PILGRIMAGE

A HISTORY OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

VOLUME 1

FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES

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FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES

by
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In memory of Dr. Brendan McGuire (1983–2020)
Classmate, mentor, and noble pilgrim, with prayers for a happy homecoming.
Requiescat in pace.

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June 16, 2023
Feast of the Sacred Heart

CONTENTS

A Note to Parents ..... *ix*
A Note to Students on Abbreviations and Spellings ..... *xi*

UNIT I: Lands of the Fertile Crescent
CHAPTER 1: A Catholic Approach to History 3
CHAPTER 2: The Neolithic Revolution 13
CHAPTER 3: Ancient Mesopotamia 27
CHAPTER 4: Gift of the Nile 41
CHAPTER 5: In the Shadow of Assyria 59
CHAPTER 6: Jewish Prophets and Gentile Kings 75

UNIT II: The Greek Odyssey
CHAPTER 7: The Origins of Greece 93
CHAPTER 8: Polis vs. Empire 109
CHAPTER 9: The Wisdom and Folly of Greece 125
CHAPTER 10: Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic World 143

UNIT III: The Glory of Rome and the Humility of Christ
CHAPTER 11: Rome Becomes a Ruler 161
CHAPTER 12: The Death and Rebirth of Rome 177
CHAPTER 13: The Fullness of Time 193
CHAPTER 14: Wheat Among Weeds 209

UNIT IV: Seeds of Christian Europe
CHAPTER 15: Crisis and Refoundation 227
CHAPTER 16: The Challenges of a Christian Roman Empire 245
CHAPTER 17: Monks and Barbarians 265
CHAPTER 18: The First Great Schism 281

UNIT V: Gain and Loss

CHAPTER 19: The Ambition of Justinian....301
CHAPTER 20: Muhammad and the Submission to God....317
CHAPTER 21: The Achievement of the Umayyads....333
CHAPTER 22: Papal Authority, West and East....351

UNIT VI: The Rise of Christendom

CHAPTER 23: Charlemagne's City of God....369
CHAPTER 24: Fiefs and Vassals....389
CHAPTER 25: Reform and Crusade....407
CHAPTER 26: Islam's Golden Age....427

UNIT VII: The Flowering of Christendom

CHAPTER 27: The Era of Eleanor of Aquitaine....445
CHAPTER 28: The High Middle Ages....461
CHAPTER 29: Plenitudo Potestatis....477
CHAPTER 30: The Mendicants....493
CHAPTER 31: Scourges and Saints....507
CHAPTER 32: Papal Overreach and the Fading of the High Middle Ages....521

Conclusion.... *539*

Recommended Reading.... *545*
Index.... *549*
Image Credits.... *567*

A NOTE TO PARENTS

Pilgrimage can be a demanding text. It both offers much content for students to learn and expects them to wrestle with challenging material. While we have tried to introduce all topics with decorum and respect for the students' age, we also felt it would be useful for parents if we highlighted different points of the narrative where some students may have more questions and need further guidance as they navigate the text. Below is a brief list of topics that may require further discussion together.

Chapter 1: This chapter defines many important concepts and explains some of the philosophical thought behind studying history. Students may initially feel overwhelmed and need more time to consider the material, especially since there is no easy narrative to follow.

Chapter 2: We introduce Enkidu and Shamhat in our discussion about *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and use their relationship to convey important social developments. While there is nothing explicit in our discussion, the *Epic* as a whole contains themes and episodes that may be too mature for most high schoolers.

Chapter 11: This chapter highlights the myth of Lucretia, in which a Roman noblewoman is assaulted by a tyrannical prince.

Chapter 18: The narratives of ecumenical councils, particularly those of the fifth century, can be distressing, especially for those unfamiliar with their events. We have tried to prepare students by providing an insert in chapter 16 that discusses the reality of human limitations and divine grace at ecumenical councils.

Chapter 22: The formal condemnation of Pope Honorius I as a heretic may be difficult to understand for students with only a basic familiarity with the Church's teachings on papal infallibility.

Chapter 24: Many of the moral shortcomings of the Early Medieval papacy are included here. The pontificates of John XII and Benedict IX may be especially troubling to students not familiar with papal history.

Chapter 27: This includes a discussion on the abuse of annulments by medieval nobility and royalty. This discussion reaches its conclusion in chapter 29 with the pontificate of Innocent III.

A NOTE TO STUDENTS ON ABBREVIATIONS AND SPELLINGS

Historians often identify the time period for a given individual (or dynasty) when introducing that person. Typically, these years indicate when a person was born and died or when a given dynasty began and ended. Sometimes, however, historians use abbreviations to clarify how they are using these dates or to provide some additional information about an individual. Below is a brief guide to the abbreviations used in this text.

AD = "*Anno Domini*" (Latin for "Year of the Lord"); this designates that a given year or range of years took place after the estimated birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Unlike BC, AD is placed before the number it references. Secular texts typically use the designation "CE" ("Common Era"). This is an attempt to be more inclusive of non-Christian societies, but there is no difference in the reckoning of the year.

BC = "Before Christ"; this indicates that a given year or range of years took place before the estimated birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Secular texts typically use the designation "BCE" ("Before the Common Era"). This is an attempt to be more inclusive of non-Christian societies, but there is no difference in the reckoning of the year. Most historians believe that our current reckoning of Jesus's birth is off by four years and thus date the birth of Christ to 4 BC rather than AD 1. This adjustment takes into account modern estimates for when Herod the Great died.

c. = "circa" or "around"; this indicates that we are uncertain of the precise year.

d. = "died"; this refers to the year that a given individual died.

fl. = "flourished"; we use this for individuals of whom we know very little except for the fact that they lived, or "flourished," at a given period.

r. = "ruled"; this indicates when a given individual ruled or held power. This is typically used for monarchs, but in this text, we will also use this designation for papal reigns.

St. = "Saint"; this designates those individuals who have been recognized by an Apostolic Church (e.g., the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, etc.) for their lives of holiness. In this text, we do not use the title "St." when referring to an individual within the chronological narrative. This title was often applied years, if not centuries, after a person's lifetime, and contemporaries did not always know who was saintly and who was not. In fact, saints could be on opposing sides of a given (theological) debate. Therefore, it helps students engage more directly with a given period if they do not rely on the title "saint" as a convenient shorthand for "good guy."

