

After the Ice: A Global Human History 20,000-5,000 BC

Steven Mithen

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004, 664 pp. (hardback), \$29.95.

ISBN 0-674-01570-3

Reviewed by JOHN D. RISSETTO

Department of Anthropology, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131, USA

After the Ice presents the global history of human existence from 20,000 to 5,000 BC. It takes the reader on a descriptive journey from the time of the last ice age hunter-gatherers to the sedentary agricultural/pastoralists on the verge of a complex social revolution. Flesh is put to bone as the daily and ritual activities of the prehistoric inhabitants of each occupied continent are described and compared in limitless detail by the story's narrators. This 15,000 year time frame was specifically selected because it represents the confluence of social, environmental, and technological events that are responsible for the direction of later human history.

Mithen states that human history began somewhere between 100,000 to 50,000 BC and is defined as "the cumulative development of events and knowledge." While these events and knowledge grew out of the last seven-plus million years of human evolution and adaptation, Mithen proposes that it was not until humankind reached this 100,000–50,000 BC threshold that the social, cognitive, and technological capabilities of modern humans were largely developed. After this foundation was established, it was not until 20,000–5,000 years ago that the final social and cognitive pieces were put in place that allowed modern humans to break through their technologically or environmentally determined barriers and to establish their own pace for future socio-cultural development.

This book is intended for a broad academic and non-academic audience. In order to bridge this knowledge gap, the author has included two principal devices for attracting and maintaining the attention of such a diverse audience. The first is the development of two overarching themes that create a tactile parallel between the subject matter and the modern world. The first theme addresses the decision-making consequences associated with Holocene wild plant and animal domestication and the modern-day issues surrounding the creation and introduction of genetically modified organisms. The second theme focuses on the individual and social responses attributed to the rapid and/or prolonged shifts in global climate. Both themes are successfully integrated throughout the book and effectively symbolize the constant adaptation by all humans to survive such universal obstacles. The second unifying device is the creation of a central protagonist named John Lubbock who the reader follows through time and space as the book progresses. Mithen has stipulated that Lubbock is unable to be seen or interact directly with his prehistoric companions in order not to interfere with the progress of history. Protagonist Lubbock is a fictional character named for the Victorian

John Lubbock (1834-1913) who was credited with defining the chronological terms separating Old World prehistory (Paleolithic and Neolithic), and being the first to espouse the interpretative significance for the comparative analogy between ancient hunter-gatherers and their contemporary counterparts. Victorian John Lubbock's seminal 1865 work, *Pre-historic Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains, and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages*, is incorporated into the narrative and descriptive storylines of the book as a means to demonstrate how the anthropological interpretation of the archaeological record has evolved since its infancy during the Victorian era. Mithen also cites various examples of how these interpretative methodologies and techniques used to recover and interpret the archeological record have changed since the 19th century. The Victorian examples are reviewed within their respective context and are adeptly and considerably evaluated for their modern applicability or quiet rejection.

The book is divided into seven main sections. Each section, minus the introduction, contains 50 to 100 pages of descriptive accounts from each major world region's archaeological record dating between 20,000–5,000 BC (Western Asia, Europe, the Americas, Greater Australia and East Asia, South Asia, and Africa). Each section is divided chronologically into individual chapters that focus on the human developments and adaptations during a specific era. Much of the detail and length of each section is determined by the amount of archaeological material and literature associated with that region. Asia, Europe, and the Americas contain the greatest amount of information, while Australia and Africa are discussed to lesser degrees, but still with considerable empirical detail.

