

The Idea of Time

by Geoffrey Bibby, 1956

In the little French village of Les Eyzies the statue of a man stands high on a rock outcrop, gazing down upon the red-tiled roofs with an air of brooding bewilderment and at the same time of a half-animal dignity. On the base of the statue is written simply *Homo Neandertalis*. It is a statue of one of the race of men who preceded man in Europe, of a collateral branch of mankind, more ape like than we, which roamed these steep green valleys some fifty thousand years ago. Opinion is divided as to the artistic merits of the statue, but no one doubts that it is, within very close limits, an accurate representation of Neanderthal Man.

In the center of Copenhagen stands a tall pillar. On its summit are the life-size bronze figures of two men, clad in knee-length woolen tunics and close-fitting astrakhan caps, blowing a fanfare on upon long S-shaped bronze trumpets. Many anecdotes, some unprintable, are told about these two figures, but one thing is certain. They are representations, completely accurate as to figure, dress, and instruments, of the people who lived in Denmark during the Bronze Age, some thirty-three centuries ago. And the musical instruments that they carry, the type of trumpet known as a *lur*, is the trademark printed on every packet of Danish butter which leaves the country.

These are only two examples of many that could be cited to illustrate how knowledge of a remote past has entered into the consciousness of ordinary men and women throughout Europe. The cave man remonstrating to his wife : “ What ! Roast mammoth *again* ? “ is a stock joke in our newspapers and the children of England play Romans and Britons in the unconscious but correct assumption that the two sides were not unevenly matched.

It was not always so. Less than a century and a half ago it would have been blasphemy to suggest that man and mammoth were contemporary, and completely unthinkable that an extinct species of man could ever have existed. Every schoolboy knew that at the time of the Roman invasions Britain was inhabited by naked blue-painted savages, while nothing was, or ever could be, known of how the inhabitants of Scandinavia lived and dressed at so odd and precisely defined a date as 1400 B.C.

A consciousness of historical tradition is of incalculable importance in the life of any people. While it is impossible to estimate the degree to which, for example, German history has been influenced by the ghost of Charlemagne, or Italian history by the knowledge that Rome was once paramount in the Mediterranean, there can be no doubt that these influences have been very great indeed. And the impact of western technology upon China and upon Africa has been very different, solely because the Chinese people are conscious of a long historical tradition, while the African is comparatively rootless, with no feeling of history behind him.

European prehistory has, in the course of a century and a half, gained coherence and depth, and is in consequence now beginning to exert a leverage on the course of present history. The English, accustomed to considering their island an impregnable fort, never successfully invaded before 1066, see it now in the perspective of millennia rather than centuries, as the object of repeated invasions, as at the receiving end of every major movement of peoples and ideas across Europe. It would be an exaggeration to explain Britain's present close association with continental policy as a result of this new view of history, but the new view undoubtedly made the reversal of the traditional policy of isolation easier to accept.

The absorption of prehistory into the life and consciousness of Europe is thus one of those silent revolutions in thought processes, analogous to, and in some ways related to the idea of progress, which changed the world just as effectively, though not so obtrusively, as revolutions in technology. It was no deliberate revolution. It was carried through by men who investigated the past because they were interested in the past, and who would have been the last to claim that their researches could have any effect at all upon the present and the future.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, historians of early man had all the answers. For the earliest periods only one history book existed ; the Bible. By an exercise of no mean scholarship the Irish archbishop Ussher had, in 1636, laid down for all time a Biblical chronology in accordance with which the world had been created in 4004 B. C., and from that date until the Greek and Roman historians came upon the scene in about 500 B. C. the Bible provided all the information which could be desired and which in fact was obtainable.

Admittedly even those who accepted the light cast by the Scriptures as clear and unambiguous had to confess that it illuminated a very restricted area. The whole of Europe and the greater part of Asia remained in darkness, beyond the rays of the feeble lamp that burned over Palestine.

It is difficult, in light of our present knowledge, to recapture how unimportant this vast area of ignorance appeared to be. It simply never occurred to the clerical historians of eighteenth century Europe to speculate over what was happening on their own continent while Abraham was wandering over the plains of Hebron or Joshua was besieging Jericho. The spiritual heritage of mankind followed a line through Rome to Greece and back to Palestine. If Europe's prehistory was speculated upon at all, it could be sketched in a few words. After the fall the descendants of Adam spread gradually over the world and possibly - there was no evidence - reached Europe before the great flood (which Ussher dates to 2501 B. C.) destroyed them. Man had then recommenced his slow extension over the world, and must have reached the savage regions of northern and central Europe not many hundreds of years before the first Greek and Roman writers gave their first descriptions of the tribes living in those regions.