Regarding spelling, there is no single best way to write words which originate in languages that use different characters from those of the English alphabet—a process known as transliteration. We have attempted to choose spellings that would either be familiar to students or reflective of modern scholarship. Since our goal is to facilitate learning, we have made such choices on an individual basis. Please note that multiple spellings exist for certain terms and that students will likely encounter alternate spellings in other history texts.

UNIT I

Lands of the Fertile Crescent

CHAPTER 1

A Catholic Approach to History

When artists paint on panels and on walls the events of ancient history, they alike delight the eye, and keep bright for many a year the memory of the past. Historians substitute books for panels, bright descriptions for pigments, and thus render the memory of past events both stronger and more permanent, for the painter's art is ruined by time.

Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Ecclesiastical History*[1]

The fifth-century bishop Theodoret wrote these words at the beginning of his ecclesiastical, or Church, history. Despite the passage of many centuries, his comparison between the painter and the historian remains a fitting one and inspired our own efforts as we wrote this book. Like Theodoret, we realize that vivid paintings are more memorable than uninteresting ones, and we have attempted to include as many details as space permits so that your encounters with the individuals and societies of earlier eras will be as rewarding as possible. Furthermore, while our primary audience is Catholic high school students, we hope that this volume will be of value to all those who are interested in deepening their understanding of history from a Catholic perspective.

This is not a simple task. It is all too easy to reduce history to an oversimplified narrative that encourages a given political or ideological position. In such cases, it is as though Theodoret's painter had produced a caricature rather than an accurate portrait. Such cartoons distort and exaggerate the features of their subjects, and a poor history does something similar to the past. Instead, like those producing

1 Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Blomfield Jackson, vol. 3 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Theodoret, Jerome, Gennadius, Rufinus: Historical Writings*, Second Series, eds. Philip Scaff and Henry Wace (1892; repr., New York: Cosimo, 2007), 33.

The Last Chapter by James Doyle Penrose. Oil on canvas c. 1902. Property of the Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, England. In this painting, the dying Bede the Venerable, patron saint of historians, dictates a translation of the Gospel of John to a young scribe.

a realistic portrait, historians attempt to recreate the decisions and events of the past as accurately as possible. Achieving this goal requires an understanding of the tools available to the historian and their limitations. We therefore begin our journey through the past by defining and explaining the subject of history and the role it plays in the formation of a Catholic.

What is History?

History is more than a "simple" list of what happened. It incorporates and references all other human endeavors and their methods of gaining knowledge. The literature, education, and philosophy of a civilization are as much a part of its history as are its medicine, architecture, and theology.

We usually divide branches of learning into "arts" and "sciences." While different fields can employ these words in different ways, for our purposes here, we define "science" as an *objective* discipline whose goal is to gain knowledge and an "art" as a *subjective* one that seeks to express knowledge. Scientific studies, such as biology, mathematics, and physics, require evidence and proof and strive to find and understand

abstract, universal laws. In contrast, arts such as painting, poetry, and music are subjective. That is, the individual, or "subject," is central to its origin. Whereas a science's laws exist whether or not one discovers them, an individual must produce a work of art for it to be real. While an art may follow a set of rules, the final product is always the fruit of the artist's intellect and imagination. Art can reflect the truth of the world about us, but we do not seek to "prove" whether art is true or untrue—it simply exists.

Where, then, does history fall in these categories? Theodoret's comparison above implies that history is an art, but that is only part of the picture. History is also based on scientific principles. Its study, like that of a science, requires evidence. We use, for example, the objective reality of buildings constructed, tools forged, and, most importantly, the words written and spoken by previous generations to develop theories about the past. We call such evidence **primary sources** because these words and artifacts left behind serve as our "primary," or first, way of understanding the past. Primary sources form the foundation for any historical inquiry since they offer us the best opportunity to "hear" the voices of earlier generations. We can never simply ignore such sources when attempting to understand the past. In this way, historians act like scientists. Their work incorporates the evidence related to the topic about which they are writing. If a historian rejects a source out of a preconceived interpretation or ideological preference, he is no longer practicing history but instead has become a storyteller with a particular ending already in mind.

Nonetheless, no historical narrative is fully objective or scientific. The past, by its very nature, is inaccessible to our observation. Unlike the sciences, no universal laws await our discovery through experimentation. Moreover, primary sources possess limitations. Some are external: Is a source still extant, that is, existing, or has it been (partially) lost or destroyed? Can we decipher its language or interpret its symbolism? What information was not included because an author considered it unimportant at the time? Other limitations are embedded in the sources themselves: What details might ancient authors have chosen to emphasize or obscure because of their own perspectives or biases? How should historians balance conflicting evidence from different types of sources and from sources that represent opposing "sides"? We may choose to favor one source over another, but such a decision must weigh factors such as a given source's trustworthiness and the confirmation of its details through other pieces of evidence. There is no mathematical equation that lets us know which of two sources is more trustworthy. Instead, we carefully consider alternatives and deduce what we believe to be the best interpretation in a way that is not purely scientific.

History's "artistic" nature extends even deeper. We can frequently narrate important events in their correct order with confidence, but as historians, we also seek to explain *why* an incident happened or *what* motivated a given individual.

Exploring such questions is inherently subjective. We seldom understand our own motivations entirely, so we cannot assume that we comprehend all the factors that shaped someone's life or inspired a given decision. Careful historians frequently admit that their deductions are, in the end, only theories. In this way, two good historians can draw different, yet valid, interpretations from the same evidence.

Historians' theories are known as **secondary sources**. History books, such as this one, offer conclusions and interpretations, but these explanations, no matter how accurate or satisfying, should not be confused with the primary sources left behind by a given society. A diligent historian consults both primary and secondary sources to learn what evidence the past has left for us and how others have used that evidence in an attempt to understand that past. The "historiography" of a given topic is the study of its related secondary sources and the methods and interpretations that historians have developed to explain that topic.

So, what can we conclude about history from this discussion about arts and sciences? History is both the science of organizing and presenting evidence from the human past *and* the art of unraveling human motivations. In short, history does nothing less than study human thoughts and actions—some of the most complex and mysterious processes in the universe.

