

Religion Before History

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Evidence from archaeology

Most religions are known to us through written sources. 'Prehistoric' means that we are dealing with the time before recorded history; that is, before there were written records about myths, rituals and beliefs. Writing was developed in the ancient civilizations of the Near East, China and Middle America. The literate era started about 3000 BC in the Old World, and shortly after the birth of Christ in the New World. For the sake of convenience we may designate all religions before 3000 BC as prehistoric.

Non-religious man?

The question of the origins of religion will not concern us here. Earlier evolutionists thought that there had been an original non-religious phase in human history. Their information has, however, proved to be false. All we can say is that some groups, for example the Maasai in Kenya, appear to lack a belief in life after death.

Some students of religion consider that man's religious consciousness was born during the time when man first appeared. Others find traces of 'religious' behaviour even in the animal kingdom. Despite some startling progress in animal-behaviour

studies (ethology) and the study of ancient man (palaeoanthropology), nothing certain can be said about these alternatives. All that we know is that some early human cultures seem to have contained traces of religious orientation.

Archaeological finds

The main difficulty in any approach to prehistoric religion lies, of course, in the absence of written sources from this extensive period in the history of mankind. The prehistorian is referred to silent survivals of the past: bone materials, stone arrangements, rough stone figures, rock drawings and similar materials. Such objects are difficult to decipher. For example, it is difficult to tell whether a Danish bog find from the Iron Age—be it a well-preserved human body or a golden dish—was used as a gift of offering or not, since there are no documents from that time to illuminate what really happened. (Some modern archaeologists even question whether Denmark, or even Scandinavia, had a religion during the Bronze Age!) We shall never know for certain what the people of those days thought.

However, there are means to come closer to an understanding of at least some general ideas of those distant times. Let us first

see how the prehistoric source materials can be classified. The difficulty of such a classification is obvious: we cannot know if a particular type of artifact—an axe, say, or a wagon—ever had a ritual purpose. Nevertheless, a survey of materials which seem to qualify as connected with religion calls for a division along the following lines:

- burial places and burial finds;
- deposition of offerings;
- representations of deities, spirits and cultic figures (carved idols, reliefs, rock paintings, rock drawings, etc.);
- remains of constructions with religious associations, such as altars, temples, or foundations of world pillars.

Archaeologists usually point out that this material can be interpreted only by analogy. The prehistoric material must be placed in a context which may suggest its original meaning. Of course, all such conclusions are hypothetical. The history of prehistoric research has seen a succession of interpretations. The methods of archaeological reconstruction have become more refined, comparisons with the world of the science of the peoples of mankind (ethnology) more restricted in scope, and ecological perspectives more decisive. Nevertheless, much of

our reconstruction of prehistoric religion remains guesswork. Almost every interpretation of beliefs can be and has been contested.

Prehistoric versus historic

The prehistoric era of religion stretches from the beginning of mankind—probably about two or three million years ago—until approximately 3000 BC. During all this time religious knowledge was transmitted through the spoken word (beliefs and myths) and through imitative behaviour (rituals). This somewhat restricted how much knowledge could be accumulated—although it is amazing how much tribal keepers of oral traditions are able to memorize.

In many prehistoric societies the fight for subsistence may likewise have precluded the growth of sophisticated religious thought (although there are examples of primal societies with a good deal of leisure time at their disposal). We therefore find some basic differences between representatives of preliterate and literate religions; for instance, the former value repetition in myth and ritual, the latter develop dogma and may go in for intricate speculations.

The perspective of society

The main differences between prehistoric and historic religions are, however, that the former are organized around the perspectives of the hunter, food-gatherer, fisherman or early farmer, whereas historic religions on the other hand, represent the world-view of the developed civilizations, beginning with Egypt, Mesopotamia and China. In other words, prehistoric religions were at home in small-scale, tribal societies where family or kin-groups meant more than other forms of social organization, and where the influence of

natural forces had a tremendous impact on daily life and religion. Such primitive societies still linger on today, and it is possible to link the types of these societies with prehistoric periods.

