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3rd Edition

# World History

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**Peter Haugen**

History Nerd



# World History

3rd Edition

by Peter Haugen

**for  
dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
A Wiley Brand

## **World History For Dummies® , 3rd Edition**

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## Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Introduction](#)

[About This Book](#)

[Foolish Assumptions](#)

[Icons Used in This Book](#)

[Beyond the Book](#)

[Where to Go from Here](#)

[\*\*Part 1: Getting into History\*\*](#)

[\*\*Chapter 1: Tracing a Path to the Present\*\*](#)

[Firing Up the WABAC Machine](#)

[Footpath to Expressway: Building on Humble Beginnings](#)

[War! What Is It Good For? Material for History Books, That's What](#)

[Appreciating History's Tapestry](#)

[Making the Connections](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Chapter 2: Digging Up Reality**

[Homing In on Homer](#)

[Raising Atlantis](#)

[Reading the Body Language of the Dead](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Chapter 3: Putting History into Perspective**

[Being Human Beings](#)

[Dividing Time into Eras ... and Giving Them Names](#)

[Noticing the Noteworthy and the Notorious](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Part 2: Finding Strength in Numbers**

### **Chapter 4: Getting Civilized**

[Building Jericho's Walls for Mutual Defense](#)

[Planting Cities along Rivers](#)

[Coming of Age in the Americas](#)

[Keeping Records on the Way to Writing and Reading](#)

[Shaping the World Ever After](#)

[Developing Cultures Abounding](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

### **Chapter 5: Rising and Falling Empires**

[Rome's Ascent and Demise](#)

[Building Empires around the World](#)

[Remembering Far-Flung Cultures](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

### **Chapter 6: Splitting Eras: The Middle Ages**

[Building \(And Maintaining\) the Byzantine Empire](#)

[Sharing and Imposing Culture](#)

[Planting the Seeds of European Nations](#)

[Emerging Islamic Fervor](#)

[Rebounding Guptas in India](#)

[Rounding Up Developments in Cultures Far to the East and to the West](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Chapter 7: Struggling for Dominance**

[Extending the Arab Empire and Spreading Islam](#)

[Excelling in East Asia](#)

[Developing a Taste for Eastern Goods](#)

[Mounting the Crusades](#)

[Growing Trade between East and West](#)

[Surviving the Black Death](#)

[Seeking a Way East and Finding Places to the West](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Chapter 8: Grabbing the Globe**

[Sailing South to Get East](#)

[“Discovering” America](#)

[Circling the Planet](#)

[Spreading the Slave Trade](#)

[Starting Revolutions](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Chapter 9: Pulling Empires Together as Subjects Push Back**

[Managing Unprecedented Empires](#)

[Challenging European Dominance](#)

[Revolting in Russia](#)

[Fighting World Wars](#)

[Running Hot and Cold \(Wars\)](#)

[Getting it Together and Forming the United Nations](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Part 3: Seeking Answers**

### **Chapter 10: Worshipping through the Ages**

[Defining Religion](#)

[Assessing Animism](#)



[Jotting down Judaism](#)  
[Hammering Out Hinduism](#)  
[Biting Off a Bit of Buddhism](#)  
[Condensing Christianity](#)  
[Investigating Islam](#)  
[Summarizing Sikhism](#)  
[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Chapter 11: Loving Wisdom: Philosophy's Impact**

[Asking the Big Questions](#)  
[Tracing Philosophy's Roots](#)  
[Examining Eastern Philosophies](#)  
[Leading to \(and from\) Socrates](#)  
[Philosophy in the Age of Alexander and After](#)  
[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Chapter 12: Being Christian, Thinking Greek**

[The Great Chain of Being](#)  
[Interpreting Christian Theology](#)  
[Establishing Jesus's Divinity](#)  
[Augustine's Influence on Early Christian Thought](#)  
[The Philosophy of Aquinas](#)  
[Embracing Humanism and More](#)  
[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Chapter 13: Awakening to the Renaissance**