What is History for the Catholic?

Our examination of what the study of history is likely inspires a second question: What role does this "scientific art" have in our formation as Catholics? Some may suggest that Catholics should limit their study to "what happened." From this perspective, the Catholic historian simply recounts the ordering of events and links these together in a seemingly straightforward chain of cause-and-effect. While it may be tempting to embrace a "facts only" approach, this easily leads to the cartoon caricatures we mentioned earlier. Whether or not we realize it, we are *constantly* interpreting the past for ourselves and others. (Just think of the last time you were explaining a decision to someone. The narrative you provided involved more than a series of factual statements; it included your interpretation of people's motives—including your own—and how those interacted.) Every historical narrative presents its own interpretation. As Catholics, our understanding of history's value derives from an interpretation rooted in our Faith. This interpretation asserts that God Himself, though unconstrained by time and space, chose to become part of our history and gave it supernatural significance through His very presence. For this reason, the Incarnation of Christ and His mission to redeem humanity from sin and lead all souls to Heaven is the central core of history and the event that gives meaning to every age, society, and individual.

The Annunciation by Philippe de Champaigne. Oil on canvas c. 1648. Property of the Wallace Collection, Westminster, England. The painting shows the moment of the Incarnation, when the Holy Spirit came upon the Virgin Mary during the Annunciation (see Lk 1:35–38).

Building upon this perspective, some saints and doctors of the Church have embraced a doctrine known as the **Absolute Primacy of Christ**. This belief, typically associated with Franciscan spirituality, proposes that God did not become man as a consequence of Adam and Eve's sin, but that He intended the Incarnation from before time, regardless of the Fall. According to this reading of St. Paul, God willed the Son's human nature—"the first-born of all creation" (Col 1:15)—before the creation of the world and intended that union of divine and human natures in Jesus to be the summit, the climax, of human history. In other words, human history was intimately tied to the Incarnation even before humanity existed! That is why elsewhere Paul joyfully declares, "He chose us in him [Jesus] before the foundation of the world . . . [and] destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ" (Eph 1:4–5). St. Peter deepens our understanding of the significance of this adoption in his own epistle when he declares that God desires us to "become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pt 1:4). If you are not astounded by those words, please read them again. God desires us to share the *divine nature* through the coming of His Son. Of course, we remain creatures, but through adoption, we become God's children and "partake" in His very essence, and God intended this "before the foundation of the world"!

Not every saint has agreed with the Absolute Primacy of Christ; both St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Alphonsus Liguori, for example, rejected the premise that God the Son would have become man without Adam's sin. Others, such as St. Albert the Great and St. Francis de Sales, did hold to the Absolute Primacy and declared that Original Sin did not motivate the Incarnation but rather added a redemptive character. Due to our first parents' disobedience, they argued that Jesus's coming now not only involved enabling our "partaking of the divine nature" but also required our redemption from sin through His passion. For this reason, we sing at the Easter

Vigil about "the happy fault" that gave us a Redeemer still willing to bring us into His own divine life, even though He now suffered in order to do so. Regardless of whether we personally hold the doctrine of the Absolute Primacy of Christ, the debate about whether Jesus would have become man if Adam had not sinned helps illustrate the profound value of history for a Catholic. History is, at its core, tied to God's desire to unite us with His own divine life. Put simply, history is the epic story of the preparation for Jesus's coming, His redemptive sacrifice, and His commission to baptize all nations in order to incorporate everyone into the "divine nature." The Catholic historian Christopher Dawson went so far as to call history "the greatest work of God."[2]

While the Church features large in a Catholic understanding of history, the Catholic historian realizes that those societies that never knew of Jesus or that have hitherto rejected His message also form an integral part of the Incarnational narrative. After all, Christ commissioned His Church to bring all peoples into His sheepfold. A global history is, therefore, inherently valuable to Catholics. Nonetheless, there is also a place for more limited and manageable studies, and this text focuses its narrative on **Western Civilization**. This term can be used in multiple ways, but we employ it here to designate those societies that influenced the culture into which Jesus was born as well as those subsequent, predominately European societies that embraced the teachings of the Gospel.

A Catholic understanding of history not only directs us to the importance of the Incarnation but also leads us to contemplate the four marks of the Church: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the four marks are both the Church's attributes and her mission (see *CCC* §811). They are *attributes* insofar as the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ and therefore possesses all perfections in Him. They are her *mission* insofar as every generation, and every individual within that generation, must strive to live out the four marks. History helps us trace out that mission, its successes, and its setbacks throughout the centuries.

For example, while faith sees the *oneness* of the Church in her teachings, her sacraments, and her fidelity to Jesus, history teaches us how each era has confronted, more or less successfully, the tensions that frequently threaten to divide the Church's community. Catholics of each generation are called to do their part through prayer and work to deepen the unity that Jesus so ardently prayed for during the Last Supper (see Jn 17:21–23). History aids us in this task by informing us how each tragic division among Christians has arisen and by offering us, its students, lessons for healing those divides.

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2 Donald J. D'Elia, "The Catholic as Historian: Witness in Every Age to Christ's Presence among Us," in Donald J. D'Elia and Patrick Foley, eds., *The Catholic as Historian* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2006), 3.

The study of history also offers us a nuanced perspective regarding the Church's *holiness*. The Church is both divine and human. In her divine Head, her sacraments, and her liturgy, she is always holy; in her humanity, the failings and vices of her members are seen in every generation. The distinction between the divine and human is crucial if we are to understand how the Church can remain holy despite the significant sins of individual Catholics. This awareness will also help us emulate those heroic Catholics of past ages who used their historical circumstances as an opportunity to seek holiness.

In addition, history enables us to observe the *universality* of the Catholic Church, whose saving Baptism is intended for all peoples, at all times, and in every region of the world. We learn through the investigation of the past how the same Faith can be embraced by different cultures, which are then inspired to highlight different facets of that same Truth. Furthermore, the historical narrative features numerous intrepid missionaries whose selfless example inspires us to evangelize the world today.

