



In Search Of The First Civilizations

Michael Wood

Download now

Read Online 

In Search Of The First Civilizations

Michael Wood

In Search Of The First Civilizations Michael Wood

Five thousand years ago there began the most momentous revolution in human history. Starting in Mesopotamia, city civilization emerged for the first time on earth, to be followed in Egypt, India, China and the Americas. The ideals of these ancient civilizations still shape the lives of the majority of mankind. In *In Search of the First Civilizations* (previously published as *Legacy*) asks the intriguing question: what is civilization? Did it mean the same to the Chinese, the Indians and the Greeks? What can the values of the ancient cultures teach us today? And do the ideals of the West - a latecomer to civilization - really have universal validity? In this fascinating historical search, Michael Wood explores these ancient cultures, looking for their essential character and their continuing legacy. A brilliant exploration. Sunday Times Well-written, gorgeous and guaranteed to induce thought... Wood takes great care to put everything in a large historical perspective, which is actually more disturbing than comforting. New York Post

In Search Of The First Civilizations Details

Date : Published April 7th 2005 by BBC Books (first published November 5th 1992)

ISBN : 9780563522669

Author : Michael Wood

Format : Paperback 208 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Ancient History, Archaeology, Historical

 [Download In Search Of The First Civilizations ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online In Search Of The First Civilizations ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online In Search Of The First Civilizations Michael Wood

From Reader Review In Search Of The First Civilizations for online ebook

Jan-Maat says

One of the covers blurbs runs: "Wood takes great care to put everything in a large historical perspective, which is actually more disturbing than comforting". So wrote an intrepid reviewer for the New York Times, but from my perspective I found this to be above all a friendly book. A spin off from a TV series first published in the early 1990s it felt very visual to me. Reading I wondered, particularly in the chapters on India and China, if it was overly simplistic in its judgements (view spoiler), which in turn led me to wonder if I only didn't find the other chapters simplistic only because they chimed in with other books that I have read. There's nothing quite like confirmation bias.

The concept of the book is that intrepid historian Michael Wood presents short overviews of the civilisations of Iraq, India, China, Egypt, Central America and the Barbarian West (otherwise known as Europe) starting from their Stone Age and Bronze Age roots drawing out the continuing trends and habits down to what was the present day.

In Iraq, glancing over ruined environments Wood tells us that it was there that the notion developed that the city & the natural environment do not form part of an integrated cosmological structure. Instead the civilised world is in anti-thesis to nature. The people of the civilised world cultivate desert places and are in effect at war with nature. This attitude was read into their theology and into the monotheistic religions (p46). What is interesting here is that Iraq becomes a formative influence on the development of Western civilisation. According to Wood, Mesopotamia and Europe are two regions of the world that have more in common with each in terms of basic attitudes than with the rest of the world.

I don't know, the nature of a project like this is that you do either present very broad brush conclusions or point out just how hopelessly messy and open ended everything is. All civilisations, all cultures impact upon the environment. Perhaps some regret it more than others, but here I think of the Walrus and the Carpenter. Does the idea of dominion over the earth and over living creatures mean that followers of the monotheistic faiths are more vicious in extracting gravel and more savage in their open cast mining than everybody else?

There was an interesting emphasis on continuity of religious practice in the chapter on India. At the end there is a description of Nehru leaving instructions in his will to have his ashes scattered at the confluence of the Ganges and Jumna at Allahabad while denying any religious meaning to the action - although in Indian Summer von Tunzelmann says that his funeral was completely planned and delivered by Indira Gandhi, which puts a different complexion on it - less cultural continuity, more political theatre. Still this tickled my mind into thinking of Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy. Orthodoxy we might say is to a culture as consciousness is to the mind while orthopraxy is the unconscious. We do the same things as our ancestors while telling ourselves that our reasons for doing so are different.

Unfortunately the bibliography for this section has a lot of older books while in the text Wood mentions recent discoveries about the Indus Valley civilisation. On reflection, a problem with this book is that the emphasis on cultural continuity sits in a narrative that makes clear how provisional much of our knowledge is. The deep stone age roots of the Indus Valley cultures were coming to light only in the 1980s similarly our understanding of the Maya was transformed in the 1980s when their script was deciphered. In twenty years time how far will these narratives be tenable? A few discoveries or a single breakthrough can transform our understanding of the past. In light of that there is an unacknowledged tension in the book between the stress

both upon continuity, very long term continuities in world cultures and how recently the evidence for some of these continuities has emerged.

Still it was an enjoyable read as the book takes in the connections between those civilisations and the far-flung communities of Jews and Muslims in China as well as surviving communities of Yezidis, the sewers big enough to walk through in Mohendro-Daro, and raucous celebrations at festivals along the Nile. The crab-wise march of Hindu and Buddhist texts through translation into Persian under the Mughals, then into Latin, to reach the likes of Schonpenhauer. How much was inspired through mistranslation?

Why was the reviewer for the New York Post disturbed? Maybe the sense of impending loss (although there are two stories in this book one of loss and the other of survival), maybe on the contrary the sense of how difficult, if not impossible, it is the escape the logic of a civilisation. Then again perhaps it was Wood invoking Karl Jaspers and his idea of the Axial Age. We may be able to fly to the Moon (and hopefully back) but inside our heads we have barely, if at all, moved. The answers to the problems of life and living in complex societies that were devised circa 500BC provided by the Monotheistic religions, Confucianism, Buddhism, Jainism, Daoism among others still satisfy a fair sized chunk of the world's population. And even if not entirely satisfactory mark out the paths that many tread.