The first period is the Palaeolithic, or Old Stone Age, during which people were hunters, food-gatherers and fishermen. Latter-day hunting societies have been organized along similar lines, and the patterns of their religions are probably reminiscent of those of Palaeolithic times.

Farmers and herdsmen

The Palaeolithic was followed by the Neolithic, or New Stone Age, about 10,000 BC. This was the time when many hunters turned into primitive farmers. In the following millennia pastoral nomadism developed out of this agriculture in places where the cultivated lands met the grasslands and deserts. The world of the farmers and herdsmen is still with us. There is every reason to expect that their religious practices resemble those of their prehistoric predecessors.

These analogies between past and present are very rough and ready. Ecological, technological, social and historical differences may cast doubts upon their validity. But they do give us certain clues on which to base our interpretation.

Lower Palaeolithic religion

It is extremely difficult to tell from the finds at our disposal what religion was like during the long period called the Early or Lower Palaeolithic (before 30,000 BC). This was the time of the pre-human members of the family of man, the early hominids such as *Australopithecus africanus*, *Homo habilis* (2,500,000 BC), *Homo erectus* (1,600,000 BC) and *Homo neanderthalensis* (100,000–30,000 BC). Originating

in Africa, perhaps—only Africa has the earliest skeletons and continuous succession of species—the hominids spread to Europe (where they appeared before 1,000,000 BC) and to Asia. Peking man and Sangiran man in Indonesia were both representatives of *Homo erectus*.

The beginnings of culture

We have some information about the modest cultural achievements of early man. For instance, we know that two-and-a-half million years ago groups of hominids in East Africa used choppers, scrapers and other stone utensils that they had shaped themselves. They practised division of labour between the sexes, and food sharing.

However, their religious ideas, if any, are unknown to us. This what we might expect, for the cultural capacity of early man was crude and he did not express clear religious ideas that can be recognized as such by today's archaeologists. We have neither burials, drawings, nor stone monuments to guide our search. However, the tool-making of these early individuals suggests that they had creative intelligence and therefore, very possibly, a form of religion.

Peking man

Many prehistorians have assumed that Peking man, who lived about half a million years ago, had some concept of religion or magic. In his cave near Chou Kou Tien he assembled human skulls which were broken at the *foramen magnum*. This gives us access to the brain, and it would seem that Peking man extracted and ate the brain. If this was the case (we can never be sure, of course), the motive was religious or magical rather than for food. For Peking man had many animals to hunt. Such cannibalism when practised in present-day primal societies, usually implies the incorporation of the donor's vigour and power.

This is a most hypothetical interpretation, and, unfortunately, practically all finds from the Lower Palaeolithic that lend themselves to a religious interpretation are subject to the same difficulty.

Take, for instance, the discoveries of circles of mammoth skulls in Russia and the Ukraine. We are familiar with similar skull arrangements from North America in historical times, the circles of buffalo skulls on the plains which were important in worship. However, the Palaeolithic mammoth skulls *may* have served as weights on the tent-cloths instead of stones. In several instances there are bone circles surrounding fire-places, and in these cases a religious purpose is probably out of the question.



This limestone fertility figure, discovered in Karpathos, dates from around 3,500 bc.

Neanderthal man

Almost all the early remains that may have religious significance are associated with Neanderthal man and the last 50,000 years of the Lower Palaeolithic—the so-called Mousterian period.

Neanderthal man buried his dead with proper ceremonies, and he seems to have believed in some kind of life after death. In the cave of Shanidar, northern Iraq, a dead person was buried under a heap of stones, resting on a bed of many flowers. At Techik Tach in Turkestan, a child was buried surrounded by five pairs of horns of the mountain goat, apparently placed in a circle. A cave at Monte Circeo in Italy contains a human skull within a small circle of stones; here is one of the so-called 'skull burials' that continue throughout the Palaeolithic period.

