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Introductory Concerns

1.1 What Is the Ancient Near East?

Few people use the phrase “Near East” today. Yet, it has survived in the study of ancient history in a scholarship that is rooted in the nineteenth century when the term identified the remains of the Ottoman empire on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Today we say Middle East to designate this geographical area, but the two terms do not exactly overlap, and ancient historians and archaeologists continue to speak of the Near East. Already this habit gives a certain vagueness to what constitutes the ancient history of this area, and the geographical boundaries of the region can differ substantially from study to study. Some definitions, then, of what this book covers are in order.

In this survey of history, Near East designates the region from the eastern Mediterranean coast to central Iran, and from the Black Sea to the Red Sea. Egypt, whose ancient history intersects with that of the Near East at many times, is not included, except when its empire extended into Asia in the second half of the second millennium. The boundaries remain vague, because in essence we study a set of core areas, and the reach of each one of them shifted in different periods. Foremost in any study of the ancient Near East is Mesopotamia, a term we use to designate the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in modern-day Iraq and northern Syria. It was home to many cultures and political formations, whose sequence we know well from an abundant documentation. At times Mesopotamian states extended far beyond their borders, drawing otherwise poorly known regions, such as the Arabian peninsula, into their orbit. The same is true for other core areas in central Anatolia, southwest Iran, and elsewhere. As historians, we rely on sources; their coverage, both in geographical terms and in what facets of life they document, fluctuates enormously over time. When they report on activity somewhere, that place becomes part of the Near East; when

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they do not, we have little to tell. The ancient history of the Near East is like a dark room in which the sources offer isolated points of light, some brighter than others. They shine especially clearly on certain places and periods, but leave much else concealed. It is the historian's task to try to make sense of the whole.

The chronological boundaries of ancient Near Eastern history are also ambiguous, and both the beginning and the end dates are flexible. If we consider history to rely on written sources, as tradition often does, the origins of writing in Babylonia around 3000 BC, must be seen as the start of history. Yet, script was just one of several innovations that had roots in earlier times, and the earliest texts contain no "historical" information that we can understand beyond the fact that people had the ability to write. Thus, most histories of the Near East start in so-called prehistory, oftentimes around 10,000, and describe the developments that took place before writing existed. During these seven thousand years, so many important changes happened in the lifestyles of humans that they deserve in-depth treatment, using archaeological sources and methodologies. There is not enough room in this book, which intends to discuss the historical periods thoroughly, to do full justice to all prehistoric developments. Therefore we will start in the late fourth millennium when several prehistoric processes culminated simultaneously, and also writing appeared, changing the nature of our source material. I will outline earlier developments only cursorily in this introduction.

History rarely knows clear-cut endings. Even when states are definitively destroyed, they leave an impact, the duration of which depends on whether one looks at political, economic, cultural, or other aspects of history. But the historian has to stop somewhere and the choice of when needs justification. Various dates are commonly used to end the ancient history of the Near East, most often either the fall of the last native Mesopotamian dynasty in 539 or Alexander of Macedon's defeat of Persia in 331. I have chosen Alexander as the last figure of my political history, because while the changes he instituted were probably not momentous for most of the people at that time, our access to the historical data is transformed starting in his reign. The gradual shift from indigenous to external classical sources necessitates a different historiographical approach. The arrival of Hellenism is a fitting borderline because the historian's access to events changes significantly.

Some twenty-seven centuries elapsed between 3000 and 331. Few historical disciplines engage with such a long time span, comparable to what is covered in surveys of European civilization that link Homeric Greece to the present day. While we can see clearly distinct periods in that western evolution and appreciate the pivotal changes that took place over time, it is harder to do so for ancient Near Eastern history. Our distance from the Near East, both in time and in spirit, sometimes leads to a view that blurs distinctions and reduces everything to one large static mass. On the other hand, one can take a diametrically opposed view and fragment this history into short, coherent, and manageable segments. Discontinuity then becomes the focus. The latter attitude lies at the basis of the standard periodization of Near Eastern history, which strings together a sequence of phases that are mostly named after royal dynasties. Each phase experienced its cycle of

rise, prosperity, and decline, as if it were a biological entity, and in between fell the so-called Dark Ages, moments of historical silence.

