

Why people started to domesticate and eventually depend on plants and animals is one of the principal areas of research in archaeology. Until the 1960s, it was widely assumed that domestication was a good thing, allowing access to more food with less risk, less work, and better health. Archaeological questions tended to focus on where the first domestication occurred and how the idea spread, all assuming that it made life better. Archaeological and ethnographic research in the late twentieth century, however, convinced many that the assumptions were not warranted; while some may have benefited from the transition to food production, many suffered from worse nutrition and less leisure time. The question then became, considering the negative effects of domestication, why many groups around the world would initiate the process of domestication, which led to pastoralism and horticulture.

Over the last few decades, popular explanations for the origins of domestication of both plants and animals have usually focused on ecological reasons. For example, many archaeologists reason that environmental changes reduced the number of people who could effectively forage in a region. Rather than reduce their population to match the now-reduced carrying capacity, move to another area, or resort to raiding others, people began to increasingly manage their resources to the point of domestication. The tendency to focus on ecological explanations may be tied to contemporary concerns about changing environmental conditions.

Other popular, but not as widely accepted, ideas are that plant domestication may have occurred to produce alcohol, or perhaps to gain status. The notion that plants and animals may have been

domesticated as prestige items, or luxury foods, to gain status and social and political advantages is the subject of an article by archaeologist Brian Hayden (2003) called “Were Luxury Foods the First Domesticates? Ethnoarchaeological Perspectives from Southeast Asia.” Hayden suggests that certain animals and plants (including rice) were domesticated as luxury foods for feasting. He reasons, “the primary force behind intensified subsistence production is not food shortage, but the desire to obtain social and political advantages—to obtain the most desirable mates, to create the most advantageous alliances, to wield the most political power” (p. 465).

In Hayden’s view, domestication was initiated in societies where people were attempting to gain wealth and status, primarily by impressing others, and one way of accomplishing this was to have feasts with what he describes as luxury foods. Eventually these luxury foods became staples. For analogies of how early domestic foods like rice became staples, Hayden writes:

Chocolate, once reserved for Mesoamerican elites, is now the bane of overfed multitudes. Oversized, out-of-season fruits and vegetables which once only graced the tables of kings and nobles have become everyday fare. Fat-rich meats, which formerly were used only for special occasions or for the highest ranks of society, are now commonplace.... Wines and spirits that played crucial roles in feasts for elites ... have now become the profane intoxicants of households throughout the industrial world. In short, our eating habits today largely are the result of, and reflect, the luxury foods of the past. (pp. 458, 459)