



MENTAL FLOSS

HISTORY of the WORLD



An Irreverent Romp Through Civilization's Best Bits

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WITH WILL PEARSON AND MANGESH HATTIKUDUR

The Mental Floss History of the World

An Irreverent Romp Through Civilization's Best Bits

**Erik Sass and Steve Wiegand with Will Pearson and Mangesh
Hattikudur**

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INTRODUCTION

BY ERIK SASS

We know that 99% of “history,” as *they* teach it, is mind-numbingly boring. And we’re sorry about that; we can’t change what happened in your youth.

But this book is about to make history, by making history interesting. Why? Because history is an edge-of-your-seat thrill ride with all the makings of a Hollywood blockbuster. You want action? We got action. Sex and violence? Plenty of both. Psychopathic mass murderers? Psychopathic mass murderers *run* history! And the best part is, it’s all real.

In the following pages, you’ll read about babies on opium, chicken-flavored beer, cosmetic testicle beads, undercover czars, and gin as a way of life. We’ve also got multibillion dollar heists, secrets from Central American jungles, a duchess who rode through town naked to get her husband to lower taxes, and Roman orgies so scandalous that even the Romans were scandalized.

Of course, if it’s the serious stuff you crave, we’ve got that, too. From the religion that gave birth to Christianity (we’re not talking Judaism), to why the Black Death may not have been *such* a bad thing, to the lurid details of how a country of 300 million people wasn’t just conquered, but coned into thinking it was their idea, there’s no shortage of substance.

A natural question about any single-volume history of the world should be: “Is everything here?” The straight answer is: no. Not that we didn’t try. Sadly, HarperCollins rejected our original 500 million-page manuscript as “overenthusiastic” and “hard on the back.” (Whether it would have been marketable as the first book visible from space is still up for debate.) And while this version does omit a few details, we think we did alright. There’s a wealth of fun facts here, and maybe three-quarters of the “important” stuff. Luckily, there’s a surprising degree of overlap.

On that note, some people claim history is a serious business, and we could lay some solemn jive on you, like “those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it.”* Unfortunately, that’s not necessarily true. As you’ll see in the following pages, history is full of people who knew plenty about history, but kept on repeating the same stupid mistakes again and again anyway.

But that doesn’t mean the past isn’t worthwhile in its own right. History is funny, thrilling, heartbreaking, transcendent. There’s laughing and gasping, crying, and so much more. And history gives us hope. Because maybe those solemn historians were right: with a little luck, maybe we *will* learn something that helps us dodge the next bullet.

So we encourage you to read, enjoy, and try to pay attention. Because there is going to be a quiz when you’re finished. It’s called the future.

AFRICA AND AFTER

(60,000 BCE–1500 BCE)

IN A NUTSHELL



If there's one thing you can say about human beings, it's that we're *always* hungry. When modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) left Africa to conquer the globe more than sixty thousand years ago, they settled near sources of food, and those areas that produced more food became more populated. Some groups found forests with game to hunt, while others wandered grasslands, tending herds of cows. In Stone Age Mexico, coastal peoples subsisted on shellfish for thousands of years, leaving a huge heap of clam shells 240 feet long, 90 feet wide, and 21 feet tall.

Another thing about us: we don't like to share. Tribes constantly battled for territory, and some were pushed into less friendly environments—but nomads made the best use of limited resources. Arabs conquered the vast Arabian Peninsula by taming the camel, a hardy desert animal that carried them between lush oases. Central Asians took to horse- and shepherding, ranging across thousands of miles in search of rare good pastures. Inuit learned to build homes out of ice.

But in terms of calories per acre, grain cultivation feeds many more people than fishing, hunting, or raising domestic animals. Grain cultivation began around 9000 BCE and soon spread around the world, and places that grew grain experienced a population explosion (oh yeah, apparently we also liked to have sex...*a lot*). Soon, there was so much food that some people could stop working in the fields and specialize in crafts. Expert potters, weavers, and masons were soon followed by tailors, leather tanners, miners, and other trades. Yes, that includes “the world's oldest profession.”

Around 8000 BCE, the world's first civilizations—defined as people living in cities—began appearing. The craftspeople lived together in encampments for safety against rival groups and for convenience of trade. Cities also became centers of government—in most cases, likely a hereditary monarchy descended from old tribal authority. Little is known about the world's first governments, but they were probably dominated by a single family or clan passing authority from generation to generation, with a dominant man becoming ruler each time. In prehistory, governments along matriarchal (woman-centered) or communal (leaderless) lines may have existed, but by the beginning of recorded history, these had been snuffed out. Each of the world's first civilizations was ruled by

one man, a king. Men have hogged the remote ever since.

