Prehistory of the Near East

Decorated Ware Jar Depicting Ungulates and Boats with Human Figures
Courtesy Metropolitan Museum (Public Domain)
PREHISTORY

The duration of the period before the invention of writing

If the 2.5 million years or so that have elapsed since the appearance of *Homo habilis* were represented by a line of a total length of 5 kilometers, each year would count as less than 2 millimeters. The period before writing would represent 4,990 meters, whereas the whole of the so-called ‘historical’ periods (those for which we possess written sources) would be reduced to the last 10 meters. The beginning of the Christian era would be indicated 4 meters from the terminal point and the discovery of America by Columbus only 1 meter from the same terminal point.

The total duration of the existence of humankind might also be compared to a 24–hour day, *Homo habilis* first appearing when the day was only 1 second old and each century corresponding to 3.456 seconds. The invention of writing and the beginnings of the first states would then be situated less than 3 minutes before midnight and Columbus’s first voyage to America just over 17 seconds before the end of the day.

‘Prehistory’: an erroneous but well-established term

This enormously long period before the invention of writing is commonly referred to as ‘prehistory’. Widespread as it is in practically all languages, this term is basically erroneous. Strictly speaking, it rejects as history about 99.8 per cent of the total existence of humanity and reduces ‘history proper’ (that based on written sources) to 0.2 per cent of that existence. Moreover, the term is resented as pejorative by the populations who adopted writing only quite recently and who think, with good reason, that their own past is as much ‘historical’ as that of populations which became literate much earlier.

This ‘prehistoric’ period witnessed the birth, childhood and adolescence of humankind. It takes us from anthropogenesis right up to the invention of writing, the birth of the first towns, the first states, the rise of the class society which was for millennia to be a feature of the period of ‘history proper’. It witnessed the slow elaboration of the basic characteristics of human civilization, and without a knowledge of which most of the outstanding features of contemporary cultures would remain incomprehensible.

The term ‘prehistory’ was coined in the nineteenth century, originally to indicate the period during which humans were the contemporaries of animals now extinct, the remains of which were found by geologists and palaeontologists in very old geological deposits. This indicated that humans had appeared much earlier than the six millennia granted them up to that time by the Biblical chronology. The adjective ‘antediluvian’ (‘before the Deluge’) was used for a short time to designate the same period. On the other
hand, the meaning of ‘prehistory’ was extended to all periods before the knowledge of writing, thus including the remains of much more recent periods. Many of the latter had for a long time attracted the attention of ‘antiquaries’, sometimes even from a historical viewpoint (see further). Historians, however, showed no interest in those periods for which written sources were lacking, and indeed for a very long-time prehistorians and historians had little or no contact. Times have changed, however, and since the period between the two world wars, these contacts have become gradually more frequent, as a consequence of the evolution of both disciplines: on the one hand, great strides have been made in the study of prehistoric times, and on the other hand, the concept of history itself has changed radically since the École des Annales. According to L. Févbre, history in the fullest sense is concerned with ‘everything which, belonging to man, depends on man, serves man, expresses man, indicates the presence, activity, tastes and manners of man’. Now, when Févbre wrote these lines, the goals of history in this broad sense had already been pursued for many years by the best of the prehistorians. This parallel trend obviously facilitated the integration of the study of so-called prehistoric periods into the general framework of the history of humankind.

So, the term ‘prehistory’ is inadequate. One could perhaps think to replace it by ‘protohistory’ (i.e. the very first history), but this term is already well established in current usage to indicate, in the history of a people or of a region, the period during which the people or the region’s inhabitants were still illiterate but during which they were written about in the texts of neighbouring peoples who were more advanced and already literate (e.g. the Celtic tribes, still illiterate but mentioned by Greek and Latin historians). Sometimes the term ‘protohistoric’ is also used for populations who used writing but whose language is still not understood (e.g. the Etruscans). However this may be, the terms ‘prehistory’ and ‘protohistory’ are so deeply rooted that they have become practically ineradicable and any attempt to replace them would be unrealistic¹.

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