

Section 3 – Settlement

From Nomad to Settler

The need to find a safe place to raise the children has always been a human imperative, not less so for our ancestors. As climatic and other conditions made perennial sources of food and water available, the impetus to wander must have been balanced against the advantages of sedentary life. Likely this was a slow process, with groups continuing to migrate for part of the year. Even once the women became settled in one location all year round, the men probably still organised hunting trips into their old territories. The egalitarian two-group structure we had evolved as wandering hunter-gatherers stayed with us and developed; it was not until much later that this changed.¹

The adoption of sedentary lifestyle was not a smooth process and was dependent on the climate and resources available. In the early stages, while the people may have cultivated small gardens on patches that they revisited during the year, there was no widespread organised agriculture. Nevertheless the cultures were successful and long-lived.

The Natufians

The Natufians lived at the western end of the Fertile Crescent, in the Middle East and Anatolia, now Turkey, twelve and a half thousand years ago. During the 1920s, British archaeologist Dorothy Garrod excavated one of their sites, at Wadi an-Natuf near Tel Aviv, and named them after it.

The Natufians were nomadic hunter-gatherers, like thousands of other scattered groups of people such as those who built Göbekli Tepe. They had lived like this for tens of thousands of years, and their society showed little change. But in the hills of the Levant, they found wild forms of wheat and barley that could be cooked and eaten. They made crude biscuits from crushed grains mixed with a little fat and water and baked on a stone. It was the beginning of bread.

Grains have crucial benefits that set them apart from the other foods gathered by foragers, and the most significant is that they can be stored. Grains will remain good for a decade or more if kept dry.

¹ Dyble, M. *et al.* *Sex equality can explain the unique social structure of hunter-gatherer bands.* Science. 15 May 2015

While there is evidence that the Natufians did cultivate, they did not practise this on a large scale. For hundreds of years they continued to live as they had, gathering grains at harvest-time and storing them, and hunting antelope and other game. In addition, they were responsible for another development that remains with us today, the domestication of animals.

Dogs probably first entered human camps to scavenge for scraps of food that had been discarded, but soon the benefit of cooperation must have become obvious to both sides. Dogs would help with the hunt, scenting game, tracking it, and running it down. They would scavenge and clean up around the camp, probably making things more pleasant for everyone, and they would help the mothers mind the children. As modern-dog owners can attest, family pets are reluctant to see the 'pack' separated and they will try to bring a wandering child back. It has even been suggested that they kept the children's bottoms clean! We remain unsure as to whether dogs adopted us or we adopted them.²

Other animals may, like dogs, have partially self-domesticated; cats feeding on the rats and mice that lived on human refuse, and even goats, well known to be able to eat almost anything. Alternatively, perhaps hunters found young goats after killing the parents and took them home, or children adopted them as pets.

People cannot live only on grains. Without the sophisticated understanding of diet that modern vegans must have just to survive, meat is essential to a healthy life. We are omnivores for a reason. The domestication of prey animals was as great an innovation as the systematic harvesting and storage of grains. It was no longer necessary to hunt for meat, although it is likely that this did continue.

The human habit of chopping down trees to clear land and for firewood and the goatish habit of eating all the young saplings combine to denude terrain very efficiently. Losing the trees makes the soil vulnerable to erosion and a vicious cycle ensues, with people clearing fresh land to compensate for this until the whole area becomes deforested. This has drastic consequences for the local ecology.

The Younger Dryas was a cold and dry period that occurred between 10,800 and 9500 BCE, characterised in the Middle East by extended drought. Archaeologists believe that a combination of this and the depredations of goats caused the fragile environment that sustained the Natufians to collapse into desert. Their lifestyle was brought to an end.

² Richard Dawkins suggests that the domestication of dogs was a two-way process, with wolves self-selecting for tameness and willingness to approach the human habitation, and then humans continuing the process. He posits an intermediary stage that he calls the 'town dog' and suggests that these were not very different from the mongrels of feral dog populations today. (Dawkins, R. *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution*. Black Swan. 2010.)

Amongst the items the Natufians left, archaeologists have found one that is fascinating: a tiny statuette of a woman and a man in sexual embrace. It is known as the Ain Sakhri Lovers and is in the collection of the British Museum in London. Precisely what the significance of this was we do not know, but it is clear that sex was something the culture felt strongly enough about to make into art. We see in the successor cultures that the act of sex became hugely important as a religious act in itself; this figure may be a precursor.