Lastly, history gives us a deeper context for how Catholicism is *apostolic* in its origin, its teachings, and its structure. The historical narrative connects the present to the Church's past through an unbroken transmission of Catholic leadership and teaching, stretching back to the twelve apostles. This, however, does not imply that Catholicism has never experienced developments. Its teachings have been enriched through further study and debate, and its organization has evolved during its two-thousand-year journey. History informs us what motivated these developments and helps us to discern how our shared Faith unites us to those of previous centuries.

All this is good, you may say, but formation is more than intellectual development. What virtues can the study of history foster? The first is the natural virtue of empathy. As noted previously, we cannot know the motivations of others with certainty. We can deduce and theorize, but God alone sees within. Empathy builds upon this awareness and motivates us to exercise compassion in our dealings with others. Our study helps us to develop this charitable attitude because in history we frequently realize the limitations of our knowledge. It is hard to pretend to know what truly motivates someone when many basic questions remain unanswered. History, therefore, encourages us to withhold judgment of others, especially those who oppose what we most value. "To withhold judgment" does not mean accepting or agreeing with sinful views and actions. Rather, it means that we acknowledge that God alone knows each person's motives. Certain beliefs and actions may be wrong and need to be condemned, but as the Gospel commands, we refrain from judging the individuals themselves (see Mt 7:1).

A second virtue is the theological virtue of hope. We learn from the Old Testament that God never abandoned His people despite the Israelites' repeated

sinfulness. We see His solicitude, too, in the centuries after the Incarnation. Even though Christians grievously sinned, God still inspired saints and popular movements to help reform society and to bring His children back to Him. History thus encourages confidence that God will not allow evil to prevail in the end.

Finally, history can instill a deeper patience, which is closely connected to the virtue of hope. As we journey through the centuries, we will encounter many injustices and wrongs, and we will likely wonder why it is that God did not intervene immediately to correct the situation. History helps us to ponder our shortsightedness and how what may seem like an obvious solution from our limited perspective may actually contribute to further turmoil and suffering. Of course, God's ways are not our ways, and historians should not pretend to know God's providence by assuming that a given situation was "providential." Nonetheless, there are some events that clearly do indicate the hand of God in time, and these should inspire our hope and patience since God continues to work in history even when we do not discern it.

To return to the introduction of this chapter: Our aim is to provide Catholics, particularly high school students, with an accurate "painting" of Western Civilization's history. Some well-intentioned Catholic history texts present a universally favorable or "triumphalist" account: these narratives generally avoid many troubling details or explain them away. For example, individuals who are Catholic are given the benefit of the doubt, while those who are not Catholic or who opposed a given saint implicitly assume "villain" status. Many times this triumphalist perspective comes from a desire to highlight the achievements of Catholics and Catholic society, but the danger of distorting the past is very great. History is messy. Individuals can simultaneously be a hero and a villain depending on what aspect of their lives you study. Unless students realize that even pious Catholics have done ignoble acts, they will be unprepared when they encounter a more accurate historical narrative that undermines a triumphalist account. We stress again: the Church is both divine and human. While her teachings, sacraments, and liturgies are resplendent in their beauty, the ugliness and distortion of sin are also present in the lives of her members. Therefore, in *Pilgrimage*, our goal has been to offer a nuanced text that shows both the beautiful and the unsightly in the story of Western Civilization. We do this neither to glory in the bad nor to scandalize the reader but rather to prepare you for when your friends, classmates, and coworkers mention some less-than-edifying event in the past as evidence against Catholicism or the value of Western Civilization.

We hope this approach strengthens your Catholic faith and prepares you to engage with and respond to explicitly anti-Catholic historical narratives, particularly those regularly taught at modern universities. It is important to be familiar with

these perspectives. To know, for example, the standard account of humanity's earliest years can prepare you for secular theories that attempt to use history to reject the existence of God or His involvement with creation. We have therefore chosen to incorporate many aspects of contemporary academic scholarship, such as the established chronology of humanity's earliest centuries, while simultaneously providing a Catholic context for interacting with these ideas. Some questions have no easy answers, such as the dating of the Exodus, but we hope that our own faith-infused discussion helps you conclude that even matters whose solutions are elusive are no reason to doubt God's perpetual presence and guidance throughout history.

We, the authors of this book, are convinced by our faith, reason, and historical training that the Catholic Church is the institution established by Jesus to lead as many as possible to supernatural beatitude. Yet, we also believe it is important for you to remember that there have been Catholics, including monarchs, popes, and even saints, who committed grave errors and wrongs. Recognizing these faults does not denigrate Catholic men and women of the past; rather, it acknowledges their humanity and helps us remember that they, too, were wounded by Original Sin. Understanding the faults they struggled to overcome can give us greater respect for the victories in virtue that they achieved.

Our "Pilgrimage" Begins

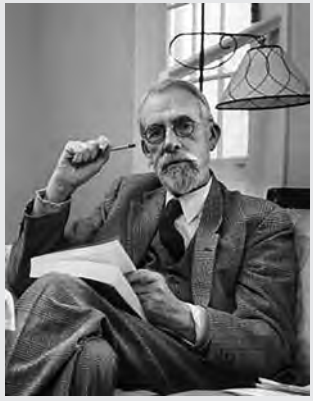
Spiritual writers sometimes describe our individual lives on Earth as acts of pilgrimage aimed towards reaching our final home in Heaven. The pilgrim's journey is a fitting symbol for the narrative you will encounter in this book. Just as a pilgrim attempts to reach a distant sacred destination through physical travel and spiritual growth, humanity has been isolated from God by Original Sin but yearns for the happiness that can only be attained through communion with Him.

You dear reader, are beginning your own pilgrimage through the pages of this book. You may have taken on this journey for love of history, casual interest, an obligation to your studies, or some combination of all these reasons. The end of this book and the knowledge we hope you will gain from its study may seem far distant, but we encourage you to persevere and grow through the challenges ahead. Along the way, we wish you all the joys and benefits that we ourselves have experienced from the study of history and which we have endeavored to share with you here.

CATHOLIC HISTORIANS

Catholics throughout the centuries have embraced the historian's vocation, but two in particular have inspired the approach of this present volume. The first is Bede the Venerable (c. 673–735), the patron saint of historians. In the fourth and fifth centuries, Christians developed and refined a new type of history, known as Church history, which focused on the Church itself and only touched upon secular events insofar as they affected the ecclesiastical. One of the most respected examples of this genre is Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Bede's style and commitment to historical accuracy are exemplary. Furthermore, Bede's narrative never reduces the people he discusses to mere names or curiosities. In his history, every individual soul has an eternal destiny that weighs in the balance, and though he decries their sins, he never loses sight of the common humanity and vocation to holiness we all share.

