

On the History of Cultivated Plants in Europe

Abstract

Most of the important species of cultivated plants which grow or did grow in Europe were domesticated in the Near East. This occurred mainly on the slopes of those mountains, where their ancestors were native. The earliest farming villages were situated in the so-called nuclear arc, where the neolithic revolution, *i.e.* the change from the hunter-gatherers to first agriculture and cattle breeding took place at about 8000 B.C. The first species cultivated were emmer, einkorn, two-row barley and flax.

Within the following millennia the neolithic revolution spread across the Balcan to Central Europe and along the mediterranean coasts to North Africa and Western Europe. Several additional cultivated species later joined the assemblage. Evidence of the early agriculture derives mainly from carbonized macro-remains and from imprints in pottery out of archaeological excavations.

A great step ahead was taken during the Greek and Roman classic era, when in particular fruit was developed and many different races were bred. This became possible with the help of grafting; in addition to it, fruit species from distant parts of the Old World were introduced. Written sources and many pictures and reliefs besides fossil finds teach us about the cultivated plants at that time and show the whole variety of agriculture.

During the Roman Period cultivated plants and agricultural techniques were introduced to the Roman provinces also, where several imported plants could be recorded in archaeological sites. The improvement of agriculture and the completion of the number of cultivated species was — especially in Central and Northern Europe — continued during Medieval times, and from about 1500 A.D. the invasion of the New World species started.

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