

FROM ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA AND THE  
VIKING CONQUESTS TO NATO AND WIKILEAKS,  
AN ESSENTIAL PRIMER ON WORLD HISTORY



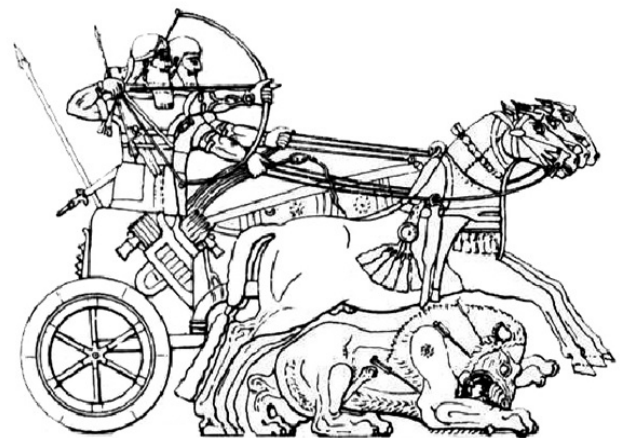
ANCIENT EGYPTIANS OFTEN BUILT LARGE TOMBS FOR THEIR DEAD AND PRACTICED MUMMIFICATION, A METHOD OF PRESERVING THE BODY IN AS LIFELIKE A MANNER AS POSSIBLE.



# WORLD HISTORY 101

A  
*CRASH COURSE*  
IN THE  
HISTORY OF  
THE WORLD

THE CHARIOT ORIGINATED IN MESOPOTAMIA IN ABOUT 3000 B.C. IT WAS USED FOR FUNERAL PROCESSIONS, BATTLES, AND HUNTING, AND LATER IN SPORTING CONTESTS SUCH AS THE OLYMPIC GAMES AND THE ROMAN CIRCUS MAXIMUS.



TOM HEAD, PHD

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VIKING CONQUESTS TO NATO AND WIKILEAKS,  
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# WORLD HISTORY 101

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## **DEDICATION**

In loving memory of my grandparents, Maybelle Bozeman Carwile (1917–2011) and Robert Serrell Carwile (1907–1998), and to the billions of ancestors—those who live on in our memories, and those too far away for our memories to reach—who have given us all our history.

# INTRODUCTION

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“If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.”

—Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936)

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History isn't just something we study; it's the story people collectively tell about themselves, both by their words and by their actions. Your birth, your death, and everything that happens in between is all part of history. It's true that most historians focus on political and military history, but that isn't because political and military history are more important than everything else; it's because this kind of history tends to leave a lot of *evidence* behind. As the great German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) put it, kisses leave no traces but wounds leave scars. History is mostly about the scars.

This book tells the story of human beings, from the very beginning to the present. Each of its sixty-four chapters tells a story about a time and place in history with a few key dates and personalities singled out. A lot has been left out—the topic of world history is huge and there's always more to be said—but by the time you've finished this book, you'll have heard one version of the story of who we are and how we got here. And what a long, bumpy ride it has been.

## A NOTE ON DATES

Most scholars now use B.C.E. (Before Common Era) instead of B.C. (Before Christ), and C.E. (Common Era) rather than A.D. (Anno Domini, which would be rendered in English as “in the year of our Lord”). I’ve adopted the scholarly habit in this book for several reasons—accuracy, mostly. The guy who came up with the B.C./A.D. dating system didn’t know that Jesus was probably born sometime between 6 B.C.E. and 3 B.C.E. Simply stated, it’s ridiculous to claim that Christ was born several years before Christ.

Although the B.C.E./C.E. distinction is more inclusive than B.C./A.D., and though it certainly *sounds* like the sort of newfangled language scholars might have adopted in the past few decades, it has a much longer history than that. The German astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) used the Latin phrase for “Common Era,” *vulgaris aerae*, as a substitute for anno Domini in his *Nova Stereometria* (1615).



# HUMANITY BEFORE HISTORY

## What the Bones Said

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“Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay  
To mould Me man? Did I solicit thee  
From darkness to promote me?”