The king's job was simple: to protect his followers. In general, the people believed that the king's authority came from the immortal gods, so kings were closely associated with religion from the get-go. In some places the king was also the high priest, in charge of sacrificial offerings and ceremonies intended to bring good harvests. In other places, the king worked closely with the high priest or employed soothsayers to help divine the future.

While rival kings could cause trouble, the biggest enemy facing early civilizations was nature itself, which operated at the will of invisible gods. Droughts, floods, and other natural disasters could destroy crops, bringing starvation and misery. Translation: If everyone had enough to eat, the gods were happy with the leader; if there wasn't enough to eat, well...It's no surprise that across the "civilized" world, each ruler's first act was to store grain against hard times.

To make this food-insurance system work, kings ordered their subjects to turn over some grain during good times, which could be distributed again in an emergency. Grain was stored in huge stone or mud-brick silos, called granaries. Priests were in charge of keeping track of which grain had come from which landowner.

To help remember the grainy details, priests invented writing. Recording quantities, names, and dates on clay tablets in turn led to accounting and banking. Soon regular people began quantifying goods such as livestock, tools, and luxury items. As writing spread to society at large, merchants, bankers, and scribes joined the other craftsmen who lived in cities. Writing led to the first commercial contracts (e.g., "for these four pigs, you bring me two cows in three days"—we're not saying it was glamorous).

However, not every culture chose to settle down and farm. The differences between cities and nomadic groups created a lot of friction. For one thing the cities' accumulation of wealth, in the form of surplus grain and other goods, naturally attracted attention from people living a more marginal existence outside the cities. Nomads often enjoyed a tactical advantage over city folk, and men from the wilds, skilled in horse-mounted warfare, have long terrified the simple farmer on the outskirts of town. The nomadic threat still exists today—but by 1500 BCE, the power of settled societies based on farming was already uncontestable. The history of civilization is their story.

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN



2,500,000 BCE *Homo habilis*, earliest protohuman ancestor, uses stone tools in Africa.

2,000,000 BCE Various protohuman ancestors spread out across the planet.

1,500,000 BCE Hominids master fire.

300,000 BCE Neanderthals live in Europe.

150,000 BCE The Sahara is a lush grassland.

130,000 BCE Modern humans, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, appear in Africa.

60,000 BCE *Homo sapiens sapiens* spread out over the planet.

10,000 BCE Polar ice caps begin to melt, raising sea levels four hundred feet.

9000 BCE The Natufian culture domesticates wheat, inventing agriculture.

7500 BCE The world's first cities emerge at Catal Huyuk and Jericho.

5,300 BCE The Sahara has become a desert.

5000 BCE Catal Huyuk and Jericho are mysteriously abandoned.

4500 BCE The first Sumerian cities, Eridu and Ur, are founded.

4000 BCE The first cities are founded in Egypt.

3100 BCE Egypt is united by the pharaohs and becomes the world's first state.

3000 BCE China's first civilization begins (Longshan culture).

2600 BCE Harappan civilization flourishes in the Indus River Valley.

2530 BCE Egyptians complete the Great Pyramid of Cheops.

2200 BCE Babylon is founded by the Amorites.

1900 BCE China's first royal family, the Xia dynasty, rules.

1750 BCE Abraham leaves Ur for Canaan.

1700 BCE Harappan civilization disappears.

1600 BCE Indo-Europeans establish Hittite and Mitanni kingdoms in Mesopotamia.



SPINNING THE GLOBE

The Highly Fertile Crescent

The *first* large-scale settlements in the world were Jericho, in modern-day Israel, and Catal Huyuk, in modern-day eastern Turkey. Both were founded around 8000 BCE(ish), in the western half of the “Fertile Crescent,” a rich agricultural belt straddling the Middle East whose eastern region includes Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq). These settlements were like a “first try”: they never grew as large as the civilizations that followed them, eventually fading and disappearing under mysterious circumstances.

Between 8000 BCE and 7000 BCE, Jericho probably had about two thousand inhabitants, living in rectangular houses with plaster walls and floors and encircled by protective stone walls. The people appear to have practiced some form of ancestor worship, venerating skulls adorned with seashells. Catal Huyuk was larger: The oldest layer yet discovered, covering thirty-two acres, dates to about 7500 BCE, when it probably had a population of six thousand. Catal Huyuk connected a network of villages stretching hundreds of miles around, and was a major center of religion and trade. It was inexplicably abandoned around 5000 BCE.

