

Songs have been written about it, places are known for specific types of it, and people plan activities around it. Can you guess what it is? Food! Food is one of the most important elements in our lives. In addition to keeping us alive, food—including the finding of it and the amount of it—has played an important part in the development of civilization and culture.

### The Characteristics of Civilization

There aren't any set rules of what makes a certain group of individuals at a specific time a civilization. But over the years, archaeologists, historians, and other social scientists have come up with some broad characteristics of what defines a civilization and its culture. Many of these characteristics center on acquiring a stable food supply, and especially on being able to *control* that supply. In the opinion of many scientists and social scientists, the domestication of plants and animals was an important point in the advancement of civilization. The word *domestic* means “home,” and domestication refers to bringing plants and/or animals closer to the home, where they can be managed.

Domestication—planting, harvesting, and storing food—was the first essential step toward civilization. From this, other characteristics of civilization evolved. These included choosing to settle in one area, where the population grew based on reliable sources of food. A surplus of food allowed people to stay in one area, instead of traveling from place to place. A *surplus* is an extra amount, left over after meeting the basic requirements for living. With a surplus of food, human settlements grew into villages, then cities.

Once people had enough food, populations could grow, and people could begin to specialize. Specialization occurs when people focus on a specific type of work. Once there was a surplus of food, for example, not everyone had to be involved in agriculture. Some people created pottery to store food. Others became merchants or craftspeople or started early systems of government. Specialization of labor led to the development of a social structure. People now had clearly defined roles in society.

In addition, early civilizations often interacted with one another through trade. In this way, civilizations shared information about their culture and way of life. They also shared technology relating to food production, building, and metalworking. Let's take a look at how characteristics of civilization and culture



Domesticated, or harvested, wheat growing in a field.

developed in two ancient civilizations of the past: the people of the Fertile Crescent and the people of ancient Mesoamerica.

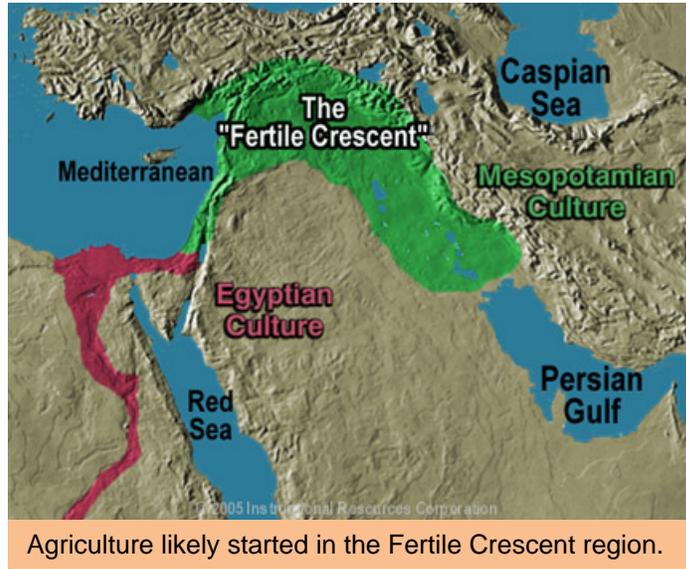
### The Fertile Crescent

Scientists believe that one of the earliest civilizations to domesticate plants and animals was located in a region in the Middle East known as the Fertile Crescent. This refers to the land that includes the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers between the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea and the northern coast of the Persian Gulf. It was in that region, at around 9000

BCE, that a group of ancient people left behind their lives as hunter-gatherers. Instead, they decided to plant grains, harvest them, and live off of them. They were among the first farmers in the world.

They took wild grains and, using their seeds, grew forms of wheat and barley that provided a nutritious, stable food supply. They grew enough to store, saving seeds for the next season’s planting. To cultivate their crops they had to stay in one place. So instead of being constantly on the move, gathering wild grains or following wild herds, they developed villages. They built permanent homes for themselves and granaries to store their crops. They domesticated animals, which became a major food source and a source of wealth, too. With a steady supply of food, the population grew. Villages grew into cities. This early group of farmers became a civilization.