I take an intermediate stance here, and while I maintain the traditional subdivisions into dynastic periods, I group them into larger units. We should not overemphasize continuities, but we can recognize basic patterns. In political terms, for example, power in the Near East was oftentimes fragmented and there were only relatively short-lived moments of centralization under rulers or dynasties whose territorial reach became increasingly wider. But these moments of centralization tend to draw our attention more, because they produced large numbers of written and archaeological sources. Taking the escalating growth of political forms into account, this history is divided into the ages of city-states, territorial states, and empires, each with their moments of greatness and disruption (if we equate power with greatness). The city-state was the primary political element from 3000 to approximately 1600, territorial states dominated the scene from that point on to the early first millennium, and empires characterized later history. Mesopotamian states usually demonstrate these stages of development most conclusively, but it is clear that they also occurred elsewhere in the Near East.

In the end, the availability and extent of the sources define the ancient Near East as a historical subject and subdivide its history. Extensive written and archaeological documentation appears in certain places at certain times, and those regions and moments form the core of the subject. The cultures of Mesopotamia dominate in this respect. They were often the leading civilizations of their time and had an impact over the entire Near East. When they influenced or controlled non-Mesopotamian regions, those areas become included in our research; when they did not, we often lose track of what happened outside Mesopotamia. Archaeological exploration in recent decades has made it increasingly apparent that other regions of the Near East experienced developments independent of Mesopotamia and that all cultural innovations cannot be credited to that area. Still, it remains difficult to write continuous histories of those regions without relying on a Mesopotamia-centered model. Mesopotamia provides the geographical and chronological unity to Near Eastern historiography. Its use of an age-old script, its preservation of religious practices, and its cultural continuity from the third to the first millennia allow us to look at its long history as a whole. The study of the other cultures in the region is mostly pegged to that of Mesopotamian culture, but we should not ignore their contributions to the history of the Near East.

1.2 The Sources

The presence of sources determines the confines of ancient Near Eastern history. Fortunately, they are incredibly abundant and varied in nature for the whole of this long history. Texts, the primary source for the historian, have survived in the hundreds of thousands – a recently published estimate speaks of more than one million. From early on, kings carved inscriptions on stone monuments, many of which were among the first archaeological finds made in Mesopotamia in

Box 1.1 *What's in a name?*

Just as the use of the term Near East is now uncommon outside the study of ancient history and archaeology, the exact meaning of many other geographical names is peculiar to those disciplines. Oftentimes usage is a matter of habit and it is rarely spelled out explicitly what names designate. They regularly derive from ancient sources, but their meaning was modified to indicate a somewhat different reality, oftentimes following British imperial terminology of the nineteenth century, when the study of the ancient Near East developed. One such term is Mesopotamia, a Greek label for the area encircled by the great bend of the Euphrates in Syria, but now applied to the entire region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and sometimes even beyond these boundaries. Two distinct zones make up Mesopotamia: Assyria in the north and Babylonia in the south. These are in origin political terms referring to ancient states that existed after 1450 BC, but they are often used purely as geographical designations at any time in history – I will use them in this way here. Many scholars utilize another political name, Sumer (or at times the non-existent Sumeria), to refer to the southern half of Babylonia in the fourth and third millennia. I do not follow that practice.

Outside Mesopotamia, ancient Near Eastern histories often speak of the Levant, that is, where the sun rises from a European perspective, to designate the region along the eastern Mediterranean coast between Turkey and Egypt. To its north the Asiatic part of modern Turkey is usually referred to as Anatolia, a name derived from the Greek word for sunrise. Also the Roman phrase Asia Minor is used to refer to the same region. Country names, such as Iran, Syria, Egypt, and Israel often appear but their borders do not exactly coincide with those of the modern nation-states. The use of the term Iraq is rare, except for in British publications. Syria-Palestine and the adjective Syro-Palestinian is a purely geographical term. All this may sound confusing at first, but quite soon it is usually clear what the author has in mind.

modern times. More important, however, was the clay tablet, the medium of writing that developed in southern Mesopotamia and that all Near Eastern cultures adopted. It has amazing durability in the dry soil of the region, and texts from the receipt of a single sheep to the long *Epic of Gilgamesh* are plentiful. The survival of numerous documents of daily use distinguishes the ancient Near East from other ancient cultures. In Egypt, Greece, and Rome, similar things were written, but on parchment and papyrus, materials that have survived in unusual conditions only. The writings from the ancient Near East are rich not only in number but also in what they cover: the economy, royal building activity, military campaigns, government business, literature, science, and many other aspects of life are abundantly documented.