[Realizing the Reach of the Renaissance](#)  
[Redefining the Human Role](#)  
[Uniting Flesh and Soul](#)  
[Returning to Science](#)  
[Being All That You Could Be](#)  
[Writing for the Masses](#)  
[Undermining Renaissance Gains with Conflict](#)  
[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Chapter 14: Breaking Away: The Reformation**

[Cracks in the Catholic Monopoly](#)

[Luther Challenges the System](#)

[A Precarious Holy Roman Empire](#)

[Here Luther Stands \(Up to the Emperor\)](#)

[Luther Gains a Following](#)

[The Empire Strikes Back](#)

[Reform Spreads to England](#)

[Along Comes Calvin](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Chapter 15: Opening Up to Science and Enlightenment**

[Mingling Science and Philosophy](#)

[Starting a Scientific Revolution](#)

[Waking Up to the Enlightenment](#)

[Engineering the Industrial Revolution](#)

[Marketing Economics](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Part 4: Fighting, Fighting, Fighting**

### **Chapter 16: Wielding Sticks and Stones: Old-Fashioned War**

[Fighting as an Ancient Way of Life](#)

[Raising Armies](#)

[Avoiding Assyrian Arsenals](#)

[Farming and Fighting Together in Greece](#)

[Making War the Roman Way](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

### **Chapter 17: Upgrading the War Machine**

[Reinventing the Cavalry](#)

[Donning the Steel Suit](#)

[Adding Firepower with Gunpowder](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Chapter 18: Modernizing Mayhem**

[Following Three Paths to Modern War](#)

[Tying Tactics to Technology in the 20th Century](#)

[Warring On Despite the Nuclear Threat](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Part 5: Meeting the Movers and Shakers**

### **Chapter 19: Starting Something Legendary**

[Spinning Legends](#)

[Uniting for Strength](#)

[Playing for Power](#)

[Building Bridges](#)

[Writing Laws](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

### **Chapter 20: Battling Toward Immortality**

[Towering Over Their Times](#)

[Building Empires](#)

[Launching Attacks](#)

[Mounting a Defense](#)

[Devising Tactics](#)

[Instigating Inspiration](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

### **Chapter 21: Exploring and “Discovering”**

[Famous Pioneers: Arriving Before Their Time](#)

[Courageous Couriers: Carrying Messages](#)

[Trailblazing Explorers: Seeking New Routes](#)

[Notorious Conquerors: Bad Company](#)

[Famous Firsts](#)

[Renowned Guides](#)

[Famous Mavericks: Taking Advantage of Opportunity](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Chapter 22: Turning Tables: Rebels and Revolutionaries**

[Rising from Revolutionaries to Rulers](#)

[Gaining Support As Charismatic Rebels](#)

[Making Ideas Reality](#)

[Standing Against Authority](#)

[Changing Rules](#)

[Living and Dying by the Sword](#)

[Dying for a Cause](#)

[Tracking the Centuries](#)

## **Part 6: The Part of Tens**

### **Chapter 23: Ten Unforgettable Dates in History**

[460 BC: Athens Goes Democratic](#)

[323 BC: Alexander the Great Dies](#)

[476: The Western Roman Empire Falls](#)

[1066: Normans Conquer England](#)

[1095: The First Crusade Commences](#)

[1492: Columbus Sails the Ocean Blue](#)

[1776: Americans Break Away](#)

[1807: Britain Bans the Slave Trade](#)

[1893: Women Start Getting the Vote Around the World](#)

[1945: The United States Drops the A-Bomb](#)

### **Chapter 24: Ten Essential Historical Documents**

[The Rosetta Stone](#)

[Confucian Analects](#)

[The Bible](#)

[The Quran](#)

[The Magna Carta](#)

[The Travels of Marco Polo](#)

[The Declaration of Independence](#)

[The Bill of Rights](#)

[Das Kapital](#)

[On the Origin of Species](#)

[Index](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Connect with Dummies](#)

[End User License Agreement](#)

# List of Illustrations

## Chapter 1

[FIGURE 1-1: The Fertile Crescent extended from the Persian Gulf through Iraq an...](#)

## Chapter 4

[FIGURE 4-1: The Indus Valley Civilization was in what is now India and Pakistan...](#)

