

Before and After Writing

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Before Writing

The human mind — consciousness, cognition, wisdom, ingenuity — has been the same for fifty thousand years. During this time it has always busied itself with the creation of art, belief, and culture, the great majority of which is unknown to you, for your history begins a mere six thousand years ago, with the invention of writing. All prior achievements are forever lost: the great religions and myths and epic stories, the cuisines and fashions, all the different sounds ever used to tell a person, “I love you.” To grasp this is to understand that what we call history — every picture and story and legend, everything anyone has ever learned — is just a film of glittering algae on the surface of a deep, unknown river.

37,002 BCE

Before Time

We have no universal measurements. We can speak the numbers from one to ten, and some elders use their own idiosyncratic terms to count higher, but we represent these values only through groups of objects, or sequential marks. We use dots to compose a crude calendar that you'll find painted beside many of the animals depicted on the cave walls. Each dot represents a lunar phase, in a series that commences with spring; if you start counting phases when the ice melts and the birds migrate, the number of dots by a given animal indicates when that animal propagates. Note that our calendar is started anew every year, and marked by a conspicuous gap between the winter solstice and the vernal equinox: in spring, time itself is born. When the daylight wanes, the birds depart, and the plants die, the motor of time slows to a stop. Now the cosmos holds its breath. It is up to us to stand sentinel through the darkness, and, come spring, to rekindle the motor of life.

37,015 BCE

Before Progress

You live on a line, but we live the circle. Without writing, universal measurements, or continuous calendars, we have no sense of historical progress. This means we have no vision of a societal future, nor any personal ambition. None of us harbors a grand life goal, or nurses some hoped-for trajectory. Of course, this is true of most people throughout human history, but even a shepherd in Sumer might dream of saving a little money, securing a blessing from a local priest, acquiring property, and giving his children a better life. By contrast, none of us wonders if we “want more from life;” if we should consider “settling down;” if we’ve made “the wrong choices.” None of us says of a newly dead relative, “She lead a good life,” because what’s a good life and what’s a bad one, and how can these retrospective totalities be conceived of without the distancing effect of continuous time and recorded language? No artist dreams of a position in the pantheon of the masters. The artist who painted the notorious Dead Man deep within the Shaft of Lascaux left an indelible image of mystery, a jewel in the crown of human achievement, but that artist, like everyone in our era, experienced only a life without witness, engulfed by the absolute.

30,118 BCE

Before Meaning

Meaning is a technology that comes into existence with the invention of writing, and is further enriched by the development of organized religion. Then comes a procession of intellectual giants, each scolding humanity that it's not what you do, it's what it *means*: first Plato, who declares that nothing visible exists, that you must instead seek the transcendental; then Jesus, who says the truth resides not in silly folk practices but in ethics; then Luther, who preaches against practice in favor of faith. By the time your era rolls around, the commonsense definition of religion amounts to what William James calls, "the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude." Such a solitary search for meaning is a poor substitute for our sacred unity with the immanence of natural space and time, which has no need for God, spirits, and meaning.

Before Distance

Distance does not exist in nature. It finds expression only through technology, beginning with the crude mark making pioneered by the Neanderthals, and culminating in your own era of machines that blow cones of air that send dead leaves down the sidewalk, and detachable faucets spewing jets of water to chase food around the sink. Your age loves distance, the more the better: your art plays with it, your financial instruments exploit it, your celebrity and glamour require it. We have technology too, of course, but the greatest distance it affords is the trajectory of a hurled spear. The curse of distance is that the world becomes merely *interesting* — you know that, artist; you know that, scientist — for this sets you on a hunt for meaning, and, just like that, you've turned your back on the life of lived and present experience.

33,968 BCE

Before Machines

Your world is made by machine; consider what it means that our world is made by hand. Recall that wherever you encounter “traditional crafts” and “local artisans,” you take pleasure in a level of artisanship that exists in inverse proportion to technological access, even literacy. Every component of our lived culture bears that same fluid and improvisatory energy, channeled equally by the history of a community and the psyche of an individual.

Handmade aesthetics are complex, and easily capable of perversity and irony. Take bead necklaces: red deer canines make the best beads, but a single necklace requires the killing of over twenty stags, so if you want one, you’ll have to wait. There’s an ingenious workaround, however: a pair of mammoth tusks yields up to two-hundred deer-tooth replicas, carved fakes so exquisite that they’ll long fool your archaeologists. It turns out that this is far more laborious than drilling and engraving authentic deer canines, and soon the fake necklaces are more sought-after than the real ones.