Archaeological material has become increasingly important as one of the historian's tools. Not only do excavations allow us to determine that the Hittites were present in northern Syria in the fourteenth century, for instance, but they also permit us to study the material conditions of their lives there. The Near East is

covered with artificial mounds that were formed over the centuries by the debris of human occupation. Those are called *tell* in Arabic, *tepe* in Persian, and *höyük* in Turkish, terms we find in the names of most archaeological sites. The possibilities for excavation are so great that we have only scratched the surface so far, despite more than 150 years of work. Major cities such as Uruk, Babylon, Nineveh, and Hattusa have been explored over many decades and have yielded numerous buildings, monuments, objects, and texts. But when one compares what has been uncovered with what remains hidden, it is clear that this is only a beginning. There remain thousands of unexplored sites, not all of which can be systematically investigated. Since dams, roads, and agricultural developments are constantly being built and threaten to annihilate ancient sites, rescue efforts often determine the selection of what is excavated.

We should not underestimate how much the ups and downs of archaeological exploration influence our outlook on Near Eastern history. Political circumstances in the modern Middle East especially have determined where one can excavate. Imperial competition between Great Britain and France in the mid-nineteenth century led their representatives to focus on the massive sites in northern Iraq, the region of Assyria. There they found the most impressive monuments to be displayed in national museums, which triggered the early interest in Assyrian history. Only later in the century, when concerns about origins peaked, did archaeologists explore the south of Iraq systematically, in search of the earlier Sumerians. More recent events have had a dramatic impact on archaeological research. The Iranian revolution of 1979, the Iraq wars of 1991 and 2003, the current civil war in Syria, and other conflicts have forced archaeologists to abandon projects, especially in the heartland of Mesopotamia. They have sought new terrain in regions previously considered peripheral, and thereby have highlighted developments there. As a consequence they forced us to reconsider the primacy and dominance of Mesopotamia in many aspects of history.

A final point needs to be made about the distribution and nature of the sources. In the ancient Near East, there is a direct correlation between political centralization of power, economic development, the construction of monumental architecture, and the increased production of written documents of all types. Thus the sources, both archaeological and textual, accentuate moments of political strength. History is by nature a positivistic science (meaning that we discuss what is preserved), and necessarily focuses on those moments for which the sources are most plentiful. In between appeared what we call the “Dark Ages.” Still, there is almost a continuous coverage for the three millennia of ancient Near East history, and at times sources are very abundant. What is available for twenty-first century Babylonia, for example, surpasses in number and scope the written documentation from many later periods in history. The ancient Near East provides the first cultures in world history in which true and detailed historical research can take place. In this research we have to remain very aware of the nature of the sources, however. Since they derive almost exclusively from the institutions and individuals that held power, they focus on their activities and present their points of view. They always describe the successes of kings, for example, never their

failures. They show the holders of power as the sole actors in societies, ignoring people and processes that opposed their actions or weakened their effectiveness. It is easy to be misled into seeing the history of the ancient Near East as a long sequence of glorious deeds of kings, whose holds on their societies was absolute. That was certainly not the case and throughout history policies failed, opposing trends operated, individuals and communities escaped the controls the official sources proclaim to have existed, and so on. Counter narratives existed, but we cannot recover them from explicit accounts. Instead we need to question those accounts we do have – to read between the lines – to balance out the picture.

1.3 Geography

The Near East is a vast landmass situated at the intersection of three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe. Three tectonic plates meet there and their movements determine the geology of the region. The Arabian plate presses to the north underneath the Iranian plate, pushing it upwards, and is itself forced down. Where the two plates meet, there is a long depression stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf in which the Tigris and Euphrates rivers flow, turning a desert into highly fertile land wherever their waters reach. The African and Arabian plates meet at the western edge of the Near East and are separated by a narrow valley alongside the Amanus and Lebanon mountains, which run parallel to the Mediterranean coast. There is little room for coastal settlement except in the south, where the plain widens. The north and the east of the Near East are also dominated by high mountain ranges, the Taurus and Zagros, which contain the sources of all rivers in the region. The south of the region is a huge flat landmass, forming the Syrian and Arabian deserts. These become more mountainous the farther south one goes and they are almost entirely deprived of water.