—John Milton (1608–1674), *Paradise Lost*, Book X

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Today’s humans are descended from scarce survivors of a global humanoid extinction. There were at one time *dozens* of humanoid species, among them Neanderthals, Denisovans, and “Hobbits,” but at some point within the past fifty thousand years, starvation, disease, and violence have exterminated most of the humanoid family, leaving us only with ourselves. But our ancestors include untold members of these species, as well as the anatomically modern humans who knew them, mated with them, and competed with them for resources.

## Stories of Creation

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Almost every religious or cultural tradition in the world has an ancient, sacred story of how humanity came to exist. Regardless of their scientific accuracy, these stories have profound historical significance of their own.

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As anatomically modern humans learned how to harness the power of agriculture, they settled into cities, city-states, and, ultimately, nations. Within these social institutions they began to keep permanent written records, records that make up source material for a broader human story. We call that story history.

## MONUMENTS OF BONE

Figuring what happened before people wrote anything down, *before* history, is a difficult task. The most common view among scientists is that anatomically modern humans began appearing about two hundred thousand years ago in Ethiopia and much more recently spread from there throughout the world. Genetics tells us that all humans share a common ancestor and common genes. Some regional mutation occurred depending on climate, but the tidy division of human beings into genetically distinct races doesn't reflect the real history of our species. For most of human history, all our ancestors lived in the same general region and would have all been classified, by contemporary standards, as members of the same race.

The 195,000-year-old Omo fossils and 160,000-year-old Herto fossils are the oldest anatomically modern human remains ever found, and they reinforce the popular theory that our ancestors called Ethiopia home. But what did our ancestors *do* during these long ancient ages? What did they believe, how did they live, how did they speak, and how did they want to be remembered? While the Omo and Herto remains are often discussed together, as if these ancient people were contemporaries, we should pay attention to the fact that the 35,000-year gap in age between these two groups of fossils—a gap that otherwise reflects our total lack of knowledge regarding this part of the human story—is eight times as large as the gap between the beginning of recorded history and the present day. Human communities rose and fell during this period, for thousands and thousands of generations, and we know as little about them as they did about us. We are permanently separated from our first bold ancestors by the impenetrable curtain of time. We know more about our recent ancestors only because history gives us ways to pierce that curtain.

## DIODORUS SICULUS WAS RIGHT

The Omo fossils were discovered in 1967, and until that time there was—as far as we know—no physical evidence suggesting that human beings originated in Ethiopia. So it's a little bit uncanny that *more than two thousand years earlier*, in his *Bibliotheca Historica*, the Greek author Diodorus Siculus (ca. 90–30 B.C.E.) had this to say about Ethiopia:

“Now the Ethiopians, as historians relate, were the first of all men and the proofs of this statement, they say, are manifest. For that they did not come into their land as immigrants from abroad but were natives of it and so justly bear the name *autochthones* [‘people of the earth’] is, they maintain, conceded by practically all men; furthermore, that those who dwell beneath the noon-day sun were, in all likelihood, the first to be generated by the earth, is clear to all; since, inasmuch as it was the warmth of the sun which, at the generation of the universe, dried up the earth when it was still wet and impregnated it with life, it is reasonable to suppose that the region which was nearest the sun was the first to bring forth living creatures.”

Diodorus had almost certainly never even been to Ethiopia, and carbon dating wouldn’t exist for millennia to come. But while his logic certainly doesn’t hold up—we now know that Ethiopia is no closer to the sun than any other part of the world—his conclusion, which presumably reflected the conventional wisdom of the time, was accurate. And we have no idea why. It could have been a lucky guess, or an astonishingly well-preserved oral tradition, or just observation of ruins of old settlements that existed in ancient times but have since vanished. We don’t know. We’ll probably never know. History is full of little mysteries like that.

## THE FIRST CITIES

Birds make nests, beavers make dams, and humans make camp. While the oldest discovered human settlements are “merely” tens of thousands of years old, we can assume—based on our knowledge of ourselves—that even the very first humans probably found environments they liked and customized them to meet their needs. While you don’t need a city in order to have a political structure (most nomadic communities manage to create one just fine), you do need an urban environment in order to create the kind of permanent political structure that leaves enough material behind to create a historical record.

