4

MARGARET EHRENBERG

Women in Prehistory, 1989

British anthropologist Margaret Ehrenberg argues here that women were likely the first farmers as well as the originators of many of the innovations of the agricultural revolution. What evidence does she offer? What was the importance of the agricultural revolution? When and how, according to Ehrenberg, did men take over?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

In this selection much of the author's evidence is anthropological or ethnographic (rather than archaeological). That is, it comes from our contemporary world, not from digging up the past. How does the use of this kind of evidence depend on the idea of historical stages? From the standpoint of women, was the agricultural revolution a single stage of history, or should we think of it as two stages? If so, what were those stages?

From the point of view of the lives of women, the Neolithic period is perhaps the most important phase of prehistory. . . . It is likely that at the end of the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic, women enjoyed equality with men. They probably collected as much, if not more, of the food eaten by the community and derived equal status from their contribution. But by about four thousand years ago, in the Bronze Age, many of the gender roles and behaviour typical of the world today had probably been established. The implication is that the crucial changes must have taken place during the Neolithic period. . . .

The discovery of farming techniques has usually been assumed to have been made by men, but it is in fact very much more likely to have been made by women. On the basis of anthropological evidence for societies still living traditional foraging lifestyles and those living by simple, non-mechanised farming, taken in conjunction with direct archaeological evidence, it seems probable that it was women who made the first observations of plant behaviour, and worked out, presumably by long trial and error, how to grow and tend crops.

This transition from foraging to farming, which marks the change from the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic or Old and Middle Stone Ages to

Source: Margaret Ehrenberg, *Women in Prehistory* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 77–81, 99–100, 103–7.

the period known to archaeologists as the Neolithic or New Stone Age, seems to have taken place initially in south-west Asia some time after 10,000 BC. By 6000 BC farming was well established throughout that part of the world. . . .

How and why did this change to agriculture take place, and, more particularly, what can we say about the role of women in this process?

. . . Foraging societies still living in the world today . . . gather and hunt food in a way similar to Palaeolithic societies before the invention of agriculture; among these people there is a regularly recurring pattern of food procurement. . . . Women are mainly concerned with gathering plant food, which provides the bulk of the diet of nearly all foragers, while men spend much time hunting animals. Although animal products form an important source of proteins in the diet, meat actually makes up a relatively small proportion of the food intake of these societies. We can also study other groups of people in places such as New Guinea and parts of Africa who still grow crops and keep animals with the aid of only the very simplest technology, in much the same way as we may imagine Neolithic societies would have done. These societies do not use ploughs or artificial irrigation, and they keep few, if any, animals. To distinguish them from people using more mechanised agricultural technologies, anthropologists usually call this type of farming horticulture, and the people using it horticultural societies. . . .

Although present-day horticulturalists live in a wide variety of places around the world, many remarkably regular patterns of behaviour can be observed, and this gives us some degree of confidence in using their lifestyles as a model for the Neolithic, particularly if some of the behaviour patterns can be seen to be reflected in evidence from archaeological sites.

Studies of the roles of women in different types of agricultural communities show a remarkably consistent pattern. In societies where plough agriculture is practised and animals are kept on a significant scale, most of the agricultural work is done by men, with women playing no direct part, or only a very subsidiary role. On the other hand, in horticultural societies, in which hoes or digging sticks are used for making holes or drills in which to plant roots or seeds, women are usually almost wholly responsible for agricultural production. A study of 104 horticultural societies existing today showed that in 50 per cent of them women were exclusively responsible for agriculture, in 33 per cent women and men shared various tasks, and in only 17 per cent were men wholly responsible for farming, and this is after decades or even centuries of contact with societies whose ideology would encourage men to take on greater roles in production. Horticultural societies are still widespread, mainly within the Tropics, in many parts of Africa, central America and Asia. The typical pattern in these areas is one of shifting cultivation, where

patches of land are worked for a few years, and then when soil fertility declines another plot is cleared and cultivated. Although men often help to clear the plots of trees and undergrowth, women usually hoe, sow, tend and harvest the crops. Studies carried out early this century suggest that this pattern of cultivation was more common then than it is today. It also seems very likely that it was even more typical before most parts of the world had contact with European traders and missionaries, with their preconceived ideas about what it was right and proper for women and men to do. . . .