The second historian is more recent. Christopher Dawson (1889–1970) converted to Catholicism as a young man and combined a lively faith with profound historical insight. Bede lived in Early Medieval Europe, and he could assume that his readers both understood and shared his religious worldview. Dawson, on the other hand, lived in the modern world. Ecclesiastical history, while important, needed to be understood within a broader context of secular events and ideas if Catholic historians were to influence the worldview of their peers. Thus, Dawson's writing took a "big picture" approach. He did not focus exclusively on the Church or even on one era but rather wrote comprehensively about civilization and its roots. He particularly emphasized the importance of religious belief. Religion, he argued, was a fundamental component of human culture, and Christianity in particular has played a critical historical role in inspiring many of the greatest developments in human thought. Notable Christian contemporaries such as the poet T.S. Eliot and the author J.R.R. Tolkien incorporated elements of Dawson's thought in their literary works, and future generations will, no doubt, continue to draw upon his insights and his faith as they seek to deepen their own understanding of history.



Christopher Dawson sitting in his study at Harvard campus c. 1958–62.

In *Pilgrimage*, we hope to combine the strengths of both historians into a single narrative so that our readers may finish this work with Bede's empathy and Dawson's ability to engage with modern society. Both lead us back to the Catholic Church and to the firm belief that God has intervened in history and has made it sacred by His Presence.

CHAPTER 2

The Neolithic Revolution

You are wise, Enkidu, and now you have become like a god.

Shamhat, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*[1]

The Epic of Gilgamesh is the oldest fictional narrative of heroic deeds that survives from antiquity. It was written in its present form around the year 2000 BC and tells the tale of Gilgamesh, the selfish king of Uruk. When the people cried to the gods to save them from Gilgamesh's abuses, the deities responded by sending a wild man of nature, Enkidu, to stop the king. After fighting, the two men became friends and sought glory through adventure together. The *Epic* describes their battles against various foes, but the chief quest of the story was Gilgamesh's attempt to learn the secrets of immortality. This adventure took him to the ends of the earth and ultimately taught the king—and the audience—the inevitably of death and how to find joy despite our mortality.

While there are many reasons that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* remains a fascinating and rewarding read thousands of years later, this chapter's opening quotation, known as an epigraph, highlights a particular theme. Before Enkidu met Gilgamesh, he lived alone in nature. The animals accepted him as one of their own, and he thrived in this wild environment. This situation changed when he met the woman Shamhat. She befriended him and "tamed" his uncivilized ways.

1 *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, ed. N. K. Saunders (New York: Penguin Classics, 1996), Tablet 1.

At first, Enkidu regretted this change since the animals now fled from him, but Shamhat consoled him with the words above. He had, as it were, lost the innocence of childhood but gained the wisdom and ability to shape his destiny like a god. This fictional transformation, which is portrayed as both tragic and beneficial, is a fitting symbol for a development that took place many centuries before the composition of the *Epic*. Just as Enkidu came to wisdom by befriending another human, the Neolithic Revolution involved the foundation and expansion of human communities so that many could live and work together and thus form the beginning of human civilization.

Prehistoric Humanity

Technically speaking, the study of humanity's origins is not a historical topic. Since the earliest generations of people did not leave us any written records, the study of prehistoric humanity is chiefly left to the domain of anthropology and archeology. Anthropology, literally "the study of humanity," can include the study of society as well as theories regarding the origin of human life itself. Archeology studies the material remains from human activity, such as pottery, tools, buildings, and monuments. Often anthropologists, archeologists, and historians work together to expand our knowledge of the past. Though many of the topics below are considered "prehistory," we believe it is useful for students to know some of the prevalent modern theories regarding humanity's earliest experiences.

The question of the origins of humanity remains a hotly contested topic, one that is fundamentally linked to a given person's theological worldview. For those with a theistic, Judeo-Christian worldview, the biblical book of Genesis presents a narrative of Adam and Eve's descendants and how their selfishness ultimately led God to send a powerful flood to destroy their society. Only one faithful man, Noah, and his family were spared. (Interestingly, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and other ancient sources also record a flood as well as a man whom the gods preserved.) After the Flood narrative, Genesis links the origins of various peoples with Noah's descendants.

For those who hold a purely materialistic perspective in which there is no God or spiritual reality, an atheistic form of the **theory of evolution** is used to explain the biological origins of humanity. This holds as a central claim that life developed, or "evolved," gradually over many years from simple organisms to more complex ones and ultimately produced the first *homo sapiens* (the scientific term for humanity) without any divine intervention. While different schools of thought propose different mechanisms for this proposed evolution, all varieties of atheistic evolution are incompatible with Catholicism because they deny God, the individual soul, and other key concepts such as sin.

Theistic versions of evolution affirm divine causality, and the Catholic Church allows Catholics to accept the principle of evolution as a general biological framework as long as they uphold three important principles.[2] First, one must believe in the existence of God and His gift of a soul to each individual human. Second, Catholics are obligated to affirm that Adam and Eve were individual people, not a name for a group or class of early humans, and that all humanity is naturally descended from these first two parents. Third, one must hold that Adam and Eve committed the first human act of disobedience against God and that the consequences of this "original" sin have been passed down to all subsequent human beings, with the exceptions of Jesus and the Virgin Mary.

Turning to archeology, we can outline some of the features of humanity's earliest societies during the so-called **Paleolithic Period** ("old stone"). These were hunter-gatherer communities. Groups of up to sixty members formed what might be called a tribe and provided for themselves by gathering fruits and vegetables and hunting animals. They had no fixed home but were nomads who migrated according

The **Cave of Beasts** is a rock shelter in Wadi Sura in southwest Egypt. It contains paintings of human and animal figures including an elephant, ostriches, gazelles, and giraffes from c. 5000 BC.

2 See *CCC* §327 (creation out of nothing), 360 (origin from one human couple), 376 (original state of innocence), and 389–90 (the historic Fall of our first parents).