Given that fact, you may be surprised to learn that historians don’t agree at all on what a city even *is*. The 21,000-year-old Ohalo II settlement in Israel, for example, meets most of the criteria we associate with cities: people lived there on a long-term basis, they had permanent huts, and there’s evidence to suggest that they practiced agriculture (with more than a hundred seed varieties found onsite). But the buildings weren’t very

durable and the human population at Ohalo II was most likely tiny, so it's generally called a village rather than a city. When we call an ancient settlement a city, we're not just saying that humans lived there; we're implying that it existed for a long enough period, and with enough stability, that it developed its own distinctive culture. Using that definition, among others, historians tend to believe that cities as we have come to know them have only existed for the past fifteen thousand years or so. For the vast majority of humanity's city-building history, all of the world's thriving cities could be found in one place: the fertile hinge connecting Africa, Asia, and Europe that we call the Middle East.

# HUMAN CIVILIZATION IN SUMER AND AKKAD

## The Cradle of History

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“That which I recited to you at midnight,  
May the singer repeat it at noon!”

—Enheduanna (ca. 2285–2250 B.C.E.), High Priestess of Ur,  
as translated by W.W. Hallo and J.J.A. van Dijk

---

Human history began with cities, not nations. It was the mastery of agriculture that led people to settle down rather than migrating from place to place, and it was this settling down that led people to record their stories in writing, where it could be physically preserved, rather than through oral history alone. Few regions on Earth were more suitable for human agriculture five thousand years ago than the region historians call the Fertile Crescent. Also known as Mesopotamia (Greek for “between two rivers”), this area is located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what we now call Iraq and Turkey. There, the people who called themselves the *sag-giga* (“black-headed people”) founded and administered dozens of linked cities; produced copious amounts of literature, art, architecture, and music; and left behind the world’s earliest known civilization. Only Egypt rivals it in age.

The broad outline of Mesopotamian history can be split into two periods: the time before 2300 B.C.E., when a loose alliance of city-states called Sumer spoke a single language and dealt collectively with natural, economic, and military challenges, and the period after 2300 B.C.E., when it was ruled over by a series of nations. The first of these nations, named after its city of origin, was Akkad.

## IN THE DAYS OF SUMER

If you lived in Sumer during its early days, your life would probably have revolved around agriculture and the weather. In contrast to a modern city, where our food sources are stable and more or less invisible to us, the dozens of Sumerian cities scattered along flood plains of the Tigris and Euphrates operated more like today's rural communities: citizens knew where their food came from, and they were never more than one bad harvest away from famine. This made agreements among Sumerian cities crucial to their long-term survival.

Agreements were also necessary to deal with floods, a very real problem in these early riverside communities. After the cultural center of Shuruppak flooded near 3100 B.C.E., survivors and residents of neighboring cities talked about it, and the story was retold for over a thousand years—it was even said that Utnapishtim, the legendary Noah-figure who survived the flooding of the entire world, had served as governor of Shuruppak at the time.

But famine and natural disasters were not the only threats Sumerians faced. Alliances were also necessary to deter war. Archaeologists have uncovered mysterious ruins they call Hamoukar, located not far from Uruk, which was clearly once a city. At some point around 3500 B.C.E., Hamoukar came under siege by the heaviest artillery available at the time. Clay slingshot pellets tore holes in the city's walls and internal structures and would have been deadly for any human targets in their path. We still don't know who invaded Hamoukar or why, and surviving Sumerian literature has no clear record of the incident, but it speaks to the dangers every city faced if it didn't prepare itself for war.

### **Gudea of Lagash**

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If you've ever seen a statue of a Sumerian, it was probably that of the governor and social reformer Gudea, who ruled Lagash for twenty years starting around 2144 B.C.E. Gudea instituted a variety of building projects and social reforms in his home city-state, including allowing women to inherit property.

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## THROUGH MANY, ONE

Although Sumer had a series of *lugals* (“kings”), these were generally the governors of specific city-states who were given regional diplomatic powers. No city-states entirely monopolized this authority—it was not uncommon to have a *lugal* from one city and then a *lugal* from another—and the pathways to power were often unorthodox. Kubaba of Kish, the only female *lugal* mentioned in the Sumerian Kings List, is said to have ascended to leadership by selling the finest beer in Sumer—an early example of a political figure achieving power by leveraging her private-sector success.