17,550 BCE

Before Architecture

Architecture functions as a diagram of social order, even cosmology, as with your cathedrals, malls, and skyscrapers. We have cosmological diagrams too, not built but given, in the form of the caves. A cave embodies public architecture as you know it: massive and indestructible, a force that regulates individual bodies and social bodies, the space that puts you in your place. Just as no one inhabits your airports, cathedrals, and shopping malls, there is no evidence that humans have ever inhabited caves in a long-term way. This is why we have no need for architecture, not yet. The coming agricultural societies will develop a true architecture, beginning with monumental, non-residential, gathering places that serve the same purpose as the caves do for us. This architecture, however, will be not given but planned. Artificial caves demand artificial gods, and a class to mediate, and now comes the carnival of the Neolithic, rattling into town in a cloud of blood.

37,809 BCE

Before Abstraction

For millennia we have honed our innate skills of naturalistic artistic representation, as seen in the brilliantly studied animals we depict in the caves. We employ close observation, anatomic portrayal, complex perspectival rendering, and the juxtaposition of multiple postures to lend an illusion of motion; in some caves we combine these techniques with animal hide screens and flickering torchlight to yield a protocinema.

In the distant future we will discover agriculture and sedentary living, and will abruptly abandon all of this. We will renounce our unerring eye for nature as if by fiat, sealing the evidence within the caves and embarking on a series of new artistic styles which by comparison will appear flat, schematic, and highly abstract. These powerful new styles make the world over as something to read, rather than to be. The picture of the bull's head gradually becomes the letter A, where it lurks still. These symbolic styles will usher in a movement toward writing, and the hierarchical social structures of the new world, and will bring artistic guardrails so unyielding that thousands of years will pass before artists rediscover the once-prevalent techniques of naturalistic representation.

21,015 BCE

Before Maps

No roads, yet we walk everywhere. The land is a hand that holds us, a palm whose branching lines we study as we go, reading the network of symbolic connections between trading partners, family, and friends, as well as those for whom we reserve a polite mask. We move in accordance with fluctuating resources, the migrations of the herds, the wheel of the stars, and the patterns of neighboring bands. One day might see us walk twenty miles and back to fetch the stuff of a life: we know where to retrieve the pungent soil that masks our scent when we venture onto the steppe to lie in wait; we know where to find the firmest stones and wood to ensure a successful kill shot; we know where to find dry hardwood for kindling, manganese dioxide for fire accelerant, and brown coal to maximize burn time.

21,479 BCE

Before War

Aggressive social conflict was virtually unknown among our Neanderthal forebears, and remains rare. Its frequency will steadily increase as we approach sedentary and agricultural society, at which point it will set the world on fire with an undying flame. For now, things are relatively peaceful. We are cautious and careful with strangers, but we don't know xenophobia. When a spark flickers on the darkened plain we wonder who it might be, but just a little, and just for a moment. We have not yet invented the bow and arrow, nor the sword; the first mass grave is millennia away; those of our skeletons that survive the ages show few signs of murderous blows; the oldest beheading known to archaeology dates from the time of the invention of writing, far in our future: why should all this be so? Because it's hardly possible to hoard resources. Because there's space enough for all. Because the borders of the self are less rigid than in your time, which takes identity and interiority to be narratives that each person is tasked with writing, in a life concerned primarily with its own documentation.

26,164 BCE

Before Food

Of course we eat food, but you'd barely recognize our diet. No plant is cultivated, because farming won't arrive for a hundred centuries. There's no bread, no rice, and no beans. Every vegetable you've ever heard of will come about only in the distant future, through generations of patient Neolithic experimentation, and your favorites won't be invented until well after the birth of Christ. Instead, imagine your favorite vegetable reduced to a tenth of its size, encased in a hard shell, and intensely bitter. As for dairy products, our stomachs can't yet digest lactose, so there's no milk, yogurt, or butter. Animal domestication starts only after the Ice Age, so we have no chicken, and nothing you'd accept as pork. We prize large, grazing mammals, just like you, but rather than steaks we favor the fattiest bits: eyeballs, brains, tongues, viscera, and marrow. We snare birds by smearing habitual perches with a mixture of pine resin and honey. We scavenge the grubs that hatch from eggs lain by the warble fly under the deer's skin, which we peel off the still-warm carcass to reveal these delicacies, nestled like brooches on a cloak.