INTERPRETING GENESIS

The Church has always held that the book of Genesis is without error, though she leaves open for discussion whether certain details in the biblical account should be interpreted literally or as an analogy for some broader spiritual or historical truth. Creation out of nothing ("*ex nihilo*" in Latin), our common ancestry from a first set of parents, their sin, and their subsequent expulsion from their state of innocence are core beliefs that the Church obliges us to hold.[3] The Church further teaches that the Book of Genesis "pertains to history in a true sense," but she also acknowledges that its account does not conform to the "historical method" developed by Greek, Roman, and modern historians.[4] Rather, as Pope Pius XII wrote, we should be conscious of Genesis's "metaphorical language [that was] adapted to the mentality" of the people at the time.[5] In Genesis chapters 1–11 we encounter, among other details, the creation of the universe, the stories of Cain and Abel, Noah, and the Tower of Babel. How should a Catholic historian interpret these accounts? Where does simple historical fact end and "metaphorical language" begin?

Tradition, as embodied in the commentaries by the Fathers of the Church and the medieval scholastics, strongly favors a literal interpretation of both Genesis's six days of creation and its account of the early history of humanity.[6] In contrast, secular historians reject the possibility of direct interaction between God and humanity and conclude that such episodes are evidence that the text has little historical credibility. For these scholars, Genesis is, at best, garbled echoes of folk memories concerning events like a catastrophic regional flood.

Modern Christian biblical scholars acknowledge the reality that God intervenes in human history, but many also accept the prevailing interpretation of archeological evidence that indicates a much longer epoch of prehistoric activity than that given in the Genesis genealogies. These Christians hold that modern historical disciplines, such as archeology, seek answers to questions that likely do not directly apply to the biblical text. In their opinion, Genesis offers illustrative

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3 See, for example, CCC §327 (creation out of nothing), 360 (origin from one human couple), 376 (original state of innocence), and 389–90 (the historic Fall of our first parents).

4 Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, 38. See also the Pontifical Biblical Commission's *Concerning the Historical Character of the First Three Chapters of Genesis* in Acta Sedis Sanctae, vol. 1 (1909), quoted in Dennis J Murphy, *The Church and the Bible: Official Documents of the Catholic Church* (St. Paul's: Alba House, 2007), 131–133 and its *Letter to Cardinal Suhard* in Acta Apostolicae Sedis, vol. 40 (1948), 45-8. Interested students should also consult John Bergsma and Brant Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018), 93–117. While it is true that Genesis does not conform to later Greco-Roman historiographical techniques, we also note that Genesis's style shares more affinity with that later genre—for example, in its genealogical precision—than those accounts of early humanity found in other cultures of the Fertile Crescent.

5 Ibid.

6 A notable exception is St. Augustine, who argued for an instantaneous creation which was symbolically divided into six periods. The designation "(Early) Church Father" refers to those first theologians whose writings and sermons helped to establish Christianity's doctrinal foundations. Many Church Fathers lived in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, though some lists include theologians from later centuries, too. For more, see the insert on the Church Fathers in chapter 18.

stories, or myths, that encapsulate certain historical and spiritual truths but are not the straightforward sequence of factual events that modern readers typically expect in a historical narrative. Rather, they are representative episodes that signify the gradual unfolding of centuries.

A small number of academics offer an alternative to the predominant approaches above. Despite the fact that some of these scholars are agnostic and discount the presence of God in history, their school of thought proposes that the events in Genesis have more factual accuracy than is typically granted by modern scholarship. They claim that archeology actually supports different stories in Genesis, such as the Tower of Babel, and that what is needed is a reevaluation of the *interpretation* of archeological findings. This position offers a number of potential connections between historical figures and the individuals and places of the Bible, but many of their arguments require further research and evidence in order to win more widespread academic support.

In light of this contemporary academic environment and mindful of the Church's teachings, *Pilgrimage* employs the chronology for ancient societies of the Neolithic era that the majority of scholars and students teach and study today. We can take what is valuable for deepening our knowledge and faith and also better follow the admonition of St. Peter to be prepared to offer an answer when we encounter those who challenge our hope in Christ on historical grounds (see 1 Pt 3:15).

In conclusion, we approach these earliest years with a sense of reverence. First and foremost, we firmly uphold the essential historical value of the Biblical account. At the same time, we welcome what our God-given reason can discern through disciplines such as archeology and acknowledge that the "metaphorical language" encountered in Genesis transcends the basic chronological cause-and-effect prose typically found in today's history books. This does not imply that Genesis is somehow inferior to our modern approach; rather, Genesis is both a historical and a theological text, and its account of our most distant past seamlessly integrates great spiritual and historical truths regarding God's providence in a that way goes beyond the limits of our modern academic historical genre.

Creation of Adam by Michelangelo. Fresco c. 1512. Located on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City.

to the changing seasons of their food supply. They learned how to sharpen stones into knives for hunting and fought one another to gain control of the best hunting grounds. The use of fire is also thought to have become widespread during this period, first as a means of warmth and protection and later as a means to food.

While there are no written sources from this era, the people still displayed a desire to communicate what mattered to them by painting pictures, often of animals, on the walls of the caves where they sheltered. These paintings show us that our earliest ancestors possessed a rational ability to contemplate their situation and a desire to express their thoughts through depiction. Both characteristics distinguish humans from irrational animals and provide us early examples of human culture.

We can, building upon Dawson's insights, understand "culture" as the inheritance a given society has received from its ancestors and then bequeaths, or hands down, to later generations.[7] This includes its language, its learning, and its morals. Culture is related to, but different from, the term "society." Society is the structure or organization of a group. It is not necessarily human. Bees, for example, also have a social structure, but they lack art, education, and the other features of culture. (Animals do have instinct, but this is distinct from education.) In contrast to animals, even the simplest human society has a culture which is passed down from generation to generation and forms a link with the past.

This human connection with those who have gone before can be seen in early burial practices. Burial as a method of sanitation could occur almost anywhere, but some early humans deliberately fashioned cemeteries to create a specific location where people's lives were commemorated by their descendants. By maintaining a cemetery, they created a physical location that linked their society with previous generations and identified the living as part of a larger world that reached beyond their individual lifespans.