This apparently friendly and practical arrangement among city-states seems to have remained stable for a very long time; if we assume it began with the founding of Eridu around 5400 B.C.E., it would have lasted some three thousand years—far longer than any of the empires that followed. So it certainly wasn’t a failure. But there’s little reason for a cluster of self-sustaining city-states to raise up a large army, a weakness the aspiring emperor Sargon I is said to have exploited at some point around 2334 B.C.E., conquering Sumer under the banner of his home city-state of Akkad. The Akkadians were not the only empire to rule over Mesopotamia, but they were the first, and their rise marked the end of Sumer as we know it. After Sargon, the only kind of peace the leaders of Mesopotamia could give their people was peace through strength.

## **The Epic of Gilgamesh**

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The national hero of Sumer was Gilgamesh, the legendary king of Uruk whose quest for immortality is the subject of the world’s oldest surviving epic poem. But there wasn’t just *one* story about Gilgamesh; like King Arthur or Robin Hood, he was imagined and reimagined for centuries by a series of storytellers who described his adventures with his lover and sidekick, the heroic beast-man Enkidu.

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# THE FIRST HALF OF EGYPT'S STORY

## The Children of Osiris

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“Thou art born, O Horus, as one whose name is ‘Him at whom the earth quakes’ . . . No seed of a god, which belongs to him, goes to ruin; so thou who belongest to him will not go to ruin.”

—The *Pyramid Texts*, Utterance 215

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Egypt is the world's oldest surviving civilization. Egypt's first few thousand years are known mainly for its pyramids, as the scale and durability of these monuments are awe inspiring, but there was a time when ancient Egypt was not that different from the nation of the same name today—a bright, noisy, diverse living society full of stories and intrigue, economics and war, beauty and horror.

Civilizations never start off as civilizations. Like Sumer, Egypt sprouted from a cluster of river settlements. Sumer had the Tigris and Euphrates, and Egypt had the Nile.

## THE HAWK AND THE VULTURE

Egypt, like Sumer, began with cities. Over time, these cities coalesced into two kingdoms: Lower Egypt, whose national symbol was the god Horus, represented by the hawk, and Upper Egypt, whose symbol was the vulture-headed goddess Nekhbet. At some point around 3000 B.C.E., a king identified as Menes is said to have united the two kingdoms forever, becoming the first pharaoh to rule over all of Egypt.



The idea of the pharaoh is a hard one for contemporary readers to wrap their heads around. Looking at the opulent tombs they were buried in, and contrasting this with the relatively simple structures and finite resources that surrounded them, we may be tempted to view them as symbols of decadence. But it's important to remember that the pharaohs, born into dynasties of rulers, were raised to believe they really were the conduits between the gods, who represented primal cosmic forces, and the people around them. The pharaoh, tasked with protecting Egypt's mortals from forces both human and divine, could not have easily rejected the trappings of this role without offending the gods—and, obviously, could not have rejected posthumous honors at all.

## Ma'at

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The most central moral value in ancient Egyptian religion is *ma'at* (pronounced “may-at”), or order. The idea is that by being honest and straightforward, and living in harmony with reality and each other, we can improve the world in this life and our prospects for the world to come.

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One of the more unsettling elements of Egyptian iconography, for today's audiences, may be the tendency to portray gods with the bodies of humans and the heads of animals. But it's important to remember that for ancient Egyptians there was no distinction between the gods and natural forces. The lion-headed goddess Tefnut was goddess of rain, for example, but she was also the personification of rain. All rain was attributable to Tefnut. So rather than portraying her as human, it was important to portray her as something wild. The human connection with the gods, the human intermediary between the world of mortals and the world of gods, was the pharaoh.

## TOMBS OF THE IMMORTALS

Ancient Egypt was one of the first civilizations to intentionally mummify corpses, but this wasn't originally an honor reserved for the pharaohs. After burying the dead in ordinary graves, the people of Egypt noticed that bodies buried in the dry desert were better-preserved than bodies buried in moist ground. Correctly surmising a relationship between dryness and

preservation, the priestly class of Egypt soon perfected the art of keeping corpses dry and free of rot, preserving their leaders' bodies as a sign of their spiritual incorruptibility.

For similar reasons, early pharaohs were buried with living servants who were sacrificed in this world, and buried with their pharaohs, to serve them in the next. In apparent recognition that this policy was inhumane, later pharaohs were buried with small *shabti* statues intended to depict their servants in the world to come.

