

# ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS

PREHISTORY TO THE FALL OF ROME



CARLTON J. H. HAYES  
JAMES H. HANSCOM

MAINSTREAMS OF CIVILIZATION

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## COVER ILLUSTRATION

*The so-called gold Mask of Agamemnon, National Museum, Athens, Greece*

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# Prologue

**H**ere is a history of ancient times and man's earliest civilizations. These civilizations, covering some four thousand years in time, were created in north Africa and Eurasia, the great stretch of land that extends from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. Today Eurasia is divided into Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. In the Middle East arose man's first civilization, the Mesopotamian, after many thousands of years had passed following man's first appearance on earth.

Why study ancient history? One answer is that the contributions of ancient men were unique. They created civilizations from a series of basic steps without precedent. Among these were learning to plant, to live together in villages, to specialize in occupation. These were gigantic steps in the development of man. Once civilization arose, why did some men organize themselves into authoritarian kingdoms while others developed self-governing city-states? Why did ideas about life after death develop, and how did they differ among different peoples? Why did such different civilizations arise once the basic steps were taken? Ideas such as creating city-states and imagining a life after death were first originated by ancient men. They set patterns of thought we follow, with variations, today. How and why did they do this?

History poses many questions. In order to answer them, the historian has to select carefully from the mass of material at his disposal. "History is . . . the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another," said the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt. Such a definition recognizes an essential fact. Although history, broadly speaking, is the record of everything men have thought, said, and done in the past, it is obviously impossible to record everything. Obviously also, we do not know everything, even if we could record it. So the historian selects what he believes to be the most significant



material at his disposal. His selection, however, may not coincide entirely with that of other historians. It may well differ from the histories written in other generations by men who saw things from another perspective. It may change as new material comes to light. History, then, is a record of events whose selection and significance is subject to the interpretations of those who call themselves historians.

The historian sees trends and developments that shed light on what came before and what happened after. Only when events have been organized into meaningful patterns, however, can they illuminate the past and the future. To be able to think about his material more easily, the historian categorizes it. The largest of these categories concern politics (how men govern themselves), economics (how men produce, distribute, and consume goods and services), society (how men deal with each other, individually and in groups), and culture (how men express their thoughts, feelings, ideas in art, literature, philosophy). How the earliest men dealt with the concerns of these categories—the mistakes they made, the successes they had—is the subject of ancient history.

Finally, and of great importance, ancient history, like all history, provides us with experience we cannot have ourselves. This experience is indirect. It comes through knowledge rather than participation. Nevertheless, it enables us to make better decisions about events affecting our lives in the present and future; it helps us to understand more clearly attitudes, interests, and values of the society we live in; it makes it possible for us to deal more successfully with societies of other peoples who have interests and values different from our own. Without experience there can be no awareness. Without awareness there can be no understanding. History, then, gives us knowledge of experience we cannot have ourselves and which, even though indirect, helps us to understand both ourselves and others.

As you begin your study of the ancient world, you might consider the words of the Roman statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C., page 390). He said, “History is the witness of the times, the light of truth, the life of memory, the teacher of life. . . .” You will discover whether these words are true. You will see how men, isolated, alone, reach out to communicate with each other, and then build villages and cities, great empires and states that exchange ideas. You will note how in so many instances ancient men lived lives that are so different from our own yet so alike in ways you may not have thought of. When you have considered all these things, you may wish to make your own definition of the significance of history and of the ancient world.

# PART 1



Beginnings

Earth existed for billions of years before man appeared. Man has existed for only a tiny fraction of time in earth's history. Yet, whereas man's history as a civilized being has covered only some five thousand years, the early stage of his development lasted for hundreds of thousands of years in the period known as the Stone Age.

The great landmark in the Stone Age was the development of agriculture, or food planting. This most fundamental of all human revolutions brought marked changes into man's pattern of life. From being a food hunter, always on the move and dependent on the environment, man became a food producer, settled in villages, where he gradually learned to gain control over his environment. The population increased from the regular food supply. New inventions were made. Man made images to worship and to appease the gods he thought were in the wind, the thunder, and the water, and gradually these images took on his own likeness. Social groups emerged, and specialization of occupation appeared. By the end of the New Stone Age man was prepared to take the great step into civilization.

The study of ancient man, in the vast ages before he was civilized, is one of the most modern areas of research. The great questions about who ancient man was, how he developed, how he lived, and why he did what he did, are in large measure unanswered.

Every day in different parts of the world, evidence of the ancient past comes to light. What we do not know, however, is still much more than what we do know. So the student of ancient man must be always alert to the latest discoveries. He must always be ready to rethink his conclusions in the light of new information.



# Man and His Past

Each person is his own past. At any moment the mind and the body are the totals of what one thought and did this morning, yesterday, and in all the days and years back to one's beginning. And beyond that, one is the past of one's ancestors through physical heredity and of other people long dead through inherited customs, traditions, and ideas.

