

Lesson 32: Before History

History begins with writing. Everything before writing is called **prehistory**, the vast, deep time before anyone left a written record. But do not mistake the absence of writing for the absence of richness. For tens of thousands of years before the first mark was pressed into clay, human beings were living full and complex lives: building communities, raising children, developing language, creating art, caring for the sick and the old, telling stories around fires, and finding meaning in the world around them. They left no words. But they left other things.

For most of human existence, people lived as **hunter-gatherers**, moving through the landscape with the seasons, following herds, gathering plants, fishing rivers, reading weather and terrain with an intimacy that most of us have lost entirely. This was not a simple or primitive life. It required encyclopedic knowledge of hundreds of plants, animals, seasons, and landscapes, passed carefully from one generation to the next through story and practice. Hunter-gatherer peoples had rich languages, complex social structures, ceremonies, art, and relationships with the land that took thousands of years to develop.

About 20,000 years ago, humans created some of the most breathtaking art ever made. Deep inside caves in France and Spain, Lascaux, Chauvet, Altamira, they painted horses, mammoths, bison, lions, and handprints by lamplight. These images are so vivid, so alive, so full of careful observation that they still move people who see them today. This **cave art** is not the work of primitive minds. It is the work of fully modern human intelligence, exercising imagination and craft thousands of years before civilization began.

Then, about 12,000 years ago, something changed. In several places around the world, independently of each other, people began growing their own food, planting seeds, tending animals, staying in one place. This was the birth of **agriculture**, and it changed human life more than any invention before it. Permanent **settlements** grew. Populations increased. People could specialize, some farming, some building, some making pottery or weaving cloth. Villages became towns. Knowledge could accumulate. And eventually, in a few of those settlements, someone pressed a mark into clay, and writing was born. The long extraordinary story of life on Earth had finally produced a creature that could write it down.