These descriptions were chaotic, fragmentary and untrustworthy. But they gave the first glimpse of their countries' history to learned men of more than half Europe. Herodotus' description of the horse-riding Scythians of the plains north of the Black Sea, Caesar's account of the Gallic barbarians and of the woad painted charioteers of Britain, Tacitus' list of tribe beyond tribe east and north of the Rhine and his tales of the puritanical poverty of the German warrior-farmers - these provided only the background to recorded history available for the inquiring minds of France, Germany, England, Russia and the smaller countries of Europe.

There was no shortage of inquiring minds. The eighteenth century had been the century of the dilettanti, of the cultured amateur and the gentleman scientist. Following the fashion of the period, the wealthy landed gentry devoted themselves to the study of the fine arts and of natural history, geology, even of physics and chemistry. It was the age of Priestly and Cavendish, the discoverers of oxygen and hydrogen, of Linnaeus, the great Swedish natural historian, of Lavoisier and Halley, Montgolfier and Adam Smith. Everywhere people were listing and collecting natural curiosities; many museums were founded in this period as repositories for these collections of curios, and by the beginning of the nineteenth century a large quantity of miscellaneous antiquarian information and specimens was in existence, scattered in the archives and collections of universities and learned societies and private collectors over the face of Europe.

It is fully recognized that many of these museum curios and many of the barrows and standing stones and earthworks listed and described at the meetings of these learned societies were prehistoric - though that word had yet to be coined. It was realized that they were the work of man's hands and that they belonged to the period before the dawn of written history, which meant, for the greater part of Europe, the period before the introduction of Christianity. What was not realized was that not every prehistoric artifact belonged to the same period.

Looking back from our pinnacle of hard-won knowledge, it is difficult to understand how anyone could have failed to see that the various objects dug up from the earth and brought in to the gentleman antiquaries and to the new museums were of different ages, must be of different ages. But in justice to our great-great-grandfathers, who were no less intelligent and in some ways of a more inquiring mind than we, we should make the effort of putting ourselves in their place. The world was not old. It was possible to count the number of generations back to the Creation of All Things. The descendants of Noah must have wandered into Europe comparatively recently - and indeed the philologists had great fun trying to trace the connections between the names of the northern European tribes given by Caesar and Tacitus and the names

of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Noah given in the Bible. There was no reason to postulate a long period of prehistory, and a good reason to postulate a short one. Moreover, there was a *horror vacui*, a disinclination to confess ignorance by attributing objects found to “some people about whom we know nothing.”

Consequently, all the antiquities assiduously collected were lumped together as the artifacts, temples, dwellings or graves of the earliest peoples in each area known by name. All British antiquities belonged to the Ancient Britons - and the more imposing of them to the Druids, the mysterious colleges of priests first mentioned by Caesar which so captured the imagination of the seventeenth and eighteenth century antiquaries. In France the Gauls, in Germany the Illyrians and the Teutons, in Scandinavia the Goths, and in Russia the Scythians were regarded as the authors of every prehistoric monument, and, once the label had been attached, the problems and inconsistencies could be forgotten. Europe was, in any case, not particularly proud of its savage ancestors and preferred to consider itself the spiritual descendant of Greece and Rome and Egypt, the wonders of whose art and architecture were just at that time beginning to break upon the world.

The “Father of European Prehistory” is, by general consent, Christian Jurgensen Thomsen, and his claim to a renown greater than has been his lot is that he discovered and introduced to the world a conception which is now taken completely for granted: a prehistoric succession comprising a Stone Age, a Bronze Age and an Iron Age.

Christian Thomsen was a Dane, born in Copenhagen in 1788. His father was a prosperous middle-class merchant and ship owner, one of the leading commercial figures of the thriving capital and a director of the Danish national bank. Christian, as the eldest of six sons of the family, was brought up as a matter of course to take his place at the head of the family business. His education laid weight in particular on modern languages, and he began at an early age to take part in the work of his father's office, filling out invoices and bills of lading, clearing the incoming ships, and attending the Copenhagen Exchange. But soon other interests claimed his attention. Among his boyhood friends were the sons of a consul-general Grove, a wealthy Danish merchant who was in Paris during the French Revolution and there saw his opportunity to acquire from the fleeing aristocracy a considerable collection of priceless paintings. On Grove's return to Denmark in 1804 Thomsen assisted the family to unpack and hang the treasures, and expressed his intention of starting an art collection of his own. The consul-general, touched by the evident enthusiasm of the fifteen-year-old boy, gave Thomsen a small number of old coins that had also been acquired in Paris, and recommended him to specialize for a few years at least on numismatics. Thomsen took the advice to heart, and within three years had built up a creditable collection and made the acquaintance of some of the leading collectors of the capital.