SLAP HAPPY

At the Akitu festival marking the New Year, the kings of Babylon had a special responsibility: getting slapped so hard their momma felt it. The ritual was part of a ceremonial purification of the city. According to protocol, the king would enter the temple of Marduk, Babylon’s chief god, and tell the god that he hadn’t done anything wrong in the last year—for example, slapped the cheek of any of his subjects. The high priest then slapped the king but good; if the king’s eyes teared up from this unjust punishment, he was telling the truth, and Marduk approved him to rule for another year.

Jericho and Catal Huyuk were followed by a collection of city-states in Mesopotamia that were all part of the Sumerian civilization. The big players were Eridu and Ur, founded between 4500 and 4000 BCE, Uruk and Lagash (3500 BCE), Kish (3200 BCE), and Nippur (3000 BCE). Though these cities quarreled endlessly, they shared a common language, culture, and religion.

SARGON BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Sargon the Great was the first in a long line of people with the same idea: conquering everything. But like most of the others, his amazing success was fleeting.

Legend has it that Sargon's mother was a "changeling," meaning either a demon or a prostitute who gave birth to the future conqueror around 2350 BCE. According to Sumerian stories, in his youth Sargon served as the royal cup-bearer for the king of Kish, named Ur-Zababa. Believing Sargon was favored by the goddess Inanna, Ur-Zababa tried to have him killed, but Sargon escaped. He built up following among local tribesmen, founding a new city, Akkad, as his capital, and then went on the warpath. After conquering all of Sumeria, including Kish (sweet, sweet revenge), Sargon symbolically washed his sword in the Persian Gulf—Sumeria's southernmost boundary—to symbolize his total control over the area. Still hungry for power, he headed north to conquer Assyria, Lebanon, and southern Turkey, before finally turning east to conquer Elam, in Persia (now Iran).

A clever ruler, Sargon understood the importance of trade and of controlling the long-distance trade routes between cities. His empire dominated the trade routes connecting the Harappan civilization of India to Sumeria, Egypt, and the Mediterranean basin. These trade routes made Sargon and his successors fabulously wealthy.

Sargon tried to continue his empire by placing his children in positions of power, but after his death, key territories rebelled against one of his sons, Rimush, who was then assassinated by his brother Manishtushu. Sargon's short-lived empire was finished.

These cities were small by modern standards: the largest, Uruk, had at most sixty thousand to eighty thousand inhabitants at its height. Even so, there was constant friction between them, as neighboring farmers feuded over property boundaries. When things got bad enough, the cities went to war. Sumerian kings eventually created standing armies, but in the early days, conflicts were probably spontaneous, with town meetings turning into angry mobs. Warriors could be armed with spears, clubs, and good old-fashioned rocks.

Politically, each city-state was ruled by a *lugal*, or "big man"—in other words, a king. His main responsibility was divvying up water for irrigation. Because water was scarce, city governments served as guardians of the water supply, and were responsible for organizing mandatory work teams a couple of times a year to maintain irrigation canals and dams.

The "big man" served alongside the high priest of the city's cult, who officiated at religious ceremonies and collected offerings for the gods. In Ur, the locals worshipped a sun god called Utu or Hadad, the boss of a pantheon that also included Inanna or Istar, the goddess of fertility, spring, storms, love, and marriage, and Ereshkigal, her twin sister, the goddess of death.

NOT SO FRIENDLY NEIGHBORS

While Babylon reigned supreme in the second millennium BCE, trouble was brewing. In the ar

north of modern Baghdad, around 1900 BCE, a fierce tribe called the Assyrians established their own civilization along the Tigris River, centered on the cities Assur, Nineveh, and Nimrud. Far more warlike than their southern neighbors, the Assyrians pretty much lived to fight, and they had a couple of big advantages. They had learned how to domesticate horses, and the secret of making iron tools and weapons that were sharper and deadlier than the Babylonians' bronze weapons. In 1500 BCE, the Assyrians were still just a bunch of hicks and Assyria was a backwater of Mesopotamia—but they were organized, ambitious, and itching for a fight. Watch this space!

