



Era 2 Overview

Physically modern humans evolved over a long time and alongside other, related species. Our ability to use and make tools gave our ancestors the ability to spread to new environments. Our ability to share information and produce symbols helped us to master those environments. Gradually, people populated almost the whole world. But populations remained small until the development of farming. Farming allowed us to produce more calories, feed more people, and eventually build villages and towns. Yet there is some evidence that early farmers had more difficult lives than foragers.



00:01

*Colby Burnett and Kim
Lochner in conversation*

It's that time again.

Is it already 250,000 years since Before Common Era?

It is. That means that Era One is over.

And Era Two begins. Must need a new battery.

00:17

*Era 2: Early Humans
Kim Lochner*

Hi, I'm Kim Lochner. Today, Colby Burnett and I will give you a preview of what to expect in World History Era Two. Era Two begins with the first appearance of modern humans, who emerged in Africa around 250,000 years ago.

00:46

*Cave painting depicting
animals;*

*Other early artwork
showing ancestors milking
cows; modern farming
equipment*

For most of human history, all of our ancestors were foragers, which means they got their food by hunting or gathering wild fruit, roots, and grains. Then, about 12,000 years ago, some people started learning how to domesticate plants and animals. Some, but not all, of our ancestors became farmers and herders.

Today, almost everyone on the planet gets most of their food from farms. Foraging is incredibly rare. So, how did we shift from foraging to farming? And what were the effects of that change?

01:14

*Another cave painting,
also of humans with
animals;
A tablet carved with early
language symbols.
Artifacts such as
arrowheads, and human
remains (like bones)*

This is not an easy question. For one thing, during most of this era, writing simply didn't exist. So, historians, archaeologists, and scientists can't rely on written documents. Instead, they examine a wide variety of artifacts that were left behind by the people who lived in this period, or they use new scientific tools to help us see thousands of years into the past.

Creating a history of this time period is challenging and complicated. Let's take a closer look.

01:52

Ruins of an ancient village

Let's zoom in on Çatalhöyük, one of the earliest farming communities we've found. Çatalhöyük is a 9,000-year-old village in Central Turkey, and it is loaded with evidence of how humans lived there. One of the ways we know about life in Çatalhöyük is through a famous painting found on the wall of a house there. Archaeologist James Mellaart described this painting as the world's first map. Take a good look at this. What do you see?

02:12

*Painting that depicts
rectangular shapes,
(perhaps houses and
buildings) as well as a
spotted, red-colored object
that Mellaart interpreted
as an erupting volcano*

Mellaart thought the image showed an erupting volcano surrounded by a street map of the houses and buildings of the village. He was interpreting an object created 2,000 years before the world's earliest writing system and 4,000 years before the development of the first alphabet. The map is a great piece of evidence, but how should we interpret it? Do you think that Mellaart got it right? We'll come back to this in a moment. For now, let's zoom back out to the bigger story.

Kim Lochner

Right. So, by the time Çatalhöyük was built, humans physically and genetically identical to us had spent hundreds of thousands of years spreading around the world.

02:54

Map showing the spread of humans from Africa, throughout the world

At the beginning of this era, all humans lived in Africa, but by the end, we had spread across Eurasia, crossed bodies of water to populate Oceania, and spread throughout the Americas. Eventually, these earliest humans populated almost every part of the Earth.

In our journey, we developed sets of physical tools that allowed us to cope with environments as different as deserts, forest, frozen tundra, vast grasslands, and humid jungles. We made intellectual breakthroughs that allowed us to create bigger communities, larger and more organized societies. We engineered wider networks of exchange. We learnt to produce and distribute the stuff we needed more efficiently. We became herders and farmers, and domesticated plants and animals changed our society.

03:49

Animation of two early farmers with a rake for farming, and domesticated plants and animals

We learned to care for them in order to feed our ever-larger populations. We developed language that enabled us to share and collect what we learnt.

Correction: Colby meant 12,000 years ago, not 250,000.