The desire to honor and remember the dead points towards a significant aspect of human culture, the widespread belief in a spiritual, or immaterial, reality. Some of the Paleolithic cave paintings depict religious rituals, indicating the belief in supernatural powers who oversaw and influenced the world. The evidence of these early religious practices suggests that some societies also worshipped their ancestors. Many early cultures around the world held that deceased ancestors interceded with the gods to provide for the living, to protect them, and to help them defeat their enemies. The discovery of decorated skulls has led some archaeologists to suggest these objects were the bones of the ancestors who had become objects of worship.

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7 See, for example, Christopher Dawson, "The Sources of Cultural Change," in Christopher Dawson, *Dynamics of World History*, ed. John J. Mulloy (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), 3–11.

Ancient human groups turned to the worship of their ancestors partly out of veneration for the cycle of fertility. The reproduction of humans, animals, and plants formed the very heart of human society. Without more people and the resources to sustain them, humanity would simply disappear. Therefore, they prayed to their ancestors, who had already completed their journey through the cycle of birth and death, to assist the living's efforts to feed themselves and reproduce.

Some of the earliest archeological sites highlight the important role religion played in the formation of ancient societies and their cultures. The **Göbekli Tepe** site in modern-day southeast Turkey—intriguingly, not far from Mount Ararat, the alleged site of Noah's landfall after the Genesis Flood—is considered one of the oldest archeological sites in the world, between nine thousand and twelve thousand years old. It is made up of approximately two hundred T-shaped stone pillars, some as large as twenty feet tall and weighing as much as twenty tons, arranged in twenty circles ranging from thirty to ninety feet in diameter. Each pillar is carved with elaborate animal motifs. Despite the fact that these carvings reveal expert craftsmanship and must have taken many hours to complete, archaeologists have found no records to suggest that any humans settled permanently at the site. Instead, the evidence suggests that Göbekli Tepe was a place where people gathered to carry out religious

The main excavation area of **Göbekli Tepe** in south-eastern Turkey. The site dates from c. 12000-9000 BC. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

rituals and to feast. Though humans were still living a migratory lifestyle, Göbekli Tepe indicates that they returned regularly to specific locations to produce the structures and carvings that survive today.

The Neolithic Revolution

Religious practice and a desire to understand the world men inhabited likely inspired a profound change in human life known as the **Neolithic Revolution**. The word "Neolithic" ("new stone") refers to the production of more efficient stone tools during this period. Historians use this term generally to signify the era when many people adopted fixed homes in specific locations as well as the cultivation of crops and domestication of animals to provide their new stable communities with food. This lifestyle provided the foundation for the subsequent religious, political, educational, and technological achievements that go hand-in-hand with civilization.

"Civilization" is a term that lies at the heart of our pilgrimage through the past, and it is important that we understand what it signifies. A civilization is an advanced form of human society that relies on physical, social, and cultural practices and technologies to support large populations. Some of the common hallmarks of a civilization include stable agricultural networks that support people living together in cities, communal sites dedicated to worship, and specialized skills such as metalwork and writing.

Historians have suggested multiple explanations for why humans first embraced the cultivation of crops and the stability of a farming lifestyle. Some have proposed that, as the climate of the planet warmed, many of the largest animals that humans had hunted, such as woolly mammoths, began to die due to the changing environment. Humans thus needed to develop new sources of food to avoid a similar extinction. Others have suggested the opposite—that the climate began to cool slightly from the highs of the Paleolithic Era. This forced humans to become more creative in their efforts to feed themselves. A third theory proposes that the formation of apparent holy sites like Göbekli Tepe inspired a desire for new lifestyles that enabled people to settle permanently at or near these locations. While none of these theories has been proven, all of them rely on each individual human's unique ability to reflect on a given situation and to solve problems or satisfy desires by conscious change.

The Neolithic Revolution began with farming. The capacity to recognize patterns of growth and reproduction among plants allowed humans to begin growing crops to feed themselves. They formed camps where they could live in the summer to cultivate and harvest the crops they had planted earlier in the year. Gradually these settlements became permanent as the inhabitants developed the shelters and storage

facilities necessary for them to live in these locations during the less abundant seasons of the year.

Another important advancement was the domestication of animals. This process began with dogs long before the Neolithic Revolution, but during the revolution itself, domestication focused on those animals whose milk, meat, and hide provided key resources for people. A new lifestyle, "pastoralism," took root as individuals and groups cared for herds of domesticated cattle, sheep, and other animals by rotating them from pasture to pasture. The animals became sources for clothes and food, though presumably the pastoralists also supplemented their diet by gathering plant-based nourishment as they traveled. Eventually, some people established permanent plots of land where they could maintain a small number of animals for themselves. These cultivators learned to use animal droppings to fertilize their fields and thereby increased the health and productivity of their crops. Some herders, especially shepherds, continued to live as pastoralists. While they might be based near a settlement and spend the winter there, they would still leave to find more fertile grazing grounds for their flocks at other times of the year.

The Fertile Crescent

Although the Neolithic Revolution took place at many different sites across the world, the most important area for Western Civilization was in Northeast Africa and West Asia in a region that became known as the Ancient Near East or the **Fertile Crescent**. The Fertile Crescent includes the Nile valley in Egypt and extends up the coast of the Mediterranean through Palestine, Lebanon, and southern Turkey, before curving southeastward through Syria, Iraq, and the western part of Iran to reach the Persian Gulf. (In ancient times Turkey was known as Anatolia or Asia Minor; we will refer to it as "Anatolia" throughout this text.)

One of the earliest groups in the Fertile Crescent to cultivate grain was the **Natufians**, estimated to have lived in Syria and Palestine from about 12000–8000 BC. (The name "Natufian" derives from a local valley near the area where the early twentieth-century archeologist Dorothy Garrod discovered evidence for the society.) The Natufians cultivated local grains to bake a type of pita bread, collected nuts such as almonds and pistachios, and hunted gazelles to complete their diets. They developed permanent villages of about a hundred and fifty people and lived in semi-underground houses with stone foundations and central fireplaces that provided heat for cooking and warmth. Archeological excavations have found stone mortars and pestles used to grind grains into flour, plows and sickles used for planting and harvesting, residue from history's earliest-known brewery, and stone weapons and fishhooks for hunting. The tombs of the Natufians also contain jewelry

made from shells. The presence of dog skeletons alongside humans in these graves suggests that they domesticated dogs, which likely helped protect the community and hunt for food.

