

# ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS THE NEAR EAST AND MESOAMERICA

*Lamberg-Karlovsky and Sabloff*



# *Ancient Civilizations*

THE NEAR EAST  
AND MESOAMERICA

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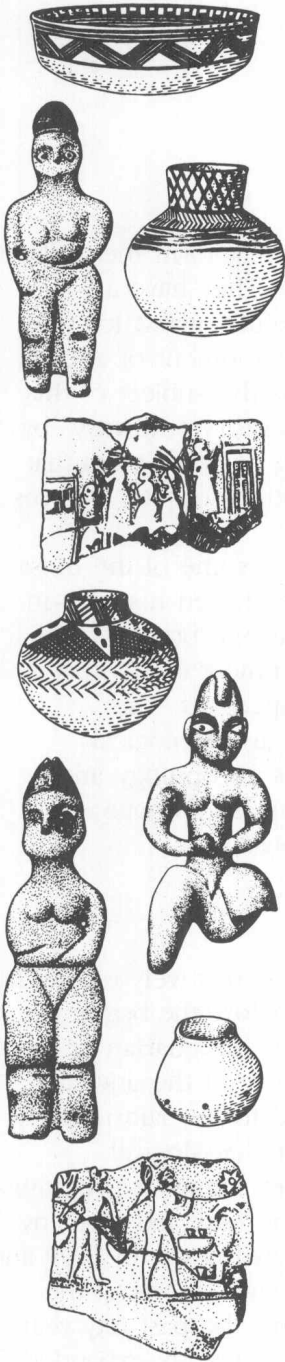
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# 1. *The History of History*

## A RÉSUMÉ OF HISTORICAL VIEWS

*Ancient Views of the Past*

*Classical Historical Views*

*St. Augustine's Linear Design of History*

*The Rise of Scientific Views*

*Twentieth-Century Outlooks*

## THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

*Recent Archaeological Contributions*

*Childe's Contribution to Theory*

## RECENT ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

*Steward's Environmental Explanation*

*White's View: Culture as a System*

*A Look Ahead*

The archaeological data and interpretation that form the bulk of this book clearly do not exist in a vacuum. They have an intellectual background that provides a useful context for the student who wishes to understand the development of ancient civilizations. That intellectual background is the subject of this chapter. Here we hope to provide a brief “history of history” by looking at the various stages of developing consciousness that have taken place in people’s conceptualizations of past cultures and civilizations.

In the first half of this chapter, we look at some of the most important trends in past ways people have viewed history—in Mesopotamia, in ancient Greece, and in Europe both in Medieval times and in the Age of Enlightenment. We will, moreover, be examining more recent perspectives. The remainder of the chapter looks broadly at archaeological discoveries and the modern discipline of anthropology and, more specifically, at the ways these two influences have transformed our view of ancient civilizations.

### **A Résumé of Historical Views**

Our knowledge of the cultures of antiquity is relatively recent, for historical records had been long lost even before the beginning of the European Middle Ages. Beyond a few antiquarian and Biblical references, the prehistory and history of the ancient Near East and other early centers have had to be painstakingly reconstructed almost exclusively through archaeological fieldwork. Within the past century and a half, intensive programs of archaeological exploration and excavation have led to many rediscoveries—among them the Sumerian civilization in 1899 and the Minoan, Harappan, Shang, and Olmec civilizations of the Aegean, India, China, and Mexico within only the past fifty years. These rediscoveries of past civilizations have greatly expanded

our appreciation of human diversity through the ages. Recognition of this diversity is part of our present-day outlook; it was not a perspective of antiquity.

#### ANCIENT VIEWS OF THE PAST

The best place to begin an examination of past views of history is in the ancient Near East, an area bordered by the Caucasus on the north, Egypt on the south, the Aegean Sea on the west, and the highlands of eastern Iran on the east. Within this area was the “Mesopotamia” referred to by Greek writers, and it was here, by the sixth millennium B.C. if not earlier, that the first urban cultures took form. The cultures which inhabited Mesopotamia, the lands between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers of present-day Iraq, are called Sumerian, the earliest literate civilization of Mesopotamia, which was chronologically followed by the Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian. Of the Sumerians we will have more to say in Chapter 3.