From about 12,000 years ago, settled farming societies like Çatalhöyük existed in many parts of the world. We call these societies Neolithic, or “new stone,” because they had new kinds of tools that older, foraging societies did not have. But life in Çatalhöyük, like many Neolithic communities,

04:20

Animation of Foragers alongside an early farming community

Kim Lochner

may not have been all that different from the lives of foragers who still roamed the area around it. Many of its inhabitants probably still hunted as well as farmed. Their social order was still relatively equal. Like forager societies, there is little evidence of leaders or important or wealthy people. And while the people of Çatalhöyük had networks of trade, so, too, did the neighboring foragers, many of whom were their most important trading partners. Finally, there is evidence that life may have been more difficult for early farmers, like those living in Çatalhöyük, than it was for foragers.

04:59

Teams of health scientists and archaeologists, like Amanda Mummert at Emory University and Richard H. Steckel from Ohio State University, compared the health of early farmers with the foragers who lived around them, and in many places around the world—Britain, Mesoamerica, Thailand, China, Peru, Tennessee—between about 6,000 and 1,000 years ago. This kind of analysis of bones is one of those new tools we were talking about in the beginning of this video. They studied whether foragers or farmers were healthier.

But here’s the problem. How can we measure the health of people who lived so long ago, and whose remains are now just skeletons in graves? Let’s take a closer look at their data.

05:42

Colby Burnett holds a femur bone

Actually, bones can tell us a lot about the health of people during their lives. You have to eat well to be healthy, and people with less healthy diets tend to have more broken bones. Their bones are shorter and less dense. Sometimes, they also show evidence of diseases or infection.

Animated femurs show the differences in the length and strength of bones of foragers and farmers

Let's look at femurs. The femur is your thighbone, and it's the longest and strongest bone in your body. Foragers, male and female, had longer femurs than farmers. Farmers' bones also show more evidence of disease due to malnutrition, with about twice the number of infections and abscesses. This data suggests that life wasn't always better for farmers than for foragers. But it isn't conclusive. It's based on a relatively small sample of skeletons, and it's difficult to be sure who were foragers and who were not. Still, this data tells us a lot about how people's physical health changed when they transitioned from being foragers to being farmers. But it doesn't tell us how people's ways of thinking were changing.

06:45

Over the course of this era, all humans—whether farmers or foragers—shared in what later anthropologists called a cognitive revolution, a dramatic change in the ways that humans could think. This change allowed them to communicate their thoughts and experiences in symbols, art, gestures, and language.

07:05

Photo montage of different types of texts, drawings, and symbols (including drawn symbols, a religious text, and art comprised of handprints)

The ability to think in and use symbols allows us to communicate complex and complicated ideas or experiences. But there's always a danger that someone might misinterpret what we are communicating. And that is doubly true when trying to understand or interpret art or symbols left behind by people in the past. It's possible to have different interpretations of the same object or documents.

07:29

The same Çatalhöyük "map" is shown again

That is, in fact, what happened with the so-called Çatalhöyük map. Scholars now think that Mellaart was wrong in how he interpreted this art. In fact, they think he may have faked a lot of his evidence. But in this case, they think he just made a mistake. They believe that the volcano was actually a depiction of a leopard skin. And the design beneath it that Mellaart thought were houses—other scholars claim it may have been just a geometric pattern used for decoration on a wall. So, what's the truth?

08:03

Kim Lochner

One thing that's fun about history is, there's not always one, simple truth. As you can see, we still know relatively little about this era, despite our best efforts. But by studying this era, you can join the debate.

Like historians and archaeologists, you can try to answer questions like: Why did so many—but not all—of our ancestors move to farming in so many parts of the world by 3000 BCE? What positive or negative impact did herding and farming have on humans, plants, and animals? Are there competing stories or narratives about the positive or negative effects of the move in life from the Paleolithic to Neolithic? What are the implications of holding one view over another? Do you think that farming was the most important or significant change in human life during this time?

08:54

*Kim Lochner and Colby
Burnett in conversation
again*

Looks like we're out of time.

Really? That was a quick 25 millennia.

Well, it's just an overview.

Uh, I knew that.

We should do this for all the eras.

We are.

I knew that, too.