[FIGURE 4-2: The Greeks built independent city-states all over the Aegean and we...](#)

## Chapter 5

[FIGURE 5-1: The Roman Empire at its height under the Emperor Trajan. 117 AD.](#)

[FIGURE 5-2: Qin Shihuangdi started linking defense works that became the Great ...](#)

## Chapter 6

[FIGURE 6-1: Charlemagne's empire as it was when he died in 814 AD.](#)

## Chapter 7

[FIGURE 7-1: The Blue Mosque in Istanbul boasts the distinctive Middle Eastern m...](#)

## Chapter 8

[FIGURE 8-1: The Mexican flag commemorates a legend about the Aztecs.](#)

## Chapter 9

[FIGURE 9-1: By 1900, the African map was a jigsaw puzzle of European conquests.](#)

## **Chapter 10**

[FIGURE 10-1: The Hindu god Skanda is often depicted atop a peacock clutching a ...](#)

## **Chapter 11**

[FIGURE 11-1: Socrates' reputation as a philosopher rests mainly on what Plato w...](#)

[FIGURE 11-2: A drawing of the marble lighthouse in the harbor of Alexandria by ...](#)

## **Chapter 13**

[FIGURE 13-1: Michelangelo's \*David\*, a holy hunk.](#)

[FIGURE 13-2: In his famous drawing \*Vitruvian Man\*, Leonardo da Vinci used geomet...](#)

## **Chapter 14**

[FIGURE 14-1: To be rid of wife Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII cut England's ti...](#)

## **Chapter 15**

[FIGURE 15-1: Children often tended the machines of the Industrial Revolution.](#)

## **Chapter 16**

[FIGURE 16-1: Macedon's phalanx was a marching hedgehog of muscular men, wood, a...](#)

## **Chapter 17**

[FIGURE 17-1: Front and side views of different stirrups, a technological innova...](#)

[FIGURE 17-2: The matchlock added a fuse to ignite the gunpowder and free the so...](#)

[FIGURE 17-3: With thick walls and a star-shaped design, the Renaissance fort wa...](#)

## **Chapter 18**

[FIGURE 18-1: Guerilla fighters such as Vietnam's Viet Cong, South Vietnamese in...](#)

## **Chapter 20**

[FIGURE 20-1: Adolph Hitler started World War II in 1939 when he sent German troops...](#)

[FIGURE 20-2: Joan of Arc led French troops to victory over the English in the Hundred Years War...](#)

## **Chapter 21**

[FIGURE 21-1: Marco Polo's travels took him to places that include today's Israel, India, and China...](#)

## **Chapter 22**

[FIGURE 22-1: North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh discovered communism as a young man...](#)

# Introduction

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The complete history of the world boiled down to 400-some pages and crammed between paperback covers? The idea is preposterous. It's outrageous. I'd be crazy to attempt it. So here goes.

This book doesn't claim to be complete. It can't be. Hundreds of other volumes are devoted to a measly decade or two (the World War II era comes to mind). Plumbing thousands of years in one little book would be impossible. Skimming the surface, however, is another matter.

## *About This Book*

Here, you can find enough information that if you hit on an era, a personality, or a civilization you'd like to know more about, you'll at least know what to look for. There's no lack of places to find out more. You can turn to many far more complete accounts of the history of specific countries (such as the United States), continents (such as Europe), and events (such as the U.S. Civil War). You can find books about all these topics and more in this excellent *For Dummies* series. But if you want a simplified overview, consisting of a collection of easy-to-read glimpses of major players and events that have made the world what it is today, I'm your guide, and *World History For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, is your first-stop reference.

History is like a soap opera that has been running ever since the invention of writing. The show is lurid, full of dirty tricks and murder, romances and sexual deceptions, adventures, and wars and revolutions. (And, yes, treaties



and dates.) Or maybe a better analogy is that history is like hundreds of soap operas, with thousands of crossover characters jumping out of one story and into another — too many for even the most devoted fan to keep straight, which is all the more reason for an easy-to-use overview.

