

Section 5 – The Advent of Agriculture

The scene is set: Ubaid

A simple, agrarian culture appeared in eastern Mesopotamia around 5,500 BCE. It has been named 'Ubaid'. The Ubaidians lived in scattered hamlets and villages, with very little in the way of infrastructure. They cultivated patches of land, probably irrigating them with water carried from the river in reed buckets. They constructed floating islands of reed bundles and on these they built distinctive houses, also of reeds. This lifestyle persisted for at least seven millennia. The people who lived there until the 1990s, still building reed houses, fishing the river and cultivating the soil, are called the Marsh Arabs. Their world was known as 'Eden'.¹

At some point early in its development, Ubaid culture was changed by the arrival of nomadic Semitic herders. Where had these nomadic herdsmen come from, and how did they become herders? Since the domestication of animals began in settlements, there are several ways in which this may have happened. Perhaps wandering hunter-gatherers came into contact with those who had already settled and either traded for or stole the animals, or perhaps they came from settlements with domesticated animals that had been abandoned due to crop failure or loss of water resources. We know that climate change brought about the demise of many proto-agrarian settlements in marginal areas. Those settlers probably did not die out but returned to a wandering life, taking their animals with them.

It has been suggested that the unification of the two cultures was through invasion and conquest, but this view is speculative. It is more likely that it was a result of cooperation.

There are mutual advantages for a culture based on arable farming to meld with a pastoral one. Meat, and particularly fat, is very high-energy food that is easy for us to digest, especially once it has been cooked. It can give humans the full set of amino acids necessary for a healthy life. In addition, animals like sheep and goats provide milk, leather, wool and many other products.

On the other hand, as omnivores we cannot live on meat alone. Humans cannot synthesise vitamins and must ingest them as a part of their diet. Meat and fat provide the fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E, and K, but we also require vitamins B and C, which are obtained from fresh fruit and vegetables.² Many other products of arable farming are also attractive to herders, such

¹ They would doubtless be there still, but after the first Gulf War, Saddam Hussein determined to exterminate the Marsh Arabs, and used engineers to achieve what hostile gods and soldiers could not: he drained their wetlands and destroyed Eden.

² Vitamin C is essential to cell replication and insufficiency results in the disease known as scurvy.

as bread, beer and flax for weaving. Also, it is unlikely that the shepherds would have been in a position to overwhelm populous settlements defended by fit men armed with scythes, sickles and other farming implements.

In addition to providing animal produce, the nomads fulfilled another need of the burgeoning agrarian culture; a workforce to help with the seasonal harvest. The necessity for such a workforce persists today and without it even modern agriculture would be severely handicapped. This seasonal help would have been vital in a non-mechanised system. Thus the settled farmers had something else to tempt wandering, herding people to stay: work.

Rather than a by conquest then, for which there is no archaeological evidence, the original Ubaidians and the Semitic herders probably came together in an alliance of mutual benefit based on trade and barter. Formalising their relationship would have given them access to one another's produce, and defined areas for arable farming and pastoral grazing. This suggests a process of alliance wherein the settled, farming people remained in control, not one in which they succumbed to war and conquest.³

These factors, often overlooked, present convincing evidence that the Ubaidian and Semitic cultures came together more or less peacefully. Their association was clearly successful, because it attracted another group towards the end of the fifth millennium BCE. The newcomers were the Sumerians, who were to give their name to the entire culture and region.

³ A similar process, where we have much more archaeological evidence, has been described in the highlands of Canaan, thousands of years later, by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Silberman. This explains the symbiotic relationship between the settled people and the nomads. (Finkelstein, I & Silberman, N. *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*. Touchstone. 2002.)