Although there is no written record of exactly what life was like for the first farmers of the Fertile Crescent, we can get a glimpse of it. The Sumerian civilization existed in the Fertile Crescent in about 3500 BCE. They developed one of the first written languages, called cuneiform. Cuneiform was a writing system with wedge-like symbols that represented different words. By studying Sumerian cuneiform, we can understand many things about their lives. We can learn about their religion, farming methods, and systems of government. Writing is not always present in civilizations, but in the case of the ancient Sumerians, their writing system helps us understand more about how the cultures of the Fertile Crescent developed.



### **The First Farmers of Mesoamerica**

A similar kind of written record is not available for the first farmers of the New World. But, based on archaeological evidence, we can learn about the lives of these ancient people, as well. Sometime around 6600 BCE, the ancient people of Mesoamerica started to cultivate a grain. The crop they domesticated was maize, or corn. No one is exactly sure where or when corn cultivation began. But archaeologists have found corncobs dating back to 5400 BCE in a cave in Oaxaca, Mexico. They have found evidence of both maize and squash that date back even further, to around 6600 BCE, in lakeside soil in the Central Balsas River Valley in Mexico.

That lakeside discovery is important in many ways. Scientists found biological evidence that early Mesoamericans domesticated maize from a wild form of the plant. The biological evidence included both pollen from the maize and charcoal, both found in the lakeside soil. The pollen was important, because scientists could use it to trace the early maize back to a wild ancestor plant. But the charcoal was important, too. It indicated that the ancient Mesoamericans had burned the area that was once forest to plant their crops. They had burned off the area as a means of clearing the land in order to make it ready for cultivation. They had controlled the planting and harvesting of maize.

Archaeologists then looked for where the early people lived. They found caves and shelters nearby made of rock, where the early Mesoamericans created their early settlements. Inside, they made another discovery: grinding tools. In addition, the grinding tools had maize starch on them. Like the corn pollen, the tools dated back to around 6600 BCE. So, these early Mesoamericans domesticated maize, lived in rock caves, and ground the maize to make food, thereby creating a stable food supply.

According to archaeological evidence, by around 5000 BCE, the early Mesoamericans in the Tehuacan Valley of Mexico were also growing domesticated pumpkins, peppers, and beans. These people were another of the earliest farming settlements in North America. As their civilization developed from approximately 5000 BCE to 3500 BCE, they built more homes—and bigger homes, too.

Archaeologists discovered artifacts in these early villages as well. These artifacts indicate that the early farmers had basic building, carpentry, cloth weaving, and pottery skills. For archaeologists, this indicates the kind of division of labor, or specialization, that resulted from a stable source of food. Just as in the Fertile Crescent, specialization in the Tehuacan Valley allowed other elements of

culture to develop, including technology and tools, art, architecture, and religion.

### **Similarities and Differences**

We can see how the two early cultures of the Fertile Crescent and Mesoamerica were alike. They both developed ways to domesticate plants. They both created permanent settlements and homes. Both groups had growing populations and the means to feed and house themselves. They both developed skills to work with wood and other resources to build structures and to produce pottery. There is evidence, too, that both groups had a stable enough food source that some of the settlements' inhabitants could devote themselves to other jobs in the community.

But there are clear differences between the two early civilizations, too. There is not any indication that those early Mesoamerican farmers lived in one spot continuously for thousands of years, the way they did in the Fertile Crescent. So there are not “layers” of civilization to discover in Mesoamerica, as there are in the Middle East. There also is not any written record that details the ancient Mesoamerican way of life. While we have much to examine of the ancient past of the people living in the Fertile Crescent, the historic record of the Mesoamericans contains gaps. Instead, their history is full of tantalizing questions. These questions encourage researchers to continue the discovery of more information about these ancient peoples, their way of life, and their path to civilization and culture.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** When did people first begin to domesticate plants in the Fertile Crescent?
  - A. around 9000 BCE
  - B. around 6000 BCE
  - C. around 3500 BCE
  - D. around 1000 CE
  
- 2.** How does a surplus of food contribute to the development of culture?
  - A. A surplus leads to specialization of labor.
  - B. A surplus allows people to develop religions.
  - C. A surplus allows people to trade food for knowledge about starting a culture.
  - D. A surplus means more and more people must be involved in agriculture.
  
- 3.** What is cuneiform?
  - A. an ancient clay pot
  - B. a form of wheat
  - C. maize
  - D. an early system of writing
  
- 4.** Culture includes many different elements. Pick three elements of culture and describe how they are present in your life. How are these elements of culture similar to and different from those in ancient civilizations? Use details to support your answer.