The most important thing to remember is that history is fun, or should be. It's not as though this is life-and-death stuff... . No, wait. It *is* life-and-death stuff — on a ginormous scale. It's just that so many of the lives and deaths happened long ago. But that's good, because I can pry into private affairs without getting sued. History is full of vintage gossip and antique scandal, peppered heavily with high adventure — swords and spears and cannons and stuff. The more you get into it, the better you'll do when the neighbors drag out the home version of *Jeopardy*. (Renaissance Italy for \$500, please.)

Every field from brain surgery to refuse collection has its conventions, a special vocabulary chief among them. History is no exception, but I tried to steer clear of historians-only words and phrases. When such a word is unavoidable, I explain it in reader-friendly terms. As for other technical terms, I usually follow them with definitions and explanations.

You'll find a few Latin and other foreign words and phrases sprinkled throughout the book too. I have to include them because I tell you about cultures and countries where English was unknown. Latin terms show up because this book's subjects include the important, influential Roman Empire, where everybody spoke Latin. I also cover Europe in the Middle Ages, when Latin was the international language. I use other words that may be unfamiliar; those terms are highlighted in italics and defined. Finally, I can't write about world history without

covering the enormous influence of the Roman Catholic Church, an institution that for many centuries clung to Latin as its official means of expression. But don't worry. I promise not to use many such terms, and when I do, I'll explain what they mean.

## ***Foolish Assumptions***

As I wrote this book, I made some assumptions about you. They may be foolish, but here they are:

- » You've studied at least some history in school. You may even know quite a lot about certain historical topics, but you'd like to find out more about how it all fits together.
- » You've seen movies or read novels set in various historical eras, and you suspect that they'd be more enjoyable if you were better informed about the time periods and the historical peoples featured.
- » At least once in your life, you've encountered an obnoxious history know-it-all, one of those people who spews random facts about ancient Rome or the French Revolution. In the event that it happens again, you want the satisfaction of either keeping up with the conversation or contradicting Smarty-pants and knowing (at least a little bit) about what you're talking about.

## ***Icons Used in This Book***

Throughout this book, icons in the margins highlight certain types of valuable information. Here are the icons you'll encounter and a brief description of each.



**REMEMBER** Remember icons mark information that's especially important. But it's okay if you forget; just go back and look for the icon. I hope that points you to content that's memorable.



**TECHNICAL STUFF** The Technical Stuff icon in this book marks information that's interesting but not essential, so if you want, you can skip it. I like these asides, but you don't have to.



**TIP** Tip icons are for ideas that you may find helpful, including places to see historical artifacts that can help you feel more in touch with the past. If the artifact is in a museum, you probably won't get to touch it physically, though.



**IN THEIR WORDS** The In Their Words icon marks a quote that makes a point better than I can, although I hate to admit it.



**WARNING** The Warning icon tells you to watch out! In considering history, it's especially important not to assume, to keep an open mind, and to set preconceptions aside.

# ***Beyond the Book***

In addition to the abundance of information and guidance related to world history that you can find in this book, you can get access to even more help and information at [Dummies.com](http://Dummies.com). Check out this book's online Cheat Sheet. Just go to [www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com) and search for "World History For Dummies Cheat Sheet."

## ***Where to Go from Here***

You can start with [Chapter 1](#) and read to the end, but that's not required. A great thing about this book is that it's organized so that you can jump in any place you want. As you page through and browse, note that you can look at the same era from different perspectives. [Part 3](#), for example, tells you how philosophy and religion shaped history; there, you can find out about the religious wars that followed the Protestant Reformation. But if you're more interested in the weaponry and strategies of war, jump to [Part 4](#). And if you just want to browse the bios of some historical all-stars, check out [Part 5](#). Not sure what you're looking for? [Part 1](#) is a good place to get a general feel for history. The table of contents and index, along with the part summaries earlier in this introduction, should get you to the pages you need.

**Part 1**  
**Getting into History**

## IN THIS PART ...

Follow the threads of cause and effect that weave through every part of human experience. If you want to know how things got to be the way they are today, look to yesterday.

See how myths and artifacts — such as the ruins of once-great cities and even the preserved remains of our ancestors — provide wonderful clues to the realities of the ancient world and the beginnings of what we call history.