Grave gifts are common in many instances (for example, at a Chapelle-aux-Saints in France). Towards the end of the Mousterian period the dead were buried in a contracted position ('flexed burials') and painted with red ochre. Both these measures may reflect a belief in a future life: a return to the womb

of Mother Earth, a continued existence in another world through the red 'blood'. Studies of certain modern peoples support these interpretations, but others are of course possible.

From this time also we have evidence of sacred objects: round fossils and pieces of iron pyrites. One round fossil from Tata, Hungary, is engraved with two lines, forming a cross; this could be the first clear evidence of the idea of a quartered universe, a concept widely represented in both Old and New World cosmology.

Bear worship

Even in recent times some Arctic peoples have worshipped bears. It is quite possible that similar religious beliefs were represented in Central Europe (France, Switzerland and Italy) in Mousterian times. Thus, in the Drachenloch Cave in Switzerland, bear skulls have been found enclosed in a stone coffin covered by stone slabs. This looks like a regular bear burial. Some reputable scholars today (Koby, Leroi-Gourhan, Kurtén) insist, however, that the bears in question—

they are cave-bears—had died a natural death in their winter lairs. The apparent burial chests would then be due to natural rockfall from the ceiling of the cave. This is a plausible explanation, but the 'cultic' interpretation seems no less plausible. Finds from Dordogne (in France) and Weimar (in Germany) suggest deliberate burial of bears—brown bears in these cases.

The main idea behind bear ceremonialism is that the dead animal will return to life, or persuade its relatives to make themselves available to the hunter, provided it has received a correct burial. The pattern of burial has been taken from human burials.

Modern man

Neanderthal man belonged to Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and northern Asia. He was slowly replaced by another species, *Homo sapiens*, our own direct ancestors, who had already spread over the continents before the end of the Lower Palaeolithic: Siberian mongoloid peoples entered the New World as early as 60,000 years ago, or perhaps even earlier, and Australia received its population from Indonesia more than 30,000 years ago. This is of some importance for our reconstruction of religious history. It means that the main structures of American and Australian hunting religions go back to the Lower Palaeolithic. And it may even imply that the totemism and high-god beliefs both appearing in these religions are just as old.

Upper Palaeolithic religion

At the beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic period about 30,000 years ago, Neanderthal man had left the scene in Europe and modern man, *Homo sapiens*, took over. The main periods were the Aurignacian (from 30,000 bc),

the Solutrean (from 20,000 bc) and the Magdalenian (15,000–10,000 bc). It is now that the religious patterns, which we could glimpse in earlier periods, take a more discernible form. The world-view is still that of hunting peoples, but it varies in different parts of Eurasia. The religious developments in Africa, southern Asia, Australia and America are as yet hidden from us.

The burial customs give evidence of a clear belief in life after death. For example, in some caves near Menton in south-east France some 'flexed' skeletons were found, stained with iron oxide, adorned with rows of pierced shells and bracelets, and equipped with quartzite tools and flint knives. Skeletons from Italy to Russia testify that the dead were buried with their most precious property. No doubt, they

were thought to take it with them to another world.

The mother-goddess

It is from this time that the famous sculptured 'Venus'-figurines in ivory, bone and stone appear (Gravettian period, 25,000 bc). They are distributed from France to eastern Siberia, and the best-known of them all is the Venus from Willendorf in Austria. They all have characteristic, distorted features: the parts of the body which serve sexual and child-bearing functions—the breasts, the hips, the buttocks, the private parts—are excessively enlarged, whereas little attention is paid to the face, the arms and the legs.

It has been suggested that these fat-rumped (steatopygous) figures are just representatives of mortal women, portrayed in the fashion of the time. This is

scarcely probable, however. The emphasis on the sexual parts shows very clearly that these Venuses were supposed to represent deities of fertility, growth and fruitfulness. Here we have for the first time real representations of a deity, the mother-goddess, conceived as one or many.