Today the mummification of pharaohs has allowed contemporary scientists to perform X-rays, genetic tests, and other experiments to help them better understand who the people of ancient Egypt were and what their lives were like. The tombs, once a symbol of how much the people loved the pharaohs, now provide the most comprehensive trove of artifacts we have by which to understand ancient Egyptian art, technology, and culture. In that respect, the pharaohs of ancient Egypt have become, in a very literal sense, exactly what their people wanted them to be: immortal conduits between their world and the next.

## The Great Pyramid

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No monument represents the pharaoh's eternal role more clearly, and more enduringly, than the 138 stone pyramids that dot the Egyptian landscape. The greatest of these is the 4,600-year-old Great Pyramid of Giza, the tomb of the pharaoh Khufu (ca. 2600–2528 B.C.E.), which still stands and, unless it is intentionally destroyed by human hands, is likely to stand for many thousands of years to come. At 481 feet tall and about 756 feet long on each side, it is the largest surviving monument of the ancient world and is still impressive by contemporary standards—big enough to be easily seen from the International Space Station, if one has a general idea of where to look. It would be extremely difficult to build a full-scale replica today, and the amount of labor and ingenuity involved in constructing it using the tools of the ancient world remain unfathomable. It wasn't just a work of genius, a work of art; it was a work of devotion and love for the dead, and its longevity is an enduring act of defiance against death itself.

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# MEGACITIES OF THE ANCIENT INDUS VALLEY

**Ancient History Carved in Stone**

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“Whence all creation had its origin,  
he, whether he fashioned it or whether he did not,  
he, who surveys it all from highest heaven,  
he knows—or maybe even he does not know.”

—From the “Hymn of Creation” (Rig-Veda 10:129), translated  
by A.L. Basham

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As the complex network of Sumerian city-states began to achieve regional dominance in Mesopotamia, mysterious communities living two thousand miles east on the Indian subcontinent began to construct massive stone cities to accommodate a growing population. Ultimately abandoned, these cities provide archaeologists and historians with a glimpse into the early centuries of one of the world’s most powerful and diverse civilizations.

Hindu tradition has its own stories of the origins of India, tales of an Emperor Bharata who left behind a mighty civilization. Do the ancient cities of Mehrgarh and Mohenjo-daro suggest that these historical accounts have a basis in reality?

## EPICS AND MYSTERIES

Like most ancient civilizations the society of the Indus Valley civilization was identified with a river. Even the name we give the country today—India, derived from Indus—comes from the Sanskrit term *Sindhu*, which refers in a general sense to any large body of water and in a specific sense to the massive Ganges river. The word *Hindu* comes from the same root

word. To the extent that we call it India, it is a country that—much like the US states of Mississippi and Missouri—is named after a distinctive river.

For most residents of India, the country has a different name: Bharat. The word has a general meaning—to keep a fire lit—and in that sense Bharat is the fire that is protected, and kept burning, by the people and their rulers. In much the same way that America was named after the explorer and mapmaker Amerigo Vespucci, Bharat is said to have been named after the ancient mythical Emperor Bharata, who inherited a united India and kept that fire burning. The broad outline of his life is described in the *Mahabharata*, the massive and ancient epic poem of India.

## ***Not* a Post-Nuclear Wasteland**

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The History Channel television series *Ancient Aliens* made the argument that the city of Mohenjo-daro was destroyed by a nuclear explosion, citing the fact that pottery found at the site had vitrified due to high heat. But vitrification is a normal part of the clay-firing process, and the relatively well-preserved state of the site—which included intact mud buildings and walls—seems to preclude a large catastrophic explosion of any kind.

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If there's a historical figure who inspired this story of Bharata, he would have almost certainly been found in the ancient civilization of the Indus Valley. Operating from about 6000 B.C.E. until around 1500 B.C.E., it was one of the oldest civilizations in the world. It was also among the most advanced, and the cities—often intricately designed, and featuring impressive amenities like indoor plumbing and public swimming pools—are still studied by urban planners to this day. But it's what we don't know about this ancient civilization that tends to captivate the people who study it.

### **The World's Greatest Detectives**

Historians are good at putting together disparate documentary evidence. But when you don't have reliable documentary evidence to work with, piecing together a timeline depends entirely on the work of archaeologists—the CSIs of historical research. By locating, collecting, and preserving physical evidence, they can reconstruct stories that would otherwise be lost to time.