From Hunters to Gatherers

Stone Age, or **Paleolithic Age**, began about 2 million years ago, with the first tool making hominids, and lasted until about 8000 B.C.E. It was during this time period that early modern humans developed. Like the hominids before them, early humans were **hunter-gatherers**. They **wandered from place to place, hunting animals and gathering plants for food**. Often, they took **shelter in caves**. Prehistoric cave painters left clues about their way of life.

The New Stone Age, or Neolithic Age, began when people started to farm and produce their own food. The discovery of farming did not happen all at once. Over thousands of years, people gradually learned to raise animals and plant crops. They eventually began to rely on these farms for their food. Now, rather than having to roam long distances in search of things to eat, people could settle down in one place.

The Neolithic Age began around 8000 B.C.E. and lasted until about 3000 B.C.E., when people learned to make tools out of metal instead of stone. During this time, farming developed in many places throughout the world, including parts of Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

Many Neolithic settlements were located in the **Fertile Crescent**, east of the Mediterranean Sea, where the land was fertile (good for growing crops). Here, people built towns such as Jericho (JER-ih-koh), **Catal Hoyuk** (CHAHT-ul hoo-YOOK), and Jarmo (see map).

People in settlements like these lived very different lives from earlier hunter-gatherers. They could now concern themselves with other matters such as building permanent shelters and forming larger communities. They could make better tools and clothing. And they could swap items they had with other communities to get the things they lacked. As you will see, these changes made life safer, more comfortable, and more interesting.

During the **Paleolithic Age, people obtained food by hunting animals and gathering plants**. **They did not have a stable, or dependable, food supply. Wild plants and animals grew scarce when people stayed in one area for too long. And hunting was dangerous. Hunters were often injured or killed.**

Gradually, people found ways to lessen their dependence on hunting and gathering. Instead of gathering wild plants, people discovered that they could plant seeds and harvest crops. Over time, farmers learned which seeds produced the most crops in the areas where they lived.

Early farmers also learned how to domesticateanimals, to raise and use them for people’s needs. They raised sheep, goats, and cattle for the meat. Goats and cattle also provided milk. Mules helped carry heavy loads and pull plows.

These two developments—the growing of crops and the domestication of animals—are called agriculture**.** The Neolithic Age began with the invention of agriculture. For the first time, people had some control over their food supply. Let’s explore why this change was one of the most important advances in all of history.

The first great change agriculture brought about was the use of permanent shelters. **During the Paleolithic Age, people had lived in caves or rough, tent like structures. These were temporary shelters because hunter-gatherers were nomads. They had to move often, to follow the wild animal herds or to find new plants to eat**. As people settled down to farm during the Neolithic Age, they built shelters that were more permanent.

In many areas, people used mud bricks, packed together, to build houses that were round or **rectangular** in shape. Sometimes, people added stones and tree branches to the mud to strengthen the walls and roof. These houses had openings high in the walls. Historians believe that people may have climbed ladders to reach the openings and enter the house.

The development of permanent shelters was important in several ways. Houses gave people protection from harsh weather and wild animals. Houses made life more comfortable. People could cook food in new ways. The long-lasting shelters enabled people to settle together in larger communities.

The ability to raise food by farming allowed people to settle in permanent shelters. These structures, in turn, enabled people to form larger communities. **In Paleolithic times, small bands of perhaps 20 to 60 people wandered from place to place in search of food**. As people began growing food, they settled down near their farms. As a result, towns and villages grew up, like those at Jericho (in present-day Israel) and Catal Hoyuk (Turkey).

Living in communities made it possible for people to organize themselves more **efficiently**. They could divide up the work of producing food and other things they needed. While some people grew crops, others built houses and made tools.

Village dwellers also learned to cooperate to do a task more quickly. For example, toolmakers could share the work of making stone axes and knife blades. By working together, they could make more tools in the same amount of time.

With many of their basic needs now met, people had more time and energy for other activities. They could invent new ways of making their lives more comfortable and much safer. Larger communities could defend themselves more easily against their enemies. The Neolithic town of Jericho, for example, was protected by strong stone walls. All of these changes in farming villages led to growing populations.

Having a stable food supply allowed people to develop new kinds of jobs. **In Paleolithic times, people’s main job was finding enough food to survive**. With farms providing steadier supplies of food, Neolithic people could develop more specialized skills.

Focusing on one job at a time gave people the opportunity to improve the ways they worked. In Catal Hoyuk, farmers learned how to grow more than 14 kinds of food plants. Clothing makers developed a way to spin and weave. They wove natural fibers such as wool and linen into comfortable cloth. In some regions, people mined flint so that stoneworkers could create sharper tools. People in Neolithic communities had the time and the tools to create works of art.

Neolithic people didn’t merely want to survive. They wanted to make themselves, and their surroundings, more beautiful. They decorated their pottery and baskets with geometric shapes. Stoneworkers learned to polish stones to make shiny jewelry and mirrors. House builders added special rooms to honor the gods and goddesses they believed in.

One effect of the development of different jobs was to inspire workers to improve their skills. This led to newer and better ways of doing things. And different jobs added much greater variety to community life.

Another **major** change introduced in Neolithic times was the growth of **trade**. **Paleolithic hunter-gatherers rarely traded with other groups**. **They were mostly concerned with the animals, plants, and other resources they found nearby**. As people settled in towns and villages, trade became a more common activity.

Usually, people trade to get resources they do not have in their own area. As Neolithic people became more skilled in their crafts, they wanted materials that would improve the strength and beauty of the things they made. Getting those resources became the job of traders. Traders often traveled hundreds of miles in search of these materials. They crossed mountains on foot, rode donkeys across deserts, and sailed the Mediterranean Sea on ships.

The growth of trade allowed people to make use of more resources. It also brought them into contact with people from distant places. These contacts helped spread ideas and knowledge throughout the ancient world.