Then came the Napoleonic Wars, and in 1807, Denmark being ranged on the side of the French emperor, Copenhagen was bombarded by the British fleet under Admiral Lord Nelson. Thomsen, who served in the city constabulary during the emergency, has left a graphic description of the havoc as the copper roofs of the capital's churches and public buildings sank in sheets of blue-green flame. Among the buildings hit was the house of one of the principal numismatists, a personal friend of Thomsen's, but, working through the night at considerable risk, Thomsen and his friend succeeded in bringing out the precious coin collection. The chance shot from one of Nelson's ships of the line changed Thomsen's life. For he helped to carry the homeless collection to the keeper of the Royal Cabinet of Antiquities for safekeeping, and thereby came into contact both with prehistory and with a small group of prehistorians who were at that time agitating for a Danish National Museum.

The leader of this movement was Rasmus Nyerup, Copenhagen professor of literary history and Royal Librarian. For some years he had been canvassing for a museum of antiquities, painting enthusiastic pictures in newspaper articles of the attractions of such a museum and gradually arousing interest throughout the country. Finally, in the same year as the bombardment a Royal Commission for the Preservation of Danish Antiquities was set up, consisting of five professors, a bishop, and the Director of the Royal Cabinet. Nyerup was appointed secretary. Immediately consignments of antiquities began to arrive from enthusiastic antiquaries all over the country, and Nyerup discovered that it was very much

easier to arouse enthusiasm than to satisfy it. He was at this time getting on in years and was already overburdened by his professorial duties and by the work of the library. In 1816, with cases of prehistoric and historical specimens piling up in the back room of the library, he threw in his hand and retired from the secretaryship. The members of the Commission, who had little spirit for the task of cataloguing the accumulation, met and after some hesitation, unanimously appointed Thomsen as an unpaid and non-voting secretary. He was then twenty-seven years of age, and probably assumed the thankless post only because he was flattered by being associated with a group of men distinguished by the academic learning that he so conspicuously lacked. One of the Commission, Bishop Munter, had said of him : “Mr. Thomsen is admittedly only a dilettanti, but a dilettanti with a wide range of knowledge. He has no university degree, but in the present state of scientific knowledge I hardly consider that fact as being a disqualification. “ On the contrary, pleased at having a man with business training at its disposal, the Commission gave young Thomsen free rein.

For three years he gave a full day each week to his unpaid duties, first bringing order into the chaotic minutes and correspondence files of the Commission, and then turning to the more formidable task of systematizing the collection of specimens. He tells how the collection, then numbering over a thousand objects, lay in parcels or wrapped in bundles, lying on dusty shelves or in cupboards with no semblance of order or labeling. “ I had no previous example on which to base the ordering of such a collection, “ he says, “ nor had I any money .”

He was in fact fortunate in having no model on which to base his systematization and in having little or no acquaintance with the ancient writings on which , in other lands, preconceptions of prehistory were based. He was forced to base his system entirely on the artifacts themselves, and in doing so he reached conclusions differing in important respects from those reached by the readers of classical writings. He applied the techniques learned in the shipping warehouses of his family business and divided the collection first into objects of stone, of metal and of pottery, and then subdivided them according to their apparent use, into tools, weapons, cult objects and containers. Before he had been working two years he appears to have reached the conclusion that the objects of stone were of an earlier date than those of metal, belonging to a period, he says, “ when metal was very expensive. “

In 1819 he was able to open his museum to the public, and in it his first three cabinets contained , respectively, objects of stone, bronze and iron. It would appear, however, that he was not yet completely aware that his division of these objects by material corresponded to a division by chronology. The realization came only gradually in the course of a widespread exchange of correspondence with antiquaries and museum directors throughout Scandinavia and northern Germany. This has resulted in a certain amount of doubt as to whether the idea of a division of prehistory into Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age actually originated with Thomsen. Recent investigations of his voluminous correspondence, however, seem to establish his right to the credit for this division, though he himself wrote, in his later years, that Professor Nilsson of Lund University in Sweden had independently reached the same conclusion.

It could, in any case, be claimed that Thomsen merely reintroduced a concept known from classical times. For the early Greek writers Homer and Hesiod lived in a period when iron was still a novelty and when local folk memory could recall the time when “ armour was of bronze and tools were of bronze; for black iron was not yet .” But even in Homer’s time the Stone Age lay two thousand years and more in the past, too far away for its tradition to have survived. And Hesiod therefore confused the issue by telling of an Age of Gold and an Age of Silver before the ages of Bronze and Iron.

