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MESOPOTAMIA
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From Nomads to Farmers

For most of human history, people did not farm—they lived by finding and using what the land provided. They were called nomads, people who moved with the seasons in search of food. Historians call this period the Paleolithic Age, a Greek term that means 'Old Stone Age,' an era that ended when humans began farming.

Foragers

These wandering groups foraged for food in small family units of between ten and thirty people. Hunting often required men, and sometimes women, to venture far from their temporary camps, using the terrain to drive herds into natural traps or over steep cliffs. Those who did not hunt—often women and young children—remained behind to gather wild plants. The size of these communities and limited opportunities for trade meant that these patterns of hunting and gathering persisted for thousands of years. Their experiences, passed down through generations, allowed them to adapt to varied environments, from the permafrost of the Arctic to the arid deserts of Australia.

While this period of nomadic living lasted a long time, the story of how humans lived would not be one of endless "moving on." The Earth's climate was changing through periodic ice ages. During an ice age, the climate cools, and sea levels fall as slow-moving masses of ice called glaciers form over the land.

Then, about 11,000 years ago, the last ice age gave way to a period of global warming. Within a few thousand years, warmer temperatures in some parts of the Earth led to an abundance of wild cereal grains. Foraging groups began to settle in these places because they provided a steady food source.

Domesticating Plants and Animals

People slowly discovered that, beyond what grew naturally, they could produce more food by domesticating certain plants. To domesticate a plant or animal means to change them over time to make them more useful to humans. For example, farmers in present-day Central America learned to cultivate a wild grass called teosinte.

Over thousands of generations, farmers cut away the protective branches of teosinte and replanted only the crops with the largest cobs. The result of this process was corn, a plant more nutritious than teosinte but incapable of surviving without human intervention.

Farmers learned to domesticate animals as well as plants. The earliest evidence of a domesticated animal appears to be the dog, about 15,000 years ago. Through careful breeding for traits that served their purposes, humans made animals better suited to their needs. The mouflon is a wild animal genetically related to sheep. Over time, breeders selected the gentlest mouflons because they were easier to herd. Today, there are tens of thousands of mouflons worldwide, compared to over one billion sheep, an animal, like corn, that could not survive in the wild.

Sheep, goats, chickens, pigs, donkeys, horses, and other animals supplied not just muscle power, but meat, milk, and eggs, and clothing from their skins and wool.

Farming and Health

Farming communities could support far more people than foraging. However, agriculture did not always improve living standards. The food gathered by foragers was more varied and provided a wider range of nutrients than food grown by farmers. This made foragers more resistant to disease. Also, in more crowded agricultural communities, diseases from domesticated animals and unsanitary conditions could spread more quickly. Many foragers did not see farming as a better way to earn a living, so farming and foraging coexisted for thousands of years. Some people continue to live a hunter-gatherer lifestyle today, but they are usually relegated to the most remote and isolated parts of the earth.

Villages Form

About 10,000 years ago, small villages began to form throughout the Fertile Crescent. Agriculture also developed independently in present-day China, Central America, and other places. The shift from foraging to farming ushered in the beginning of the Neolithic Age, or "New Stone Age." The Neolithic Age began even

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earlier and ended when civilizations made another significant discovery.

Humans found they could extract copper from rocks and melt it together with tin to create an alloy, or a combination of metals. The alloy of copper and tin is bronze. Bronze tools were more durable than stone tools. Further, bronze tools were more malleable than stone tools, allowing them to be more easily shaped. The discovery of bronze was so significant that historians consider it a marker of the end of the Stone Age.

Fill in the Blanks

Before the invention of a__r__c__l__u__e, humans lived a *n__m__dic life foraging for food in e__t__nd__d family groups. About 18,000 years ago, the earth warmed as the last of several periodic i____ a_____ ended. Because of the warming, wild c__r__al grains began to grow in some parts of the earth. The *a__u__d__n__e of food encouraged some n__ma__s to settle.

The now settled people learned to d__m__s__i__a__e plants and a__i__a__s. In addition to m__s__le power, the animals supplied f_____ and c_____. By 9500 years ago, small farming villages formed along the F__r__i__e Crescent.

Humankind took another great step forward when they learned to create bronze, an a__l__y of c_____ and t____. Bronze tools were l__g__t__r and more m__l__e__b__e than tools made of stone. The discovery of b_____ was so significant that historians consider it the end of the Stone Age.

Answer in Complete Sentences

1. What does *paleolithic* mean?

*2. Define the term *domestication*. Give an example of how domestication made life easier for humans.

*3. Why did many foragers reject farming? Remember to provide at least one specific reason why foragers rejected farming.

4. What does *neolithic* mean? How did the Neolithic Age differ from the Paleolithic Age?

*A higher order learning question. Any reasonable answer will be accepted.

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