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Early Pastoralists

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The origins of pastoralism

[Early farming](#) ([farming](#)) communities had to learn how to make best use of the land which they occupied. For some this meant focussing more on crops than animals; for others, in less fertile landscapes, it meant focussing more on raising livestock.

In the grasslands and highlands of Eurasia, the dry climate and poorer soil made it hard to make a living from growing crops. In these regions, small groups developed a lifestyle based on keeping flocks and herds of animals. These groups became the first pastoralists.

Animals, particularly sheep and cattle, require large amounts of grazing land to feed on, and need to be regularly moved from place to place to find fresh pastures. A pastoral economy therefore demands much more land than one based on crop-growing, and supports a smaller population.

Most pastoral societies, therefore, consist of small groups which tend to follow a nomadic or semi-

nomadic way of life. In many cases, there is an annual cycle of grazing the herds in cooler, mountain pastures during the summer and bringing them down to warmer grasslands in winter (a practice known as *transhumance*).

Pastoralism probably originated in early Neolithic times, when, in areas not suited to arable farming, some hunter-gatherer groups took to supplementing their traditional way of life with keeping domesticated cattle, sheep and goats.

Pastoralism in the ancient Middle East

Pastoralism has always been important in the [Middle East \(/history-middle-east#2\)](#), much of which, being very dry, is unsuitable for arable farming. The archaeological record suggests the presence of pastoralists in Palestine as early as 8000 BCE.

The rise of irrigation farming and, later, urban civilization, in the great river valleys of Mesopotamia would have given pastoralism an extra boost. The dense populations that now arose in the great river valleys progressively shifted to intensive crops growing in order to feed themselves. Animal husbandry would have become less important to them, as it took up a lot of land which could be more efficiently used for crops. The people of the river valleys still needed animal products, however, and for these they relied increasingly on the animal herders.

Relations with farming populations

These lived on the less fertile grasslands on the margins of the irrigated areas. An exchange system grew up in which pastoralists swapped their hides, wool, milk, meat, horn and bone, or even live animals, for the villagers' grain, peas, and so on; and probably for some professionally-produced craft goods as well. This exchange allowed the animal herders to specialise more on their pastoral activities.

Pastoral tribes became an important element in the ancient Middle East. Most of the time, relations between city-dwellers and farmers, on the one hand, and pastoralists on the other, were probably reasonably harmonious. It is likely that animosity was never far away, however. The differences in lifestyles bred mutual suspicion and contempt.

At regular intervals open hostilities broke out between them. In these the nomads, despite their fewer numbers, had a military edge because of their mobility. Coalitions of nomadic groups could quickly bring concentrated force to bear on certain points, and as quickly disperse. Farmers would have found this harder to deal with, tied as they were to their own plots of land.

Also, the nomadic lifestyle was a hard one, and competition between nomadic groups for scarce resources made low-level warfare endemic between them: they were inured to warfare in a way that farmers were not. This too would have given them an advantage when it came to fighting. As a result, Middle Eastern history was characterised by frequent nomadic raids, migrations and outright conquests.

Camels

Sometime before 1000 BCE some pastoralists succeeded in domesticating camels. This allowed pastoral groups to penetrate much deeper into the [Arabian desert \(/history-of-arabia\)](/history-of-arabia). The Bedouin way of life, in which small bands of nomads based on scattered oases in the deep desert, became possible.

Some pastoral peoples of the Middle East

In the Middle East, the pastoralists mostly belonged to the Semitic races (though not all Semites were pastoralists – witness the Canaanites). The first to make a major impact on history were the Akkadians, then the Amorites, the Hebrews, the Aramaeans, the Chaldeans, and later the Arabs. Other non-Semitic pastoralists who made an impact on the ancient Middle East were the ancestors of the Hittites, the Mitanni (who ruled Syria and northern Mesopotamia c. 1500 BCE), the Kassites (who ruled Babylonia for some four centuries) and the Iranians. All these groups originated on the steppes of central Asia.

Pastoralism in central Asia

The great expanses of grassland in central Asia were well suited to a pastoral economy. The sheer vastness of the steppes in this region meant that groups ranged over far greater distances than in the Middle East, and had less regular access to the produce of farming communities. They came to depend more on their animals, every part of which was exploited: wool and skins for clothes and tents; milk, meat and blood for sustenance; bone and horn for weapons and implements.

Horses, wheels, carts and chariots

It was here that, between 4000 and 3500 BCE, groups of people first domesticated horses. They did so for their meat and milk, rather than for riding: the tough little steppe ponies were too small for that. Some however may have been used to drag primitive sleighs along the ground, used to help carry goods on the regular migrations these nomadic people undertook. By 3000 BCE these sleighs had had wheels attached to them, to make the earliest carts. A thousand years spoked wheels allowed heavy carts to evolve into light carts, or chariots. These may have been developed first to help the people herd their horses, or for hunting; they were soon being used for war, and were to have a far-reaching impact on the civilizations of the Middle East and China.

A related development, also used in both hunting and warfare, was the composite (sometime called the compound) bow. This was a bow made of horn, sinew and wood glued together, which allowed it to pack much more punch than one made entirely of wood.

The Indo-Europeans

The early nomadic groups who domesticated horses and then developed wheeled vehicles and chariots, are thought by most scholars to be the ancestors of a group of peoples who spoke a language which we call "Indo-European". They spread out from their homeland north of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, across the central Asian steppes westward into Europe, eastward to what is now northern China, and southward into Iran and the Indian subcontinent. In so doing, they spread their language, which became ancestral to the Indo-European group of today: most European languages (including Greek, Latin, the Romance languages of French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian, and the Germanic, Scandinavian and Slav languages), Iranian and several languages in South Asia.

