



7

JERICHO

CIVILIZATION

800L

BIG HISTORY PROJECT



JERICHO

ENDURANCE IN THE
FERTILE CRESCENT

By Craig Benjamin, adapted by Newsela

Jericho is located in the West Bank region of the Middle East. It is the oldest city on Earth that still exists today.

History and environment

Advantages in Jericho's environment have allowed the city to survive for 14,000 years. They also explain why humans settled there in the first place. In this essay, we'll explore the idea that a place's environment is as important as its technology or government.

Big Historians are interested in the appearance and development of the first agrarian civilizations.

They want to answer these questions:

What advantages did some regions have that made possible the first cities and towns there?

What role did climate play in allowing agrarian civilization to appear in some regions?

Why did some agrarian civilizations abuse their environments and cause their own destruction? How did others benefit from natural resources and survive for thousands of years?

Studying Jericho can teach us about the important relationship between a place's history and its environment.

The factors that made Jericho a sustainable city 14,000 years ago also led to the biggest revolution in human history — the appearance of agriculture.

The transition from hunting and gathering to farming was revolutionary. Think of the world 15,000 years ago. Humans lived on every continent except Antarctica. All humans survived by foraging, also known as hunting and gathering. Humans learned to forage successfully in many different environments. They searched for food in deserts as well as the Arctic. But groups of foragers were small. They did not trade much with other groups. There was little collective learning.



But then something changed. About 10,000 years ago, farming began to appear. Farming gave humans access to more food, more energy. As a result, humans began to multiply more rapidly. They lived in larger communities.

Human society became more complex. Agriculture began a revolution that transformed human civilization. That transformation led to the amazing complexity of the modern world. Early settlements like Jericho were an important early step in that process.

Climate change plays a large role in the history of Jericho. Climate change led to farming in early Jericho. But why there? What natural advantages have allowed Jericho to survive for so long?

The role of climate change

The end of the last ice age caused a gradual warming of the Earth. It allowed humans to transition to agriculture and form large settlements.

Conditions became warmer and more stable about 13,000 years ago. Entire landscapes were transformed. Forest took over grasslands. Large animals like mammoths and bison were pushed out. Animals that humans had hunted for tens of thousands of years migrated north. Communities then became dependent on smaller game like boar, deer, and rabbit. Root and seed plants became more necessary for food.

These changes were important in the Fertile Crescent. This area of river valleys stretched from the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea, through Turkey, and into Iraq and Iran.

Early humans were attracted to places with favorable conditions. Regions with water supplies and plants and animals that could be domesticated were suitable. Many Stone Age foraging communities were experimenting with these plants and animals. The most important of the groups in the early Fertile Crescent was the Natufians.

Natufians and the “trap of sedentism”

About 11,000 years ago, some human groups began to settle down. They became sedentary. That is, they now lived in one place — at least part-time. A changing and growing population caused humans to set down roots.

The stable climates at the end of the ice age created areas where large numbers of humans were able to settle. These people did not farm. They lived off the rich natural resources of the land.

There is a special name for groups that stayed in one place, but lived as foragers. They are called “affluent foragers,” or wealthy hunter-gatherers.

The Natufian people were affluent foragers. They began to settle in the western Fertile Crescent just over 14,000 years ago.

Dorothy Garrod discovered the first evidence of Natufian culture in northern Israel in 1928. The name “Natufian” comes from Wadi en-Natuf. It is the place where she found the evidence. We have no idea what this group actually called themselves.

We do know that they lived in villages, harvested wild grains, and hunted gazelles. The Natufians hunted and gathered like other groups of the time. But they used tools such as sickles to harvest wild cereal grains. This was a serious change in food-gathering practices. They also processed their grain more than anyone before.

Natufian cemeteries also show that society was becoming more complex. Some individuals received special burials, while others did not. This suggests a society with different social levels.

The Natufian diet consisted mainly of grains. Skeletal remains showed that most of the residents had rotten teeth. The Natufians had been eating too much barley and wheat.

Affluent foraging led to increasing populations. Perhaps 200 to 300 people lived in one Natufian site in Syria year-round. This may seem tiny today. At the time, however, it may have been one of the largest human communities on Earth. Affluent foraging caused growing communities, and “population pressure.” Humans were almost forced into smaller territories and denser settlements.

By 10,000 BCE, foragers had migrated to most parts of this region. In some areas there was simply not enough room for them all to settle. Each group had to survive on smaller and smaller pieces of land. These communities found themselves in the “trap of sedentism.”

Traditional foraging ways of life are almost always nomadic. They require almost constant migration. Human communities had to keep populations small. It’s impossible for migrating bands to support too many infants or elderly people. In order to survive, these bands had to practice natural birth control. They also killed off unwanted infants and the elderly to keep populations small.

But when groups like the Natufians decided to stay in one place, all this changed. There were no longer the same limits on population. Older members of the community did not have to be abandoned. More children could be supported. As a result, more well-off foraging groups got bigger. This led to the problem of overpopulation.

Evidence found in Jordan shows that many Natufian sites experienced population pressure. There were simply too many mouths to feed by foraging.

