

WORLD PREHISTORY

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Fourth Edition



Brian M. Fagan



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A Brief Introduction

FOURTH EDITION

Brian M. Fagan

University of California, Santa Barbara



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Preface

Golden pharaohs, lost cities, grinning human skeletons: archaeology is the stuff of romance and legend! Many people still think of archaeologists as adventurers and treasure hunters, like Indiana Jones of Hollywood movie fame seeking the elusive Holy Grail. This enduring image goes back to the late nineteenth century, when archaeologists like Heinrich Schliemann fame could still find lost civilizations like Troy and excavate three royal palaces in a week. Today, few, if any, archaeologists behave like Indiana Jones. They are scientists, not adventurers, as comfortable in an air-conditioned laboratory as they are on a remote excavation. The development of scientific archaeology from its Victorian beginnings ranks among the greatest triumphs of 20th-century science. Archaeology has changed our understanding of the human experience in profound ways. A century ago, most scientists believed humans were no more than 100,000 years old. Today we know that our origins go back 5 million years. Our predecessors assumed the Americas were settled in about 8000 B.C. and that farming began around 4000 B.C. New excavations date the first Americans to at least 12,000 B.C. and the beginnings of agriculture to 8500 B.C. Most important of all, archaeology has changed our perceptions of ourselves, our biological and cultural diversity. Welcome to the fascinating world of archaeology!

The fourth edition of *World Prehistory* continues a long tradition of providing an interesting, jargon-free journey through the 5-million-year-old landscape of the human past. I hope you enjoy your sojourn in its pages!

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FOURTH EDITION

This is an exciting time to be writing about archaeology, for many scientific advances are changing our perceptions about the past. Accordingly, the fourth edition is somewhat longer than its predecessors, with expanded coverage of major theoretical issues and the early civilizations. The fourth edition contains important new discoveries about early human evolution, the late Ice Age, and the origins of agriculture. New and updated coverage of the field appears in

every chapter, with an up-to-date Guide to Further Reading at the end of the book along with Glossaries of Technical Terms and Archaeological Sites and Cultural Names.

Updating and Rewriting

- *New perceptions of world prehistory.* Chapter 1 includes new discussion of archaeology and alternative perspectives on the past, reflecting new thinking on this important topic.
- *Early human evolution.* Chapter 2 discusses the latest advances in the study of human origins, including the latest fossil discoveries in Ethiopia and Kenya, among them *Ardipithecus ramidus*, the earliest known human ancestor.
- *Origins of modern humans.* Chapter 3 covers new research into the controversial issue of the earliest modern humans and fresh perceptions of Neanderthal ancestry and behavior.
- *Origins of food production.* In Chapter 6, the fourth edition incorporates much-expanded coverage of the latest theories on the origins of agriculture and animal domestication. Chapter 7, which describes the first farmers, incorporates new dates for early agriculture obtained from accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS) radiocarbon dates.
- *Origins of states and civilization.* Chapter 9 has been expanded to include current theoretical debates on the origins of state-organized societies. Chapters 10 to 14 offer an up-to-date description and analysis of the first civilizations, with expanded coverage of ancient Egyptian civilization and of south and southeast Asian states. Chapters 12 and 13 offer more comprehensive analysis of highland and lowland Mesoamerican civilizations than in previous editions.
- *Revision and updating throughout.* The entire text and Guide to Further Reading have been revised and updated on a page-by-page basis. Over half the book has been completely rewritten for this expanded edition.

Boxes

Two types of in-text boxes enhance the book, designed to amplify the narrative:

- *Discovery.* These boxes include brief accounts of spectacular discoveries that have revolutionized our understanding of the past, such as Grotte de Chauvet, France, the Ice Man of the Alps, and the Lords of Sipán, Peru.
- *Dating the Past.* These boxes introduce key dating methods, such as radiocarbon and AMS dating.

In addition, Chapter 1 includes boxes on ethnographic analogy, classification of ancient societies, and chronological methods.