The most important religious festival was the spring planting festival, also marking the Sumerian New Year. It lasted twelve days, during which the priests purified themselves, presented animal sacrifices, and supervised the king's prayers for divine assistance. The festival also involved visits by "gods" on river barges and mock battles representing the struggle between good and evil. Like all good holidays there was plenty of time for banquets and parties.

As agriculture spread, so did civilization, and before long, new players arrived on the scene. In what is now western Iraq, the Amorites, distant (and apparently more ambitious) relations of the Sumerians, founded a great city, Babylon, by 2200 BCE. Babylon grew far larger than the first generation of city-states, and before long it dominated the older urban centers of Sumeria. Babylon had a population of more than two hundred thousand at its peak in 1700 BCE, when it was the center of regional trade and manufacturing. Like their predecessors in Sumer, Ur, and Uruk, the people of Babylon built a giant ziggurat—a stepped pyramid with a temple on top—bringing them closer to their gods for religious ceremonies.

Egypt:

Winner of the World's First Mega-State Contest

Egypt is often pictured as the world's first civilization, but its cities got rolling a little later than Sumer, sometime after 4000 BCE. Still, a couple of hundred years is loose change at this point in human history—and if it's a contest of size, Egypt wins hands down. Around 3100 BCE it became the world's first mega-state, unifying almost five hundred miles of territory from the Mediterranean Sea to the first cataract (waterfalls) on the Nile River. The pharaohs who ruled Egypt were the most powerful men in the world, and their power lasted far beyond that of the Sumerian kings.

NAME THAT GOD

Among the active gods, Ammon's power was represented by Ra, the sun god, with a human body and the head of a falcon, wearing a crown shaped like the sun. Ra crossed the sky in a golden ship every day, then descended into the underworld at night, where he fought and defeated Death before reappearing the next morning. He was the patron god of the pharaohs, symbolizing power.

The first god of death (yes, there was more than one) was Anubis, depicted with a human body and the head of a jackal. He was the chief god of funerals, weighing the hearts of the dead

determine whether they had behaved justly while alive. The second god of death, Osiris, replaced Anubis as chief god of the underworld sometime before 2000 BCE. His story is truly bizarre: after his rival god killed Osiris and chopped him into pieces, Osiris's sister and wife(!), Isis, reassembled the whole body except for Osiris's penis, which she replaced with a wooden replica. The Egyptians worshipped the dead Osiris, wooden package and all. Isis was the "mother goddess," usually depicted wearing a crown of cow horns and holding a sun disc. She was the patron goddess of the royal throne, closely associated with the power and dignity of the pharaohs.

Egypt was unified by a semi-mythical king (or kings) named Menes, who founded the First Dynasty as well as Egypt's capital, Memphis, just south of the Nile Delta. There are stories of conflict between the people of northern Egypt and southern Egypt, but the Nile united them. Egyptian culture and religion centered on the river, whose rhythms structured Egyptian society for thousands of years. (Currently the giant Aswan Dam controls the floods.) During the winter months, snow fell in Ethiopia where the Nile begins in the mountains. In the spring, when the snow melted, the floodwaters rose to cover the surrounding "flood plains" at the bottom of the Nile Valley, in Egypt. When the Nile finally retreated a month later, it left a thick layer of silt—fertile farmland. This made Egypt the breadbasket of the ancient world.

The Nile could also be incredibly destructive when it flooded, so it's no surprise that Egyptians believed it had divine power. The Nile *was* the universe, controlled by gods who required prayers to avert their wrath. The first god was a primordial spirit named Ammon, representing the chaos that existed before the universe was formed. He was an invisible father who held the power of creation—fact he created himself (ah, paradox). His name means "the Hidden One." Fittingly, he usually stayed in the background.

Each pharaoh was a representative of a single divine spirit, which transmitted itself from pharaoh to pharaoh. This is an important area where Egypt differed from Mesopotamia. In Mesopotamia, the "big man" ruled alongside a high priest, while in Egypt the pharaoh was both ruler *and* high priest, *and* a living god to boot.

After the pharaoh died he required magnificent funeral rites to ensure his resurrection in the afterlife. The practice of building pyramids as crypts for dead kings began around 2700 BCE, with the stepped pyramid built for Pharaoh Djoser in Saqqara. There were some mishaps along the way. The most famous screw-up is the bent pyramid of Snefru, built at Dahshur around 2600 BCE: apparently the designers realized the sides were too steep halfway through, and reduced the angles dramatically, resulting in the odd eight-sided structure that's still visible today.