In discussing China Wood suggests that civilisations consciously pursue something like Maslow's hierarchy of needs - seeking to provide first adequate food, shelter and security to the population and then the possibility of self actualisation (at least for the elite). Like much in this book the story is appealing, the conception nice, but the evidence for such a controlling mind is not to be found here.

Nina says

I thought this might be a same-old, same-old archaeological book, but it was a more unique, longitudinal look at civilizations with a real focus on how religious beliefs shaped society. "Gilgamesh, what you seek you will never find. For when the Gods created Man, they let death be his lot, eternal life they withheld. Let your every day be full of joy, love the child that holds your hand, let your wife delight in your embrace, for these along are the concerns of humanity." Quite good and quite refreshing reading.

Tasneem says

I love Michael wood and the way he teaches and explains. He loves history and the ancient past and that comes through so well in this. Fabulous. A really good introduction to these civilisations.

Elentarri says

Vague. Lacks focus. I preferred Ancient World by Richard Mills but that book doesn't cover any of the non-Western civilizations such as China, India or the America's.

Nikki says

Michael Wood's clear writing renders his overview of the "First Civilisations" (as defined by him, based on a fairly Western definition of civilisation) easy to read as well as informative. He's generally aware of colonialism and his own potential bias. He does his best to explore the ancient civilisations of Iraq, India, China, Egypt and the Americas on their own merits, though he frequently lapses into wondering about what merit they could have for our own civilisation's future, particularly in the last section of the book.

Well-illustrated and, as with his other books, more of an overview than anything, but worth picking up for an introduction. I didn't know all that much about these civilisations apart from the official colonial myths still taught in schools. (E.g. the Mayans doing human sacrifices and needing to be subdued for their own good.)

Jaime Contreras says

This is an interesting and well-illustrated book about the first urban civilizations that flourished in ancient Mesopotamia (Iraq), Egypt, China, and the Americas. There is much reverence given to the people, their culture; art & architecture, scientific advancements, and society. It is fascinating to gage how much modern society owes to these forerunners. There is some speculation but the book holds together well.

Pete daPixie says

I've long been a fan of the writings and television work of Michael Wood. In fact Wood's early eighties broadcast and publication of 'In Search of the Dark Ages' set me on fire with that particular period of English history. So whenever I've come across any writing from this man I've had to read it. 'In Search of the First Civilizations', published in 1992 does not disappoint.

The book is set into five main sections, looking at the civilizations that grew in Iraq, India, China, Egypt and Central America. With such broad histories, covered in less than two hundred pages, the topics are naturally kept concise, yet reveal deep insights into the developments of the separate societies, their religions, science, philosophies and politics.

As Wood writes, "the point about the independent origins of civilization has particular significance for us now, for only when we look at the beginnings and the long and continuing influence of the first civilizations can we hope to understand what is universally relevant in our own history and what is merely Western idiosyncrasy."

The final chapter 'The Barbarian West', which forms the epilogue to this book, brings the reader up to the twenty first century, with many a thought provoking bump. A stark warning then, that our modern scientific civilization where man has become a law unto himself, set apart from nature, we race toward a similar fate suffered by the ancient Sumerians.

Kerry Hennigan says

This first edition hard back copy of Michael Wood's "Legacy" arrived just in time to save me from drowning in a boring novel. Never mind that I already had two later editions (large format paperback and a revised mass market edition) this one felt good in my hands and drew me in from the first paragraph.

Knowing the classic television series on which the text is based helped me to readily digest this outline of the rise and decline (and destruction) of the major ancient civilisations of the world. How did the rampant West get to be top dog over older, richer and more spiritually evolved civilisations?

The book is divided into chapters that correspond with the episodes of the TV series, namely Iraq; India; China; Egypt; Central America and finally The Barbarian West, of which we are all heirs, for good or ill.

One of the things I love about Wood's books is that I can hear his voice in the printed words... not just because I know the TV episodes almost by heart, but because his turn of phrase and excitement for the subject is preserved in the text.

For me, Michael Wood has done for historical subjects what Carl Sagan's "Cosmos" (book and TV series) did for science and astronomy... made something complex and almost unpalatable into a thing of beauty and wonder - and understandable.

Finishing the book just makes me want to get out the DVDs of the series and watch them again. I can never get enough of this sort of subject matter when it is done this well.

Review by Kerry Hennigan
April 7, 2013.

Emmi says

Nice compact chapters on human history. Good for general revision reading.

Anna Kaling says

It's clear the author knows his stuff but the writing just isn't engaging. I wanted to feel immersed in those first civilisations, to understand what it was like to live in those early towns and cities. Instead, I felt like I was reading a research paper from a historian.

Not bad, just not for me.

Jaya says

**“Iraq: The Cradle of Civilization
India: The Empire of Spirit
China: The Mandate of Heaven
Egypt: The Habit of Civilization
Central America: The Burden of Time
& The Barbarian West”**

These are the *Legacies* according to Wood that the world has received from the civilizations of the ancient world. Just about a bird's eye view of the ascension of these civilisations, their developments and the supposed legacies that they have left behind in forms of traditions, practices, religion or the way of life that are prevalent even today. There was a bit of stereotyping imho, of the so called legacies from the respective regions.

I watched the tv adaptation before picking up the book. A relatively easy book esp for the uninitiated if you don't want to be bogged down with too many names, dates, details or much of theories. Having said that it needs to be kept in mind that this was written way back in 1992, more information in terms of research; theories; arguments and contentions are available today, but reading/ watching Wood's unabashed enthusiasm is always fun...