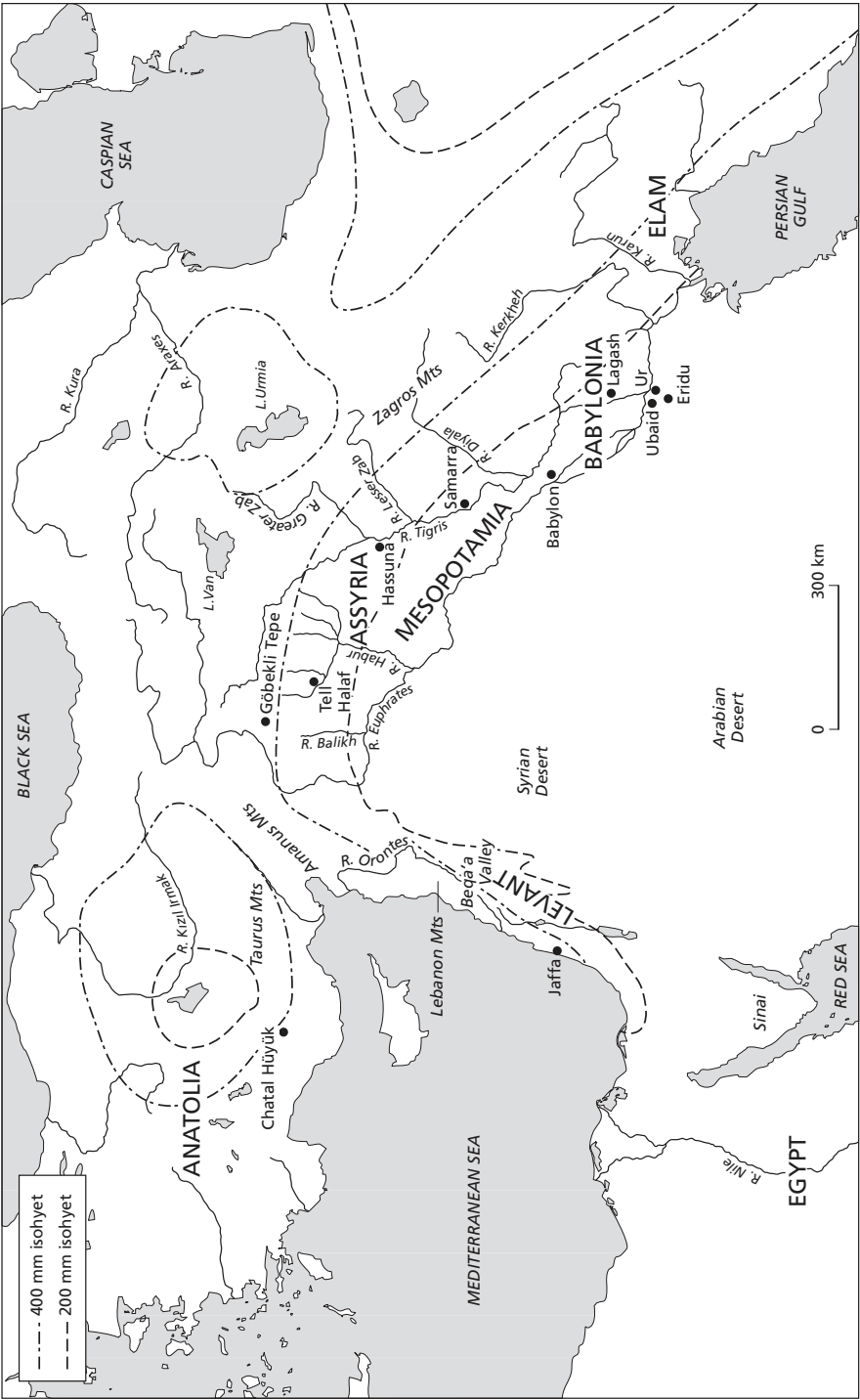
Geological phenomena, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, as well as the effects of wind, rain, and water have created a highly diverse area. Quite in contrast to the popular view of the Middle East as a flat monotonous expanse, the variation in natural environments is enormous, ranging from large marshes to vast arid deserts and from low-lying alluvial zones to high mountains. Also on a local scale great ecological variation exists in distinct microenvironments. Two examples demonstrate this. Babylonia, the area between the Persian Gulf and modern-day Baghdad, may seem an area with little diversity that relied on irrigation by the Euphrates and Tigris rivers for its survival. But that stretch contained very different ecological zones. The north was a desert plateau where agriculture was only possible in the narrow river valleys. Somewhat downstream the rivers entered a flat alluvium, but still had clearly defined channels, allowing for irrigation agriculture in square fields. South of the city of Babylon the rivers broke up into constantly shifting branches that ran almost on top of the land, and numerous man-made canals brought water into elongated fields. Finally, near the Persian Gulf vast marshes made agriculture impossible. In each of these zones distinct ecological niches were present in close proximity to one another, depending on access to