SURPRISINGLY ORDINARY EATS

So what did ancient people actually eat? The best source of information about ancient food comes from Egypt, where ancient Egyptians turned wheat and barley into porridge and also baked a bread that was something like modern-day pita. Sometimes the Egyptians added figs, honey, butter, or o

infused with herbs to the bread for flavor. Beer was an important source of nutrition, consumed every meal along with bread.

Ordinary Egyptians made butter, and seem to have made some kind of cheese, though it's unclear what its consistency was, or what it tasted like. Vegetables included beets, cucumbers, sweet onion, radishes, garlic, turnips, chickpeas, beans, leeks, lentils, and lettuce. They also ate meat, though that was for the most part food for the rich, and a relatively rare treat for the lower classes. Upper-class Egyptians ate beef, mutton, antelope, gazelle, ibex, and hyena. (They wouldn't eat pork, which they believed carried leprosy.)

The poor had more access to domestic and wild fowl, including duck, goose, heron, quail, pelican, and crane. Fish were plentiful in the Nile, and probably constituted the main source of protein in poor people's diets. Popular species included perch, catfish, and mullet. For dessert, Egyptians liked sweet fruit such as figs, dates, pomegranates, grapes, and watermelon.

The largest pyramid ever built is the Great Pyramid: 481 feet high, 756 feet on each side, containing about 2.3 million blocks of granite weighing 2.5 tons each, with a façade of 144,000 white limestone blocks, which were later removed for use on subsequent pyramids. The pyramid was built between 2550 and 2530 BCE, for the pharaoh Khufu, known in Greek as Cheops. The massive structure, covering a total of 13 acres, probably took 100,000 workers 20 years to complete—and to this day, we're still not sure exactly how.

India:

What Harappan taught the Harappans?

Not much is known about Harappan civilization, which blossomed around 2600 BCE along the Indus River in present-day Pakistan and India. But in some ways it is the most impressive of all early cultures because Harappan cities were incredibly well-organized.

Mohenjo-Daro is a good example. Like the cities of Sumeria, this city was built out of mud-brick and wood. It probably had about thirty-five thousand inhabitants, and they clearly valued cleanliness, building a sewage system, aqueducts to bring fresh water to neighborhood fountains, and a communal bath, where an underground furnace provided hot water. Wide streets were planned in a grid formation, with "zoning" separating residential and commercial activities. Mohenjo-Daro had a large granary, a public well, and a citadel with an impressive "castle" structure. There were also two large assembly buildings for town meetings.

To this day, no one has deciphered the Harappan written language, which had about four hundred characters that appeared on large public "sign boards" and on clay and bronze tablets. To create documents, scribes carved sentences or phrases into stone seals, then pressed the seals into the wet clay. Bronze documents were reserved for special ceremonial use.

Harappan religion is also something of a mystery, although there are hints of a cult centered on bull worship, including the image of a man with bull horns, or a bull horn headdress, seated in the lotus position. Archaeologists have also found small statuettes of round-bellied women—possibly

symbols of a fertility goddess. The Harappans buried their dead with their heads pointing north, and included pots of food, tools, and weapons for use in the afterlife.

In its nine-hundred-year existence, Mohenjo-Daro was totally rebuilt six or seven times after being destroyed by floods. The entire Harappan civilization probably disappeared around 1700 BCE because of massive flooding, foreign invaders (possibly “Indo-European” tribes), or both.

China:

Building Walls, Making Pots, Sacrificing Children

The first Chinese cities emerged as part of the Longshan culture, a Stone Age civilization that existed from roughly 3000 BCE to 1500 BCE, with about fifty separate city-sites distributed along the Yellow River. The Longshan people surrounded their cities with deep moats and large walls made of rammed earth. Some cities had walls more than four miles long. Indeed, ever since then, Chinese cities have boasted impressive fortifications—and in fact, the Chinese word for “city” (*cheng*) comes from their word for “wall.”

Early Chinese religion centered on worship and veneration of ancestors, who held a place in a larger cosmology where a supreme god presided over lesser gods representing the sun, moon, wind, rain, and other forces of nature. Priests used “oracle bones” bearing inscriptions to learn the will of the spirits, writing a question and then heating the bones in a fire until they cracked, providing a “yes” or “no” answer. The inscriptions on oracle bones are the first evidence of written language in China.

The Longshan culture produced exquisite black pottery, including fragile wine vessels, bowls, and incense burners. Some of these clay creations are as thin as eggshell, yet have miraculously survived to the present day. Like other early civilizations, the people of Longshan included these works of art in the graves of the wealthy to make things easier for them in the afterlife.

