



Frames in Era 2

The cognitive revolution allowed us to develop language. Language made it possible to develop large, stable bands and communicate with neighboring bands and communities. The result was a global patchwork of little communities and networks. But late in this era, farming developed independently in several places and then spread to surrounding communities through our networks. Farming began to really change the way we produced and distributed goods and, eventually, lived.



0:01

*Bob Bain, PhD, University
of Michigan
A map of the world zooms
into the African Continent*

A lot of big changes happen in the period we call Era 2. How can we understand these changes through our three frames?

At the beginning, our ancestors lived only in Africa, in very small groups. Then cognitive breakthroughs happened that allowed us to communicate better and pass information along through generations.

One of the most important innovations of this era was the development of language. Humans are social animals— we need to cooperate with each other in order to survive and thrive. The development of language allowed us to do this in two ways.

00:49

*A piece of artwork
comprised of handprints
layered upon one another
An early piece of art
reflecting humans in a
community, carved into
stone*

First, sharing ideas through language allowed us to work together, or collectively to achieve goals. Working collectively meant that we could build our first communities— large, stable bands that could work together for common purposes despite being made up of many individuals. Languages also allowed humans to create our first networks— enabling us to communicate with people who were in neighboring communities, whose languages were similar, in order to exchange ideas, things, and even members through intermarriage and migration. With the tool of language, our ancestors expanded from our original home in Africa throughout most of the world, picking up new skills and technologies along the way and forming a whole patchwork of little communities and networks by the end of the era.

01:29

*A painting on
stone depicting the
domestication of cows*

But in Era 2, the biggest story was the development of farming. Farming is the domestication and cultivation of plants. This was one of the most important transformations of production and distribution in all of human history.

Of course, not everyone became farmers. Those who did made the changes at different times, and sometimes they still also hunted and gathered like their ancestors before them. But even so, farming dramatically changed how all people lived and worked.

02:07

*Photos of Neolithic tools
– much more basic, stone
tools—next to Paleolithic
tools—tools that were
much more complex in
the ways that they were
carved (for example, early
arrowheads).*

(music playing) Farmers generally settled down in one place. They also developed an entirely new set of tools— that’s why we call the original foraging societies Paleolithic—or “old” stone tool—societies, and the farmers who came after them Neolithic— or “new” stone tool—societies.

Farming societies also grew much more rapidly than their foraging neighbors. Farmers had more children than foragers, partly because they had more food. And although farmers had more diseases and were often less healthy, over time, farmers came to represent the majority of human societies. Farming radically changed how we made and shared things.

02:49

*A colorful painting that
depicts farm life including
domesticated animals,
pottery, and humans using
farming tools (such as an
axe-like object)*

Farmers had to spend long hours doing work that foragers didn’t have to do. They had to plant crops, tend them, protect them from weeds and bugs and other animals that wanted to eat them. They had to harvest them and process them. Women, especially, found their hours consumed with turning harvested plants into edible food.

03:10

*Painting of people making
tools to be used for
farming
A tablet with language
symbols carved into it*

But farming also produced enough calories that some people could do other work—specializing in making clothes, or tools, for example. In this way, farming was also a gateway to a lot of other innovations. Later, as we will see, farmers were more likely to create villages and cities, and produce innovations like writing and iron-working. And these changes are still with us today.

03:35

Bob Bain

Farming is still the way most of our food is produced—even if fewer and fewer of us are farmers. In fact, we won't see a change in production and distribution that is this significant again until Era 6, about 12,000 years later, when we get to the Industrial Revolution. That makes farming one of the most enduring historical transformations of all time, and it began a very, very long time ago.