

The climate was changing dramatically. The Earth had been warming since the height of the last ice age, about 20,000 BCE. By about 8000 BCE the Earth’s regional climates had become warmer, on average, supporting agricultural production. After this point, the climate in the northern hemisphere generally became drier. This dryness attracted people from mountain areas down into river valleys to access water and resources. During annual spring floods, rich soil was deposited into the valleys. It made the land fertile and good for farming.



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

As more food became available and populations shifted to larger communities, the social structure changed. In most societies, leading members became a ruling class, perhaps based on wealth, power or wisdom. Why did this pattern develop? Perhaps leaders were needed to manage tasks like making irrigation systems or building projects. Leadership skills would also have been useful in competition and conflict with other groups and societies. However, not all early societies were organized in the same way.

Areas without early societies

Some areas of the world were slow in developing full-blown cities or states. Even so, the trend toward agriculture seems to have been present everywhere.

In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, 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 what is Nigeria today, cultivated yams, oil palm trees, millet, and herded cattle. Small regional states and kingdoms emerged. But in this more challenging region it took some time before a major agrarian society formed.

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. In general, resources there were sufficient to support the population by means of hunting and gathering.

And let's not leave out South America. Archaeologists have long thought that the basin of the Amazon River didn't contain enough resources to support large human societies. But recent evidence suggests that people living here found ways to fertilize the soil with 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.² 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, including:

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



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.

² “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. 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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