Some of our most valuable information about the historical outlook of these ancient civilizations comes from deciphered writings from Egypt and Mesopotamia. Although only a small proportion of texts has yet been translated, those documents have allowed us a glimpse of ancient attitudes, myths, legends, and everyday life that would be impossible without the thousands of tablets that archaeologists have recovered.

In dealing with texts from the remote past, the modern reader meets with conceptual barriers which become a constant source of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Just as the physical plan, the social structure, the economic foundations—and almost every other aspect of a civilization—have varied from one culture to another over time, so has the way people think.

This is especially true of perceptions of history. The historical consciousness as we know it is a recent development. Only in the past few hundred years have the study and placement of historical processes in their “proper” sequence and perspective been a concern of history and science. Even now our understanding of the historical process continues to change from one generation to the next. Each period of time appears to have derived its own valid “truth” in reference to its own social framework.

That is why modern historians, as they try to outline the ancient Mesopotamian's attitude toward the past, are tempted to use concepts, attitudes, and categories that would have been alien to the Mesopotamian. In the thousands of written inscriptions relating to economic, political, legal, literary, and daily affairs discovered in the archaeological remains of third-millennium Sumer, for instance, the word for *history* is wholly absent. This absence does not indicate a lack of interest in the past, for numerous inscribed clay tablets suggest the contrary to be true. Instead it signifies a completely different world view—including a different approach to history.

A basic principle of both Mesopotamian and Egyptian thought was the virtually total lack of distinction between heaven and earth. To the Mesopotamian and the Egyptian, every mundane matter depended on divine action—from appointments of kings and victories at war to the birth of infants. The questions of why or how past events occurred seemingly never troubled the Mesopotamian or the Egyptian, because everything—including cultural change—was controlled by celestial powers! This conception explains one aspect of the ancient Near Eastern idea of history—the complete absence of reference to causes of the kind we require today in understanding historical processes. The search for a cause could hardly go beyond that of divine causation.

Related to divine causation is the belief in *divination*, the ability to predict the future. Divinations became a highly developed practice in the ancient Near East (and in early Mesoamerican civilizations as well); indeed, they are responsible for most of the historical records we now have.

In Egypt and Mesopotamia, scribes recorded both events and the omens that attended these events. Records of omens appearing before major events were carefully compiled for future reference in predicting the will of the gods. In this way, the compilation of events and omens served a real and practical purpose to the ancient “historian.”

Because of the function they served, these very ancient records are just that—descriptions of events. The personal beliefs and theological or philosophical insights of the scribes who kept the records are conspicuously absent in cuneiform literature. In this respect, the “historical” perception of the ancient Near East is vastly different from that of the Classical world

of the Greeks and from later Judeo-Christian traditions. The newer outlooks, and the "truths" which they inspired, are as different from Mesopotamian or Egyptian traditions as the social institutions which fostered them.

#### CLASSICAL HISTORICAL VIEWS

According to Hecataeus of Miletus (ca. 550 B.C.), the first Greek historian of whom we have any knowledge, the ideal in Greek historical writing was the eyewitness account. The historian's function was to act as a judge, making careful notes from eyewitnesses and evaluating testimony. Impartial reconstruction of past events was recorded as the history of the immediate past.

While Greek historical writing is like that of ancient Mesopotamia in that both provide accurate descriptions, there are some very basic differences. For one, the Greek historian was concerned with historiography—the methods and principles that govern the writing of history.\* A concern for historical methodology was part of the classical tradition but was unknown to ancient oriental civilizations. Of course, the limitations of classical historiography are all too apparent to us now. The time constraints of dealing only with events within the memory of living witnesses may seem unduly restrictive to modern historians accustomed to relying on archaeological or archival data and excavations. But these sources of evidence were not to become a concern for another two thousand years, and the point remains that the classical historians were the first to derive a methodology for studying the past.