water and other factors, each providing a variety of resources: fish and reeds in the marshes, fodder for herds of sheep in the northern steppe, and so on. The extent and location of these niches shifted due to natural factors and human activity, and the landscape underwent change over time. But natural diversity always characterized the area we summarily call Babylonia.

In the mountains of the Lebanon there was an even greater range of ecologies. The Beqa'a valley between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon ranges is some 100 kilometers long and 25 kilometers wide. On a map this small area looks uniform, but there are local differences. The high mountains cause plenty of rainfall on the western side; the area to the east is consequently dry. Springs, while numerous, are unevenly dispersed through the region and the Orontes River is not a good source for irrigation water. Wetlands alternate with very dry areas, zones of intensive horticulture with zones where only animal herders can survive. The valley is thus a collection of what has been called micro-ecologies, each enabling different lifestyles.

Within this vast area we have to recognize great variability in the natural environment. However, there are certain basic characteristics with important repercussions for the livelihood of the inhabitants. Agriculture, the prerequisite for the permanent settlement of large populations, is difficult. Rainfall is scarce almost everywhere because the high mountains in the west leave large parts of the Near East in the rain shadow. Agriculture that relies on rain, so-called dry farming, requires at least 200 mm of water annually. The 200 mm isohyet, that is, the line that connects those points of equal rainfall, runs in a great arch from the southern Levant to the Persian Gulf. The mountains and foothills receive more rain, the plains less to almost none at all. But the line on the map is misleading: annual variability is great and there is a large marginal zone which at times receives sufficient rain, at times does not. Rainfed agriculture is only guaranteed when one reaches the 400 mm isohyet. The effect on human settlement is drastic. South of the 400 mm isohyet, agriculture is possible only if there are rivers to provide irrigation water. The Tigris and Euphrates afford a lifeline to the Mesopotamian plain where rainfall is scarce and erratic. These two rivers and their tributaries, the Balikh, Habur, Greater and Lesser Zab, Diyala, Kerkheh, and Karun, originate in the mountains of Turkey and Iran where rainfall and snow feed them. As perennial rivers, their water can be tapped to irrigate the crops with careful management and using techniques we will discuss later in this chapter.

Long periods of drought could easily have occurred in the time span we study here. While we can assume that over the last 10,000 years the climate in the Near East has not substantially changed, it is certain that even marginal variations had serious consequences for the inhabitants and affected historical developments. Did the so-called Dark Ages result from a drying of the climate? It would have made rainfed agriculture impossible in zones that usually relied on it, and would have lowered the rivers to such an extent that irrigated areas were substantially reduced. Or should we focus on human factors in trying to explain such periods? We will see that explanations for decline and collapse are always complex and involve multiple factors. Climate probably played a role in many occasions, but



Map 1.1 The ancient Near East.

unfortunately insufficient details on the ancient climate are available to serve as a historical explanation for the drastic political and economic changes we observe.

A second important characteristic of geography involves boundaries. These were created by mountains, seas, and deserts, which could all be crossed, although in limited places and with special technology only. The Zagros and Taurus mountains were massive barriers to the states of Mesopotamia, and could be entered only through the river valleys. Military expansion was thus always restricted there, even by such mighty powers as Assyria. The mountain ranges in the Levant left a narrow corridor only for movement from northern Syria to Egypt, and control over a single valley could deny passage between the two. Mountains were also home to many groups that the states we will study were unable to govern. To the dwellers of the plains, the mountains thus often presented a fearful and inhospitable sight.

