

Introduction

As soon as humans began to form permanent settlements and gave up wandering in search of food, agriculture was born. The Latin roots of the word *agriculture* mean “cultivation of the fields.” From the beginning agriculture has included raising both crops and livestock. At first, this new way of providing food and other raw materials developed slowly. But, because it made life much easier for many people, it became the preferred way of supplying a basic human need. The people who worked at agriculture came to be called farmers.

Society was different before there were farmers. Nearly everybody devoted much time to gathering plants for food or to hunting or fishing. When food was abundant there were feasts; when it was not, there was famine. Gradually people discovered the advantages of caring for animals in flocks and herds. They learned to grow plants for food, medicine, clothing, and shelter in areas set aside for that purpose.

As the food supply became more reliable and raw materials became more abundant, some people were free to do other things besides farming and hunting. Many of them chose to live in towns and cities, using their talents in various ways, including becoming expert in different trades. They made a variety of goods, which they could trade with the farmers for food. This began the division of labor into the rural farming community and the urban industrial complex, a fundamental partnership that still exists throughout the world.

Development of Farming

Agriculture, which is the basis of [civilization](#), has no single, simple origin. It developed independently in many regions of the world. A wide variety of plants and animals were domesticated at different times. Agriculture began in the [Middle East](#) more than 10,000 years ago. Perhaps attempts at agriculture were underway even earlier in Southeast Asia. Both of those areas were rich in animals that were suitable for domestication and in varieties of plants, and both have mild climates. Agriculture was also developed in East Asia and in the Americas thousands of years ago.

Agricultural Landmarks

Grazing animals were likely [domesticated](#) before plants were tended. Among the earliest animals domesticated were the gazelle in the Middle East and the dog in Asia. Sheep, cattle, and pigs came later. In the Americas domesticated animals included dogs, llamas, and alpacas.

The first crops in the Middle East probably included grains such as wheat, oats, rye, barley, and millet; and legumes such as peas, lentils, vetch, chickpeas, and horsebeans. Grapes, olives, dates, apples, pears, cherries, and figs were among early domesticated fruits. Early crops in East Asia included millet, rice, Chinese cabbage, and soybeans. In the Americas corn (maize) and squash were among the earliest domesticated plants.

Mesopotamia, called the cradle of civilization, was a great influence in the Old World, especially in Syria and Egypt and perhaps in India and China. The ancient Mesopotamian cultures—Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Chaldean—developed an increasingly complex and rich agricultural system that freed many people from farming. As a result, the first cities arose in Mesopotamia.

Ancient farming is clearly recorded in Egypt, where it flourished along the Nile River. Egyptian farmers developed drainage and irrigation techniques through construction of a system of dikes and canals. During this time farming tools were developed and refined.



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