There is a seemingly puzzling question here. How could the mother-goddess, forerunner of Ishtar, Cybele and Artemis, be such a prominent divinity in a hunting culture? The answer is simple. In recently-studied northern Eurasian cultures, the

Magnificent cave-paintings have been discovered in several sites in southern France, dating from before 10,000 bc. Was this simply the self-expression of man the hunter-gatherer? Or were these caves used (as has been suggested) for 'religious' purposes.



women had similar birth goddesses protecting them during pregnancy and childbirth. Many Siberian tribes believed in a mother of the wild animals, a mistress who protects the wild creatures she has given life to. We also know that women played a very important role during the Stone Age as mothers, housekeepers and gatherers of roots and berries.

Do these figurines prove that the concept of a male god was introduced later than the concept of a goddess? Such a conclusion seems unwarranted. Before the emergence of the Middle Eastern city-states, the Supreme Being was never represented in art as far as we can tell. As a diffuse sky-god he was not easy to picture.

We know that bull-roarers have been used to imitate the voice of the Supreme Being, or the voices of dead ancestors, in some modern primal hunting religions (in Australia, South Africa, Brazil and California). Some perforated, ornate stone slabs that have been found in Upper Palaeolithic caves may have been bull-roarers symbolizing the presence of the Supreme God, or other supernatural beings. However, this is far from certain.

Cave paintings

The most telling artistic creations from the Upper Palaeolithic are the engravings and paintings on cave walls. They first appear in the Aurignacian period, but receive their full development in the Magdalenian. Their focus is in southern France and northernmost Spain. The most famous and most numerous rock-paintings stem from 15,000 to 11,000 BC; this is the time of the caves of Dordogne (Lascaux), Ariège (Niaux, Les Trois-Frères, Montespan) and northern Spain (Altamira).

Four-fifths of the figures are animals, and of these most are horses and bisons, the hoofed

fauna of the frost-bitten plains. Reindeer occur only at a late stage, at the same time as the glaciers made their last push forward. The composition of the beautiful, realistic animal scenes has been interpreted in various ways. In spite of some recent speculations in another direction, it seems quite reasonable to believe that the animals refer to hunting ritual and hunting magic. Hunting was the major occupation of Palaeolithic man, and ceremonies to secure a successful hunt were most certainly part of the hunting craft, just as they have been among traditional hunters up to the present day.

Only 4 per cent of the pictured animals show arrows (or wounds resulting from arrows). Does this mean that they cannot be associated with hunting magic? Not necessarily. Among primal peoples hunting ceremonies are often very complicated, and real magic—indicating the anticipation of success in the hunt—is only part of a wider pattern. The mere representation of an animal form may lead to the kill—so it was believed.

Why did this animal ceremonialism take place in caves, often in the depths of scarcely accessible inner chambers? We do not know, but it may, perhaps, have something to do with the fact that in widespread tales, recorded even in this century, the animals are supposed originally to have come from underground, or to have once been secluded in caves.

Some wall scenes depict human beings in animal disguise. They may represent ritual performers, perhaps magicians or ritual dancers, or maybe mythical beings. Well-known is the 'sorcerer' of the cave Les Trois-Frères: a picture of a human being with reindeer antlers, long beard, bear's paws and a horse's tail. He has been interpreted as a shaman or a god of the cave, but his position in the picture over a great number of animals makes it

more likely that he was a lord of the animals, a master of the game.

All these interpretations are of course tentative. There is a host of pictures which do not easily lend themselves to interpretation, such as pictographs of headless animals (there is even a sculpture of a bear without a head), of women dancing around a phallic man, and so on. However, such representations strengthen the general impression that Upper Palaeolithic European religion was concerned with the animals and sexual fertility—natural targets in a religion chiefly concerned with hunting. We can say the same about animal ceremonialism in Siberia in the same era: reindeer skeletons were carefully buried in anatomical order. Such hunting rites have survived in this area into the twentieth century. As in the bear rites, the aim has been to restore the animal to a new life, in this world or hereafter.

From the end of the Palaeolithic, or the Mesolithic, we have evidence of what appear to have been sacrifices to the supernatural rulers of the reindeer in northern Germany. Reindeer were submerged in a lake close to present-day Hamburg, and weighted down with stones. It is less likely that these reindeer were caches for the hunters, as has been suggested.

