



4-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

Farhat-Holzman, Laina (2014) "James DeMeo, *Saharasia, The 4000 BCE Origins of Child Abuse, Sex-Repression, Warfare, and Social Violence in the Deserts of the Old World*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*. Vol. 70 : No. 70 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol70/iss70/11>

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**James DeMeo, Saharasia,
The 4000 BCE Origins of Child Abuse, Sex-Repression, Warfare and Social
Violence in the Deserts of the Old World,
Revised Second Edition
Natural Energy Works, 2011**

Reviewed by Laina Farhat-Holzman

This book is a brave attempt to do a big-picture study of human history that addresses a question: do the violent, oppressive cultures that stretch in a belt from North Africa through the deserts of Central Asia derive from a drastic climate change? This is a geographer's question, and DeMeo is a geographer. He proposes that a great climate change that we know happened, the great desiccation of 4,000 years ago that came with a returned Ice Age, created havoc for the human societies living in that swath of the earth.

We already know that the Arabian Peninsula was once a great watered grassland with rivers and teeming with game; we know that the Sahara Desert was an inland sea, and we know that what would be today's Asia Minor, Persia, and Afghanistan were forested. Central Asia was a vast grassland that was host to herds of wild horses. People who live in such fruitful places are not in a daily struggle for survival.

What happens to the societies that had been living in such lands of plenty when almost overnight (in geological terms) these regions become desiccated, setting communities fleeing for their lives? Could such a thing have happened and could this be responsible for some of the most oppressive human societies ever devised, even today?

In the 1950s, a psychiatrist, Immanuel Velikovsky, tracked ancient mythology around the world and controversially proposed that the earth had experienced an enormous astronomical cataclysm (a near collision with Venus) that left us forever traumatized. Velikovsky's work is fascinating but as yet not accepted scholarship because there is no solid proof for his idea of a "collective unconscious." DeMeo is also an outlier in the world of academic scholarship, but his huge book, now further enlarged with new archeological findings, is provocative, and he provides a continuing stream of new findings about the prehistoric world.

Deserts are not a comfortable habitat for human beings. Tribes must keep on the move to find food and water, and they are in constant conflict with other tribes, fighting over these scarce resources. Life under such duress requires the fierceness of male unquestioned leadership. These societies are harsh and uncompromisingly nasty, as we see today in this same great desert crescent.

The most provocative argument in DeMeo's work is that before the great desiccation, human beings lived in more humane groupings, often led by women; that they were more egalitarian; and that they were more sexually permissive. This is an idea that has great currency today within feminist groups, and while it may be true, there is no evidence that such matriarchal groups were always so benign. Anthropologist Margaret Mead was deceived by Samoans into believing this, although it was not true. Polynesian society was not benign.

DeMeo is correct that the societies living in the great deserts today have customs and behaviors that are among the worst of all human arrangements. They are authoritarian, male dominated, belligerent, wedded to vengeance, violently suppressing of women, child abusing, and practitioners of violent surgical practices inflicted on children of both sexes. (Think of Tribal Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Chad as examples of the worst.)

DeMeo notes that this testosterone-poisoned desert culture had an effect throughout the world, particularly in the treatment of women and children. But nowhere was it ever as severe as in the desert regions, and nowhere else has it remained as resistant to any remedy.

It is difficult for us to look into the distant past and see exactly how it was. We often romanticize or demonize the past, but perhaps as we understand better the flood of current archeology, we might find some important answers to why some cultures have chosen the paths that they have.