Different groups tried desperate ways to increase food supplies. Many were forced to leave their settlements. At some sites though, the inhabitants learned to domesticate plant and animal species. They began full-scale farming. Jericho was one of these sites.

The environmental advantages of Jericho’s site

Farming led to larger settlements. Eventually, towns, cities, states, and empires appeared for the first time. But cities and states emerged only in a few regions. They needed certain environmental factors to make them possible.

Cities and states didn’t just happen. Environmental reasons allowed some villages to continue to grow. They expanded into towns and cities.

There are many examples of villages that grew quite large. The reasons why are not always clear. Some may have been important religious centers. Others had access to a critical resource, such as a reliable water supply. Still others became important trade centers.

Jericho was sustainable because it had several of these advantages. Most importantly, it had a very favorable environment.

Jericho is located in the Jordan River Valley in the West Bank. It is 864 feet below sea level. Jericho is not just the oldest city on Earth. It is also the lowest one.

The city is well known in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Israelites returned here after their slavery in Egypt. According to the Bible, Jericho’s walls were destroyed when the Israelites sounded their ram’s horn trumpets. But the natural walls around Jericho are even more important.

The geological walls around Jericho were created by tectonic activity. The movement of the plates there was powerful. It was so intense it tore a great crack in the Earth’s crust. Of course, plate tectonic movements like this are driven by heat trapped deep inside the planet. This heat can be traced back to the processes that created the Earth and Solar System in the first place, all the way back to the Big Bang itself.



Reliable water supply was a critical factor in Jericho's development

Jericho lies deep in this Jordan Rift Valley. The valley was formed by a fault — or crack. The fault formed between the African and Arabian tectonic plates. Because of the fault between these two plates, the land dropped 3,000 feet. It eventually settled almost 900 feet below sea level. At this astonishingly low elevation, Natufians established the settlement that became Jericho around 14,000 years ago.

But we still haven't answered the question why. What attracted these affluent foragers to this particular location? Again, geography and biology provide the answer.

The Jordan River is the only major water source that flows into the Dead Sea. Jericho is located just west of the Jordan River. And it is just north of the Dead Sea. The city is well protected by Mount Nebo to the east and the Central Mountains to the west. These geological features form natural defenses. Jericho's location in central Palestine was also ideal for the control of trade and migration routes. Traders passed up and down the valley.

Throughout the city's history, these geographic advantages made it the target of invaders. Jericho was seen as the key to controlling Palestine. We've established that Jericho had natural defenses and a favorable location. But its most important environmental advantage was its water supplies. Water was essential for survival in the harsh desert. Access to water explains the city's origin and long history.

Jericho is located in an oasis. It is supplied by an amazingly dependable underground water supply known as the Ain es-Sultan. In the Bible it's known as Elisha's spring. The biblical story tells of the prophet Elisha healing these waters. This natural spring has apparently never dried up during the 14,000 years humans have lived there.

More than 1,000 gallons of fresh water bubble up from the source every minute. Early farmers took advantage of it. They quickly figured out a system of canals to send the precious water to farmland nearby.

Natural defenses. Strategic location. Rich soil. Abundant sunshine. Plentiful water. All these have made Jericho an attractive and sustainable place for thousands of years. When we list these environmental advantages, it's not surprising that Jericho has enjoyed a long and rich history.

The human history of Jericho

Archaeologists have discovered at least 20 layers of settlement at Jericho. In the 1950s, Kathleen Kenyon was the first to investigate the site using modern techniques. She was searching for a Bronze Age city. In the Hebrew Bible it was called the “city of palm trees.” But her excavations found something else. She discovered that humans had been there thousands of years before the Bronze Age.

She found an early farming settlement that dated to about 9600 BCE. More digging uncovered remains of foragers from as early as 12,000 BCE. This made Jericho the oldest continuously inhabited settlement in human history.

Early farmers at Jericho domesticated wheat and barley. Wheat is one of the most important global food crops. Today, our planet produces more than 620 million tons of wheat each year. Wheat provides roughly one-fifth of all the calories consumed by the 7 billion people on Earth.

Between 8350 and 7350 BCE, the village of Jericho evolved into a town. About 3,000 farmers had homes there. They lived in simple mud-brick houses. Later residents learned to domesticate sheep. They also developed a cult of preserving human skulls and placing shells in their eye sockets.

Later farming communities became more socially complex and better organized. Their houses were bigger, with multiple rooms. They may have begun religious practices at this time as well.

Archaeologists investigating this period have discovered farming tools like sickle blades and axes; dishes and bowls made from limestone; looms for weaving textiles; and extraordinary full-sized plaster human figures likely used in a religious practice.

After more than 10,000 years of continuous occupation, Jericho reached its height in the Bronze Age, between 1700 and 1550 BCE. Chariot-riding elites dominated and defended the city. This was a time of widespread conflict across much of Palestine. At the time it was known as Canaan. The city’s

defenses were based upon a massive stone wall. But even this was not strong enough to prevent disaster. Around 1550 BCE, the ancient city of Jericho was destroyed.

