Frames in Era 3

The communities frame is a useful one for viewing developments in Era 3. The spread of village life and the development of cities made it necessary for humans to come up with new ways of governing ourselves. In many regions, that led to states and even empires. Our ancestors also found new ways of explaining and understanding the world around them through the development of belief and ethics systems that were portable and could spread widely. Viewed through different lenses, these same changes also affected production and distribution and networks.

00:01

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An ancient desert village structure; an image of hillside farmland

00:38

Photo montage of different kinds of village structures around the world

00:57

Image of an early city with more and more advanced structures than the villages that came before them

01:33

A tablet with language symbols carved into it

02:07

02:38

Text bubble: Portable belief systems build connections among communities Religious texts in multiple languages

BAIN: In this course, we use the communities frame to describe the ways that humans organize themselves.

Many of these organizations first emerged in Era 3. They include the village, the city, the state, and the congregational religion. A village is made up of a group of people who live together, usually staying in one place year-round or for most of the year. In many places, these settled communities were only possible because of farming, although some foragers also lived in settled villages.

Villages were different from earlier organizations because their ways of governing themselves were more complex. Nomadic groups moved around, broke apart, and reformed. But villagers had to deal with each other constantly. They shared duties like protecting crops and animals or building and maintaining communal structures.

During Era 3, village life spread across much of the world. In some of those places, cities developed. Cities were larger and more densely populated than villages, and they could support people who were specialists and who didn't produce food at all. Cities needed more governance than villages for two reasons. First, most people did not know— or had little reason to trust— each other. And second, food had to be distributed from farmers and herders to those who had other jobs. In some places, groups of cities and villages came together to form states.

A state is an even more developed form of community, one that has many more people and more layers of government. States face the particular problem of ruling large groups of people spread across distances, often in challenging situations. Over time these communities developed strategies for keeping everyone together and in agreement. Sometimes they convinced people that they had a shared interest and identity. Sometimes they convinced people that the government had a right to rule them. And sometimes they ruled by force.

But not all communities were states or were controlled by governments. For example, the family—often extended families— was still a powerful force for shaping how people acted. Religion was also an important form of community. Until Era 3, religion was generally closely tied to the family and to one location. But in this period, some religions or ethical ideas began to connect people to each other through a shared belief system across vast areas.

These religions or ethical systems were portable, meaning that they were not tied just to family or land, but rather to a sense that God or gods and principles were everywhere. This was very useful when people wanted to travel or trade. In these new religions or ethical systems, like Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Confucianism, and Islam, a merchant might find someone of the same beliefs far away, someone with a similar ethic whom they could trust as a trading partner or host.

Era 3 was not just an era in which communities expanded. Networks also grew as people traveled, made contact with each other, and shared ideas.

03:20

Diagram shows networks formed between villages, farms, nomads, and cities

Villages gave rise to village networks, which connected villages with each other in relationships of rough equality. The emergence of cities led to the rise of metropolitan networks that connected cities to the villages, farms, and nomadic people around them. These networks were often less equal, with the rulers of the cities dominating their surrounding communities, although this was not always so. There were also thinner, less populated, and slower long-distance networks that conducted ideas between and among communities.

03:56

Early maps show trade routes

Production and distribution also increased in this era. New techniques were developed for making things, and some very long trade routes, and lots of smaller ones, emerged in many parts of the world. Webs of long-distance trade developed in several regions, although most people still made things mainly for themselves or for the wealthy elites in their local cities.

04:18

By the end of this era, change was accelerating as reflected in all three frames. The abundance of new and larger communities meant more ideas and things. Enlarged networks meant that ideas could flow more extensively between different communities and regions. Increased production and distribution meant that more people had access to more goods and services.

Now, was this true for everyone? Would this always be true? You will be able to judge the answer to these questions for yourself in this era and beyond.