The Secondary Products Revolution, or the Great Male Takeover Bid

In an earlier section it was argued that women almost certainly "invented" or worked out the principles of farming as well as many of the concomitant skills and tools which go to make crop agriculture possible and profitable. As principal food providers they were probably respected and had equal status with men. But between then and now, in all but the most traditional hunter-gatherer and horticultural societies, the status of women has been drastically reduced, and in many areas farming has become a predominantly male preserve. Why the change, and when did it happen? Two facts are certain: Firstly, by the time of the earliest written records, everywhere in Europe farming was primarily a male occupation, and men owned the farmland and the tools. Secondly, in those areas of the world where women are still the main agricultural producers, most of the farming is concerned with crop production, and if animals are kept at all, it is usually on a small farmyard scale, rather than as large herds or flocks. The change to male dominance in agriculture, therefore, took place at some time between the first stages of the Neolithic period and the advent of written records, and may be related to the changing role of animals within the farming economies of prehistoric Europe. It also seems likely that such a drastic shift in lifestyle, whether it took place gradually over millennia or as a sudden "revolution," would have been associated with other changes within society. Anthropologists have shown that in present-day societies a significant (though not 100 per cent) correlation exists between plough agriculture and patrilineal descent and land ownership in the same way as there is a correlation between non-plough agriculture and the heavy involvement, and consequent enhanced status, of women. We can look for evidence of this shift in the archaeological record: for example, changes in family structure, wealth or ownership patterns may show up in settlement sites or in burials. . . .

The crucial changes in farming practice are thought to have taken place around 3000 BC, in the later Neolithic period. This would have been some five millennia after the introduction of farming in the Near

East, and similar economic shifts can be detected in many areas of Europe at about the same time. Andrew Sherratt has suggested that although domesticated animals were kept during the early Neolithic, they were used only as a source of meat; the consumption of milk or milk products was probably not significant, nor were the animals used for pulling ploughs or carts. All these innovations came later and not only revolutionised agricultural productivity, but also reduced the amount of labour involved in farming. Moreover, the greater importance of domesticated animals and their products would have reduced the necessity for hunting wild animals. As the balance of work changed from part hunting, part crop cultivation and tending a small number of animals to an economy dependent on mixed farming, so the roles and duties of women and men may have shifted. Let us examine the evidence and arguments. . . .

Both carts and ploughs first appear in depictions on clay tablets and cylinder seals in Mesopotamia, around the beginning of the fourth millennium BC, and both seem to have spread to Europe fairly rapidly over 500 years or so. One of the earliest depictions of ploughing [Figure 1.8] shows an ox drawing a two-handled plough with a sowing funnel, a device used for sowing seed deeply in the soil and often associated with areas where irrigation is needed. Most significantly the two individuals involved, one guiding the animal from the front, the other guiding the plough, both appear to be men with beards. Early depictions of ploughs in Egypt, from Old Kingdom tombs, also show them being used by men. . . .

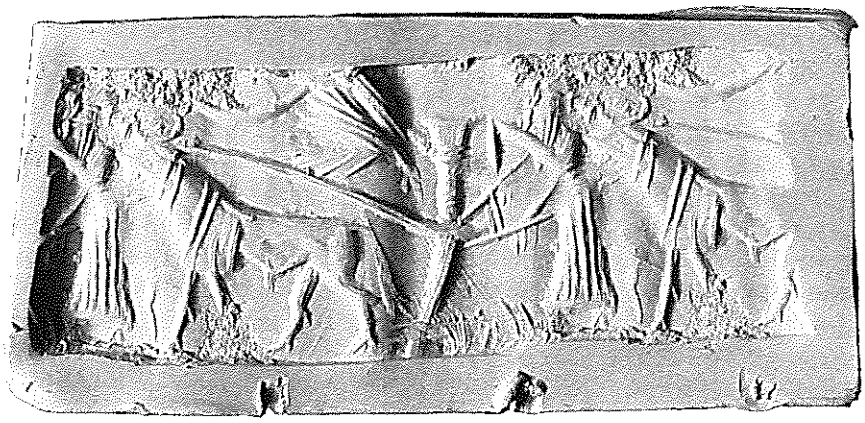

Figure 1.8 Men leading and guiding a two-handled plough, depicted on a cylinder seal from Mesopotamia, late third millennium BC.

Source: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

In areas of the world where plough agriculture and the herding of animals are the predominant form of farming, men universally play the major role in agricultural tasks. Women either take no part in farming or only a small one. They may sometimes contribute to harvesting, or to the care of domestic animals, if these are kept only in small numbers. An important distinction exists today between Africa, where horticulture predominates, and Asia, where plough agriculture is far more common and where domesticated animals are kept. Even in those areas of Asia, for example, where women are involved to some extent in aspects of plough agriculture, they work fewer hours than men; whereas in Africa, where farming is predominantly carried out without the use of the plough, and primarily by women, they do far more work than men. The other main difference between these two farming regimes is that social and economic stratification is a far more significant factor, with greater extremes of poverty and wealth and of land ownership amongst the Asian plough agriculturalists than amongst the African hoe agriculturalists or horticulturalists. . . .

