



Farming and the State

Did farming lead to the state? Were all states made by farmers, and did all farmers come to live in states? In this video, two leading world historians share what they know about the connections between the shift to agriculture and the rise of states.



00:01

Trevor Getz, PhD, San Francisco State University

Hello, my name is Trevor Getz. I'm a professor of history at San Francisco State University, and I'm here with two leading world historians, Candice Goucher and Laura Mitchell, to talk about the connection between farming and the emergence of the state in human history.

We often hear that farming was a precondition for the state. In fact, James Scott argues that there was no such thing as a state that didn't rest on an alluvial grain farming population. In your experience, do you think this is correct?

*Text bubbles:
"Wait, what?!"*

"Trevor just said, 'alluvial grain farming.' Huh?"

"We should take a sec to tell you what 'alluvial' means."

"It just means that the farming was taking place in river valleys."

"Like this."

Image shows a lush farmland within a river valley, surrounded by mountains.

James Scott argues that there was no such thing as a state that didn't rest on an alluvial grain farming population. In your experience, do you think this is correct?

01:12

Text bubble: Could states have developed without farming?

Candice Goucher, PhD, Washington State University

Painted depiction of an idyllic-looking, early community living alongside water.

Laura Mitchell, PhD, University of California, Irvine

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GOUCHER: I think there are some other examples that don't require farming for large populations to settle in one place— fishing populations; there are the herders, the nomads; states on the move. You do need stable resources, and farming is one way to reach that scenario.

01:34

Early painting of humans with domesticated animals; painting of another farm community featuring brick and straw huts and olden farmland

MITCHELL: I would encourage students to think about farming in the state in multiple ways. In world history we tend to look for generalizations and for broad patterns. And, in general, farming is an important precondition for the state. But what that farming looks like and what the relationship between a particular kind of farming and the form of the state are is always contingent—it depends on local factors. So you want to be able to push and think that even if farming is generally related to the state, the fact that there is farming does not inevitably mean that there will be a state. The fact that there is an accumulation of agricultural surplus doesn't mean that we're going to lead to a state, and even if it does lead to the state, it doesn't tell us what form that state's going to take. So thinking with this generalization is a great place to start, but you always want to dive in and look at specific examples and not be content with just a generalization that farmers live in states. Because mostly they do, but not always, and they don't live in the same kind of state in every place, in every time.

02:37

Trevor Getz

GETZ: Scott also argues that grains in particular, rather than other foods, make states possible. But I know of at least a few states in East Africa, like the kingdom of Buganda, that actually developed around a diet of plantains and bananas, rather than grains. What do you think?

Candice Goucher

GOUCHER: Grains work as an argument in some parts of the world. Grasses were indeed very important in the early farming societies of parts of Eurasia. But if you look at parts of West Africa, South America, then you have a totally different scenario. You have yams that are important. And, indeed, in some places you don't even need agriculture because the resources are so abundant.

03:25

Farming Labor and State Formation

GETZ: Scott also argues that the labor requirements of farming, like doing irrigation work, help lead to the state. What's the connection there?

MITCHELL: There is a connection about labor. And it, it doesn't only have to be farming labor. And I don't think that Scott's off-base in his focus on farming, because farming is the basis of most people's livelihood, right? If you're, if you're not farming you're not eating, if you're living in a large community. But there are other kinds of communal labor that also matter for state formation,

03:58

Image of an ancient Sumerian fortress

and for state maintenance, particularly the construction of state buildings and communal religious sites.

GETZ: All right, all of this leads me to ask: Was the state actually a good idea? I mean, Scott seems to suggest that the state just added a burden. It created taxes, it created warfare, and that it wasn't actually a very good deal for the farmer. What do you think?

04:24

Text bubble: Were states a good idea?

GOUCHER: The state could be a good idea if there were moments of crisis. But the model for the state as a coercive entity is not the only model. So, states could alter people's experience in times of crisis by storing food and providing excess food to those without food in, in environmental crises, or in times of famine.

MITCHELL: I want to push back on that question a little bit and say, a good idea for whom? Scott gets at that question when he's saying it wasn't a good idea for farmers, that farmers were more oppressed and had fewer advantages. But for elites? For people who could control the labor of farmers, states were, were clearly a good idea.

05:19

An early Sumerian artwork depicting horse-drawn carriages and humans

Without the coercion and hierarchy that we see from most states, we wouldn't have the kind of artisanal and artist class. There's a richness of development and the continuation or circulation of knowledge. There are complex religious practices that I think wouldn't happen without the exploitation of farming labor.

05:44

A drawing depicting what looks to be noblemen walking above men that are in chains

That's not to justify exploitation, but to say that it's hard to say that a state, either a state as a concept or a specific state, is a good idea or a bad idea because, as in most historical circumstances, you have winners and losers.

Text bubble: How are farming and states connected today?

GETZ: How does the connection between farming and the state work today? What has changed over the past thousands of years? For example, most of us today aren't farmers today but there are still states.

06:06

Image of a very poor farming village; a young child sits on the ground

GOUCHER: I think one of the important measures of the success of a state is whether it can deal with the distribution of food. And if we look around and see people who are without houses, people who are hungry, then we have, I think, evidence of failed states. So we can measure states in ancient times in much the same way that we can measure states today.

GETZ: I want to thank both of you for joining me here today. This is a really important topic, the connection between farming and the state, and I think we've all learned a lot.