


Encyclopedia Of The Ancient World


EARLY CIVILIZATIONS

THE FIRST FARMERS

Until about 12,000 years ago, people everywhere were constantly on the move. They covered huge distances hunting wild animals and collecting wild plants to eat. They lived in caves or in makeshift shelters that could be packed up easily and carried to the next hunting ground. Then an extraordinary thing happened that changed their lives forever: they learned how to farm.



Map showing the Fertile Crescent, the area of the Middle East where farming first began



The land around the banks of the Euphrates, one of the places where the first farms grew up, was much greener in ancient times than it is now.

LAND OF PLENTY



Farming didn't happen overnight - it took hundreds of years of gradual change and happened in different parts of the world at different times. The first farmers appeared in an area known as the 'Fertile Crescent', a great arc of land stretching from the shores of the Mediterranean, through the mountains of Syria and Turkey and down to Iran and Iraq. It had rich, fertile soil which was watered each year by rivers and streams swelled with melted mountain snow.

THE FIRST HARVESTS

The wild ancestors of the first crops and farm animals were probably native to this part of the world. For thousands of years before they started farming, people had been gathering the seeds of wild grasses to eat. People began to plant the seeds and harvest them, instead of searching for wild plants for their food.

This change brought about changes in the crops too. Wild wheat has brittle ears, which break and scatter its seeds in the wind. But when the first farmers selected seeds to plant, they chose them from the plants which kept their seeds a bit better, so they could harvest them more easily.

So, very gradually, the wheat changed and a variety called emmer wheat developed, which keeps its seeds much better than wild wheat and is an ancestor of modern types of wheat.



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