Patterns of social organisation in horticultural societies today are quite different from those of intensive agriculturalists: these seem to be linked to the balance of agricultural tasks and to their allocation to each sex. One of the greatest differences is in the position of women. This reinforces the theory that it was in the later Neolithic, when men began to take over most agricultural work, that the social status of women declined.

. . . It is likely that most of the tending of animals was done by men. Large-scale herding often takes place some way from the farm or settlement, as fresh grazing land is continually sought. Raiding by neighbouring tribes seems to be an endemic part of most cattle herding—almost a variation on hunting! This has been seen as the origin of warfare, when for the first time people owned a resource which it was both worthwhile and fairly easy to steal.

Secondly, the invention of plough agriculture, too, would probably have resulted in farming becoming predominantly a male activity, while on the basis of ethnographic analogy, at least, women would probably have spent more time in food preparation, child-rearing and textile and perhaps other craft production.

Thirdly, although less land is needed for the same amount of production, plough agriculture is far more labour-intensive than hoe agriculture: where land is poor, ploughing makes agriculture possible. In some areas of prehistoric Europe it had the effect of making large tracts of lighter, sandy soil available, but in other areas it may have allowed an increase in population where there was a real or perceived shortage of land. In the earliest phases of the Neolithic, land shortages would certainly not have been a problem, as witnessed by the rapid population spread discussed in an earlier section. However, in the later Neolithic

there may have been a shortage of land perceived to be suitable for agriculture. Women would therefore have been expected to produce more children and thus more labourers. This would have been seen as their major role. Moreover, male children might have been valued most highly, as future farm workers. Women, meanwhile, would have become less valued by men in their own right: as more time was spent in pregnancy and the care of very young infants, so less time could be spent on farming activities. As men took over many of their tasks, they no longer contributed so much to the daily production of food, which had been a crucial factor in maintaining the equal status they had previously enjoyed.

Fourthly, another social change which might have been an indirect result of the secondary products revolution was the switch from matrilocal residence and matrilineal descent to patrilocal residence and patrilineal descent. There is a very strong ethnographic correlation between male-dominated farming and patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence. A male farmer will teach his sons the necessary skills and expect them to tend his land and animals. In a matrilineal system his sister's sons, rather than his own sons, inherit these herds, land and equipment on his death. This is not in the male interest if men are the main agriculturalists. When women were involved in the land-based tasks, they would have learnt the basic skills from their mothers, so it would have been more obvious for them also to inherit their land and equipment. However, it also seems that individual land ownership is less common amongst hoe agriculturalists, and, by definition, less equipment is used. Therefore, at least in terms of material goods, far less is typically at stake in matrilineal than in patrilineal systems.

Finally, the development of agriculture brought with it a large increase, not only in the number of related tasks, including several which are very time-consuming, but also in the range of material possessions such as farming and food-preparation tools and storage vessels. Two consequences would have resulted. On the one hand, this may be seen as the spur to the development of craft specialisation, as some individuals concentrated on the production of one particular item, which they would exchange for other products or services. At first this could have been in addition to normal farming tasks, but increasingly some people might have found that they could acquire enough food and other necessities by producing only their specialised article. In this way exchange must have become more common, and more sophisticated. On the other hand these material possessions, as well as the domesticated animals themselves, would have constituted considerable wealth, which could be accumulated and handed on from one generation to the next. . . .

The wealthy can become powerful by lending to poorer families in return for services, such as farm labour, or support in combat against

other groups. By this means the rich are able to become more wealthy, while the poorer become indebted to other families, and have to produce more and more, or spend time on tasks other than directly for their own subsistence. So the vicious circle develops, and it is easy to see how from this point permanent hierarchies not only of wealth, but of power and status come about, in a way which is impossible in forager societies. This is also the context in which a society can begin to think of people, as well as material possessions and land, as objects of value and exchange. A child could be given as labour to a family to whom the child's parents were indebted, or a woman given to work or to produce extra children.

How such fundamental changes actually took place is not clear, even if we assume they were a gradual process in each community. The full consequences which have just been discussed would have developed very slowly, even over millennia, and are difficult to pinpoint chronologically. In any case, as women were increasingly relegated to secondary tasks, by the end of the Neolithic period they had fewer personal resources with which to assert their status. Presumably, as with so many innovations even in the modern world, the social and economic consequences of seemingly minor innovations would not have been apparent until it was too late to return to former *mores*. The discovery of agriculture, which at the beginning of the Neolithic had been such a positive step by women, was by the end of the period to have had unforeseen, and unfortunate, consequences for them.