Neolithic religion

The Neolithic is, strictly speaking, the period when objects of stone were no longer chipped but ground and polished. More important, this is the age, from about 10,000 BC, when man went over to producing rather than hunting or gathering his own food. The population of the world was probably then around 10 million people. The climate had changed—the melting of the ice was in full flux—and the warmer weather made new inventions in subsistence possible.

Farming and village life

Agriculture was born, possibly as a consequence of the gathering of seeds by the women. This new way of life made it possible for a rapidly-growing population to settle in one place—to live in villages, and to practise pottery-making and weaving. Village life had a tremendous impact on religion, and so had the new food sources, the products of agriculture (or horticulture, as primitive agriculture is sometimes called).

The Neolithic period provides us with archaeological materials from the whole world. There are at least three independent centres where farming began. One is the Middle East, more specifically the mountain slopes of the Fertile Crescent. Wheat and corn were cultivated here, and dogs and goats were domesticated. The taming of animals slowly developed into pastoral nomadism on the outskirts of the area. In the north where the grasslands were wide and open, horse riding was introduced in about 900 BC.

Another centre of agriculture was south-east Asia, homeland of the cultivation of root-crops such as yams. Close by, in Assam, rice was introduced as a staple food that quickly spread to China and the surrounding areas.

A third centre was Central America, where the cultivation of maize began around 5000 BC.

The religions of the Neolithic peoples were closely adapted to these three agricultural civilizations and spread with them. When pastoral nomadism appeared on the scene a new profile of religion was formed that changed the course of world religions.

Death and burial

If we now concentrate on the west Asian-Mediterranean Neolithic religions, it is easy to see how the archaeological finds fit in with this picture. People lived in villages and similar settlements; outside these, true cemeteries have been found (although in

some cases the bodies were buried under the floors of the houses). Graves were provided with gifts and offerings, such as beads, shells, utensils like ivory combs, and female figurines—perhaps symbolizing servants for the next life, or protective goddesses.

The closer we come to the time of the developed civilizations, the more differentiated are the burials according to rank or class. Social distinctions (stratification) developed as the political organization based on kinship was succeeded by one based on territory, and a surplus of products made it possible for some men to become relatively rich and important. This development was reflected in the burial customs. 'Inhumation' was now common: man was interred in the ground like the grain, to arise again in another world. Coffins became more commonly used as time went by. Towards the end of the Neolithic, cremation was practised here and there, perhaps associated with a more spiritual view of the afterlife.

In some early Neolithic burials the heads of the dead were removed and placed in a circle, facing the centre. This seems to be the last survival of an old Palaeolithic tradition. The beliefs behind this arrangement are hidden from us. Perhaps the circle as a symbol of the universe had something to do with it.

Male and female

Many female sculptures, fat-rumped and violin-shaped figures in bone, clay and terracotta, testify to the prominence of fertility cults. Figurines from Romania (5000 BC) show a mother with her child, later a favourite motif in the Egyptian and Christian religions. In some places there are also phallic statuettes, most certainly representing the male companion of the fertility goddess. The female statuettes are, however, in the majority, no doubt reflecting the

elevated position of the woman, and so also the goddess, in a matrilinear agrarian society. The functions of the mother-goddess were now adapted to farming needs: she appeared as goddess of earth and vegetation.

Other fertility divinities were also portrayed, sometimes through animal masks, sometimes in sculpture. Serpentes around the goddess hint that she was a snake-goddess; in later Cretan culture the goddess raises her hands holding snakes. The snake was a fertility symbol in historical times in Europe, the Middle East, India and China (as the dragon).

Another divinity is probably represented in the bull effigies with human masks in the Balkan area. The cult of the bull, symbol of fertility, seems to have been distributed over the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world. In historical times, it became associated with gods like Baal and Dionysus, with the supernatural master of the bull figures in Zoroastrian religion, and Mithra is represented as killing the bull to rejuvenate the world. The bull-fights in south-western Europe are probably reminiscences of ancient rituals in the worship of the bull-cult.