One of the Natufians' settlements was at the site of the biblical city of Jericho. This settlement was founded in approximately 9000 BC around a spring which continues to this day to provide fresh water for the community. Archaeologists estimate

The dwelling foundations discovered in ancient **Jericho** (Tell es-Sultan) are located about one mile north of the modern city of Jericho. It has been called "the oldest town in the world," dating from 10,000 BC. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

that sometime between 8300 and 7300 BC, Jericho experienced dramatic growth and became one of the first cities where people lived in a larger community than tribes and clans, sharing a common identity that transcended biological ties. The population grew to more than two thousand residents, who cultivated barley and wheat and lived in round houses made of hardened mud bricks. Massive stone walls ten feet thick and thirteen feet tall sheltered the city from flooding and enemies. In the center of the city stood an enormous thirty-foot tower that was perhaps used for religious rituals. Such structures indicate that the community could be organized and united in order to complete substantial projects.

Despite the Natufians' achievements, it was further to the east, in modern-day Iraq, that the first civilization flourished. At first glance, this region seems particularly inhospitable. Temperatures can average as high as 120°F in the summer, and the annual rainfall is typically less than ten inches. Furthermore, the two rivers in close proximity, the Tigris and the Euphrates, flood erratically in late spring and early summer. As crops were not yet ready to harvest, the often-violent influx of flood water hampered rather than helped the agricultural foundation necessary for any

settled society. Furthermore, the rivers encountered little natural resistance as they approached the Persian Gulf and frequently divided into numerous, shifting branches over the level plain before terminating into extensive marshlands. This made flooding particularly dangerous because the locations affected could shift suddenly.

Despite these difficulties, the area between the two rivers, later known in Greek as **Mesopotamia** ("between rivers"), also had significant advantages. The presence of marshes in the far south enabled extensive fishing, and the plains permitted husbandry (the care, cultivation, and breeding of plants and animals). More importantly, the land was rich and fertile when proper irrigation methods were used, and the rivers—though unpredictable in their flooding—provided not only water for crops but also an efficient means of transportation. Even the clay deposited by the floods could be used as material for building and writing. Through the development and maintenance of irrigation canals, the people of southern Mesopotamia turned desert and marshland into the seedbed for humanity's first civilization.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Neolithic populations across the Fertile Crescent adopted the practices of living in villages and cultivating domesticated crops and animals to provide themselves with food and clothing. In the years that followed, their agricultural production became stable enough to produce surplus goods to exchange with other settlements and to establish a system of trade. Desirable items included obsidian, a type of glass used to produce sharp tools; bitumen, a type of petroleum used for brick mortar and waterproofing boats; and salt, a food preservative. Canoes enabled the first merchants to transport these goods over long distances, while the domestication of oxen and donkeys brought further benefits for travel.

The successes of the Neolithic age contributed to further achievements. The craft of pottery, which is produced by shaping and heating clay, dates from approximately 6000 BC and is an extremely important artifact for historians. It can be broken, but it is almost impossible to destroy completely. Along with providing us with durable evidence from some of the most ancient societies in the world, the various designs produced by different potters help historians differentiate between early societies who are otherwise indistinguishable prior to the survival of written sources. Furthermore, pottery kilns provided enough heat to melt copper to a point where it was flexible and could be forged into weapons, tools, and jewelry. This first metalworking was a significant achievement for humanity.

While the Neolithic Revolution enabled many successes, these achievements were not gained without sacrifice. Leaving behind one's migratory tribe to settle in a permanent location could involve breaking bonds of family and friendship and

exposing oneself to the vulnerability of potential starvation if the crops failed. Archeological records of the early Neolithic sites have provided evidence of the hardships faced by those who pioneered this way of life. Skeletons from these sites show that the men and women of these societies developed deformed toes, knees, hips, and backs, probably from kneeling to grind grain into flour for long periods of time. These skeletons also display evidence of increased tooth decay, probably because their diets relied more heavily on carbohydrates, such as oats and bread. Those who lived in these communities were also exposed to higher levels of disease due to primitive sanitation systems in densely populated areas. Neolithic farmers were less healthy, worked harder, and had a shorter average lifespan than their nomadic Paleolithic peers.

When considering these disadvantages, some modern historians go so far as to suggest that the Neolithic Revolution was the greatest mistake in human history. By adopting the Neolithic model of cultivation, human beings set their descendants on a path of ever-increasing human consumption of the planet's resources. In addition, the development of more complex populations meant that some inhabitants enjoyed significantly more wealth and prestige than others. They argue that humans would have been better served if they had learned to limit the increase of the population and to retain the smaller, less established, and more equal societies of the pre-Neolithic eras.

The Epic of Gilgamesh perhaps provides us with the best response to these criticisms as well as the most fundamental explanation of what motivated some Neolithic people to choose a sedentary life. Enkidu learned that friendship with Gilgamesh far outweighed any of the benefits he had enjoyed while running wild and free. The value of human companionship, lived out in a growing community, outweighed the benefits he had enjoyed alone. It may be that a similar desire for enrichment through stable human friendship best explains the decisions of our earliest ancestors to seek a new lifestyle despite its tremendous hardships.

Conclusion

Our earliest evidence of humanity teaches us several important lessons about the dignity of human persons and their centrality to history. First, we see the ability of individual men and women to make choices and to shape the world about them, even to the point of adjusting their way of life. Although geographical and cultural factors certainly exercise important influences in human actions, the Neolithic Revolution is an excellent illustration of the fact that human actions are not predetermined by forces outside their control. Individual humans had the choice to either join the farmers of a developing sedentary society or to remain a part of the nomadic

traditions of their ancestors. Their decision had a profound impact on their own lives and those of their descendants.

Second, the centrality of religion and the recognition of the supernatural stands as a clear testament to the elevation of humans above animals. The evidence of sites like Göbekli Tepe indicates that as humans interacted with one another they instinctively developed communal religious practices. Indeed, as we will see throughout this unit, the human desire to understand and interact with the supernatural was a critical factor in encouraging the development of large permanent settlements and the foundation of Western Civilization.