



Brian M. Fagan

World Prehistory

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

WORLD PREHISTORY

A Brief
Introduction

BRIAN M. FAGAN

University of California, Santa Barbara

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To Jan,
former student and friend —
who learned, came back, learned again,
and grew more than us all

To qualify as human, a hominid has, so to say, to justify himself by works; the criteria are no longer biological so much as cultural.

Grahame Clark, 1977

To the Reader

Prehistory is the story of human cultural evolution before the advent of written records. It comes as a surprise to many people that archaeologists have managed to piece together the story of humankind for hundreds of thousands of years before the world's first civilization in the Near East 5000 years ago. Some of the discoveries that have contributed to this exciting story are household names — like Olduvai Gorge, Ancient Troy, and Teotihuacán. But most prehistory is much less spectacular, a sober chronicle of cultural evolution over thousands of years of prehistoric time.

This book is a narrative summary of world prehistory from more than two million years ago up to recent times — a span covering the origins of humanity, the peopling of the world, and the beginnings of food production and urban civilization. I cover the basic concepts of archaeology in outline so you can gain some understanding of how archaeologists write world prehistory, then take you on a narrative journey through time. The emphasis is on what happened as much as on why it occurred. This story is incomplete and summary at best, but you will find three points that recur again and again, either explicitly or implicitly. These are:

- That anthropological archaeology shows how people have developed widely differing solutions to similar problems of survival.
- That literate civilization is not just an invention of the Near East, the Mediterranean basin, and western Europe.
- That many prehistoric societies have become extinct in recent times as a result of their contact with technologically more advanced societies.

Referring to the chronological tables will help you understand the narrative. References for more detailed reading appear at the end of the book.

Few people who will read this book will become professional archaeologists, but I hope that you will visit famous sites and have many opportunities to enjoy archaeology. And you can help us all enjoy the past if you follow the ethical principles given on page 194 of this book.

To the Instructor

This book, a brief summary of the major developments in world prehistory, is designed as a supplementary text for basic anthropology courses. Part One deals with basic method and theory in prehistoric archaeology, as a basis for understanding the rest of the book. I then cover the origins of humanity, the peopling of the world by hunter-gatherers, the origins of food production, and the beginnings of literate civilization. I end with a capsule description of the end of prehistory, and of the destruction of prehistoric societies by Western civilization.

The book proceeds on the assumptions that your students will have but two or three weeks to cover world prehistory, and that technical terms should be kept to a minimum. By no stretch of the imagination can this book be called complete. Many fierce academic controversies lurk in these pages and are glossed over here. My feeling is that it is better to overstate the facts at this stage in learning rather than present an inconclusive piece of reasoning, which will tend to confuse the beginner. One can always correct errors of overstatement in class or at a later stage. Length restrictions prevent this book from being referenced. A guide to further reading appears at the end of the volume.

World Prehistory is written within a generalized evolutionary framework; however, I have tried to avoid encasing the narrative within a rigid theoretical framework. Every instructor has his own theoretical viewpoints that he or she will seek to impose on the chapters that follow. You will probably use your own case studies to illustrate the basic concepts of archaeology. For this reason, I

have kept such examples to a minimum. My assumption is, too, that you will fill in additional details for your classes as you see fit, for each course situation is different.

Finally, I draw your attention to the statement on archaeological practices at the end of the text; I hope you will point it out to your students. Unless we educate people about the importance of respecting the archaeological record, and about living responsibly with the past, there may be no archaeology for future generations to study.

Several colleagues provided evaluations of the manuscript and helpful suggestions for change. Thanks especially to J. M. Adovasio, University of Pittsburgh; Lynne Goldstein, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee; Dennis Lee Heskell, University of Utah; and William Turnbaugh, University of Rhode Island. Any comments or ideas for improving future editions of this book would be much appreciated.

A NOTE ON CHRONOLOGIES

The chronologies given in this book are based on radiocarbon, potassium argon, and tree-ring dates, as well as historical documents. While every effort has been made to make them accurate, many of them should be recognized for what they are — statistical approximations. I rely heavily on chronological tables to give the timescales of world prehistory, rather than interrupt the narrative with strings of dates.

The following conventions are used:

- Dates before 20,000 years ago are expressed in years Before Present (B.P.).
- Dates after 20,000 years ago are expressed in years Before Christ (B.C.) or Anno Domini (A.D.).

Please note that all radiocarbon and potassium argon dates should be understood to have a plus and minus factor that is omitted from this book in the interest of clarity.

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STUDYING WORLD PREHISTORY

PART I