Priests and temples

This was the time when a form of priesthood evolved and temples of wood, stone and clay became common. The casual sacrificial places of the earlier nomadic hunting culture were succeeded by large buildings for divine service. Here were kept altars, vessels, inscribed objects, vases with paintings of ritual scenes, sculptures in clay and, later on, copper and gold. All these were used in the rituals.

In the Ukraine and surrounding areas archaeologists have found remains of temples, and clay models of temples. For instance, in the southern Bug Valley, now in Soviet Moldavia, Russian prehistorians have dis-

covered a temple at Sabatinovka dating from about 5000 BC. Built of wattle-and-daub, it occupied about seventy square metres. Its big rectangular room, with a floor plastered with clay, contained at the back a clay altar, upon which sixteen female figurines were found. They had large buttocks and were seated on horn-backed stools. Beside the altar was a chair of clay, perhaps intended for the high priest.

European and west Asian Neolithic developments are paralleled in east Asia, and are definitely connected with the Chinese Neolithic period. But the developments in south-east Asia are more difficult to follow. In America the fertility religion of the horticulturists was simply a transfer of the hunter's conceptual world to the planter's; agrarian rituals did not vary basically from hunting rituals in post-Columbian eastern North America. However, some mythological motifs connected with the 'maize mother' point to communications with Indonesia. In large areas of agricultural America the Neolithic period continued until the arrival of Columbus, and even beyond this date.

Megalithic monuments

Towards the end of the Neolithic era structures composed of large stones, or megaliths, were erected in Europe. Perhaps most of them were burial structures: the striking tombs (dolmens) consisting of a large, flat stone supported on uprights, and the passage graves, found on the islands and shores of the Mediterranean and Western Europe.

However, beside the megalithic tombs there are also huge stones in alignment, or menhirs, as at Carnac in Brittany. Their purpose is hidden from us; perhaps they marked ritual procession routes. Some large constructions, such as the Hal Tarxien stone buildings in Malta, were evidently temples. Chalk sculptures found in them show

realistic human features and some kind of gowns, and may represent gods and goddesses and their priests.

Other megalithic structures give the impression of having had astronomical functions. Perhaps they helped to determine the calendar and the agricultural seasons, always important to the farmer. Stonehenge, on Salisbury Plain in England, for instance, has a circle of sarsen stones; certain stones line up with the sunrise at midsummer. Whatever calendar purpose Stonehenge had, it was also a place of worship. Fertility-gods and goddesses were probably worshipped here, as has been suggested by archaeologists.