Seas formed a very different kind of boundary, the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf being the most important. They did create a border, but once crossed, they provided access to distant regions. Thus the Persian Gulf and the marshes at its head made up the southern limit of Mesopotamia, but from the fifth millennium on, Mesopotamians sailed in primitive craft to regions along the Gulf coasts. In the late fourth millennium sailors may have reached Egypt that way, and in the third and early second millennia direct seaborne contacts with the Indus valley were common. The Mediterranean was a different prospect. Only a few harbors existed along its coast, none south of Jaffa. By the late third millennium, however, Aegeans sailed to the Syro-Palestinian coast, and in the second half of the second millennium shipping throughout the eastern Mediterranean was common. Around 1200, technological innovations enabled people from Syro-Palestinian harbors to travel long distances, and the entire Mediterranean came within their reach. First-millennium Phoenicians established colonies as far west as Spain and the Atlantic coast of North Africa.

More formidable as a border was the great desert stretching between Mesopotamia and the Levant. For millennia, people could only make their way along the Tigris or Euphrates river valleys and cross the northern Syrian steppe. With the domestication of the camel around the year 1000, direct passage became possible, although it remained infrequent. Even when small companies of people could cross directly through it, the lack of water still forced armies to take the roundabout route through the Levant and northern Syria to get from Egypt to Mesopotamia. The desert, like the mountains, was home to groups feared and hated by the settled people, nomads whose lifestyles were despised and who were impossible to rule. Even if the desert could be crossed, the states of the Near East could not overpower its inhabitants.

The permeability of boundaries not only allowed Near Easterners to move outward, but also enabled outsiders to enter the region. The area's position at the juncture of three continents is unique in the world. Populations from Africa, Europe, and Asia have moved into the region from early prehistory till today, causing interaction, exchange of technologies, and increasing pressures on the natural resources. This may explain why so many "revolutions" in the lifestyles

of humans occurred there: the emergence of farming, of cities, and of empires. It is certain that population movements took place throughout ancient history, but studying them is difficult. While we can say with confidence that the Mongol tribesmen who invaded Iraq in the thirteenth century AD came from inner Asia, we are not so certain about the origins of the Hittites, for instance. Perhaps, as speakers of an Indo-European language, they came from a region north of India and arrived in Anatolia in the early second millennium. But the presumed Indo-European homeland north of India could be a pure phantom, and speakers of Indo-European languages could just as easily have resided in Anatolia from prehistory on, only entering the historical record in the early second millennium. The same is true for so many populations – Sumerians, Hurrians, Sea People, Israelites, and so on – who once were thought to have invaded parts of the Near East. To reprise the earlier metaphor, the Near East is one area of light in a world of prehistoric darkness. When people suddenly enter its spotlight it is often impossible to establish whether they came from far away or nearby – or if they had always been in the region where they first appear in the documentation.

1.4 Prehistoric Developments

We must undertake the study of the long cultural evolution of prehistory from a perspective that takes the entire Near East into account. Despite the great ecological diversity in the region, we see simultaneous developments in several places. The absolute chronology of events is still uncertain and debated, but we have a good idea about overall trends. Especially with the beginning of the Neolithic period around 9000, important cultural developments occurred that established the setting for the later historical civilizations.

The most crucial technological development was agriculture, which made it possible for large groups of people to remain in the same place year-round. The Near East was the first region in the world where agriculture was invented. The process took several millennia and involved the domestication of plants, primarily cereals, and of animals. The archaeological sites where we see these changes happen are usually located at the borders of different ecological zones, whose occupants took advantage of varied plant resources and hunted different animals. The natural variety described above may in fact have been one of the reasons why agriculture evolved so early in the Near East. People became so used to having access to a variety of food resources that they sought to guarantee supplies by interfering in the growing cycles of crops and animals. Moreover, by chance the wild resources available to them were more suitable for domestication than those elsewhere. Harvested wheat and barley can be stored much longer than most African plants, for example.

For millennia, humankind had lived by gathering food locally, and moved when the supply was exhausted. The hunting of animals probably complemented a diet that relied primarily on wild cereals, fruits, legumes, fish, shellfish, and whatever else the environment provided. Their lifestyle should not necessarily be