

ARCHAEOLOGY SOURCE READING # 2

THE EFFECTS OF SETTLING DOWN

Imagine a life in which you moved every season and had to carry all your belongings with you. Would you bother owning a stereo, a television, or other material possessions? Before the agriculture revolution, people were nomads with no permanent homes, moving in search of food. The development of agriculture allowed people to become sedentary, or to live in one place. In the following selection, historian Leffen Stavianos describes some of the results of sedentary life.

Reading Questions:

1. What are three problems caused by a sedentary lifestyle?
2. How did sedentary living allow people to have better housing and more tools?
3. How do the work habits of Neolithic people compare with those of modern people?

The most obvious impact of the agricultural revolution was a new sedentary existence. Man now was able to settle down; in fact he had to in order to care for his newly domesticated plants and animals. Thus, the Paleolithic nomadic band now gave way to the Neolithic village as the basic economic and cultural unit of mankind. Indeed it remained the basis for a pattern of life that was to prevail [exist widely] until the late eighteenth century and that persists [continues] to the present day in the vast underdeveloped regions of the world.

It is easy to romanticize [glorify] Neolithic village life, but to do so would be grossly misleading. Everyone - men, women, and children - had to work, and work hard, to produce food and a few handicraft articles. Productivity was low since man learned slowly and painfully about soils, seeds, fertilizer, and crop rotation. Despite the hard labor, famine was a common visitation following upon too much or too little rain or plague of pests. Epidemics swept the villages repeatedly as sedentary life introduced the problem of the disposal of human waste and other garbage . . . Also, malnutrition was the rule because of the inadequate food supply or unbalanced diet. Life expectancy under these circumstances was exceedingly low, but the high birth rate tended to increase village populations everywhere until famine, epidemic, or emigration restored the balance between food and mouths.

Yet, Neolithic village life was not all misery and suffering. This was a time when men made technological progress at an infinitely more rapid rate than in the preceding millennia [thousand years] of the Paleolithic era. The basic reason probably was not so much that settled man had more leisure time than nomads, but rather that sedentism made a richer material existence physically possible. The living standards of the nomadic hunter were limited to what he could carry, whereas the Neolithic village could indulge in substantial housing together with furnishings, utensils, implements, and assorted knickknacks. Thus he learned to make pottery out of raw clay, at first imitating, naturally enough, the baskets, gourds, and other containers of preagrarian times. Gradually, he grasped the potentials of pottery materials and techniques and fashioned objects that no longer resembled the earlier

containers. At the same time that man was developing the art of pottery making, he also acquired the skill in the production of textiles. He used fibers of the newly domesticated flax, cotton, and hemp plants, and he spun and wove fibers on spindles and looms that he gradually developed. Neolithic man also learned to build dwellings that were fairly substantial and roomy, the materials usually being wood or adobe depending upon local resources and climate.

Sedentism also made possible a more elaborate tribal political structure that replaced the primitive hierarchies of nomadic people. The inhabitants of the villages of a given region comprised the tribe, which was identified and distinguished from others by distinctive characteristics of speech, custom and in some cases tattoos. Some tribes boasted powerful chiefs and primitive nobilities as against the commoners, though the lines distinguishing them were often blurred and never reached the class exclusiveness characteristic of later civilizations.

The basic social unit of the Neolithic village customarily was the household consisting of two or more married couples and their children. This extended family was more common than the independent nuclear family because it was better suited to coping with the problems of wresting a livelihood. It could absorb the temporary or permanent loss of an individual producer and could function during "choke" periods when many hands were needed for clearing forest, harvesting, or pasturing livestock.

The distinctive feature of the Neolithic village was social homogeneity [similarity]. All families had the necessary skills and tools to produce what they needed. And equally important, all had equal access to the basic natural resources essential for livelihood. This was assured because each family automatically was a component part of the village community, which had ownership rights to farmlands, pastures, and other resources of nature. Hence, there was no division between landed proprietors and landless cultivators in a tribal society.

Precisely because of this communal equality, tribal societies, whether of Neolithic times or today, have a built-in brake on productivity. Output is geared to the limited traditional needs of the family, so there is no incentive to produce a surplus. This in turn means that labor is episodic. The daily grind – the eight hour day five days a week – is conspicuously absent. The typical tribesman worked fewer hours per year than modern man and furthermore he worked at his pleasure. The basic reason was that he labored and produced in his capacity as a social person – a husband or father or brother or village member. Work was not a necessary evil tolerated for the sake of making a living; rather it was part of family and community relations.