New and Revised Art Program

The fourth edition's art program has been expanded with new photographs and fresh or revised line art. The new illustrations provide additional background on recent discoveries, amplify the narrative, or replace older art with new pictures. Some expanded captions serve to integrate the illustrations more closely into the text.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The fourth edition has benefited from the expertise of many colleagues, too numerous to list here. I am deeply grateful for their encouragement and assistance. I would like to thank the following reviewers for their help in revising the ninth edition. I appreciate their frank comments:

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Lastly, my thanks to my editor of many years, Alan McClare, also to photographic researcher Mira Schachne, and the editorial and production staff at York Production Services. They have turned a complex manuscript into an attractive book and done all they can to minimize unexpected difficulties.

As always, I would be most grateful for criticisms, comments, or details of new work, sent to me c/o Department of Anthropology, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93108 (e-mail: bfagan@west.net).

Brian M. Fagan

A Note on Chronologies and Measurements

The narrative of prehistory in these pages is organized in as linear a fashion chronologically as is practicable. It is based on radiocarbon, potassium-argon, and tree-ring dates, as well as historical documents. Although every effort has been made to make dates accurate, many of them should be recognized for what they are—statistical approximations. The time scales of prehistory are presented in two ways:

- At the beginning of each chapter (except Chapters 1, 5, 8, and 13), a Timelines column shows the reader the relative position of the developments described in that chapter within the broad time frame of prehistoric times.
- Chronological tables placed at strategic points in the book provide a comparative view of developments in different areas of the world. Each is linked to its predecessors and successors, so that they provide background continuity for the narrative.

The following conventions are used:

- Dates before 10,000 years ago are expressed in years Before Present (B.P.)
- Dates after 10,000 years ago are expressed in years Before Christ (B.C.) or Anno Domini (A.D.).

Another common convention is B.C.E./C.E. (Before Common Era/Common Era), which is not employed in this book. By scientific convention, “present” is A.D. 1950.

Please note that all radiocarbon dates and potassium-argon dates should be understood to have a plus and minus factor that is omitted from this book in the interests of clarity. They are statistical estimates. Where possible, radiocarbon dates have been calibrated with tree-ring chronologies, which adds a substantial element of accuracy (see Chapter 1).

For tree-ring calibration of radiocarbon dates, see *Radiocarbon*, 1993. *Measurements*. All measurements are given in miles, yards, feet, and inches, with metric equivalents.

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P A R T

1

PREHISTORY

It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly, one begins to wish facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts. . . .

SHERLOCK HOLMES
A Scandal in Bohemia

C H A P T E R 1

The Study of Human Prehistory

Since time immemorial, humans have been intensely curious about their origins, about the mysterious and sometimes threatening world in which they exist. They know that earlier generations lived before them, that their children, grandchildren, and their progeny in turn will, in due course, dwell on earth. But how did this world come about? Who created the familiar landscape of rivers, fields, mountains, plants, and animals? Who fashioned the oceans and sea coasts, deep lakes and fast-flowing streams? Above all, how did the first men and women settle the land? Who created them, how did they come into being? Every society has creation stories to account for human origins. However, archaeology and biological anthropology have replaced legend with an intricate account of human evolution and cultural development that extends back more than 2.5 million years. This chapter describes how archaeologists study and interpret the past.

"IN THE BEGINNING . . ."

After the Great Fire destroyed the world and before the little bird Icanchu flew away, he roamed the wasteland in search of First Place. The homeland lay beyond recognition, but Icanchu's index finger, of its own accord, pointed to the spot. There he unearthed the charcoal stump that he pounded as his drum. Playing without stopping, he chanted with the dark drum's sounds. . . . At dawn on the new Day, a green shoot sprang from the coal drum and soon flowered as Firstborn Tree. . . . From its branches bloomed the forms of life that flourished in the new World. . . .¹

We Westerners take the past for granted, accept human evolution as something that extends back many thousands, even millions of years. Science provides us with a long perspective on ancient times. In contrast, the story of Icanchu's drum is a classic origin myth of the cosmic fire told by the Mataco Indians from South America. Like all such accounts, the tale begins with a **primordium** (the very beginning) in which a mythic being, in this case Icanchu, works to create the familiar animals, landscape, and plants of the world, and then the human inhabitants. Icanchu, and his equivalents in a myriad of human cultures throughout the world, create order from primeval chaos, as God does in Genesis, Chapter 1.

¹Lawrence Sullivan, *Icanchu's Drum* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), p. 92.