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What Is History?

The word *history* comes from an ancient Greek word meaning “inquiry” or “to ask” or “question.” So, what is history? This appears to be a simple, three-word question, but it’s not. How do we know today what happened 10,000 years ago, or 5000 years ago, or even last week?

Last week is easy. It happened recently enough that you have some memory of its events. Some of those events happened in your life. Others you may have read about in the newspaper or heard about on television. But what of the events of hundreds or even thousands of years ago? How do we know about them?

Today, people called historians help us make sense of the past. By examining sources (sometimes called artifacts) such as clay tablets, temple carvings, and journals, historians piece together a picture of earlier times.

Sources can generally be divided into two groups: primary sources and secondary sources. Of the two, primary sources tell us the most. A primary source is one written, carved, or etched during the time it covers. For example, when an Egyptian scribe copied a poem praising his pharaoh, he left us a valuable primary source. Similarly, we know what it was like to travel on the Oregon Trail in the 1840s because pioneer women wrote about their experiences.

Other primary sources include paintings, sculpture, buildings, and burial sites. Such artifacts provide vital information about the lives of our ancestors: what they ate, how they dressed, what their religious beliefs and values were. Secondary sources are the works of historians, often written long after the events being described have taken place.

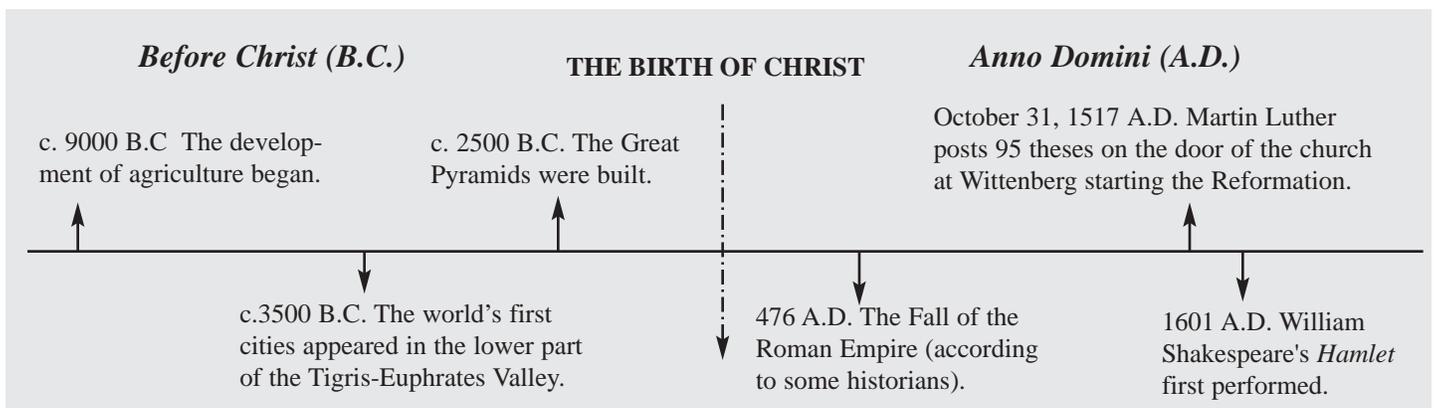
In this book and others in this series, we will look not only at how people lived in the past, but how they progressed from rather primitive beginnings thousands of years ago to the point of creating civilizations.

What do we mean by the word *civilization*? It comes from the Latin word, *civis*, meaning “citizen of a city.” Prior to the development of cities, early humans were wanderers relying on hunting and gathering to feed themselves. Only after humans created cities based on cooperation, organization, and specialization did they begin to create civilizations. So civilization, in this sense, means the improvement of life by humans working together to change their world.

For now, you should begin forming in your mind an idea of what you think is required to make a people civilized. Before we are finished with this study, we will look closely at the adventure of human history, discover our past and, hopefully, develop a clearer understanding of how the world we live in has changed over thousands of years.

A Lesson on Dating

In this book, you will see references to years followed by the letters *B.C.* These letters refer to dates before Christ. For example, 3000 B.C. refers to a date 5000 years ago, since the historical Jesus lived about 2000 years ago. Also, all dates designated as B.C. are counted backward, (in other words, they get smaller) since each year brings us closer to something (in this case, the birth of Christ), rather than further from it. Therefore, a period of time covering from 3000 to 4000 years ago would be written as 1000–2000 B.C.

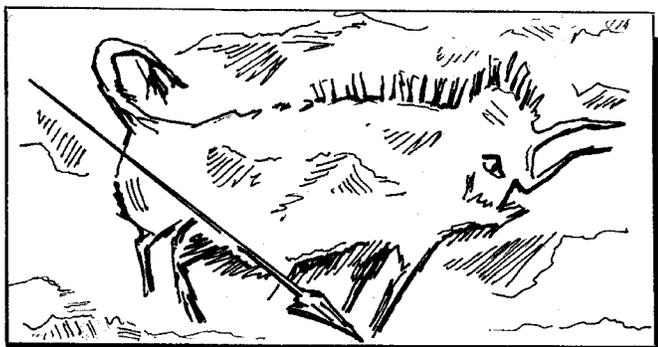


The Paleolithic Age

Humans first appeared on the scene of the ancient world in Africa 1,500,000 years ago during a period called the Paleolithic Age. The word *paleolithic* comes from the combining of two words: *paleo*, meaning “old,” and *lithic*, meaning “stone.”

Anthropologists, scientists who study human history and its origins, call these ancient humans *Homo sapiens* (meaning “wise humans”).