The Greek historians were also the first to concern themselves with a theoretical framework for understanding the past. They no longer perceived history as wholly directed by divine ordination. Rather, they looked for other causes and effects. The classical historians were concerned with questions of historical directionality and cause, the cumulative effects of the growth of civilizations, the purposive growth of civilizations, and the irreversible aspects of history.

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\*A formal description of this historical method is first provided by Polybius. His treatment of the Roman conquests became the model for classical historiography.

*Plate 1.1* Aristotle.

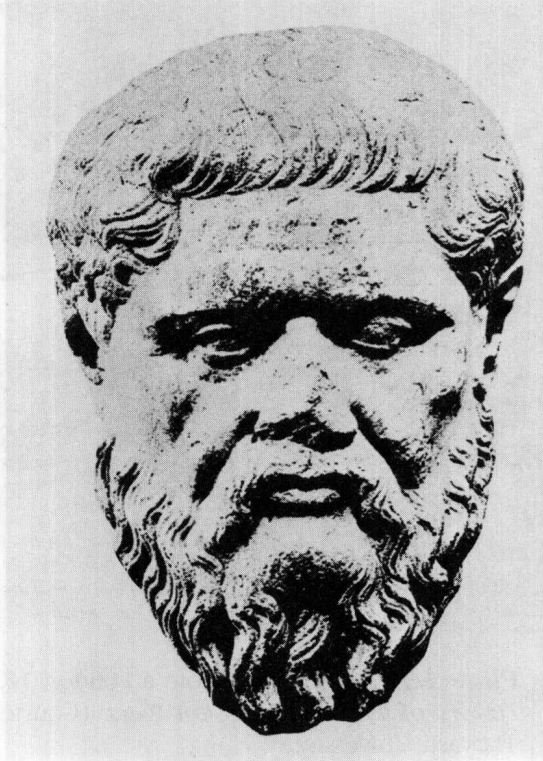


An overriding theme among classical historians was the belief in the *cyclicity of history*: the view that history repeats itself in a series of events that recur regularly and usually lead back to the starting point. It might be noted in passing that some ancient Mesopotamian peoples also had a cyclical view of the past, but this view regarded divine direction as the only moving force. To Aristotle and Plato, the cyclical course of history provided a model of change as well as development in both immediate and remote times.

The Greek historians' view of the cyclical nature of cultural growth continues to have a remarkable impact even today. Take the twentieth-century comment of Oswald Spengler that each civilization "passes through the age phases of the individual man. It has a childhood, youth, manhood, and old age."<sup>1</sup> In this remark we can find a direct analogy in the writings of Heraclitus, Aristotle, Plato, Polybius, Lucretius, and Seneca.

One important element of the tradition of cyclicity was the classical world's concern for a developmental perspective which

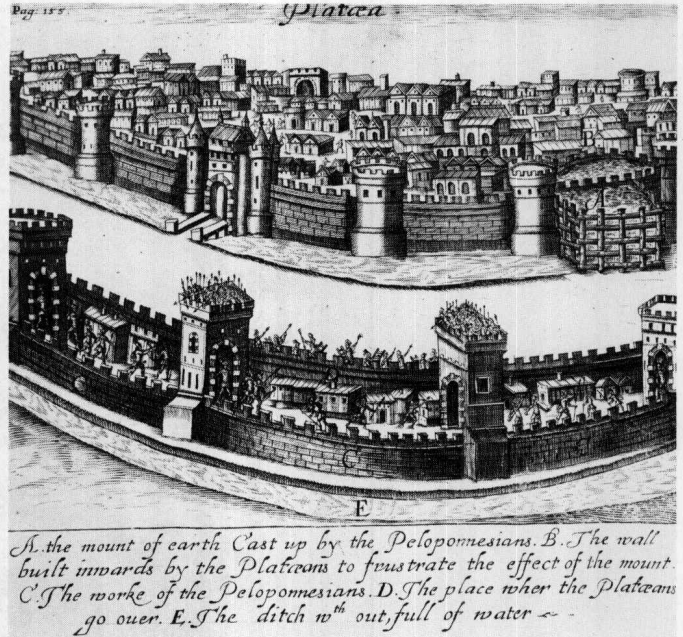
**Plate 1.2** Plato.



