

# New views on ancient peoples

A bold reappraisal of human history upends long-held theories about early societies

By Erle C. Ellis

With vivid narrative prose and rich detail, in their new book, *The Dawn of Everything*, the late anthropologist and activist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow take readers on a myth-busting journey through the inner workings of prehistoric and historic societies around the world, showcasing the remarkable intelligence and agency of ancient peoples and the diverse societies and societal solutions that they helped shape. By the end of the book, the question of whether small bands of egalitarian hunter-gatherers were doomed to become highly unequal large-scale societies—a

lightenment's calls to freedom, equality, and the rule of rationality were no European invention, they argue, but a direct response to Indigenous critique of Western civilization.

From Hobbes's "brutes" and Rousseau's "noble savages" to Marshall Sahlins's "original affluent societies," hunter-gatherer societies have long served as stand-ins for what is "natural" in human societies. But as the authors show, historical hunter-gatherers are no simple exemplar of anything.

Mobile bands of hunter-gatherers are certainly part of the human story, but their culturally complex social relations and material exchanges can extend across vast regions. Historical hunter-gatherers built major permanent settlements, produced and stored surplus food in granaries, and built massive earthworks on scales similar to the first Eurasian cities. Many, such as the Calusa of Florida, were highly stratified, with kings, nobles, commoners, and even slaves taken captive from farming societies. Such societies may be uncommon now, but the authors argue convincingly that they were the prehistoric norm.

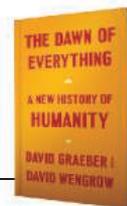
Did crops domesticate people, as Harari and others have argued? Not at all, maintain Graeber and Wengrow. Many

early societies dabbled in cultivation for millennia without committing to full dependence on farming. New evidence from one of the world's most famous first "towns," Turkey's Çatalhöyük, indicates that cereal farmers in this region may have rejected domestic livestock, preferring instead to remain hunters of "wild and glamorous" cattle and boar for millennia after their domestication. Indeed, many societies chose to shift seasonally from dense settlements and intensive gardening to more-dispersed hunting and foraging activities, and their social arrangements shifted accordingly. Agriculture, in other words, did not represent a point of no return but rather one of many cultural practices within the diverse lifeways of evolving cultures.

The notion of cities as technology-driven crucibles of stratified states is also called deeply into question. Some Ukrainian settlements that emerged more than 6000 years ago and consisted of more than 10,000

## The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity

David Graeber and David Wengrow  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,  
2021. 704 pp.



people predate and were larger than the first Mesopotamian cities and show no evidence of centralized governance, social hierarchy, or fortification. Nor was Sumerian Mesopotamia "an eternal 'land of kings.'" Its first cities, write Graeber and Wengrow, were likely "organized into autonomous self-governing units" that operated for centuries before any sign of monarchy. Meanwhile, the scale of Teotihuacan and Tenochtitlan, the world's largest early cities, which evolved without wheels, plows, metallurgy or even domestic livestock, "makes the 'city-states' of Bronze Age Greece (like Tiryns and Mycenae) seem little more than fortified hamlets."

Did Cortés negotiate with an Indigenous democratic "urban parliament" like "the republics of Venice" to form an alliance against the Aztecs? Was Teotihuacan once an "anti-dynastic...utopian experiment in urban life"? To cast out one myth, another must replace it. Like Graeber, *The Dawn of Everything* is a rabble-rouser—a great book that will stimulate discussions, change minds, and drive new lines of research. ■

10.1126/science.abm1652

## SCIENCE & RACE



### PODCAST

**Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race**

Beverly Daniel Tatum  
Basic Books, 1997. 464 pp.

In 1997, psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum's groundbreaking book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* offered a framework for thinking about racism in educational settings. This week on the *Science* podcast, Tatum reflects on the impetus for, and outcomes of, this classic text, interrogating how identity and bias emerge and are shaped from a young age. <https://scim.ag/3GQJoEs>

10.1126/science.abn0865



Some California tribes accumulated and traded shell money.

narrative advanced by everyone from Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Hobbes to Jared Diamond and Yuval Harari—is poked so full of holes that it may never recover.

Our first guide on this journey is Kandiaronk, a 17th-century leader of the Wendat tribe, whose incisive "Indigenous critique" of Western society is brought to life from historical sources. In his words, "what species of creature, must Europeans be, that they have to be forced to do good, and only refrain from evil because of fear of punishment?"

Kandiaronk's brilliance as a debater and social critic was unexceptional among Native Americans, maintain Graeber and Wengrow. Such skills were common in people living in societies governed by convincing, rather than coercing, collective action. Moreover, the En-

The reviewer is at the Department of Geography and Environmental Systems, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Baltimore, MD 21250, USA. Email: [ece@umbc.edu](mailto:ece@umbc.edu)

## New views on ancient peoples

Erle C. Ellis

*Science*, 374 (6571), • DOI: 10.1126/science.abm1652

### View the article online

<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abm1652>

### Permissions

<https://www.science.org/help/reprints-and-permissions>

Use of think article is subject to the [Terms of service](#)