This Old Stone Age lasted a very long time—well over 1,000,000 years. The word “stone” is used to identify these early people because they used stones and rocks as tools, weapons, and cooking utensils. Sometimes we think of these early humans



Cave artwork depicting a prehistoric bison

as “cavemen” dressed in animal skins, carrying clubs, and grunting all the time. But this image of early humans as merely a bunch of “Fred Flintstones” may not be very accurate.

Much of what we know today about these early people comes from their artwork, which includes

small statues of women and cave paintings. Anthropologists have discovered over 200 caves where late Paleolithic artists painted pictures of animals, including bison, horses, bulls, and rhinoceroses.

These early painters used charcoal sticks to draw the picture outlines and produced colors from lumps of red, yellow, and brown clays. Feathers or ferns were used as brushes.

These ancient people were, however, primitive by modern standards. They spent their entire lives traveling in search of food. They did not understand how to plant seeds in the ground, farm, or keep livestock. Instead, they hunted animals and gathered wild plants, seeds, fruits, and nuts. For this reason, anthropologists refer to Paleolithic people as hunter-gatherers.

In a typical Paleolithic group, the men were the hunters; the women and children were the gatherers of wild plants. Most of these early people lived in organized social units, with some people considered more important than others.

For example, the men who hunted were very important in the Paleolithic social order. Also, in a time when people did not have laws, political leaders, or learned judges, the elderly members of their group were respected for the wisdom and experience they had gained through long life. Such individuals were very unique in the Paleolithic Age since most people died from disease, harsh living conditions, or accidents before they were 30 years old.

Review and Write

1. What do you imagine was the most difficult part of living in the Paleolithic Age? _____

2. Create an imaginary Paleolithic meal. What foods would be included? How might they be prepared?

Paleolithic Hunting: The Most Dangerous Game

What will you have for supper this evening? You probably have no idea. Someone else will likely prepare it for you, and you will give little thought to where it came from or what it took to put such a meal together. For Paleolithic people, thinking about food and figuring out where it would come from was something which took much time, planning, and skill. For ancient hunters, bringing a meal to their family might even be dangerous.

These early hunters used several different techniques and a variety of weapons to help them in their efforts to track down dinner. The animals they hunted might include bison, horses, reindeer, elk, or ibex (a kind of goat). During an Ice Age, a period of hundreds of years when daily temperatures were colder than normal, these primitive hunters stalked thick-haired rhinos and now-extinct elephants called woolly mammoths.

Stone and wood provided the basic materials for Paleolithic weapons. Flint was the best stone available for making hunting points, such as spear heads and later arrowheads. Every Paleolithic hunter needed to know how to make and maintain his hunting arsenal.

Paleolithic spears served as the primary hunting tool. Another important device was a spear-thrower. This tool, made of wood or antler, included a sheath and a handle, with the blunt of the spear placed in the sheath. Working on the lever principle, the hunter could use such a tool to throw his spear with greater accuracy over longer distances, with increased force, allowing the spear to pierce the target animal's skin even deeper.

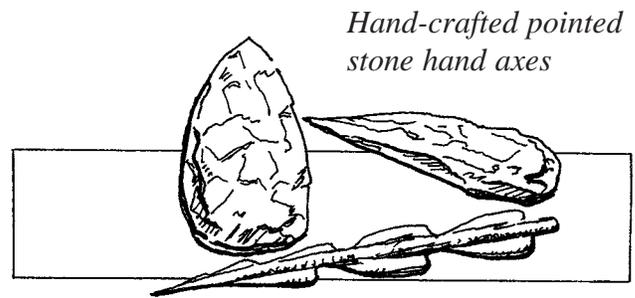
Other weapons included bone or antler harpoons, which featured not only spear points, but additional bone barbs that would hold a spear in the side of an animal without allowing the beast to wiggle the weapon out.

In time, the Paleolithic hunter added the bow and arrow to his choice of weapons. This instrument, as well as the spear-thrower, allowed the hunter to kill his prey at a safer distance.

In the field, Paleolithic hunters roamed in bands and used cooperation to outwit their quarry. Sometimes a hunting party might select an animal from a herd and simply chase it down until it was finally speared and killed.

Other methods of capturing and killing game included digging pits along frequently used animal trails and covering them with branches and leaves. An unsuspecting animal would then fall into the trap and be easily killed. Hunters also gathered along river banks, waited until a herd began crossing, then leaped out when the animals were in deep water, unable to escape.

Another method of hunting involved approaching a quarry from three sides, leaving open only one avenue of escape which led to a canyon trap or a cliff where a blindly running bison or mammoth would plunge to a violent and bloody death.



Hand-crafted pointed stone hand axes

Review and Write

1. What dangers might a Paleolithic hunter face when tracking down ancient animals such as woolly mammoths and bison?

2. On page 2, you read that hunters were respected people. Why do you think they were considered so important to their people?

What is history? Edward Hallett Carr was born in 1892 and educated at the Merchant Taylors' School, London, and Trinity College, Cambridge, where he was Craven scholar and took a double first in classics. As a historian he is best known for his monumental History of Soviet Russia, which the Guardian referred to as 'among the most important works by a British historian this century' and The Times called 'an outstanding historical achievement'. He began his History in 1945 and worked at it for nearly thirty years. Every educated person should know what history is, what this science is studying. After all, the past for each generation is the basis of its future. In this article we will talk about history as a science. History is a humanitarian science, a field of knowledge about human activities in the past. This can include important events, social life, world outlook, social ties and so on. The word "history" has Greek roots (ἱστορία, historia), the origin of the pre-Indo-European (the word wid-tor, that is, to know, to see).