

Student Handout 2- Animal-Herding Societies

Animal-herding societies. From about the fourth millennium BCE (4000 BCE), Afroeurasia saw the development of a new type of society and economy in parts of the Great Arid Zone. This is the belt of dry and semi-arid land that extends across Afroeurasia from the Sahara Desert in the west to Manchuria in northern China.



Here, communities began to organize themselves around a specialized way of life based on herding domesticated animals, like sheep, cattle, horses, or camels. Known as pastoral nomadism, this economic system permitted humans to adapt in larger numbers than ever before to climates where intensive farming was not possible. Pastoral nomads lived mainly on the products of their livestock—meat, milk, blood, hides, hair, wool, and bone. They often grazed and migrated over extensive areas, and they only planted crops either as a minor, supplemental activity, or not at all.

Stop and Jot: Why didn't nomadic pastoralists settle down and farm where they were? (This is an inferential question... you need to use information in the text to make your best guess!)

By the third millennium BCE (3000 BCE), animal-breeding societies were appearing in a number of regions, notably along the margins of the Great Arid Zone. These communities found they could adapt to dry conditions because sheep, cattle, and a few other domesticated animals could thrive on wild grasses and shrubs. These animals converted vegetable matter that humans could not digest into meat, milk, and blood, which they could.

Stop and Jot: Why did humans need these animals to survive on the margins of the Great Arid Zone? What was this area like and what did animals do to help humans survive?

Pastoral communities usually followed regular migratory routes from pasture to pasture as the seasons changed. When families were on the move, they lived in hide tents or other movable dwellings, and their belongings had to be limited to what they could carry along. This does not mean that they wished to cut themselves off from farming societies or cities. Rather, pastoralists eagerly traded with people from farming societies. In doing so, they obtained farm produce or other items in exchange for their hides, wool, and dairy products. Sometimes pastoralists even traded their services -- as soldiers and bodyguards for farming communities. Thus the ecological borders between pastoral societies and town-building populations were usually scenes of lively trade.

Because pastoral societies were mobile, and not permanently settled, the way they expressed social relationships differed. Instead of referring to people by where they lived, pastoral nomads expressed social relationships in terms of kinship -- that is, who was related by "blood" to whom—closely, distantly, or not at all.

Turn and Talk: Why did pastoralists move so regularly and how did they interact with agrarian communities in this process?