Archaeologists and biblical historians debate whether this was the Battle of Jericho discussed in the Bible. Modern archaeologists don’t think it was. They say the timing of the collapse doesn’t match the chronology of the Bible. Biblical historians argue that it must have been the Battle of Jericho.



A plaster sculpture excavated from Jericho, about 7000–6000 BCE



An 18th-century engraving of the biblical Battle of Jericho

Despite this disaster, Jericho rose again in the centuries that followed. By the eighth century BCE it was taken over by the Assyrians. The powerful Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar also conquered the land of Israel. He sent tens of thousands of its residents into exile. But the exiles were freed by the Persian king Cyrus the Great. Jericho then served as an administrative center for the Persians. Later it was a private estate for Alexander the Great. Both were attracted to the city by its strategic location and abundant resources.

Three centuries later, the Hebrew king Herod the Great was given control of Jericho by the Romans. Under Herod the city thrived. It became an important agricultural, commercial, and administrative center. Rich aristocrats from Jerusalem spent their winters there. In the first century of the Common Era, the Greek geographer Strabo described the city's environmental advantages like this:

Jericho is surrounded by mountainous country which slopes toward it like a theater. It is mixed with all kinds of cultivated and fruitful trees, though it consists mostly of palm trees. It is everywhere watered with streams.

Jesus passed through Jericho, according to the Christian Gospels. In Jericho he is said to have healed a blind beggar. The Bible also says it was there that Jesus inspired the tax collector Zacchaeus to give up his unethical practices.

Jericho entered a period of decline after Jerusalem fell to the Romans in 70 CE. In the seventh century, Jericho became part of the realm of Islam. We have another description of the advantages of the city written by the tenth-century Arab geographer Al Maqdisi:

The water of Jericho is held to be the highest and best in all Islam. Bananas are plentiful, also dates and flowers of fragrant odor.

During the Crusades, Christians occupied the city. Saladin, who led the Arab and Muslim opposition to the Crusaders, drove the Christians from the city. During the long reign of the Ottomans, from 1517 to 1918, Jericho slowly shrank to the size of a village. In the twentieth century, Jericho was controlled at various times by Britain, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinians. Today Israel and the Palestinian Authority continue to argue over the city. The future of Jericho and its 20,000 residents is not clear.



King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, in an undated illustration

Physical endurance

The history of Jericho is rich and complex. It has seen the same triumphs and tragedies that so many other ancient cities have experienced. What makes Jericho unique is that it is the most ancient city on Earth.

Jericho has been inhabited continuously for 14,000 years. Its long life shows that history is as much about the physical environment as it is about technology or leadership.

The Fertile Crescent at the end of the last ice age had many natural advantages. These advantages explain the emergence of agriculture and the first towns and cities. Natufians started as a small foraging community. They developed into a thriving agricultural civilization.

Jericho shows that human history can really only be understood by looking at it in the natural setting where it happens. For the environment is truly the great physical stage upon which our human drama continues to unfold.

Sources

Kenyon, Kathleen. *Digging up Jericho*. London: Ernest Benn, 1957.

Murphy-O'Connor, Jerome. *The Holy Land: An Oxford Archaeological Guide from Earliest Times to 1700*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Scarre, Chris, ed. *The Human Past: World Prehistory and the Development of Human Societies*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2005.

Smith, Bruce. *The Emergence of Agriculture*. New York: Scientific American Library, 1995.

Wright, G.A. "Social Differentiation in the Early Natufian." In *Social Archaeology: Beyond Subsistence and Dating*, edited by C. L. Bergman et al., 201–230. New York: Academic Press, 1978.

Image credits

The Fall of Jericho from *Gates of Paradise*, by Lorenzo Ghiberti
© Bill Ross/CORBIS

Hisham Palace in Jericho
© Atlantide Phototravel/CORBIS

A painting of Jericho by David Roberts
© Historical Picture Archive/CORBIS

A Neolithic plaster sculpture excavated in Jericho by Kathleen Kenyon
© Nathan Benn/Ottochrome/CORBIS

Eighteenth-century engraving of the Israelites tearing
down the walls of Jericho
© Bettmann/CORBIS

An illustration of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon
© Bettmann/CORBIS

NEWSELA

Articles leveled by Newsela have been adjusted along several dimensions of text complexity including sentence structure, vocabulary and organization. The number followed by L indicates the Lexile measure of the article. For more information on Lexile measures and how they correspond to grade levels: <http://www.lexile.com/about-lexile/lexile-overview/>

To learn more about Newsela, visit www.newsela.com/about.



The Lexile® Framework for Reading

The Lexile® Framework for Reading evaluates reading ability and text complexity on the same developmental scale. Unlike other measurement systems, the Lexile Framework determines reading ability based on actual assessments, rather than generalized age or grade levels. Recognized as the standard for matching readers with texts, tens of millions of students worldwide receive a Lexile measure that helps them find targeted readings from the more than 100 million articles, books and websites that have been measured. Lexile measures connect learners of all ages with resources at the right level of challenge and monitors their progress toward state and national proficiency standards. More information about the Lexile® Framework can be found at www.Lexile.com.