What personal experience is to the individual, that is, a past that gives him greater understanding, history is to mankind. But experience has no meaning or usefulness for those who cannot recall it. In the same way, history can have no meaning unless the great experiences of groups, of nations, or of all mankind are remembered. And to be remembered longer than the lifetime of those involved, the experience must be transmitted, or passed on, from one generation to the next.



## TRANSMITTING EXPERIENCE

In order to pass on experience one must have speech, so man's first and most difficult task was to develop language. Without the aid of words and precise ideas, man could not organize his personal memory, and he could not tell his experiences and his ideas to others. With speech, individuals

could exchange thoughts, and group traditions followed. Such traditions could then be transmitted orally from old to young.

Genealogies (family relationships), sagas (tales of heroes and their adventures), moral precepts and rules of behavior ("Thou shalt"), taboos (warnings of things dangerous or forbidden—"Thou shalt not"), legends of ancient happenings, and myths of superhuman beings—all these are known to have been transmitted orally from generation to generation, sometimes for centuries without alteration. Two thousand years ago the Druids of Britain transmitted their beliefs orally, and when the last Druid trained in the lore died, the details of their beliefs were lost forever.

### CLARIFYING TIME

Man found, however, that to organize his experience and to transmit stories of events from earlier times, he had to make reference to time. The reality of time *as it relates to human life* was and is difficult to understand. It may be measured by some mechanical device in terms of units such as minutes, hours, days, weeks, years. But in relation to daily life, one hour is not the same to two different people. For one person the hour drags and seems endless; for another the same hour races by. The holidays so slow in coming may seem to gallop once they are here; so in relation to human reaction the duration and passage of time cannot be recorded in a meaningful way. To say that one civilization lasted five thousand years and another lasted one thousand does not tell us which was richer in terms of human experience.

Man, however, needed to organize time so that he could remember events in the order in which they happened. He therefore invented time measures.

The rising and setting of the sun served as the unit of the day. When a larger measure was needed, the apparent growth and waning of the moon was used. To tell the "months" apart, man identified them by descriptive names. The American Indians, for example, had a "Planter's Moon," a "Hunter's Moon," and a "Harvest Moon." Some early men stopped at this point. Their traditions might hark back to "many moons ago," but this could mean anything—years, centuries, or eons.

Some early men noted that the moon's development from crescent to full was repeated twelve or thirteen times during the cycle of the seasons. Others noticed that different conditions repeated themselves regularly—the lengthening and shortening of the daylight hours, the appearance of certain groups on the horizon at sunset or sunrise, the rising and falling of the Nile

in Egypt, the regular changes in the seasonal winds and rains in India, the recurrence of planting and harvesting seasons. From some or all of those cycles came the concept of the year as a measure of time.

To identify the different years, they were named. One year might become known as "The Year of No Harvest," another as "The Year of the Earthquake," a third as "The Year of the Coming of the Strangers." The name would then be expressed in a simple picture, and lists of the pictures were kept to help transmit the tradition.

The oldest example of such a list or calendar known today is the Palermo Stone, so called because of its present location in the museum of Palermo, Sicily. It is a list some five thousand years old, covering Egyptian year-names and kings for about seven hundred years.

#### THE INVENTION OF THE CALENDAR

As time went on, men in many societies made lists of rulers, and years were identified as the first, second, or whatever year of a certain king's reign. This *regnal* calendar system has continued through history in governments headed by emperors, kings, caliphs, and popes. The Assyrians kept lists of officials (*limma*) plus records of eclipses of the sun and moon. The Roman Republic dated its laws by the chief Roman executives, the consuls. Modern republics, such as the United States, never follow this practice because it might seem to suggest that the President is a ruler in the royal sense.

The Romans also identified the year by reference to the founding of Rome. The destruction of Carthage, for example, was recorded as taking place during the consulate of Scipio Aemilianus and in 607 A.U.C. (*Anno Urbis Conditae*, Year of the Founding of the City).

The Greeks also used two systems, identifying a year by the name of the chief magistrate, the archon, or by reference to the Olympic Games, which were held every fourth year, or by both.

In more modern times, similar calendars have been invented. Muslims date their era from the year of Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina, so their dates are identified for us in the west with the letters A.H. (*Anno Hejirae*, Year of the Flight).

The Christian calendar is based on the birth of Jesus, although the estimated date of this event is considered to be wrong by three to seven years. The early Christians did not use this system. It was not until several hundred years after Jesus' birth that Christians determined to date their calendar from his birthday.

Christians have since used the A.D. (*Anno Domini*, in the year of the Lord) calendar so widely that today in much of the world, including non-Christian areas, the A.D. letters are omitted as unnecessary.

In the Christian calendar the years before the birth of Christ are counted backward from the year 1 A.D. and are labeled B.C. (before Christ). According to the Christian calendar the traditional date of the founding of Rome was 753 B.C. (the year 1 in the old Roman calendar), and the Greek Olympics were first held in 776 B.C. (the first year of the first Olympiad according to ancient Greek reckoning).

