

Why did humans create societies, states, and empires from the late neolithic period to 1500 CE?

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Introduction

Agriculture changed the way that people lived. People went from nomads with no territorial boundaries to permanent settlements with clearly defined territorial boundaries. As people formed permanent settlements, the population swelled. The emergence of cities meant that rules needed to be put in place to keep people from being at constant odds with each other. This growth led to the creation of societies, states, and empires. People created societies, states, and empires from the late Neolithic period to 1500 CE to centralize power.

The Structures of Complex Societies

Approximately 10,000 years ago people started a transition from nomadic hunters and gathers to agricultural civilizations. Before the knowledge and technology was discovered around how to grow plants or how to domesticate animals, people were nomadic. Hunter-gatherer civilizations lived as small bands of people whose lives revolved around their upcoming meals. They hunted animals and gathered edible plants. As the food supply dried up, their game animals migrated, or as seasons changed, they moved. As small nomadic societies, they had no need for territorial boundaries, as it would be a self-imposed limitation of gathering food.

The advent of agriculture meant that people could create permanent settlements. As a result, populations grew, and a new way of life was created. Agricultural food production; growing edible fruit bearing plants and domestication of animals changed how people lived. Suddenly, the labor necessary for food production shrank. “Societies that made the Neolithic transition from foraging and hunting to food production typically produced enough of a surplus of that farming groups could provide for the dietary needs of the more powerful elites in addition to their own needs”.¹ Fewer people were required to grow copious quantities of food than in previous periods.

Class and Gender Structures

Many states and empires have operated under patriarchal systems, where men hold primary positions of power and authority. In patriarchal societies, men are the decision makers, engage in their local political system, farming, or trade. Woman, by contrast, were confined to domestic duties, such as managing the household and raising children. With men being the holder of power and authority, women often had limited influence within their society. In some

¹ Welsh, Robert L., Vinaco, Luis A., Fuentes, Augustín, “Anthropology: Asking Questions About Human Origins, Diversity, and Culture”, Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 307

societies, women in elite classes were able to influence decision making. The Inca empire was ruled by men, with their wife, known as a *coya*, or queen, was the ruler's sister². While the Inca ruler was the head of the state, “the *coya* had both economic and administrative influence”.³ This allowed for women to have more impact on their society than other patriarchal societies. Other societies actively sought to minimize the influence by women. Many of the early Chinese dynasties participated in a patriarchal society, such as the Qin and Han dynasty, in which they were influenced by Confucianism. These societies were strict in their dominance by men. To limit a woman’s ability to gain momentum outside of their gender role, they often resorted to foot binding. Foot binding is “a practice that involved the tight wrapping of a young girls’ feet with straps of cloth that prevented natural growth of the bones and resulted in tiny, malformed curved feet”.⁴

Class structures states and empires often evolved so that there was an elite class and a peasant class. The elite class often included the heads of the state along with advisors and religious consultants. The elite class guided the decision making for the societies, states, and empires. They also imposed rules on society that defined the social order of the society. The peasant class were the common working people. These people tended to farm and were merchants participating in trade. The peasant class was often responsible for producing the products to necessitate trade on the trading networks. In addition, they made up the abled body class of the militaries. They also helped build roads, buildings, and other infrastructure. In some cases, the peasant class tended to state lands, which produced goods for the empire. An example of this can be seen in the Incan empire. The common class people, known as peasants, were

² Bonvillain, Nancy, “Cultural Anthropology”, Pearson, 2013, pp. 332

³ Bonvillain, Nancy, “Cultural Anthropology”, Pearson, 2013, pp. 332

⁴ Bentley, Jerry H., Ziegler, Herbert F., Streets-Salter, Heather E., Benjamin, Craig, “Traditions & Encounters: A Global Perspective of the Past”, McGraw Hill Education, 2021, pp. 257

given required to tend to state lands building and maintaining infrastructure. Excess crop yield from the state lands were stored in store houses known as *tambos*. The excess crops could then be given to people and communities in the empire during a time of need.⁵

Intellectual and Religious Structures

Ever growing trading networks in what is now Europe and Asia spurred the spread of religions through the continents. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism spread through many of the societies that were traveled along the Silk Road. As soon as the second century BCE, Buddhists merchants were traveling the Silk Road to China.⁶ The Han dynasty, which had primarily practiced Confucianism, started seeing an uptick in people converting to Buddhism. In regions where trade was primarily within the empire, religious beliefs lacked the same diversity. This can be seen in the Incan empire, which practiced polytheist religion.⁷

In addition to religious diversity, trade networks also introduced innovative technologies and intellectual advancements to the world. The propagation of knowledge, spurred by increased literacy led to people better understanding astronomy and the creation of complex math. Knowledge of the stars and the monsoon winds spurred sea-based trade routes. Seasoned sea explorers learned the weather patterns of the seas, which allowed them to expand their trade networks to include sea routes.⁸

