

1

A Brief History of History

Archaeology, in fact all science, is like a puzzle. The goal is to put the pieces together in a way that makes the most sense. Unfortunately, in archaeology there often is no picture from which to start. Like the once-beautiful girl in the famous Star Trek episode, *Menagerie*, whom aliens pieced together without ever having seen a human, this can sometimes lead to horrifying results. In today's world, we are the aliens trying to guess what life must have been like 5000 years ago with only a few artifacts to guide us. Are we sure our conclusions are any better?

One of the primary assumptions of Western historical sciences is that civilization advances in a near-linear fashion, that modern society is more advanced than previous civilizations intellectually, technologically and spiritually. Our level of understanding and culture, and especially our technical prowess, allow us to place ourselves above previous civilizations. Presumably, we are the first ones to come to the intellectual point where there is enough need, desire, or interest to unearth the past, right? Not if you ask Ashurbanipal.

The First Archaeologists

Ashurbanipal ruled the Assyrian empire from 669 to 627 BC. One of the most powerful men of his time, he was considered to be the last great ruler of Assyria in an area that today encompasses northern Iraq

and southern Turkey. While his many conquests are noteworthy, he is best remembered for his academic and antiquarian pursuits. If not for him, we would know even less about the ancient world than we do. Ashurbanipal had a passion for the preservation of knowledge, and so he created an extraordinary library in his capital city of Nineveh. This archive was more than just a housing of records, it was a collection of astrological and astronomical texts, myths, omens, religious and political doctrines, medical information and more – the cultural riches of his time.

Ashurbanipal sent scholars out to travel the empire and copy every important text they found. Through the formation of the library at Nineveh he would have control of and access to the wisdom of ancient cultures as he dealt with the needs of his own age. More than a king, Ashurbanipal was a scholar in his own right who prided himself on his knowledge of astronomy and mathematics, and his ability to translate and read the far older Sumerian script. It may be difficult to imagine that the Ancients themselves looked to the wisdom of the distant past, but in Ashurbanipal we see an example of the high value given to such knowledge.

Perhaps this desire for linkage to the past had a higher purpose, for Ashurbanipal was not the only one who revered the wisdom of far earlier times. There were others – Nabonidus, for instance. He was the last king of Babylon before it was conquered by the Persian king Cyrus the Great, in 539 BC. Nabonidus was a scholar and a recluse who most likely came to power after marrying Nebuchadnezzar's daughter. As king he managed to alienate both his subjects and high priests by neglecting his obligation to pay homage to the god Marduk; instead, he built a temple to the moon god Sin, where he installed his wife and daughter as priestesses. Happily for us, he did have two saving attributes: His scholars kept excellent records, and he was absorbed in historical and religious speculation. The following account from Nabonidus shows the importance he placed on the structures of the distant past, those he considered to be from a higher age. Here

Ships of Antiquity

Traditionally it is understood that the first modern ships equipped for transoceanic travel were Viking, who came to America in 1000 AD. By the early 1400s China had 400-ft nine-masted junks sailing east to the Americas, and west in vast trading armadas as far as the east coast of Africa; and many Europeans were sailing the open seas, including Columbus' sailing to the "New World." There were other cultures far more ancient than the Europeans who were equipped with the knowledge and skill to sail on open seas - some of these dating as far back as 2600 BC.

Recent evidence shows that the Egyptians had this ability 4000 years before Columbus. The "Solar Boat" of Khufu, found near the pyramids, is a 144-foot long craft estimated to weigh 150 tons. Few realize this is twice the length of Columbus' ship, the Santa Maria, which was just 77 feet bow to stern.



The Solar Boat of Khufu. (Image courtesy of Professor Mary Ann Sullivan)

In ancient writings we find reference to ocean-going ships and travel. Sharrukin, the first ruler of Akkad, (2370-2316 BC) wrote of playing host to ships from many distant lands at the Wharf of Akkad. It seems the ancients had the ability to traverse the oceans long before Columbus.

he hints at recapturing the richness of a 3000-year-old structure (5500 years old to us) by exactly duplicating its foundation:

...I pulled that house down and made search for its old platform-foundation; and I dug to a depth of eighteen cubits, and Shamash, the great lord of E-babbara, the temple, the dwelling well pleasing to him, permitted me to behold the platform-foundation of Naram Sin, the son of Sargon, which during a period of thirty-two hundred years no king among my predecessors had seen. In the month of Tishrit, in a favorable month, on an auspicious day, revealed to me by Shamash and Adad in a vision, with silver, gold, costly and precious stones, products of the forest, sweet-smelling cedars, amid joy and rejoicing, I raised its brick-work – not an inch inward or outward – upon the platform- foundation of Naram Sin, the son of Sargon. I laid in rows 5000 large cedars for its roof; I set up in its doorways high doors of cedar. . . . I took the hands of Shamash, my lord, and with joy and rejoicing I made him take up a residence therein well pleasing to him. I found the inscription written in the name of Naram Sin, the son of Sargon, and I did not alter it. I anointed it with oil, offered sacrifices, placed it with my inscription, and restored it to its place (Nab. Cyl. II. 47 ff.).¹

