BONES FROM THE DISTANT PAST: THE NEOlITHIC REVOLUTION

The archaeologist took out his small brush and carefully removed the remaining dirt from the fragment of human skull. To help him reconstruct the life of the long-dead human, he could look at the other artifacts found in the grave. There were broken pieces of roughly-formed, earth-colored pottery, a stone pick-ax for tilling the soil, sheep bones, and tiny clay beads. Based on the evidence, it seemed likely that this human must have lived during the Neolithic Age.

Scholars still debate over the origins of human society, but most agree that sometime before 10,000 B.C. the Neolithic Revolution occurred. Neolithic means "new stone age." This refers to a change in the way of life of early man from mobile hunting and gathering to settled agriculture in villages. An important part of the explanation for this change has to do with the climate. The earth became warmer around this time, and new kinds of animal and plant life flourished. Humans learned that they could be assured of food by planting wild wheat and wild barley. They also learned to domesticate animals like dogs, sheep, and horses. The wild wheat and barley were so easy to harvest that there was no reason to move on in search of food. People began to live permanently in settled villages. It is hard to know how early Neolithic farmers divided the labor, but archaeologists believe that women played a crucial role in the discovery and development of agriculture.

Life became even easier with new inventions like pottery, which was discovered in Iran around 6500 B.C. Others invented weaving in what is now modern-day Turkey. Still others nearby began to use crude carts on wheels to haul food. Now Neolithic humans could store food from year to year and build up surpluses.

With extra supplies some people could also specialize in certain skills, like making pottery or beads or tools. Earlier discoveries could be refined. For example, potters began to decorate their work with beautiful designs. They also experimented with new shapes and materials. The discovery of the potter's wheel enabled the potter to make jugs, dishes, and containers much more easily. Where before a pot would take days to make, now it took only minutes.

Others specialized in knowledge of the climate and the changing seasons so important to farming communities. Because these things seemed mysterious to the rest of the community, these men in time were respected as magicians or priests. At the same time,
certain farmers expanded their holdings and gained power over others. Because of these changes, new social and economic classes emerged. With these advances also came new needs and further outlets for human creativity. As society became more complex, there was a greater need to record and pass on information. Thus, writing was invented, and with it came civilization.

At first Neolithic humans lived in caves or huts made of mud, reeds, or logs. These early dwellings were grouped in small, open villages. The purpose of the village was to form a community of workers who could share the jobs of planting, sowing, and harvesting crops and caring for livestock. The Neolithic age was a dangerous time to live, however. Predatory animals and humans might attack the herds or steal the precious food supplies. Therefore, farmers formed larger communities where they could help to protect each other and their livelihoods. Remains of Neolithic villages have been found all over Europe, Africa, and Asia. However, the most extensive remains of Neolithic villages and towns appear in the Middle East.

One of the best-known of these sites is the Neolithic town of Jericho in Palestine near the Dead Sea. The town dates back to at least 9500 B.C. The inhabitants built massive walls for protection against invaders or floods. They also constructed a great tower 28 feet tall and 33 feet in diameter. To accomplish such a feat, the inhabitants must have been well organized and disciplined. They also built structures for religious practice. Here, statuettes of an Earth Mother have been found. The inhabitants worshipped her in the hope that she would make the land fertile for agriculture. Archaeologists estimate that around 2,000 people lived within the enclosed 13-acre town. There, they cultivated barley and wheat, domesticated goats, and traded salt for obsidian and turquoise.

It is important to remember, however, that development and change occurred at a very slow pace. At least 5,000 years separated the beginning of the Neolithic Revolution from the first civilization. The next important stage of human development occurred elsewhere in the Middle East, in a land between two rivers that the Greeks called Mesopotamia.

**Discussion**

1. How did the Neolithic Revolution cause the emergence of social and economic classes?
2. What conclusions can you draw about the people who lived in Jericho from the remnants of their city?
3. What caused the Neolithic Revolution?
4. Based on the other artifacts, why would the archaeologist in the opening paragraph believe he was looking at the skull of a Neolithic human?

**Map Activity**

Using map B, locate and label the Mediterranean Sea, the Dead Sea, the Jordan River, the Sea of Galilee, and the modern cities of Jerusalem, Beirut, and Damascus. Label the modern states of Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Finally, using a pen or pencil of a different color, locate ancient Jericho on the northern tip of the Dead Sea.
CHALLENGES

1. What does Neolithic mean?

2. When do archaeologists believe the Neolithic Revolution occurred?

3. What was the Neolithic Revolution?

4. What did Neolithic humans learn to plant so that they would be assured of food?

5. How did pottery make life easier for Neolithic humans?

6. What accompanied the ability to write?

7. What is the name of the best-known Neolithic site?

8. Where did the Neolithic Revolution occur?

9. Why do we believe that the residents of Jericho were well organized and disciplined?

10. Do we know why the inhabitants of Jericho built walls?