



4-1-2012

Richard Rudgley, *Lost Civilisations of the Stone Age.*

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Recommended Citation

Farhat-Holzman, Laina (2012) "Richard Rudgley, *Lost Civilisations of the Stone Age.*" *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 66 : No. 66 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol66/iss66/16>

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Richard Rudgley, *Lost Civilisations of the Stone Age*. Arrow Books Ltd, 1999.

Having just finished reading this book, I found in the morning newspaper an article about an amazing find in the Ethiopian desert—several hippo bones with indications that the bones had been smashed by a human tool—by homo erectus, our first ancient ancestors. Of course, the anthropological community is up in arms with fierce debate over the interpretation of the discoverers.

Lost Civilisations of the Stone Age was written a decade ago by this British cultural anthropologist with a distinguished trail of scholarship. He won the British Museum Prometheus Award for his book *The Alchemy of Culture: Intoxicants in Society* (British Museum Press, 1993). He also wrote *Wildest Dreams: An Anthology of Drug Related Literature* (Little Brown, 1999) and *Secrets of the Stone Age* (Century, 2000, which has become a TV series (History Channel, I believe). But this book, *Lost Civilisations*, must be creating even more furor among his more conservative colleagues, but for us as outsiders to the discipline, it is enlightening to learn how contentious ideas can be among specialists.

Rudgley makes the point that “despite the fact that prehistory makes up more than 95 percent of our time on this planet, history, the remaining 5 percent makes up at least 95 percent of most accounts of the human story.” He believes that the prehistory of humankind is no mere prelude to history; rather it is history itself.

Anthropologists themselves have had a bad record in this regard, according to Rudgley. The famous early anthropologists (1863 London) had some unsavory skeletons in their closets—and may not have behaved any better than notoriously disrespectful colonialists. Richard Burton, for example, used anthropology to sensationally discuss sexual issues not possible in proper British society (and his proper British wife burned his papers when he died). Others were involved in criminal grave robbing, selling body parts, and one even fashioned a gavel in the form of an African head. How different is this from the making of lampshades from human skin (under the Nazis), he asks?

Rudgley attacks the whole notion of history blooming 5,000 years ago out of a cloud of dust, without antecedents. He also takes on the notion that modern man has evolved and invented astonishing institutions from that point forward. And he questions the notion that all of these innovations made life better for us all. “That the average Stone Age individual may have enjoyed greater freedom than the serf (or even the average citizen of a modern democratic state) is simply ignored in this version of the human story, in which we ascend to ever greater heights and only look back in order to congratulate ourselves on how far we have come.”

He examines the most basic sign of any society's success—the health of its members. Anthropologists have found that our hunter/gatherer ancestors had far better health than their agricultural successors. Agriculture was not an improvement for the mass of peasants throughout history—although it certainly helped to make populations explode and those elites at the top flourished with better health. This is one area in which progress was a mixed blessing.

Many historians still regard ancient Egypt as some sort of miracle, arising out of primeval darkness. The more ideological among them believe that there had to be some “outside” influence (the space alien theories) because these people couldn't possibly have invented it. But newer anthropologists (such as Rudgley) see that Egypt's great culture emerged out of impressive indigenous prehistoric cultures—including elaborate tombs, religious motifs, and religious themes.

Writing has always been considered the hallmark of civilization—beginning with the Egyptian hieroglyphics and the Mesopotamian writing (which seem to be independent of each other). New findings trace writing systems ever earlier in human existence, as our own colleague, Donald Burgy, has shown in his series of “Reading Paleolithic Writing” articles printed in the *Comparative Civilizations Review*. Although a contentious proposition, there are others, in addition to Burgy, who are finding writing systems—astonishingly as early as *Homo erectus*. They claim that we have misread the brain capability of these early ancestors (just as we used to do with *Homo Neanderthalensis*).

In a brief tour of this book, Chapter 2 deals with The Mother Tongue (an idea as old as mankind) — that there was an ur-language very long ago out of which all of our languages have come. I think of the story of the Tower of Babel in the Bible indicated somebody's awareness of an original mother tongue.

Chapter 3, A New Rosetta Stone, traces writing systems (and counting systems) much farther back in history than we thought — with modern archeology providing increasing evidence for this. In Chapter 4, we are given examples of writing (and pre-writing) in “old Europe,” with many illustrations and plates of these finds. Chapter 5 takes on The Paleolithic Origins of Writing. Anthropologist Paul Bouissac “sees the resistance to the serious investigation of the possibility of Paleolithic writing as partly due to an entrenched tradition of viewing Ice Age paintings and other forms of prehistoric art as simple representations of the objects that they depict.” He and others of his school are proposing other ways to look at this art.

Chapter 6, which addresses Paleoscience, astonished me most. Science and technology did not begin 5,000 years ago, which is evident from the wonderful stone-age constructions we find around the world—the Stonehenges and their relatives. I

visited one in Malta and was struck by its builders' obvious skill. And ten years ago, an 11,000-year-old sophisticated temple complex was found in Turkey, built by hunter-gatherers well before the advent of agriculture.

But much older than these are the tools and weapons ingeniously developed by ancestors as old as *Homo erectus*. The hand axes demonstrate keen observation, practiced skill, and transmission of this technology down hundreds of generations. Furthermore, even our most ancient ancestors counted. Ridgley discusses and illustrates the work of Michel Dewez (1970) who found 10,000 year-old animal bones with clearly marked counting systems engraved on them.

Chapter 7, From Footprints to Fingerprints, follows the antiquity of man as detective. Hunters have always been noted for their observational skills (tracks, broken branches, tufts of hair, entangled feathers, odors) and modern anthropology detectives themselves now maintain that contrary to the belief that these skills only emerged 40,000 years ago, they were much older than that. Our Paleolithic ancestors were not just lucky scavengers; they were also hunters and transmitters of these skills.

Chapters 8, Under the Knife, and 9, Surgery, provide numerous examples of our most ancient ancestors performing surgeries from which their patients survived (trepanning and amputations), and considerable knowledge of pharmacology. Chapter 10, Pyrotechnology, provides evidence of much earlier taming of fire than we had thought.

The rest of the book deals with the antiquity of religious ideas, themes, and motifs, all far predating 5,000 years ago.

This book would have delighted our late, great colleague, Stedman Noble, who claimed to be bored by anything later than 300 AD. Before his death, he was working on the antiquity of seagoing—and his numbers, increasingly, were getting earlier.

Finally, there is a work of art, a sculpture reproduced on the cover of the book, which shows an amazing predecessor of the famous 19th century “The Thinker.” This is a book worth reading—and I will order his other works as well.

Laina Farhat-Holzman