They also spread their polytheistic religion into Europe, where it evolved into the religions of ancient Greece, Rome, the Celts, and the Germans and Norse peoples. In Iran it formed the context in which Zoroastrianism eventually arose; and in South Asia it became the Vedic religion of early India and formed the context in which Buddhism and mature Hinduism emerged.

Horseback riding

Sometime about 1000 BCE, pastoral groups in the central Asian steppes, having bred larger and larger horses, took to riding on horseback. Horse-borne warriors are much swifter and more mobile even than chariot-borne ones, and this skill gave these nomads a huge advantage over other peoples. Civilized cultures soon adopted horse riding (the Assyrians were probably the first to do so, and the Chinese did so somewhat later), and horse cavalry was to remain a major component of armies right up to the 20th century. For thousands of years, though, the steppe nomads, as a result of lives spent on horseback, were by far the most adept at this kind of warfare. Coupled with the hardihood that their lifestyles gave them, and the toughness of their ponies, they would have an impact on the history of Eurasia out of all proportion to their numbers. Right up to the 17th century, when central Asia fell under the control of the expanding empires of Russia and China, nomadic peoples posed a danger to settled agriculturalists.

The nomadic peoples who would have the most impact on world history were the Scythians, the Huns, the Bulgars, the Magyars, various Turkish tribes, and the Mongols.

Pastoral peoples in other parts of the world

Early pastoral societies also arose in India and Africa. The arid regions of central India are very suitable for the pastoral way of life, and here the distinctive zebu cattle were domesticated. In North Africa, Berber and Taureg peoples took to herding sheep and goats, while pastoral cultures also arose in the Sudan (ancient Nubia), the savannah belt south of the Sahara (where the Fulani people would later predominate), and in east Africa (including such peoples as the Somalis and Masai). All these specialized in cattle herding.

Some features of pastoral societies

Hundreds of pastoral groups have made themselves known to world history, each with its distinctive culture; however, some features were common to many such societies.

Clans and tribes

Nomadic societies are based on small groups made up of extended families, or clans, moving their herds from place to place at regular intervals. A number of such clans form a tribe. The clans of a tribe congregate in one location at regular intervals – perhaps once a year – to trade with one another, forge marriage alliances, and deal with matters concerning the entire tribe. They then disperse again to their various ranges.

For nomads, control of strategic resources, particularly watering places and good pasturage, was vital. Each tribe and, within this, each clan, claimed privileged access to certain of these; and if this access was denied, disputes resulted. When a dispute arose between two clans of the same tribe, the tribal elders would try to deal with it. They often failed to prevent low-level hostilities and violent vendettas lasting several generations. If a dispute between two or more tribes arose, tribal warfare would result.

The steppes saw frequent clashes between tribes as one sought to expand its pasturelands at the expense of another, which often spilled over as raids into the territories of neighbouring farming peoples. This situation gave rise to a culture which stressed warlike qualities as well as a ruthless will to achieve advantage by whatever means. Both in the Middle East and central Asia, cunning and trickery were part of the nomad's stock in trade, side by side with open-hearted generosity and hospitality.

Equality

Women had a more respected position in some pastoral societies than others. In all groups, leadership was exercised by men. The continual warfare will have reinforced this situation. It will also have produced a regular intake of war captives, especially women and children (most men on a

defeated side would have been massacred). Some members of nomadic societies, therefore, were slaves. On the whole, however, pastoralists tended to have more egalitarian societies than farmers, and certainly more so than civilized ones.

Exchanges

Because nomadic groups travelled comparatively long distances, they were in a good position to trade with the settled populations in which they came into contact. This may have taken the form of gift exchanges, to maintain peaceable relations between the different groups.

Linked to this, in the central Asian steppes especially, the vast areas covered meant that, even from an early date, the nomads acted as a conduit of ideas and technologies – such as wheels, chariots, metallurgy and horse riding – between the more sedentary civilizations they bordered.

Impacts on the environment

The nomadic way of life clearly alters the landscape less overtly than does arable or mixed farming, but this does not mean it has no impact at all. Over generations, grazing herds tend to favour certain plants over others, so that the plant cover in pasturelands become less varied. Also, pastoralists sometimes use fire as a way of turning forest into pasture, and of rejuvenating pasturelands. This can have a significant impact on the type of plants present in such a landscape. Fire and grazing can also prevent forests from growing, and if on mountain slopes, this can lead to erosion.

When nomadic pastoralists encroach on farmland their impact can be devastating for farmers. This is especially so on the marginal agricultural land on the frontier zones bordering the deserts. The grazing of herds can quickly reduce plant cover. This makes the soil unstable, and erosion soon follows. Much land that was once well suited to crops, especially in the Middle East, has been permanently rendered fit only for the grazing of sheep and goats, which can survive in semi-desert landscapes. What has made this worse is the contempt which nomads feel for farmers and farming; the spoiling of agricultural land has sometimes been quite deliberate.

One modern problem, overgrazing, has tended not to occur on a significant scale in the past, in that nomads have been skilled in culling unwanted animals and keeping their herds to optimum sizes. It has mainly been when the populations amongst the herders themselves have expanded, as has occurred after the introduction of modern medicines, that their herds have ballooned in numbers too, beyond the capacity of their environments. This has been a particular problem in regions with fragile ecosystems, such as is found for example in the Sahel, on the southern margins of the Sahara desert.