



Era 3 Overview

Era 3 was a period of great change and innovation. In many places, the development of farming contributed to new types of communities and long-distance networks. But we don't entirely understand how (or even where and when) these changes happened. We can begin to explore these transformations through two pieces of evidence: a case study of Tapajos in the Amazon rainforest, and data on the emergence of cities around the world.



00:01

*Kim Lochner and Colby Burnett in conversation
Era 3: Cities, Societies,
and Empires*

So how are Australian cities different from American ones?

About the same—like it or not, progress is always driving forward.

But sometimes on the other side of the road.

—Oh, that’s deep, Colby.

00:22

*Animated world map
showing foragers and
farmers all over the world*

Animated foragers

Hi, I’m Kim Lochner, and along with Colby Burnett, we’re introducing Era 3. In Era 2, our ancestors expanded from their homeland to cover much of the world. By about 6000 BCE, a small group of people dotted the planet. Some farmed or herded animals. Others foraged for food. Many did all three to sustain themselves and their families. Although humans lived in most of the places where we live today, the world of 6000 BCE differed a lot. There were no cities, there were no states, and there was no long-distance trade. Most people were born, lived, and died within an area of a hundred square miles. Not only that, most of their stuff came from within that same area. There was no world history. There were many individual, disconnected histories of many different communities from around the world.

01:24

Yet, by 700 CE, societies across much of the planet had changed radically. Cities, states, and long-distance trade networks were established in many parts of Africa, Eurasia, and the Americas. Humanity had developed new connections and types of communities, and different ways to thrive around the world.

So, how did these new, complex political and economic systems develop? How did their rise affect the relationships among people within the systems and between systems?

Colby Burnett

*Birds-eye view of the
lush Amazon rain forest
in South America; video
footage of the rainforest*

We begin in the Amazon rain forest in South America. This seemingly unspoiled and untouched wilderness spot highlights the story of the emergence of cities, states, and long-distance trade. You might be wondering how the Amazon could possibly be related to city life. And you’re not alone in that skepticism.

For a very long time, historians, archaeologists, and other scholars told a story that describes the Amazon rainforest as a pristine jungle.

02:29

*Artwork of rainforest-
dwelling foragers; an
animation of farmers
failing to farm in the
rainforest*

In that narrative, this place has always been inhabited by foragers, similar to the ancient Paleolithic people that we studied in the last era. And it makes sense. The rainforest is difficult to farm. Its nutrients are not found in the soil. They’re stored in the trees and vines of the jungle. There’s even evidence supporting that story because the remaining rain forest in the Amazon today is mostly populated by foraging communities who do not farm.

02:55

But some startling evidence and theories raised doubts about that seemingly logical idea. A new generation of Brazilian and American archaeologists in the 1990s found mounds of very dark earth in the rain forest. These mounds held ceramics, some dated as far back as 6000 BCE. That is 8,000 years ago and some of the earliest pottery in the Americas.

03:21

An animated map points out the city of Tapajos

Using new tools and logical calculations, the archaeologists came to the conclusion that big, long-lasting cities covered large portions of the Amazon. One city, Tapajos, may have had as many as 400,000 people by the 15th century, larger than Paris or London at that same time. Some scholars argue that these population claims are wildly overestimated. But most agree, the inhabitants of the Amazon rain forest did participate in the great transformation of human society in this era. This included many farming villages becoming cities or metropolitan areas.

03:57

Kim Lochner

Animation of early villages – houses and structures continue to pop up, representing the urbanization of these villages

So, why did the number of cities and the number of people living in cities increase between 6000 BCE and 700 CE? And what were some of the consequences of these changes?

These changes probably began with the spread of farming as more people settled into villages. Eventually, some villages became more densely populated, covered a larger area, and became more urbanized. That is, they became cities.

Scientists and historians who study urbanization don't all agree on how big a community must be to be recognized as a city, or how many cities existed in the past. But they have collected data that gives us a picture of the rise of cities over this era.

04:46

Colby Burnett

An animated map shows very few cities in the whole world; most are clustered in one area

These researchers looked at all of the archaeological findings and written records that provide any sense of the number of cities in the world at different times. For example, here is a map of all of the cities they could locate between 3700 BCE to 0 CE. You may notice that almost all of them sit along a narrow belt stretching from Europe across Asia near the equator. There are a few cities in Meso-America, but there's only one in South America. And the only cities in Africa are in Egypt. Now look at this map from 1 CE to 1000 CE. There are now more cities in the world, including at least one in what will become the United States, and more in Africa. But remember, this does not give us the whole picture. For one thing, the scholars may not have known about the cities in the Amazon during this time. Our understanding of the urban past is changing all the time.

05:40

Kim Lochner

An animation shows people switching out their foraging tools and clothing for tools and clothing more appropriate for city life

So, what was it like to live in a city during this era? What changes did cities bring? Cities were more than just communities that had more people. Growing populations meant that new forms of leadership were needed to make decisions. Specialists, like, soldiers, and scribes or historians to remember laws, assisted the leaders in keeping peace and order among so many people. Many, if not most, of these specialists did not produce food. They depended on a system of tax or tribute to sustain them so they could do their jobs.

06:19

Some historians describe these changes in governing as the rise of the "state," or the organized way a territory is ruled. States can be of many different forms and different sizes, but they typically have ways to make and enforce laws, levy taxes, and manage a military or police force.

06:43

Artwork from early civilization shows humans

Living in cities also transformed the production and distribution of goods. Some farmers stopped farming and became specialists, producing goods like iron tools, leather or parchment for growing markets. As cities grew, so did networks of trade. At first, new urban societies probably just exchanged with surrounding

producing new goods such as pottery and iron tools; A drawing shows the transport of goods by ship.

07:15

*Colby Burnett
Drawings of people studying religious texts and worshipping throughout the world*

villages and neighboring cities. But over time, it became possible to exchange goods over longer distances.

During this era, humanity also developed new transportable belief systems. These grew as trade routes grew. Beliefs and gods were, for the first time, portable. People could take their beliefs with them when they traded or migrated. Some of these new faiths—Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—spread vast distances.

Life in cities represented progress. Unlike those who came before them, city dwellers had governments. They had wider networks. They encountered people they did not know, some of whom came from very far away. They could exchange goods, services, or sometimes money for the things they needed. Life had changed for the better.

07:57

Kim Lochner

Or had it? Were cities really progress? Along with the benefits of the city, the state, and long-distance trade came problems. Humans in cities, for the first time, dealt with major pollution issues. Remains of slaughtered animals and human waste piled up in the streets. Leaders oppressed people and many inhabitants of some cities and villages were enslaved. Some states became empires, divided into citizens with rights, and subjects who had none.

08:32

An ornate mosaic of a ship; a painting depicting citizens running from a plague

Long-distance trade made some people rich, but that created inequality. It also sometimes brought diseases, which could decimate the population of a region. All the evidence suggests that cities were generally dirty, unpleasant places to live. Yet people still built new cities and moved into old ones during this era, a trend that has continued to the current day.

09:01

Colby Burnett and Kim Lochner in conversation again

As you begin studying Era 3, keep these key questions in mind: How were these changes similar or different in different parts of the world? How do these changes support, extend, or challenge your understanding of the past or the present?

That's all the time we have for this overview.

Was it me or did this era cover fewer years than the one before it?

Yeah, I think that's going to start happening a lot.

BOTH: Scale.