Section 5 – The Advent of Agriculture

Sumer

Until the 19th century, no-one in the modern world knew that Sumer had ever existed. Scholars in the West, trained in the classical tradition, believed that the first flowering of civilisation had been in Ancient Greece.[1] Even Egyptology was in its infancy, and was challenging, and challenged, in turn. These views were dramatically overturned by the discovery of Sumer, where a refined and developed civilisation had been established at least a millennium before the earliest on the Nile.

Sumer was in Mesopotamia, Greek for 'Land Between Two Rivers'. It was situated in what is now Iraq, on a plain between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which flowed out from the mountains to the north-west. These rivers had deposited a thick layer of fertile alluvial soil. They provided good water, abundant with fish and other wildlife. The riverbanks were thick with reeds that could be cut to make shelters, baskets and cradles. The land close by the river was bountiful, and there would have been much for the foragers to find. There was game, too, especially on the grassy steppe that lay further from the rivers.

The Sumerians invented the Eurasian arch, which uses a keystone, as well as the wheel, writing, and codified laws. We have recovered much of their mythology, yet the people themselves still seem mysterious. For the first thousand years of its life, the major Sumerian city, Uruk, had no wall. This is significant, given that some of the earliest examples of catastrophic warfare were to appear here, and the entire region was to be ravaged by genocidal savagery in later centuries.

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[1] Until the 18th century and the identification of dinosaur fossils, the age of the Earth as stated in the Bible, some 6,000 years, was generally taken as correct. This meant that scholars could not comprehend the existence of cultures older than that, and even where they found evidence of them, considered them to be later. (The true age of the Earth is 4.5 billion years.)