Each chapter, regardless of geographic or temporal setting, is divided into three main parts. The first begins with protagonist Lubbock describing his general geographic and/or cultural surroundings either in quiet contemplation or as he arrives in a temporary or permanent human occupied settlement. This introduction provides the reader with background information describing why Mithen has chosen to place Lubbock at this location at this moment in time. Lubbock then does his best to assimilate himself into the various activities of the present group. Unbeknownst to his hosts he takes part in everything from food collection or preparation, tool manufacture or use, to participating in religious or ritual ceremonies. Lubbock goes into great detail about the who, what, where, and sometimes the why of what is going on. Nothing is witnessed without explanation. Since time is relative, Lubbock is able to fol-

low each group as they participate in the creation of the archaeological record. Whether he is tracking bison across the American plains or participating in rituals at Çatalhöyük, Lubbock paints the reader a series of elaborate pictures, using climate, architecture, technology, food, and social organization as the most vibrant colors. The second part of the chapter brings the reader back to the present through Mithen's own description of the existing archaeological record. This review of the local or regional archaeological record is the empirical basis for Lubbock's narrative descriptions and interpretations. The level of detail achieved by Lubbock is directly attributed to the exhaustive research completed by Mithen into the, vast or not so vast, environmental and archaeological literature associated with each region. This wealth of data is conveniently and efficiently referenced in the book's nearly 100 pages of Notes and Bibliography sections. Mithen incorporates the work of both local and foreign archaeologists responsible for the existing archaeological data and subsequent interpretations that help define each time period and region. The archaeological remains come from large, well-known, general occupation sites with long stratigraphic sequences, as well as smaller, more specialized, single occupation sites. This use of diverse archaeological contexts and data creates a well-rounded representation of human social and technological adaptations to that given area. The third and final section of the chapter returns back to protagonist Lubbock who offers a brief summation of his visit. This concluding section provides the reader with the opportunity to reflect on the connections between the "story-like" description presented by Lubbock and the empirical archaeological evidence provided by Mithen, including the comparison of chronologically similar but geographically disparate regions on the bases of technology and social organization. Broad questions of different adaptations are addressed with respect to the direct or indirect influences of climate, topography, geography, and/or culture. Through the tripartite organization of each chapter, in each continental section, the reader is provided with enough empirical data to draw his/her own conclusions regarding the plausibility of Mithen's narrative interpretations.

While the amount of description regarding the modern archaeological investigations can at times be overly technical, the addition of John Lubbock's explanations provide even the most novice archaeologist with a clear mental picture to adequately comprehend the transition from archaeological record to archaeological interpretation. Nevertheless, there are places when Mithen seems to try too hard

to incorporate too many voices into the action. On occasion, Mithen describes the present state of the archaeological context, then quickly creates a scene with protagonist Lubbock, then uses a quote by Victorian Lubbock, and then jumps back to the first-person to address a tangential topic. While all of the information is useful, its disparate presentation causes confusion particularly in grasping non-linear relationships. But this is an occasional lapse in an otherwise clear thematic development. Another suggestion to assist in the more a fluid understanding of the material would be to better incorporate the visual images. As much as I enjoyed the color plates, their centralized location within the book, disassociated from their subject matter, limited their effectiveness. I also would have gladly traded some of the color plates for a few line drawings of the frequently described lithic and ceramic artifacts. Having the images more strategically located would have more effectively conveyed the intended information.

At first glance, one might think it too ambitious to attempt to synthesize human history from 20,000–5,000 BC in just one book, let alone in 500 pages of text. But after reading *After the Ice*, I felt the author successfully achieved his goal of presenting a great deal of information about a pivotal point in our history in a thorough and easily digestible manner. Mithen also does a commendable job presenting a modern view of gender roles within prehistoric societies. This allowed for a non-stereotypical point of view regarding the strong possibility of equal participation by both sexes in utilitarian and spiritual activities. Mithen is quick to point out that the issue of women's roles in prehistoric societies was never fully addressed by Victorian Lubbock in *Pre-Historic Times*. This represents a good example of how Mithen makes valuable use of Victorian Lubbock through his personification of how things used to be as compared to how things are today.

Beyond these minor suggestions, there is little that diminished my enjoyment and enthusiastic recommendation of *After the Ice*. This successful compilation of human history from 20,000-5,000 BC should not be overlooked as a key reference and welcome addition to any library of an interested novice, undergraduate student of prehistory, or seasoned archaeologist looking for a well written synthesis describing global human adaptation.

REFERENCE

Lubbock, J. 1865. *Pre-historic Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains, and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages*. London: Williams & Norgate.