emphasized origins. Thus Aristotle, when investigating the nature of the state in his *Politics*, noted that: “He who considers things in their first growth and origin, whether the state or anything else, will obtain the clearest view.”<sup>2</sup>

The concern for origins led to inquiries into the nature of knowledge in many other disciplines, including science, ethics, politics, and art, and the answers helped to provide the Greeks with a framework for viewing history. Attempts to answer the question “What sort of being must being be when being becomes?” led Plato to outline social evolution from prestate conditions and primitive states to the rise of civilization in both *The Laws* and *The Republic*.

The Greek historian’s concern with cyclical development formed the basis for another element of the classical perspective: the idea that future events could be predicted through an understanding of the past. This notion can be seen in the historical treatises of Thucydides (471–400 B.C.), who shares



**Plate 1.3** Frontispiece from a London 1629 edition of Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*. (Courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard University.)

the mantle, “Father of History,” with Herodotus (490–409 B.C.). Thucydides found a repeating pattern in history: a rise of civilizations that was inevitably followed by a fall—the result of increasing pride and arrogance. Power led to wealth; wealth led to indulgence and pride; and these in turn led the civilization to believe itself exempt from the laws of human behavior. The result was the civilization’s downfall. A clear illustration of this pattern was the rise and fall of the Persian Empire, described in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*. By the same process, Thucydides predicted, Athens was doomed to a similar fate.

In their recording and interpretation of past events, the classical historians laid some foundations for Western social thought that are still very much with us today. Evidence for this can be seen throughout classical writing in an overriding concern for understanding the origin of things; a belief that developmental processes followed definite patterns and a



concern for isolating the causes that underlie those patterns; a belief that all things within nature are set to specific purposes; and an emphasis placed on methodology to provide guidelines for scientific inquiry.

While much of our own historical tradition has roots in early classical views, the dominant Western perspectives have undergone many changes in the interim. The first major shift accompanied the rise of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

### SAINT AUGUSTINE'S LINEAR DESIGN OF HISTORY

While the Greeks perceived the pattern of history as cyclical, there existed another, quite distinct, contemporaneous view. The biblical tradition of the Old Testament saw history as linear, the work of divine providence guiding events toward the fulfillment of a final purpose. The fusion of these two contrasting views added an important new perspective to Western historiography. This fusion is best illustrated in the writings of St. Augustine (A.D. 354–430), whose historical perspective has influenced Western civilization for well over fifteen hundred years.

In the fifth century, non-Christians blamed the fall and sack of Rome in 410 on the turning away from their pagan gods. In his monumental study, *The City of God* (written between A.D. 413 and 426), St. Augustine set out in ten volumes to show that there was a different cause. The fall of Rome was part of the purposive design of history leading to the establishment of a new Christian civilization.

In his book, St. Augustine introduced two basic ideas. The first was that history follows a linear path. Unlike the cyclical conception of classical historians, Augustine's linear view of history was universal, encompassing all civilizations and moving in a definite direction and by a definite design, all imposed by God's will. "He made in time not from a new and sudden resolution, but by His unchangeable and eternal design."<sup>3</sup> Within Augustinian tradition, history was "going somewhere": it was an irreversible process moving along a predetermined course. (The revelation of this divine plan was to become a primary concern of scholars through the age of the Renaissance.)

A second important element of St. Augustine's conception was that progress over earlier times was inevitable. The notion of