During this period, Chinese society was already organized around the patriarchal clan—the male-centered extended family that dominates Chinese culture to the present day. The Longshan culture also left evidence of big gaps in wealth: of fifteen hundred burials in the Taosi cemetery, just nine male burials included large numbers of precious objects, while the rest contained virtually none.

A capital city should be square on plan. Three gates on each side of the perimeter lead into the nine main streets that crisscross the city and define its grid-pattern.

—*Book of Diverse Crafts, China*, a text recording ancient wisdom

China’s first hereditary monarchy, the Xia Dynasty, was widely thought to be mythical until the discovery of the Erlitou culture, a Bronze Age civilization that followed the Longshan culture. According to one of the first written histories, around 2200 BCE, Gun, the father of the founder of the Xia Dynasty, built “a city to protect the king and the people.” However, his attempts to control

massive flooding ended in disaster. His son, Da Yu, managed to control the flooding (presumably from the Yellow River) by following the advice of his advisor, Boyi, who suggested channeling rather than blocking the water. Later Yu wanted to abdicate in favor of Boyi, but Yu's son Qi killed Boyi and seized power himself, establishing the Xia Dynasty. Thus China's first hereditary dynasty was founded on disobedience, murder, and injustice.

We must recall that all life evolved from water. Many creatures still live in water. All creatures drink water. Our bodies are predominantly water; the layers that make us human are thin. We may need the air of heaven, the nourishment of the earth, but we also need the quenching power of water.

—*I Ching*, mystical Chinese text, c. 2800 BCE

The Xia were replaced by the Shang Dynasty around 1750 BCE (there was probably some overlap), by which time China's first cities were well established. Archaeologists believe they have discovered Xibo, the capital of Shang, in modern Henan province. As part of their religion, the Shang sacrificed humans right and left: in one Shang city, archaeologists discovered 852 human sacrifices to dedicate new buildings. Meanwhile kings were buried with thousands of sacrificial victims to serve them in the afterlife. Sacrifices included, but were not limited to, elephants, rhinos, buffalo, oxen, sheep, deer, dogs, tigers, and children.

Australia:

Where You Can Get Away From It All

For anyone trying to avoid the rest of the human race in the ancient world, Australia was your best bet. Beginning about ninety-nine million years ago, the continent began drifting away from Antarctica, India, and Africa (which were joined together in a supercontinent, Gondwanaland) and by thirty-nine million years ago, it was more or less isolated.

The ancestors of today's aborigines migrated southward from Asia across landmasses that would later become the separate islands of Indonesia, New Guinea and Australia when sea levels rose at the end of the last Ice Age, twelve thousand years ago. The rising water isolated the aborigines on Australia, basically cutting them off from other humans for thousands of years.

IT'S A BIRD, IT'S A PLANE, IT'S...SUPER-WOMBAT!

Australia's bizarre animals evolved in isolation for millions of years, acquiring characteristics found nowhere else on earth. For example, the young of marsupials such as kangaroos and koalas gestate in an external pouch on the front of the mother's body. The duckbill platypus seems to combine a bird's bill with the body of a beaver; a sharp spur behind each leg is tipped with incredibly toxic poison.

(Don't ever play with a platypus.) Then there's the kiwi, the small flightless bird native to New Zealand; kiwis are just weird. And don't forget the ancient world's "megafauna"—animals much larger than their relatives today—including the ten-foot-tall kangaroo with vicious claws, "marsupial lion," and the six-thousand-pound super wombat. (Hey, that's a great name for a band.) The extinction of these animals is associated with the arrival of humans in Australia around 50,000 BCE.

Australia wasn't always a desert. Archaeologists have found evidence of freshwater lakes and a large inland sea in the central part of the country. A Stone Age culture lived on these shores between 45,000 and 40,000 BCE, subsisting on fishing, hunting, and gathering. Some kind of human habitation continued until 20,000 BCE, when the sea dried up. Today's aborigines are probably related to this extinct culture.

The aborigines developed a unique religion centered on the "Dreamtime," when archetypal animals and mythic heroes created the Universe; giant cosmic snakes and lizards are thought to have played a role in creating the landscape, and are associated with certain features of the terrain. All existence can be traced back to the first primeval creators, and all beings in nature are therefore related to one another in a vast cosmic network. Aboriginal beliefs have been credited as forerunners of modern ecological science.