The diversity of the goods that were traded on the trade networks also grew. People gained access to diverse foods and the knowledge to cultivate new crops. They also traded goods

⁵ Bonvillain, Nancy, “Cultural Anthropology”, Pearson, 2013, pp. 332

⁶ Bentley, Jerry H., Ziegler, Herbert F., Streets-Salter, Heather E., Benjamin, Craig, “Traditions & Encounters: A Global Perspective of the Past”, McGraw Hill Education, 2021, pp. 262

⁷ Bentley, Jerry H., Ziegler, Herbert F., Streets-Salter, Heather E., Benjamin, Craig, “Traditions & Encounters: A Global Perspective of the Past”, McGraw Hill Education, 2021, pp. 417

⁸ Bentley, Jerry H., Ziegler, Herbert F., Streets-Salter, Heather E., Benjamin, Craig, “Traditions & Encounters: A Global Perspective of the Past”, McGraw Hill Education, 2021, pp. 231

that advanced the state of military technologies globally. Iron weapons, such as swords and spears, and gunpowder were traded.

Economic and Political Structures

Post hunter-gatherer societies had economies that revolved around agriculture and trade of merchant goods. Trade networks with neighboring and far away societies allowed societies to produce goods and trade. These goods included agricultural goods, textiles, and even industrial goods. The currency for many of these societies was precious metals, such as gold, silver, and copper. Rapid economic growth led to a shortage of precious metals in some societies. The Tang and Song dynasties converted to a paper currency system in the wake of precious metal shortages.⁹

Improving agricultural techniques allowed societies to increase their food production. This allowed societies to increase the volume of goods to be traded and allowed societies to consume the crop yield for their own benefit. Tang and Song armies encountered strains of fast ripening rice, which they brought back to China. The fast-ripening rice allowed them to double their rice food production by producing two crops of rice per year. Using metallurgy techniques, Chinese cultivators created iron plows, which they pulled behind beasts of burden. This allowed them to increase the speed at which they could prepare the land for cultivation.¹⁰ In the Incan empire, common class people worked in state lands to produce crops for the elite class. Excess crop yield was kept in *tambos*. Inventory accounting of food goods entering and leaving *tambos*

⁹ Bentley, Jerry H., Ziegler, Herbert F., Streets-Salter, Heather E., Benjamin, Craig, “Traditions & Encounters: A Global Perspective of the Past”, McGraw Hill Education, 2021, pp. 260

¹⁰ Bentley, Jerry H., Ziegler, Herbert F., Streets-Salter, Heather E., Benjamin, Craig, “Traditions & Encounters: A Global Perspective of the Past”, McGraw Hill Education, 2021, pp. 256

using a knotted line system called a *quipu*. This excess crop yield helped supply the Incan empire with food.¹¹

Political structures in empires shared similarities. Empires often employed a hierarchy of centralized power. The ruler of the empire was the ultimate authority and set its strategic direction. They would often deploy local authorities that would control specific regions at the direction of the ruler. In some instances, the regional authority had autonomy to rule the region as required with little input from the empire's ruler.

Growing trade networks throughout the regions allowed societies to influence each other. Chinese societies learned how to cultivate fast-ripening rice from Vietnam. This allowed them to produce more rice and feed their growing populations. Likewise, cultures learned about gunpowder, paper, silk, and metallurgy from China, which enabled cultures to produce goods with as well as implement new military technologies.

Historical Perspective

Many societies, states, and empires grew independent of each other. Initially, societies may have only known their direct neighbors. As trade networks expanded societies learned of cultural traditions, agricultural technologies, techniques, and products that they could have then used within their society. Beyond agriculture; goods and industrial technologies such as gunpowder, textiles, and metallurgy made a significant difference in the abilities of a society to thrive economically and militarily. Without globalized trade, the growth of many societies, states, and empires would have been delayed if not stunted.

¹¹ Bentley, Jerry H., Ziegler, Herbert F., Streets-Salter, Heather E., Benjamin, Craig, "Traditions & Encounters: A Global Perspective of the Past", McGraw Hill Education, 2021, pp. 417

Conclusion

As populations exponentially expanded during the early days of agriculture, complex communities with classes began to form. With the increased populations, communities needed to be organized so as not to be at odds with each other.¹² This led to elite classes amassing land, wealth, and resources that allowed them to impose their rule on lower class peoples. As these communities continued to grow and absorb neighboring communities, the need grew to create unified currencies and laws. With this action, elite classes centralized power which created societies, states, and empires from the late neolithic period to 1500 CE.

¹² Welsh, Robert L., Vinaco, Luis A., Fuentes, Augustín, “Anthropology: Asking Questions About Human Origins, Diversity, and Culture”, Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 305

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