



Crops were first grown in the Middle East – the Fertile Crescent stretching through Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The earliest known site is Tell Qarassa North in Syria dated to 8650 BC to 7950 BC. Here grain was found with about 70% wild type genes and 30% varying degrees of genetic change associated with domestication.

So-called ‘founder crops’ were einkorn and emmer wheats, barley, lentils, peas, bitter vetch, chickpeas and flax. One theory is that these plants had been gathered from the wild but, as the climate warmed and became dryer, people started to either gather plants or sow seed in areas where there was still enough rain to ensure that they flourished – in effect farming.

Agriculture reached southern Europe by c.6500 BC but nearly another 2000 years passed before it is evident in Britain. In general agriculturalists advanced from one patch of fertile alluvial soil to another, bypassing mountainous areas. Many Neolithic sites in Europe produce evidence of einkorn, emmer, barley and lentils; other crops came later. A third type of wheat, spelt, is first found in Central Europe by 2500 BC and by 500 BC was in common use in southern Britain. Domesticated oats do not appear until the Bronze Age in Europe. That is also the case with rye; although the crop is found in Neolithic contexts in Turkey, it was otherwise absent until the Bronze Age of central Europe, c. 1800–1500 BC. We know little of the production of green vegetables or herbs since unlike cereals they did not require processing equipment (quern stones), would not survive through accidental carbonisation and would not have left tell-tale impressions on wet pot bases.

Early ground preparation was rudimentary and consisted of little more than scratching a furrow in the ground with a pointed stick but on the Continent at least both manuring and crop rotation were known by the end of the Neolithic period. Every household would have produced its own flour by grinding grain with

stone querns and analysis of wear and tear on specific parts of the skeleton show that women undertook this work. As well as bread and gruel cereals were used for producing beer. The earliest evidence comes from Iran and dates to c.5000 BC and beer appears to have been produced in Europe from about 3000 BC.

Agriculture would not have been without its problems: disease and pest build-up both in the fields and in settlements; rodent attacks on grain stores; and vulnerability to bad weather. Study of skeletal remains suggests that the physical hard work involved in early farming increased the incidence of arthritis and eating bread made from flour containing grit from stone querns increased damage to gums and teeth. Average heights decreased from 178 cm to 165 cm for men and from 168 cm to 155 cm for women.

Grain production meant that food could be saved for use over winter. Primitive wheats had a much higher protein content than modern varieties and, with some exceptions, population levels appear to have risen rapidly at the beginning of the Neolithic period. Permanent, if short-term, settlement led to accumulation of goods and tools and the possibility of producing surplus food enabled some individuals to develop other skills and specialist activities. Removal of the need to find food on a daily basis, and the seasonal nature of labour requirements in agriculture, furnished surplus time for monument construction and time-consuming activity like polishing axes. Different mechanisms for making communal decisions were needed and society may have become more hierarchical. Elites needed prestige goods which encouraged development of trade networks – society became more complex and more deeply divided.

Further Reading

Bellwood, P. 2004. *First Farmers: The Origins of Agricultural Societies*. Oxford: Blackwell

This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Judie English

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