INSTRUCTOR RESOURCE MANUAL

for

*A History of the World in Seven Themes*

Volume One: to 1600

by

Stewart Gordon

*Contributions by:*

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**CHAPTER ONE**

**PEOPLE AND PLANTS: ON THE MOVE**

CHAPTER 1

PEOPLE AND PLANTS: ON THE MOVE

Thinking About the Big Picture

1. What are the human and non-human ways that plants have become disseminated throughout the world?
2. How did humans change the physiology of rice, wheat, and corn through selective breeding?
3. What role did empires play in the movement of agricultural products? What specific examples does Gordon provide?
4. What is the “Neolithic wave” model of plant movement and how does Gordon challenge this model with evidence from the Americas?

Points of View

1. Gordon challenges the common theories related to the origins of agriculture, also known as the Neolithic Revolution. Give a lecture reviewing the theories that he dismisses (single-factor theories such as population pressure, climate change, insufficient caloric intake, or social competition for scarce resources) and have students consider them. Do any of the alternative theories seem better than Gordon’s argument using the Nukak as an example? Why or why not? *World History: An Introduction* by Eric Vanhaute, Chapter 4 has a great overview of the theories that try to explain why humans went from hunters and gatherers to farmers.

In the Classroom

1. Examine the world of hunters and gatherers in more detail.
2. Give a lecture on the life of Pliny the Elder. Discuss how Romans viewed science and the natural world.
3. Discuss how the fields of paleobotany, archaeobotany, and archeology contribute to our understanding of the past.
4. Discuss the importance of the nitrogen cycle as it relates to plants, animals, and farming.
5. Is the dissemination of plants always a good thing? Discuss the impact of invasive species on local habitats.
6. Have students read Gordon’s discussion of the domestication of rice for class. Prepare a lecture on the genetic modification of agricultural staples, like wheat, that has been occurring for the past half-a-century. Compare and contrast the positive and negative aspects of genetically modified foods with selective breeding.
7. Gordon calls the Americas “the so-called New World.” Discuss “Old World” and “New World” in the context of Eurocentrism.
8. Expand on Gordon’s discussion of the transmission of maize in the Americas. Using a map of the spread of maize production in the Americas, talk about its impact on the development of cultures in North and South America. For example, examine maize production among the Anasazi of the American Southwest.
9. Give a lecture on the rituals and dishes of a Roman or Chinese banquet. Using a map discuss the relationship between the ingredients of the dishes and the geography of the empire.
10. Online Discussion: Record a lecture on the advantages and disadvantages of hunting –gathering and agriculture. Have students debate which way of life they think is better and why.

Suggestions for Active Learning

1. Have students research the origins of the ingredients of one of their favorite recipes. Taken as a whole, can any conclusions be made about the dish’s history?
2. Gordon states, “The point here is that plants were not domesticated by a single or even a small number of ‘advanced’ civilizations or ethnic groups.” Have students research books or articles that discuss the domestication of plants and see if they are attributed to civilizations or ethnic groups. After conducting research, have students reflect on the accuracy of Gordon’s statement.
3. Gordan states, “Pliny knew a great deal about wheat, which is the principal subject of Book XVIII of his *Natural History*. He described it as fundamental to the mythical beginnings of Rome.” Have students read the Mayan creation myth in the [*Popol Vuh*](https://www.learner.org/series/invitation-to-world-literature/popol-vuh/popol-vuh-read-the-text/) and then have students discuss in groups or write about how maize was central to Mayan beginnings.
4. Gordon’s focus in the first chapter is on plants. Have students research the domestication and movement of animals around the globe. Can Gordon’s arguments be applied to animals as well? Why or why not?

Websites for Students to Explore

1. Learn more about different human species: <https://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-fossils/species>
2. There were two notable Plinys in Roman History. Learn more about Pliny the Elder: <https://www.livius.org/articles/person/pliny-the-elder/>. Learn more about Pliny the Younger: <https://www.livius.org/articles/person/pliny-the-younger/>
3. Learn about how Stanford researchers used DNA to lay out the genetic history of Rome: <https://news.stanford.edu/2019/11/07/genetic-history-rome/>
4. Learn about the origins of the chili pepper. This article will also give you a peek into the world of the paleobotanist: <https://www.pnas.org/content/111/17/6165>
5. Learn more about the role of people in the movement and cultivation of bananas from New Guinea to West Africa: <https://www.pnas.org/content/108/28/11311>