

Chapter 2: Mesopotamia: 2-1 Neolithic Southwest Asia
Book Title: World Civilizations
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2-1 Neolithic Southwest Asia

Around 15,000 B.C.E., the world's climate began warming after centuries of Ice Age conditions, melting glaciers in the northern hemisphere, raising sea levels, and covering the planet's landmasses with vast inland lakes, streams, and forests. In southwestern Asia giant stands of oak and pistachio forests and bounteous herds of game replaced Ice Age grasslands. Hunter-gatherers of the Near and Middle East, called [Natufians \(The earliest settlers of the Levantine Corridor, they founded the first known settled communities.\)](#) (nah-TOO-fee-ans), stalked antelope and Persian gazelle and harvested wild nuts and grasses using flint-bladed sickles, enabling them to dramatically expand their populations. However, around 11,000 B.C.E., a catastrophe occurred. Known to archaeologists as the *Younger Dryas Event*, glacial melt water that had accumulated in a colossal, freshwater lake in northern Canada suddenly burst into the Atlantic Gulf Stream, triggering a thousand-year-long regression in Europe and southwestern Asia to the cooler and drier conditions of the late Ice Age.

The abundant sources of water and plant foods previously available to humans and animals alike disappeared, forcing Natufians to congregate in small, semipermanent villages near surviving streams and rivers. Coming after a time when populations had grown dramatically, these catastrophic events forced small groups of these western Asians to adopt more intensive ways of managing their food resources. Basically, this encouraged them to switch from gathering and hunting to planting and domesticating cereals such as emmer wheat, einkorn, and barley, which grew in wild forms in their natural environment. Thus, the world's first farming settlements appeared in a section of the Near East called the [Levantine Corridor \(Region that included most of present-day Israel-Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and northern Iraq. Archaeologists have discovered the earliest evidence of agriculture here.\)](#), an arc of land that was endowed with especially high water tables and encompassed much of present-day Turkey, Israel, Syria, and the Euphrates River valley. By 7500 B.C.E., cereal agriculture had become widespread among the Natufians and, furthermore, they had added to their food stocks by domesticating and breeding goats and sheep. Cattle were introduced later still.

The switch to agriculture and livestock breeding provided an abundance that allowed people to grow their populations and congregate in towns and cities for the first time in history; and wherever this transformation occurred, the world's earliest recorded civilizations also appeared. Among the earliest of these settled communities were Jericho, founded around 8000 B.C.E., and somewhat later, Çatal Hüyük (see [Chapter 1](#)). The first of these was located in a part of the Levantine Corridor that included the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers—a land that the ancient Greeks called [Mesopotamia \(Literally, the “land between the rivers”; the fertile lands between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers where the](#)

earliest known civilizations appeared in the fourth millennium B.C.E.) (“land between the rivers”), now the southeastern portion of Iraq.

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