From his notes, it is easy to see the respect that Nabonidus held for this ancient structure and the meticulous attention he lavished on its restoration. Upon finding the original foundation of the building, he “raised its brick-work – not an inch inward or outward – upon the platform” and did not alter the original inscription at the temple. His mention and reverence for a 3000-year-old building is controversial because many historians can’t believe that any large buildings existed that long ago in this part of the world, if anywhere at all. Furthermore, the idea that someone of Nabonidus’ time would go to such lengths to restore an ancient structure is contrary to current views that his was a more primitive and less caring society. Yet, Nabonidus showed great care for something that he believed was built in a higher age by those wiser than himself – for this was the common belief of the day.

We find evidence of a similar awareness in neighboring Egypt, where today much controversy surrounds the origins and dating of the Great Sphinx. Robert Schoch, a professor of geology at Boston University, makes a compelling case (based on erosion patterns and geological evidence) that the Sphinx dates back to at least 7500 BC, and quite possibly may have been erected as early as 10,500 BC, a date far outside the traditionally held view that assigns it to the Pharaoh Khafre, around 2300 BC. Controversy aside, one uncontested fact is that over a long period of neglect the Sphinx fell to ruin, and by 1400 BC, the time of Pharaoh Thutmose IV, was buried up to its shoulders in sand.

While there is limited documentation of the details of its restoration, plenty of physical evidence indicates that Thutmose led a campaign to do just that. He ordered a stele made to record the moment when Khepri, the Sphinx, spoke to him and charged him with clearing away the sands, in return for which Thutmose would be made king. The stele between the Sphinx’s paws reads:

Now the statue of the very great Khepri (the Great Sphinx) rested in this place, great of fame, sacred of respect, the shade of Ra resting on him.



Schoch has argued that much of the erosion is due to vertical water weathering, which would require large amounts of rainfall; yet that degree of rainfall has been virtually non-existent in this area since the end of the last Ice Age. But traditional archaeologists dispute the possibility of water weathering because it doesn't fit the accepted time frame for the age of the Sphinx. (Photograph courtesy of www.sacredsites.com)

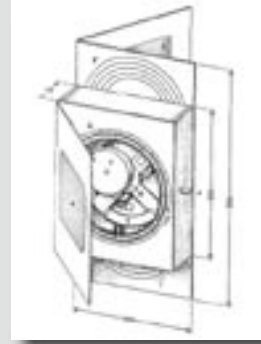
Memphis and every city on its two sides came to him, their arms in adoration to his face, bearing great offerings for his ka. One of these days it happened that Prince Tuthmose came travelling at the time of midday. He rested in the shadow of the great god. (Sleep and) dream (took possession of him) at the moment the sun was at zenith. Then he found the majesty of this noble god speaking from his own mouth like a father speaks to his son, and saying, 'Look at me, observe me, my son Tuthmose. I am your father, Horemakhet-Khepri-Ra-Atum. I shall give to you the kingship (upon the land before the living)... (Behold, my condition is like one in illness), all (my limbs being ruined). The sand of the desert, upon which I used to be, (now) confronts me; and it is in order to cause that you do what is in my heart that I have waited.

The exact motivations for the restoration remain unclear, with some modern scholars guessing he may have used the tale of his dream to justify his ascension to the throne. Whatever the reasons, Thutmose IV was another early example of humans assigning great significance to the structures of the very ancient past – in this case a structure that was unfathomably old even in his time, no matter which dating you accept.

The Antikythera Device

In 1901 divers working off the Greek isle of Antikythera found the remains of a clocklike mechanism 2000 years old. The mechanism now appears to have been a device for calculating the motions of stars and planets

The object consisted of a box with dials on the outside and a very complex assembly of gear wheels mounted within, resembling an 18th-century clock. Doors hinged to the box served to protect the dials and Greek inscriptions describing the operation and construction of the instrument. At least 20 gear wheels of the mechanism have been preserved, including a sophisticated assembly of gears that were mounted eccentrically on a turntable.



Gear housing of the Antikythera device.

To index a device so that each tooth was identically cut implies a high degree of manufacturing sophistication. Filing each tooth by hand, no matter how carefully done, would have had enough variation to end up binding the device at the first turn.

Nothing comparable to it is known from any ancient scientific text. From a traditional scientific point of view, such a device should not exist in the Hellenistic Age. Its design incorporated mathematical and astronomical knowledge anomolistic to the period. Put in context of traditional history, the discovery of this mechanism is equivalent to the find of a supercomputer centuries ago.



