



## How Western Civilisation Came To Be

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Penguin is producing an eight-volume history of Europe from antiquity to the end of the 20th century. Interestingly, the works are not appearing in chronological order this volume, which kicks things off chronologically, is actually the fourth to be published.

The sub-title of this volume is a little misleading as its story begins in Minoan Crete several centuries before Troy. In some ways, the decision to start with Crete is an odd one for, as the authors themselves acknowledge, once that civilisation collapsed 'their inheritance to the next generations was meagre'. In the second millennium BC, it was not Crete or Mycenae, but the civilisations of the Near East that proved to be 'the real drivers of change'.

However, Troy is important because the stories it created, whether real or mythical, were to have a profound influence on all subsequent beliefs in classical Europe. The book details some of the

most recent archaeological discoveries at Troy, but also explains that there are limitations to what archaeology can reveal, for while it 'is good at producing evidence for long term patterns' it does not provide answers 'in relation to specific events (or alleged events)'.

The authors reiterate the same point when discussing the veracity of events described in the Old Testament. However, they do believe the archaeological evidence is strong enough to conclude that the biblical writers of the 7th century BC over-dramatised the events of earlier centuries to increase the degree of conflict. On the other hand, the authors reject the arguments of sceptics who doubt the existence of characters such as David and Solomon. In other places, such as the Celtic migrations of the 3rd and 4th centuries BC, the written and archaeological evidence 'are in perfect alignment with one another'.

As well as their views on the degree of use of archaeology, another point the two authors both of whom are historians at Oxford-make more than once is that mono-causal explanations for historic events, such as the collapse of civilisations, are rare, and when proffered need to be treated sceptically.

The fact that a book covering more than 1,500 years of European history is dominated by the lands around the Mediterranean is because that is where the historically significant action was. In considering the drivers of progress, the authors point to technological innovation, which allowed agricultural intensification, which in turn produced population growth and the scope for entrepreneurship. One key factor that shines through is the importance of the movement of goods and people. After centuries of decline, the Greek world revived in the 10th century BC, stimulated by 'the reestablishment of its old external contacts', a process that culminated around 500BC when the Mediterranean becomes 'a single cultural unit'. Similarly, at the highpoint of the Roman Empire, the extent of trade is shown to be quite phenomenal as 'staggering numbers of Roman coins have been found in Sri Lanka and southern India', and there is even evidence of Roman influence on shipbuilding in Vietnam.

This volume tries to relate how the ancients perceived themselves, not how we view them with hindsight. The authors are at pains to stress that while we think of the ancients as being at the beginning of something, they saw themselves at the culmination of centuries of history, and in almost everything they did they justified their actions by reference to a real or imagined historical precedent. Reform was never reform to them and the Athenians would have found the suggestion that they had created something radically different to be 'a deeply alarming idea'.

Roman political leaders were also determined to maintain that all their actions were part of the city's traditions. Hence, while we moderns see a clear break between the Republic and the Empire, Augustus 'would have been horrified to find us making the battle of Actium a break between two historical periods'. Of course, any study of the ancient world does throw up a multitude of firsts and this book is able to draw out a number of slightly esoteric ones. My personal favourite occurs at the museum in Alexandria in the 3rd century BC where Eratosthenes produced the first critical chronology of Greek history, dating back to 776BC. The authors argue that while the substance of his document was largely guesswork, and is thus of dubious value in trying to date past events, 'the importance and originality of his work lay in its method'. The

commencement of making lists and compiling dictionaries and encyclopaedias 'marked a new way of thinking about the past' and the Museum's scholars were for the first time attempting to classify and organise their cultural heritage. One might suggest that a few more Eratosthenes, and a few less post-modernists, might be a significant boon to many modern university humanities departments.

Given the nature of this work it is not surprising that there are some omissions, perhaps most topically given recent debate in Australia around free speech and its history, the trial of Socrates.

The authors emphasise the importance of the year 146BC by ending consecutive chapters there to mark the end of Corinth and Carthage respectively, and to make clear that from now on the story of antiquity is dominated by Rome. And the chapters on Rome are perhaps stronger than the ones on Greece. They demonstrate a great ability to meld economic, political and cultural history as within a few pages we progress from how the economy of Gaul worked in the 1st century BC, to how Julius Caesar captured it, to the politics of the end of the Republic, and to how Virgil's *Aeneid* became the classic literary work of the time.

One of the most interesting sections of the book is the description of how Rome applied 'soft power' to its empire, something which they compare to the modern cultural hegemony of the United States. Celtic peoples coming under the orbit of Rome quickly changed from their traditional diet of porridge and beer to the preferred Roman ones of bread and wine. Related to this is how rare rebellion was for several centuries as captured peoples showed little inclination to throw off Roman control. However, the authors explain that is hard at this distance to get a clear view on what 'the real cultural affiliations' of many of these people were as they often displayed an intriguing mix of Latin and native language and Roman and traditional deities.

Another feature of the book is the regular deployment of boxes that discuss features of the ancient world with modern relevance, covering everything from the calendar, to the constitution of the United States and the ethnicity of ancient Macedonians in relation to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. It is not just in the boxes that interesting comparisons with the modern are made. When discussing the Social Wars of early in the 1st century BC, the writers make the point that the Italians opposing Rome were the last leaders to proclaim an Italian state until Victor Emmanuel in 1861.

The authors are also alert to the potential ideological biases of other scholars working in the field. For instance, they describe how a hundred years ago there was a tendency to see every aspect of the early part of the ancient world through Greek eyes and hence the Phoenicians were dismissed as 'mere traders'. Conversely, 'a younger generation of scholars, predominantly from the New World (the United States and Australia)' have tended to give the Phoenicians credit for all the developments of the 7th and 8th centuries BC, 'with the Greeks stumbling along in their wake'. Price and Thonemann describe this as 'little more than ideologically driven wishful thinking'. The authors also point out where often repeated 'facts' are completely spurious-such as that Carthage's soil was laced with salt by the Romans to make it infertile; this is pure fabrication 'invented by a historian writing in 1930'.



This volume provides an excellent introduction to those with a limited knowledge of ancient history and its insights into the latest archaeology contributes to it being a wonderful new synthesis for those already possessing a good working knowledge of the commencement of the European story and Western Civilisation.