Prehistory

Since we are studying the beginnings of human history, we will deal at this time only with the Agricultural Revolution. The Agricultural Revolution began sometime around 8000 BCE in the Neolithic period when people ceased their nomadic lives as hunters and gatherers and settled down to farm the land and domesticate animals. This event is rightly called a revolution since as a result every facet of human life changed dramatically. The way people constructed their homes, the way they governed themselves, the art they made, the gods they worshipped and the way they earned and measured wealth wholly and absolutely changed. Moreover, this change would dominate the world until the Industrial Revolution began in the 1700’s of the common era.

Our earliest human ancestors appeared some 2 million years ago in Africa. Over the shadowy millennia, they evolved and developed until they devised a division of labor in which the men hunted and the women gathered and prepared food. By 200,000 BCE they learned to make and use tools, bury their dead, paint and sculpt. This age may loosely be called the Prehistoric period.

By the year 8000 BCE, in at least three places on earth, people ceased their nomadic existence and began farming. Those places are the Yellow River Valley in China, the Nile River Valley in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). Villages grew into towns and towns into small cities, some with as many as 50,000 people. By 3500 BCE, these settled people developed the ability to write. Although having an organized system of religious beliefs and government is (among other things) important, writing is the single most deciding factor in determining when a people have reached a level of sophistication that we may justly call civilization. When a written history of events is possible, the prehistoric era ends.

Prehistoric peoples were more at the mercy of their environment than the people of Egypt or Mesopotamia, however all were vulnerable to natural disasters, like floods, and manmade disasters, like the invasion of another people. The art, world views, modes of transportation, religious beliefs, writing and building materials of these ancient peoples all reflect the close, dependent and vulnerable relationship they had with the earth. Considering how old these cave paintings are, a remarkable number survive today. We don’t know if our ancient ancestors painted the easily accessible parts of the cave near the entrances where they probably did most of their living, but we know for certain that they traveled deep into the earth, into difficult to reach parts of the cave where the air was poor, and painted on the walls and ceilings. The very remoteness of these images ensured their survival. It is widely believed today that prehistoric people painted these images as apart of a religious ritual or in the practice of sympathetic magic (the belief that if one imitates what they hope will happen, then the event has a greater chance of actually happening). As shown in the example above, most cave paintings are painted atop one another willy-nilly. It appears the images were painted, perhaps in the
hope of securing a successful hunt the next day, and then ceased to serve any purpose. These people were hunters and gatherers and as such lived constantly on the razor’s edge. An unsuccessful hunt meant hunger, maybe even death. It is no wonder then that the cave art of prehistoric peoples is dominated by herds of animals and hunting scenes.

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