Kebaran/Natufian/Early Neolithic Cultures in the Levant

Overview
During Late Glacial maximum (ca. 18000 – 12,500 B.C.) this region was cold and dry. But hilly coastal areas were forested. In warmer pockets wild cereal and other plants sensitive to these conditions continued to grow. Precipitation increased beginning ca. 12,500 B.C. (it later decreased during Younger Dryas period, ca. 10,000 B.C.). During the period of warming temperatures and increased precipitation (corresponding to the Mesolithic in Europe) the transition from mobile hunter-gatherers to sedentary farmers occurred.

During Upper Paleolithic in Europe, Kebaran in Levant (ca. 18,000 B.C. – 11,000 B.C.) Took advantage of expansion of steppe into areas formerly desert.

Kebaran followed by Natufian which in turn is followed by the Pre-Pottery Neolithic.

The end of the Natufian
1. Beginning at about 11,000 B.C., Natufians exploited two types of terrain: oak forests between coast and Jordan Valley and steppe-like areas further inland. In forests major resource was acorns; in steppe, legumes and seeds. In both cases augmented by gazelle, deer and other species. In richest areas, sedentism resulted from storage of surpluses.

2. Younger Dryas (beginning about 10,000 B.C.) imposed changes on subsistence strategies as forests retreated and thinned and steppe became more desert like.

3. Premium placed on sites with permanent moisture. It is in their vicinity that cereals manipulated or to which they are moved.

4. This survival strategy becomes full-fledged cultivation as climate improves. Bigger reserves and larger populations now result in true, year-long sedentism. This is the Pre-Pottery Neolithic.

[List adapted with modifications from C. Maisels, Early Civilizations of the Old World, Routledge 1999]

Natufian/Early Neolithic sites

Abu Hureyra (10500 – 6000 B.C.)

Key points:
Edge of Euphrates. Open forest of oak and pistachio on steppes nearby with dense stands of wild grasses among trees (wheat, rye, lentils, legumes).
Early year-round occupation featured small circular houses, with a population of 200-300. Gazelle hunting important. Most food from wild plants – lentils, hackberry, capers, nuts, wheat, rye, barley.

About 10000 B.C. cooler, drier – Younger Dryas period:

**Effects?**

Earliest known domesticate: rye at about this time. May have been domesticated elsewhere and adopted at Abu Hureyra. Soon after the domestication of rye and the likely cultivation of wild wheats, lentils and legumes reappear. By 8500 B.C. – domesticated rye, lentils, large seeded legumes and domesticated wheats.

Food from Euphrates as well: fish, mussels. Gazelle 80% of bones in Mesolithic and Early Neolithic. By beginning of Neolithic sheep and goat domesticated. After 7500 B.C. gazelle decline. Then pigs and cattle added.

Grew to largest community of day with 2000-3000 and 38 acres.

Exotic materials: cowrie shells, turquoise, obsidian, malachite, jadeite, agate, serpentine. Shows wide connections.

6000 B.C. abandoned. Increasingly arid conditions.

**‘Ain Ghazal (8000 – 6000 B.C.):**

Early Neolithic site in Jordan

Large for its time – almost 30 acres, twice as large as others in area

See illustration of houses in Price &Feinman for Abu Hureyra – they actually represent ‘Ain Ghazal

Architecture: lime plaster on lower inside walls and posts

House as dynamic reflection of changes in household

Burials often beneath floors. Some skulls removed and plastered. Significance?

Ceramic figurines – human and animal. Human mostly female

Clay tokens and geometric objects (cones, balls, cylinders)\(\rightarrow\) counting and recording system

Plaster statues up to 3 feet tall (see color plate in P&F)

**Jericho (8500 – 6000 B.C.)**

(see discussion in text)
Environmental Impact of Earliest Farming

Abandonment of ‘Ain Ghazal, Abu Hureyra and other villages around 6000 B.C. Why? Just a climate change or something more? What lessons had to be learned? What does this say about subsistence systems based on agriculture?

Impact of earliest farming on nutrition, labor and role specialization

Issues:
Diets of farmers compared to hunter-gatherers

Effects of surplus production

Physical effects of division of labor by sex

Breast-feeding, birth spacing and other factors associated with demographic growth