Read the passage.

**The Neolithic Revolution**

**Key Questions**

* Why did some early peoples make the transition from hunter-gatherers to pastoral and agricultural societies?
* What kinds of changes occurred as people settled in one place to farm?

The hunter-gatherers who used stone tools and mastered the use of fire lived in an era of prehistory called the Paleolithic period, or the Old Stone Age, which lasted from about 2,000,000 B.C. to about 11,000 B.C. Beginning about 11,000 B.C., the Old Stone Age gradually gave way to the New Stone Age, or the Neolithic period, when stone tools were increasingly used for farming.

**The Agricultural Revolution**

Over the long course of human history, there are key turning points when life changed so dramatically that the impact is still felt today. These moments of dramatic change are often described as revolutions. One such revolution occurred during the Paleolithic period when, more than a million years ago, human ancestors first learned to make use of fire.

As the Ice Age ended around 11,000 B.C., the Paleolithic period gave way to the Neolithic. As the glaciers retreated, changes in climate created changes in the life patterns of Neolithic people. In western Europe, for example, hunters who for centuries had fed their clans by following massive herds of reindeer found the game increasingly scarce as the global temperature warmed.

To adapt and survive, these people had to find new sources of food. Groups in some parts of the world made innovations so dramatic that historians call it the Neolithic Revolution. The Neolithic Revolution is also referred to as the agricultural revolution. It marked a great shift, as humans turned from hunting and gathering to farming—from food getting to food producing.

**The Beginnings of Agriculture**

Great changes seldom take place all at once. The agricultural revolution was more of a series of hits and misses than a single event. Human beings were not hunters and gatherers one day, then farmers and herders the next. That change took place very slowly and almost always near river valleys, where the first producers of food had a helping hand from Mother Nature.

The first people to produce food were probably women. Well before 8000 B.C. in the Middle East, women learned to cut the wheat and barley grasses growing wild along the hillsides. Next, the women made an important discovery. They learned that if they let some of the ripe grain seeds drop to the ground, more grasses would grow in that place the next year. Eventually, the women learned that they could sow those seeds in fields where such grasses did not usually grow. Using sharp-pointed digging sticks, they could break the ground and plant the seeds. With plentiful water and good luck, they could harvest the life-giving grain to make bread or porridge at season’s end.

**Keeping Track of the Years**

Various initials can be used to designate dates. The initials B.C. (“before Christ,” that is, before the birth of Jesus) are interchangeable with B.C.E. (“before the common, or current, era”). The initials A.D. (anno Domini, Latin for “in the year of the Lord”) are interchangeable with C.E. (“common era” or “current era”). The bigger the number B.C., the earlier the date; thus, 1500 B.C. is earlier than 150 B.C.

This new endeavor—deliberately planting seeds—was the beginning of the agricultural revolution. Agriculture was a momentous change indeed. It meant that human beings were beginning to control their physical environment.

People soon tried to improve the way they farmed, expanding the areas they could plant. For example, some farmers learned that fire could help them grow more grain. They cleared land by cutting trees, bushes, and grass, and then burning them. The remaining ashes left the soil rich in nutrients. This kind of farming is called slash-and-burn agriculture, and it helped early people maintain fertile soil. The first farmers used simple wooden sticks to plant their crops. People soon invented new tools, including sharp-bladed hoes of wood or stone. The growth of farming also led to advances in pottery. Early humans learned to make clay jars and storage containers to stockpile the grain harvest. Farming also led to new human relationships, because growing enough crops to feed an entire clan required cooperation and organization.

**Domesticating Animals**

With the development of agriculture, the human population grew, thriving on plentiful harvests of wheat and barley. But the area around the grain fields was not good for wild animals. When people cleared a piece of land, the gazelles, red deer, wild boar, and goats that once roamed there lost much of their natural food supply, and so they moved on. As time passed, hunters found fewer and fewer animals to hunt. Hunting had always required great skill. Now hunters needed even greater skill if they wanted to eat meat.

Some men chose to remain hunters, and they followed the animals into different regions. Other men, however, began to share in the work of agriculture. For many, farming was a more reliable way to get food than hunting. Still others began to catch some of the wild animals that had stayed behind. Instead of killing them, they domesticated them—they tamed the animals and kept them in herds.

Like agriculture, the domestication of animals was another significant change in human history. By keeping a small herd of goats, sheep, or cattle, people could be sure of having meat close at hand. As these early herders watched the tame goats and cattle feed their young with milk, they learned to milk the goats and cattle.

They learned to use the sheep’s woolly skin to make clothing. In some places, the wolves that traveled along with people, scavenging bones and growling over scraps, became less fierce with each generation. Tamed descendants of those wild wolves became dogs. Domesticated dogs accompanied people on hunts, providing companionship and a way to ward off enemies.

**Where Is the Middle East?**

The area that today is known as the Middle East is situated at the crossroads of three continents—Europe, Asia, and Africa. The “Middle East” is a general and unofficial label. It is usually considered to include the extensive region that stretches from Turkey in the north to Yemen in the south, and from Egypt in the west to Iran in the east.