19,928 BCE

Before the Self

You modern people tend to see any individual animal less as a unique being than as an instance of a timeless and continually replenished archetype. A deer, for example, is a discrete but fungible facet of some eternal *deerness*, in the way that lakes, streams, and oceans are interchangeable expressions of one overarching substance: water. We share this view, but we also extend it to humankind. We know there to be one human essence — a being of great age, though maybe younger than the one flame, or the one stone — which expresses itself through innumerable glinting facets. Towards the end of the Paleolithic era this notion will recede, though it will dimly survive in your hopes about reincarnation.

44,736 BCE

Before Children

Most of us in the band — most humans alive today — are under the age of twenty-five, and most teens are already parents. Some members of the band have reached their forties and fifties, and a handful are older; we rely on these elders for advice about kinship ties with others in the region, and what to do in the face of extreme weather variation. There are no children here, not in your modern sense of sheltered dependents. Our lifestyle obliges the youngest among us to study the ways of the group and the vagaries of nature, and this makes a person patient, rational, empirical, and engaged. By the age of ten, we can read the animals, the minerals, the stars, and the seasons; we know the roots to apply against inflammation, and the sap that fights infection; we can help to break down a carcass, strip the hide, cure it over a smoldering fire of rotten wood, soften it by grinding it between our molars, carve a sewing needle from bone, and stitch a pair of leather trousers.

14,091 BCE

Before Family

For you, family derives from bloodline, but our notion is more expanded: for us, the band is the family. We might grow up knowing the identity of our biological father, even if only through hearsay, but it's not so important; to the extent that a man feels a sense of paternal responsibility, he directs it toward all. Many in the band form lasting partnerships, but some never do. Fixed gender roles are rare, though older women do most of the breast-feeding. The size of the band fluctuates, but let's call it twenty-five. Imagine that your world shrinks to the size of your high school math class, or the population of the subway car you rode this morning. We don't have the resources to grow much beyond that, so we take time between pregnancies. We're not entirely alone; we share an annual solstice festival with other groups of the region, and use the opportunity to mingle. Of course, our number is regularly diminished, because we die from parasites or bacteria, or leave for another group, or are driven off, or simply vanish. And then a newcomer shows up, joining for love or loneliness, or in flight from a bad situation, or for mysterious reasons, and if it feels right, they're family.

20,660 BCE

Before the Party

No beer, wine, or whisky. Cannabis and coca and tobacco arrive only much later, with cultivation. There's no coffee or black tea. We do have fearsome delirians, like the tea we brew from the *brugmansia* shrub, but take care, for it can lift a person so high they never again find their feet. For this reason we administer these herbs ceremonially. There's hope for the party, though, because we also like to ferment mashed honey and berries and wheat to yield a beverage with lovely effects. In fact, we increasingly find that we'd like to have a steady supply of grains for the purpose, and this will eventually lead us to agriculture (bread is just a happy bonus.)

31,134 BCE

Before Separation

In our roamings and migrations we depend on our innate sense for magnetic north, similar to that found in birds and cats and turtles. This helps us both in tracking the herds and in finding a temporary camp easily lost in visually monotonous grassland. These magnetoreceptive brain structures require iron molecules, which are supplied chiefly by red meat, and secondarily by the ferric red ochre pigments that we've been daubing on our skin for two hundred thousand years. One day the glaciers will melt and we'll settle into agricultural societies, and our directional sense will have little use. We'll scarcely notice when we lose it entirely, heedless that we've taken a great step away from the flow of nature. Advances in DNA collection will allow your scientists to pull evidence for this ability from the very soil of our graves, and they'll shake their heads in wonder.

35,221 BCE

Before Sickness

There is no common cold. Neither is there flu, nor measles, mumps, smallpox, cholera, and all the rest, because the sparse distribution of humans deprives viruses of the dense host populations they need. Sexually transmitted viruses: okay, they claim their share of our genitalia, and sometimes our lives. And we're crawling with lice. And, sure, it's true that by the age of thirty most of us live with sharp chronic pain. Yes, any given band is full of amputations, missing teeth, blind eyes, horrific scars, and lame legs. Yet by your standards we are hardy and robust. Our immune systems are not yet chronically depressed, as they will be one day among 83% of humans; our elders exhibit few symptoms of senility, which only emerges with agriculture; and cancer strikes only every five generations or so, for it will be eons before we invent the plastics and chemicals that exponentially multiply its occurrence.

20,002 BCE

Before White People

The flows of migration have produced many human variations. Light skin is just another mutation that you see from time to time. It will become massively widespread only much later, as an adaptation to agriculture. We are accustomed to many different appearances, but virtually every one of us alive is what you would call dark skinned, even as some may yet have pale eyes, or hair like straw.

26,164 BCE