When it is noted that the year 1 in the Jewish calendar corresponds to 3761 B.C. and the year 1 in the Chinese calendar to 2697 B.C., it might be thought that these calendars were in existence before these dates. Actually, the beginning dates are estimates. Just as the Christians in the fourth century A.D. counted back to the birth of Christ, so Jewish leaders of about 360 A.D. counted back to a traditional date for the beginning of the world. Thus the Christian and Jewish calendars have actually been used for about the same length of time. In the same manner the Chinese counted back to the time they believed their calendar system had come into existence.

Since there is no calendar accepted by all nations and religions, events are often dated according to two or three systems, as was the Roman and Greek custom. A recent Thanksgiving Day proclamation by a state governor was dated three ways—by the Christian year, by the founding of the state as a colony in America, and by the independence of the United States. Thus the year of Caesar's murder could be identified as 709 A.U.C. (Roman), 44 B.C. (Christian), 3717 (Jewish), 2653 (Chinese), the first year of the 183rd Olympiad (Greek), and 1845 before the founding of the United States. Or, to use a calendar that is always in the back of our minds, how many years ago?

## THE MODERN HISTORIAN AND THE PAST

Knowledge of the past comes from many sources—from written records and also from knowledge revealed by sciences developed in the last century or so. New sciences of some importance to the historian are *anthropology*, the study of man's physical and cultural development; *archaeology*, the discovery and study of material remains; *geology*, the study of rock and earth formations; *philology*, the study of languages and written records; *sociology*, the study of conditions and change in groups; and *psychology*,

An archaeological dig. Archaeological excavations in the sands of Nubia, Sudan, revealed the wall of a buried building and on the wall the painting of an angel. The wall, it turned out, belonged to an early Coptic Christian church.



the study of human behavior. Archaeologists have found and studied caves, ruins, and tombs containing bones of and objects—artifacts—made and used by early man. From these bones and artifacts scientists have discovered facts and made deductions about the history and culture of man for periods when writing did not exist, or when written records were lost, or when an existing record was in a language not yet translated.

It used to be customary to use the word “history” to mean only that part of the human past that could be learned from writings and inscriptions. The story of the eras before writing was invented was called “prehistory.”

The phrase “unrecorded history” was preferred by some writers because it could apply equally to the period before writing was in existence and to the many cases after its invention when records were lost or the ability to read them was lost. Thus many older historians omitted the prehistoric because it was not history as they defined it.

More and more, however, the word history is being used for the whole human story, regardless of the source of information. In this usage the term prehistoric is not distinct from historic but is one part of it. We will use prehistory in this sense in this book.

#### CHANCE AND THE SURVIVAL OF RECORDS

Various unplanned conditions or events have helped preserve some ancient ruins, artifacts, and writings for modern use. Because the Egyptians hated the ruler Ikhnaten for tampering with their religion, they abandoned his capital, Akhetaten, after he died. The desert winds and sands buried it.



Because the people of the Middle East hated and feared the mighty Assyrian city of Nineveh, after its overthrow no one could be persuaded to live on the site. Even thieves developed a superstitious fear of the place. As a result the ruins, including the great library, lay covered until modern times by a mound of earth.

The eruption of the volcano Vesuvius in 79 A.D. buried two small Roman cities, Pompeii and Herculaneum. Much of Pompeii has been excavated in modern times to reveal many facts about city life in Roman times that would otherwise be unknown. The work at Herculaneum has gone more slowly. Unlike the tons of ashes that buried Pompeii, rivers of liquid mud and lava flooded over its sister city and hardened into airtight rock. The rock covering has made excavation extremely difficult and costly, but it has also preserved precious art treasures and many Greek and Roman manuscripts. Two thirds of this town still lies buried and nobody knows what long lost classics still wait in the stony darkness of two thousand years.

Over three thousand years ago a landslide covered the entrance to an Egyptian royal tomb. So, although other tombs were pillaged centuries ago, the tomb of the teenaged pharaoh Tutankhamen kept its marvels until the twentieth century.

These are only a few examples of chance preservation of the past.

#### CHANCE AND THE RECOVERY OF THE PAST

Sometimes knowledge of the past is recovered only by chance.

Digging a trench at Rosetta in Egypt in 1800, a French soldier unearthed a slab inscribed with one text in three kinds of writing. This accidental discovery made it possible for experts eventually to solve the mystery of the long-unreadable Egyptian inscriptions, because one of the three languages was known to experts.

In 1819, British army officers on a hunting trip in India accidentally found caves at Ajanta covered with magnificent Buddhist wall paintings fifteen hundred years old. Similarly, by mere chance Angkor, the ancient capital of the Khmer civilization, deep in the Cambodian jungle, and the amazing twenty-thousand-year-old cave paintings of prehistoric man in the Pyrenees mountains were stumbled upon by men in search of other things.

#### INSPIRATION AND THE RECOVERY OF THE PAST

Sometimes it is not pure chance but inspiration combined with good luck that helps searchers on the trail of the past. Nineteenth-century scholars