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Teacher Background Materials

I. Unit Overview

Sometime between 12,000 and 10,000 B. C. small bands of hunter-gatherers roamed the earth as they had done for 500,000 years. But things began to change about this time. Thus we call the period from 10,000 to 3,500 B.C. the New Stone Age, or the Neolithic period. This fascinating era is characterized by the development of farming (the domestication of plants and animals), and the resultant move into hamlets and villages. It has been called a great leap forward in the history of humankind.

This unit will investigate the profound changes brought about by the domestication of plants and animals. **Lesson One** will place the Neolithic period in its geological time-frame and explain the discoveries made by archaeologists, which are our main source of information for this period. **Lesson Two** will describe the shift from hunting and gathering to herding and farming. **Lesson Three** will discuss the archaeological sties of Beidha and Çatal Hüyük as examples of permanent villages and houses. **Lesson Four** will cover developments in both decorative and religious arts. It is essential that students of world history understand that the Neolithic Revolution was the necessary foundation for the great civilizations that followed. It was one of the most important single innovations in the evolution of human society before the Industrial Revolution. As a result of the coming of agriculture, humans controlled and regulated their food supply rather than depending on foraging and hunting in the wild. Without this essential shift to plant cultivation and stockraising, total world populations might have remained less than 10 million. Because domestication permitted an assured food

II. Unit Context

This Neolithic unit should follow a larger study on the origins of humankind. It fits chronologically between the Old Stone Age and the Bronze Age. It precedes and lays the essential foundation for a study of the rise of later civilizations in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley. Thematically the unit should be seen as a profound leap for humanity, leading to the production of food surpluses, which permitted denser population, cities, and more attention to creativity and innovation.

Farming may have emerged first in Southwest Asia, that is, the region that today we call the Middle East. Any discussion of the Neolithic Revolution, however, must recognize that farming may have developed independently in as many as seven or eight different parts of the world. Factors in Eastern Asia led to the domestication of millet, rice, and yams, and in Central and South America to the domestication of beans, squash, gourds, potatoes, and corn. It is important to realize that the genius of humankind at adaptation was not unique to the Ancient Near East. In these other areas the same consequences followed: division of labor, specialization, technological and artistic advances, city development, and large-scale political organization.

III. Correlation to National History Standards

The Neolithic Revolution: The First Farmers and Shepherds provides teaching materials that address *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 1**, "The Beginnings of Human Society." Lessons specifically support **Standard 2**, "The process that led to the emergence of agricultural societies around the world." Students are to be able to explain how and why humans established settled communities and experimented with agriculture (**Standard 2A**) and how agricultural societies developed around the world (**Standard 2B**).

The unit likewise integrates a number of specific Historical Thinking Standards including: establish temporal order in constructing historical narratives (**Standard 1, Chronological Thinking**); draw upon visual sources and data in historical maps (Standard 2, Historical Comprehension); hold interpretations of history as tentative and evaluate major debates among historians (**Standard 3, Historical Analysis and Interpretation**); and, interrogate historical data (**Standard 4, Historical Research**).

IV. Unit Objectives

1. To be able to define and describe the Neolithic period in world history.

2. To discover how and why we are dependent upon archaeological evidence for information about the ways in which prehistoric humans lived.

3. To learn how to work with and interpret renderings of archaeological evidence as historical sources.

4. To explain how relatively "recent" the Neolithic Revolution is in geological time.

5. To distinguish between humans as hunters and gatherers and humans as domesticators of plants and animals (food producers).

6. To become aware of the profound changes in society brought about by the domestication of plants and animals and the development of agriculture.

7. To identify and describe some of these changes as they affected art, religion, domestic architecture, and the growth of villages.