WHO'S UP, WHO'S DOWN

Wheat: Up

Archaeologists say that human beings domesticated wheat about eleven thousand years ago—but did wheat actually domesticate *us*? Bizarre as it sounds, it's a question that has evolutionary biologists scratching their heads.

After the last Ice Age ended, the planet warmed up and there was abundant rainfall. In the typical Stone Age hunter-gatherer society, men went hunting while women gathered fruit, vegetables, tubers and herbs growing in the wild. One group of people in what is now present-day Syria and Lebanon, the Natufians, harvested grain from wild wheat fields using pottery sickles (which broke all the time, leaving archaeological clues).

The wheat grew well by itself because the world was a lush paradise very different from today. But that paradise didn't last. About thirteen thousand years ago a cold snap called the Lesser Dryas caused a drought. This was bad news for the Natufians: as plant life shriveled up, the climate changes hit wild wheat fields hard. Harvests shrank dramatically, and there was probably mass starvation.

Hunger is a great motivator, so eventually the Natufians discovered ways to maximize wheat harvests. They carefully set aside a portion of each harvest as “seed grain” to plant the next crop, and they also figured out the basics of pollination and cross-breeding. By breeding certain plants selectively, they encouraged desirable traits such as bigger seeds, more seeds, and less chaff (the inedible fibers that have to be filtered out).

But who was really wearing the pants, humans or wheat? In the good old days the Natufians were seminomadic, wandering through forests and wild wheat fields. But when fertile areas contracted during the drought, the Natufians settled down permanently to focus on their most important food resource. Wheat cultivation also changed gender roles and the structure of family and society, as men gave up hunting to work in the fields (traditionally women’s work). Then property and ownership were invented to allow farmers to divvy up land.

All this effort had a single goal: making sure the wheat plants survived and reproduced. Natufian style agriculture spread quickly, triggering the formation of civilizations in Jericho, Catal Huyuk, Sumer, and Egypt. Since then, thanks to mankind’s tender loving care, wheat now covers a much larger percentage of the globe than when it grew wild. Take the United States: unknown before Spanish colonists introduced it in the sixteenth century, wheat now occupies forty-seven million acres of land. That’s almost seventy-five thousand square miles! From the perspective of evolutionary biology, wheat made out like gangbusters—and we’re doing all the work.

Jews: NOT DOWN YET

Most early human religions were polytheistic (multi-god), meaning that worshippers had to guess the mood of a particular god or goddess, then try to influence it by sacrificing precious objects, animals, or even people. Too much attention to one god would arouse the jealousy of the others, who also had to be placated with prayer and sacrifice.

But what if it were all controlled by one all-powerful God? With one God, it’s a lot easier to figure out if you’re on the heavenly naughty list: if things are good, God’s happy with you. If things are bad, you have some work to do.

That’s (sort of) the revolutionary idea behind Judaism, the world’s first and longest-lived monotheistic (single-deity) religion. Abraham, the founder of Judaism, was a Sumerian prince who answered a call from God to leave the city of Ur, where he was living, and settle in the land of Canaan (modern Israel and Palestine) sometime around 1750 BCE. In return for worshipping just one God—that would be Him—God said he would make Abraham’s descendants into a great people. With his wife (also half-sister) Sarah, Abraham obeyed God’s command and trekked about five hundred miles west, to the Promised Land of Canaan.

THE JEW CREW BELIEVED IN A FEW—WHO KNEW?

When they finally got around to writing stuff down, the Jews talked a good game about always having been monotheists...but it’s not quite that simple. According to some scholars, the Hebrews finally embraced monotheism long after Abraham, as a way to unite against their neighbors the Canaanites.

In fact, evidence suggests that the early Hebrews worshipped the Canaanite gods Ba'al and El and the goddess of birth and mercy, Asherah. But the best evidence comes from the Bible itself, in Psalm 82:1: "God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment." And the First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me," doesn't state that other gods don't exist.

But God didn't really make it *easy* on his chosen. When he doubted Abraham's commitment, he ordered him to sacrifice his oldest son, Isaac, on a stone altar in the desert. At the last minute, convinced of Abraham's faith, God changed his mind and said that Abraham could sacrifice a ram instead, leading to another of Judaism's brilliant innovations: no more human sacrifices. Human life was too valuable for such bloodthirsty displays. (Animals were not so lucky, however.)