But the importance of Thomsen’s work was not so much that he postulated the Three Ages, but that he put the postulate to work and demonstrated that its application to the antiquities of a land far removed from Homer’s Greece could bring order out of chaos and turn curios into historical evidence.

Thomsen was no lover of the printed word. He gave it as his considered opinion that “ far too many books are printed. “ With characteristic modesty he was convinced that his lack of a university education must of necessity mean that he could not write, a belief to which several thousand of his letters, written in a

colorful and lucid style, give the lie. His sole published work for many years consisted of a half-dozen articles to learned journals, mostly concerned with numismatics. Finally, however, he was constrained to write a short account of his arrangement of the Copenhagen Museum and of his Three Age system, which appeared in 1836 under the title of *Ledetraad til nordisk Oldkyndighed (Guide to Scandinavian Antiquities)*. By this time his system was fully worked out, and he gave not only a list of the major items included under each of the three heads, but also an account of the art forms belonging to each period, by means of which it was possible to ascribe objects of other materials - bone, wood or pottery, for example - to their appropriate period, and to distinguish between the objects of bronze in use in the Bronze Age and those made of that metal during the Iron Age. His guide achieved immediate popularity, being translated into German and later into English and French, and his system, previously known only in the restricted area of Scandinavia and in Switzerland, became widely known and discussed over the whole of Europe.

It was not, however, immediately accepted. Particularly in Germany there was a strong opposition to the idea of the Three Ages. Taking the theory of division by material in its most literal meaning, the learned antiquaries asked derisively why there should not also be an Age of Pottery, a Glass Age and a Bone Age. Even in Denmark there were many who denied the validity of the new order. They claimed that the use of the different materials was due to economic rather than chronological causes, the stone tools were used by the poorer classes at the same time the wealthy were using bronze. Later research has shown, moreover, that this was to a limited degree true during the periods of transition from one age to the next, but otherwise has confirmed Thomsen's division to the hilt. I required many years of research and digging to quiet the doubters.

At this time Thomsen had continued to work in his father's business and had steadfastly refused to accept any salary for his museum work. In 1833, on the death of his father, he succeeded as head of the family firm, and it was only when his mother died in 1840 that he disposed of the business at advantageous terms and devoted himself fully to his museum. From then on he accepted a modest salary, the title of Director, and later the rank of Honorary Privy Councilor. During this period he traveled widely, in Scandinavia, Germany, Italy, France and England, always paying his expenses out of his own pocket except on one occasion when he was deputed to convey a gift of archaeological specimens from King Frederick VII to the Emperor Napoleon III of France.

Many descriptions are extant of the middle aged director during this period of consolidation. In all he is seen against the background of the museum, in which he spent the greater part of his time, being unmarried and having no interests beyond his coins and his antiquities. A tall, thick-set man with kindly brown eyes, clean-shaven and with thick white hair falling to his high stiff collar, he could be seen any Sunday, in his frock coat and drainpipe trousers, sporting a lace stock and an incredibly tall top hat, guiding parties of visitors around his collection. Self-taught himself, he understood to the full the art of interesting others in prehistory. He would hide behind his wide coattails some object of particular beauty or significance and hold forth at length on the story of the discovery, finally producing the object at the precise point in the story where it had first appeared in the earth. Or, taking a heavy gold torque from one of the cases, he would place it around the neck of the prettiest girl in the party, with the remark: "Yes, they were a proud and well-built race of women in the old days, to bear a three-pound weight of jewelry."

In his later years, Thomsen was not always easy to work with. Being of independent means, he could never accustom himself to the necessity of applying for grants for extension of his museum, while he took it for granted that his assistants should be able and willing, as he himself had been, to work long years without salary. But this attitude, while irritating to his subordinates, endeared him to the masters of the Privy Purse, who saw a museum that was the envy and admiration of Europe come into existence at practically no cost to the treasury. When he died in 1865, he was mourned as an admired friend and as a prehistorian of first rank even by those who had not yet accepted his epoch-making system.

In the verdict of history Thomsen's significance is greater even than his introduction of the Three Ages. He had introduced the idea of time into prehistory. Whether his theory was accepted or denied, no one, after Thomsen published his *Ledetraad*, could any longer suggest or believe that the time before the dawn of written history was a single, short, homogeneous period. No longer could stone axes and iron swords and

flint arrowheads and bronze bucklers be lumped together as “ Pre-Roman “ or “ Gothic “ or “ Ancient British “. That Thomsen produced the right answer is not so important as that he asked the right question. In the future whenever two artifacts came together a museum curator was bound to speculate which was older. And the whole of our present knowledge of the prehistory of mankind has come from the necessity of answering that question.