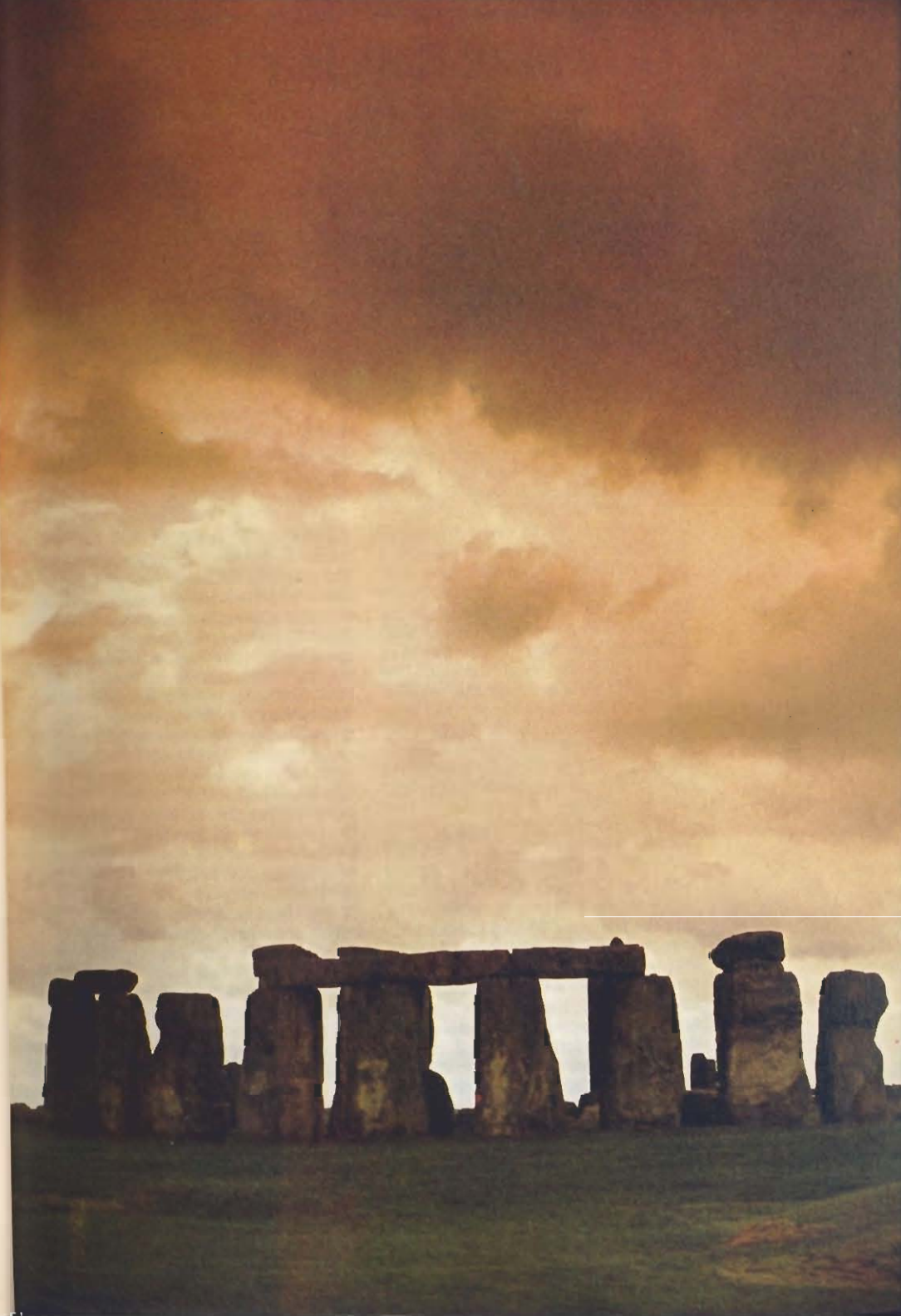
Megalithic monuments have been found from Britain in the west to Assam in the east, and reached south-east Asia, Polynesia and—according to some scholars—even the New World. Certainly, the Egyptian pyramids and the Maya pyramids in Yucatan do resemble each other, and in both cases they served as burial chambers. All over Eurasia and America, astronomers and prehistorians have identified stone constructions as observatories and megalithic calendars. If this is true, it is almost certain that astronomy was pursued within the frame of religious and ceremonial interests.

The great civilizations

The megalithic monuments are, like the Bronze-Age finds that date from approximately the same time, stepping stones to the era of the great civilizations, or 'high cultures'. The latter started on the river plains in Egypt, Mesopotamia and other Near Eastern areas around 3000 BC. They introduce the age of history, that is, of writing. Living in towns, central political power, large economic surpluses and strict class differentiation are the characteristics of these new kingdoms. In the religious sphere

they are distinguished by sacred kings, a priestly hierarchy, developed ritual, hecatombs of blood-sacrifices and imposing temple buildings. Their religious world is populated by great gods and goddesses (usually arranged in hierarchical order under a supreme god); their realm of the dead is stratified.

We have come a long way from the simple stone arrangements of the Palaeolithic peoples. Despite the 'Neolithic revolution', it is a continuous road that leads from the simple beliefs of Palaeolithic hunting groups to the polytheism of the great ancient kingdoms.



The Megalithic monument of Stonehenge dates from the early Bronze Age. It is thought to have been used for astrological and religious purposes.

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