8. To identify the Neolithic period as a major turning point in human history.

V. Lessons

Lesson One: Geological Time and Archaeology

Lesson Two: The Domestication of Plants and Animals

Lesson Three: Houses and Villages

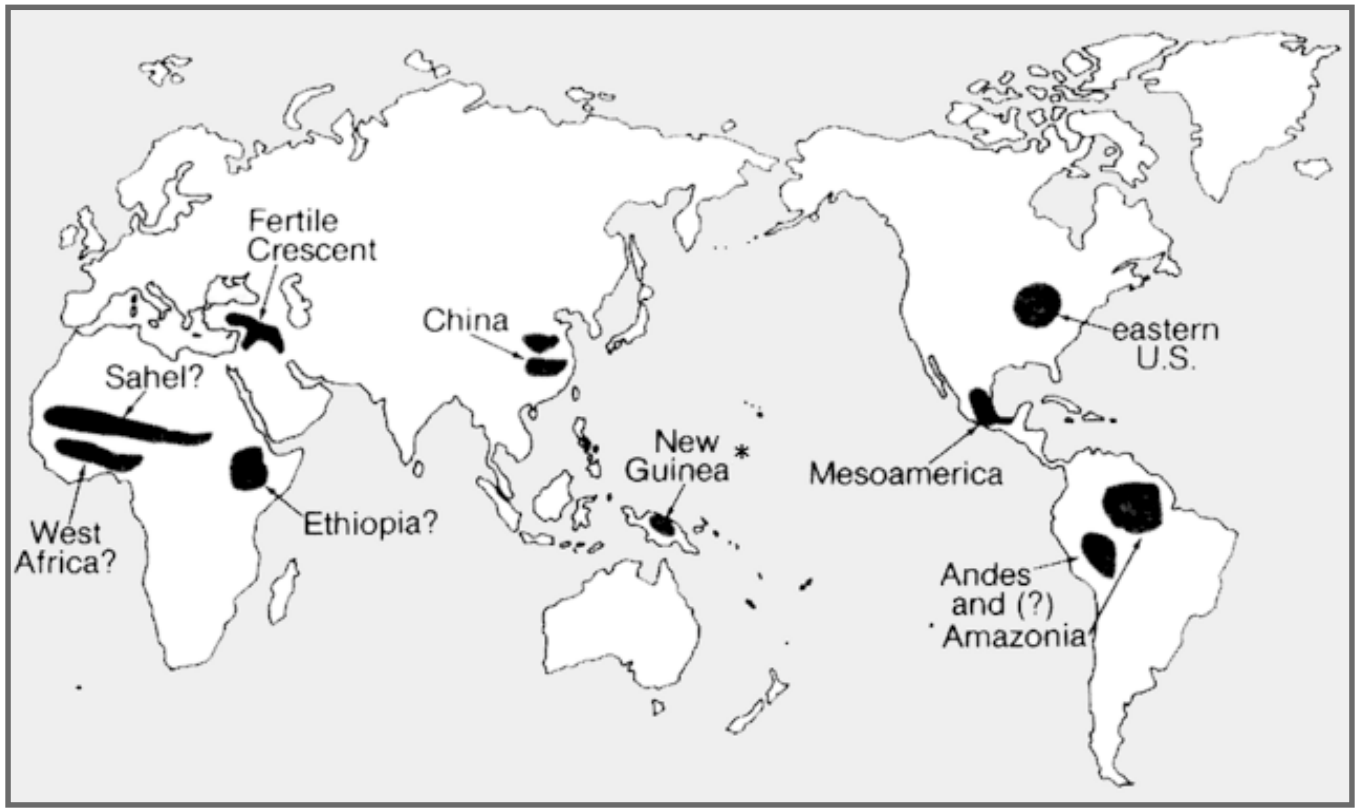
Lesson Four: Art: Decorative and Religious

VI. Introduction to *The Neolithic Revolution: The First Farmers and Shepherds*

The units of time into which historians divide up the past are always, to some extent, arbitrary. We talk about the "Middle Ages," the "Classical Era," or the "Early Modern" period, none of which would have been identifiable as such by people living through them. The terms provide a convenient system within which to organize our understanding of the past. In the same manner, archaeologists and ancient historians have divided the early history of humankind into ages: the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age. When the terms were originally defined, historians equated the beginning of each with the introduction of a new type of technology in the manufacture of tools and weapons. With advances in the sophistication of archaeological techniques, scholars have since realized that the definitions of the "ages" are too simplistic. The system continues to be used, but with the recognition, for example, that most of the earliest "bronzes" were not bronze at all but copper or other copper alloys. Also, the introduction of iron did not immediately cause sweeping changes in society because manufacturing processes were initially faulty and early iron was weak and no match for bronze. The Stone Age, meanwhile, has been subdivided into two major parts, the Paleolithic ("Old Stone Age") and Neolithic ("New Stone Age"), in recognition of the great changes that took place in the last few millennia of the period. The Neolithic is the name given to the time when humankind first settled in villages, herded and domesticated animals, and farmed the land.

The reasons for the dramatic changes in the ancient economy are intriguing but elusive. Why did our ancestors, who for thousands of years had survived on food that they could hunt or forage, choose to take the risky step of settling in one place and trusting their survival to the vagaries of the weather and its effects on their crops? Archaeologists and anthropologists have shown that early farming involved much more labor and much more risk than did hunting and gathering; a crisis must therefore have forced men and women to give up their traditional way of life and resort to agriculture. Archaeologists have put forward many suggestions as to the nature of this crisis (such as climatic change or population pressure) and the sequence of events that followed: whether settled communities preceded farming or vice versa, whether herding preceded or succeeded the growing of crops, and whether the earliest farming took place in the "nuclear zone"—the area blessed with plenty of rainfall, fertile soil, and abundant wild life—or outside it.

None of the theories has yet found general acceptance, and in the following unit we have not emphasized the question of why agriculture developed. The nature of the crisis and the sequence of events giving rise to village life are less important than the fact of village life in the Neolithic Age and its significance for the rest of humankind's history.



Origins of Food Production

Darkened areas indicate independent rise of food production. Some sites (marked?) may have been influenced by food production in another area. New Guinea (marked*) is thought to have independently produced food, but the exact crop produced there is unknown.

Map adapted from Jared Diamond, *Diamonds, Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 99.