But the new rules of sacrifice still didn't make being Abraham's children any easier. When Abraham had a son named Ishmael by his Egyptian maid Hagar, his jealous wife, Sarah, convinced him to banish both mother and son to the desert—a virtual death sentence. But God protected them, and Ishmael became the "father of the Arab people." (*Ishmaelite* is an archaic term for "Arab.")

Indo-Europeans: UP

The combination of horses and chariots gave Indo-Europeans—also called Aryans or Caucasians because of their proximity to the Caucasus Mountains—a big advantage over opponents still fighting on foot. Between 2200 and 1500 BCE, the nomadic Indo-Europeans left their homeland in southern Russia and conquered a wide swath of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Aside from horses, their principal wealth was herds of cattle, and everywhere they went there are stories of cattle rustling and warfare to steal enemies' herds.

AND WHY NOT MAKE UP HISTORY?

Sometimes a little knowledge can be dangerous. In the nineteenth century, European racists claimed that the Indo-Europeans were "white" conquerors who subdued "inferior" Semitic and Asiatic people. In the twentieth century, Adolf Hitler said that the "racially pure" descendants of Aryans were blond-haired, blue-eyed Germans, who therefore had a right to conquer and dominate their neighbors. The racist visions have almost nothing to do with historical reality. Because Hitler hated Russians, he said that the Aryans must have come from Thule, a mythical island near Iceland (say what?). There's also no real way to know what the Aryans looked like for sure, with no human remains. And they probably weren't racially superior: they just got around a lot faster because they had horses.

One of their first conquests was Persia, or Iran—in fact, *Iran* comes from the Farsi word for "Aryan." In Mesopotamia the Indo-Europeans clashed with the native Semites, the ancestors of today's Jews and Arabs, creating the Hittite and Mitanni empires around 1600 BCE. The Hittites were

a powerful, well-organized state whose chariot-mounted warriors terrorized Egypt. They reigned supreme until the rise of the Semitic Assyrians, who also knew something about the horse and chariot thing.

Two thousand miles to the east, different Indo-European tribes arrived in the Indus River Valley around 1700 BCE. The demise of Harappan civilization around the same time may have resulted from these invasions. The Indo-Europeans became the new bosses of India, cementing their rule with a strict “caste” system dividing society into an elaborate hierarchy. They dug in their heels on the top three rungs of the ladder, dominating the priesthood, nobility, and merchant class. Over time, intermarriage lessened racial distinctions, but the caste system remained.

Meanwhile the Hellenes—the people who became the ancient Greeks—migrated into the peninsula from the Balkans between 2100 and 1600 BCE. The Mycenaean civilization they created is named after Mycenae, an important city located southwest of Athens.

Mediterranean Residents: DOWN

Imagine a wall of water 10 stories high moving toward you at 450 miles per hour. Terrified? Now you know how the Stone Age inhabitants of the Mediterranean basin must have felt around 7000 BCE when the largest tidal wave in human history struck without warning. This super-tsunami wiped out coastal settlements along thousands of miles of coastline in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Although there are no casualty estimates, the death toll could have been in the millions.

Geologists believe the tidal wave was caused by a volcanic eruption by Sicily’s Mount Etna that dumped 6 cubic miles of rock into the sea at more than 200 miles per hour. The force of this impact liquefied the seabed, triggering a giant submarine mudslide. The resulting 130-foot-tall waves reached the farthest parts of the Mediterranean basin in about three and a half hours. Because the sea has only one outlet, at the narrow straits of Gibraltar, tidal waves probably bounced back and forth from one side of the basin to the other for some time, like ripples in a giant pond.

Archaeologists have found the remains of a Neolithic fishing village at Atlit-Yam, on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, which was obviously abandoned in a hurry. How can the archaeologists tell? Fleeing for their lives, the fishermen left their half-gutted catch to be buried under a mountain of mud, which preserved the fish remains for thousands of years.

Drinking: UP

Luckily for them, most ancient peoples had some kind of wine—meaning an alcoholic beverage stronger than beer, made from grapes or other fruit. Wine-making probably began shortly after 6000 BCE, when people started using clay to make pottery that was fired in ovens to create a hard, durable material for storage. Clay pots were used to store fruits and vegetables, and the first wine may have been the result of accidental fermentation of grapes or grape juice.

The earliest evidence of wine-making comes from the Zagros Mountains of northern Iran, where archaeologists excavated a kitchen with six clay jars that were being used to make some sort of wine between 5400 and 5000 BCE. One 2.5-gallon jar contained a yellow residue they believe is the remains of white wine made from green grapes.

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