Activated by hand, the Antikythera mechanism consists of a train of more than thirty gears of greatly varied sizes meshing in parallel planes. Its most spectacular feature is a differential gear permitting two shafts to rotate at different speeds, like the one that allows the rear wheels of a modern car to turn at different rates on a curve. A similar mechanism was described by Cicero and later by Ovid and others: This was an ingenious planetarium, simulating the movements of the sun, the moon and the five planets, that had been devised in the 3rd century BC by Archimedes. (Photograph courtesy of The Greek National Archaeological Museum)

The Trouble with Assumptions

The early 19th century set the stage in Europe for the development of archaeology and the study of history in general as a science. The era marked the culmination of a gradual shift in societal thinking, from ecclesiastical dominance in both social structure and scientific thought, to one of rationalism in academic thinking. This new mindset – that the exercise of reason, rather than experience, authority or spiritual belief forms the primary basis for knowledge – caused a change in the way European academics perceived themselves, particularly in relation to the rest of the world. Scholars began looking at the world by taking a step back, evaluating social systems as separate from themselves, viewing the world through a looking glass and making determinations based on the new paradigm. Descartes, Pascal, Bayle, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau were all major players in what was mostly a positive trend. As a benefit, this method of thinking laid the groundwork for the creation of a true scientific methodology and promoted the introduction of new theories through which scientific debate could be fostered and ideas could be tested.

This growing intellectual movement, and the recognition that the innovations of the Renaissance were superior to almost everything having to do with the preceding Dark Ages, fostered a skeptical attitude toward prior belief systems and histories. Based on sketchy archaeological evidence available at the time, any ancient civilizations older than Greece or Rome were deemed primitive, or at least less capable of complex thought and culture. This was done without regard for the local lore that comprised much of the historical record up until that time. So, although many traditions and myths spoke of the wonders of the lost Golden Age they were generally rejected out of hand or thought to be childish in this new age of reason. Ashurbanipal would be spinning in his grave!

When Charles Darwin published his ideas about evolution in the mid-19th century they generated great controversy. In the scientific community, the idea of evolution had been discussed for some time,

though it lacked any real data to support it. While theoretical arguments were made by the social evolutionist Herbert Spencer and others, Darwin was the first to make a strong physical case. For example, he noticed that groups of finches that had been separated over generations on different islands in the Galapagos had all adapted different features to allow them to cope better on their particular island, yet they all appeared to have the same ancestor. His work was groundbreaking, and his evidence for adaptation appeared solid. The unfortunate side effect of his work was its transposition into the evolution of just about everything, including fairly recent trends in civilization.

The leap was made: If Darwin had evidence that physical organisms adapt to fit their environment (evolve), then society, even over short periods, must evolve in the same linear fashion. In other words, if evolution existed in physical development, it must also play a role in societal and cultural development within humanity. This was very appealing to the intellectuals of post-Renaissance Europe as it justified a superior attitude toward less complex societies. Spencer argued this theory in his essay “Progress: Its Law and Causes,” in 1857:

Now, we propose in the first place to show, that this law of organic progress is the law of all progress. Whether it be in the development of the Earth, in the development of Life upon its surface, the development of Society, of Government, of Manufactures, of Commerce, of Language, Literature, Science, Art, this same evolution of the simple into the complex, through a process of continuous differentiation, holds throughout. From the earliest traceable cosmical changes down to the latest results of civilization, we shall find that the transformation of the homogeneous into the heterogeneous, is that in which Progress essentially consists....²

Since that time these ideas have become entrenched within the culture of the archaeological community. If all things evolve, then what is newer must be more advanced, and conversely, the older a society is found to be, the more backward it must have been. While this is generally true based on the experience of the last half dozen centuries since man emerged from the worst of the Dark Ages, it was

not true *prior* to this time. The steady decline of civilization from Sumer to Akkad to Babylon, each apparently less accomplished than the ones previous – and all eventually disappearing – helps to illustrate this point. Of course, scholars of the post-Dark Age Renaissance were not yet aware of the extent of Mesopotamian civilizations, or for that matter Jiroft, Mohenjo Daro, Caral or a hundred other complex civilizations of great antiquity only recently discovered.

Ironically, these Renaissance men did *not* look to their recent past for knowledge of certain sciences as we do today, they looked back almost 2000 years to a time well before the Dark Ages; they looked to the great minds of Classical Greece and Rome for their mathematical, philosophical and logical approaches to the sciences. The last vestiges of the prior higher age had become the foundation for the Renaissance.

Scientists today would hardly consider such an approach. They consult the most recent “evolved” sources – papers or textbooks of the last decade or two – before postulating a new theory. But the greatest men of the Renaissance, including Copernicus and Newton (an alchemist, by the way), leapfrogged over the Dark Ages and went back to tap ancient resources before formulating their profound contributions to modern society.

Great care is needed when reconstructing anything, especially something as sacred as the history of mankind. Even minor errors in our assumptions will create a distorted picture. When pieces of our past are put together under the assumption that older civilizations “had to be” less sophisticated and therefore were inferior in almost every way, how many holes will there be in our jigsaw puzzle of history? If we discount prior knowledge out of hand and assume that the ancient reverence for prior structures, the stars and all things spiritual was pagan or backward, then we run the risk of losing track of our history – all in the name of rationalism.