Put history and its personalities into perspective and wrap your head around how long humans have been doing a lot of the same things people do today: buying, selling, cooking, falling in love, traveling, and fighting wars.

# Chapter 1

## Tracing a Path to the Present

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### IN THIS CHAPTER

- » **Pondering how the past shaped the present**
  - » **Thinking about humankind's remarkable journey**
  - » **Tracing a tapestry of historical threads**
- 

Just two decades into the 21st century, humanity hit a speed bump, in the form of a pandemic. The pandemic was a new viral disease — relatively benign in many patients but deadly in others and wildly unpredictable. Because it was new to our species, nobody had a ready immune response. Highly contagious, it spread rapidly around the world. Immunologists, the scientists who are experts at these things, had to figure out how to fight the disease on the fly.

The World Health Organization called the virus SARS-CoV-2, for severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus, version 2 (after a predecessor in 2003). It called the sickness COVID-19, for coronavirus disease 2019, the year it was identified.

The nature of the threat and how it should be dealt with sparked worldwide debate. Some governments took quick, decisive action to contain it, while others decided to go more slowly. The latter approach proved to be ineffective as infection rates soared.

Another point of discussion was why the world was caught unprepared. “Public health experts have predicted we’d be hit by another pandemic for decades,” puffed the pundits. “Why didn’t leadership have a plan?” asked the journalists. “Why the heck didn’t anybody see this coming?” queried podcasters. “It’s all a hoax!” screamed too many conspiracy theorists.

The pandemic changed the world. According to Johns Hopkins University, it killed more than 4 million people worldwide by the middle of 2021, with case rates rising again. It stalled the world economy and influenced the way people did their jobs, as well as where and how they chose to live.

But this book isn’t about a 21st-century pandemic any more than it’s about the bubonic plague that ravaged Europe and Asia in the 14th century. It isn’t about modern epidemiology or economics, either. It’s about two broader questions: “How did things get to be like this?” and “Why is the world as it is?”

There have been too many years of human activity on this planet — too many lives lived, too many diseases, technological breakthroughs, migrations, wars, murders, weddings, coronations, revolutions, recessions, natural disasters, and financial meltdowns — to trace humanity’s route simply. Too many historians have interpreted events in too many contradictory ways. But what I hope you find in this book is a general view of how human history has gotten you and the world you live in to current reality. To this. To now.

## ***Firing Up the WABAC Machine***



If you care about classic TV cartoons, you've heard of the WABAC Machine. Pronounced "way back," the machine was a fictional time-traveling device built and operated by a genius dog named Mr. Peabody. In every episode of the 1960s animated series *Rocky and His Friends*, the professorial pooch and his pet boy, Sherman, transported themselves to a historical setting — say, ancient Rome, revolutionary America, or medieval England — where they interacted with famous people and solved whatever ridiculously absurd dilemma was troubling cartoon Julius Caesar, George Washington, or King Arthur. Thus, Mr. Peabody and Sherman allowed the events we think of as history to take their proper course.

These episodes spoofed a classic science-fiction premise. Storytellers often use time travel as a plot device. American novelist Mark Twain did it in 1889 with *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. England's H.G. Wells followed suit in 1895 with *The Time Machine*, although he sent his protagonist (identified only as "the Time Traveller") into the future. Other examples include British TV's numerous incarnations of *Doctor Who* to hundreds of novels, graphic novels, plays, films, and videogames.

Often, these stories involve someone going back in time to change something in the present or to prevent the present from being changed in some fashion that will cause a future catastrophe. One tiny interference in the "time continuum," as it's often called, can lead to a monumentally altered chain of events.

Nobody can do that, of course.



**REMEMBER** You can, however, understand more about the present if you time travel in your head — that is, think about the ways that yesterday’s events shaped today. You can ponder how what happened a decade ago shapes this year and how a single change somewhere in the past could have made today different. Historians scoff at the “what if” game, but it’s a tool for getting your head into history.

What if incumbent Donald Trump had won the 2020 U.S. presidential election instead of challenger Joe Biden? Would an angry mob have attacked the U.S. Capitol the following January? How different would American politics have been? How about if voters in the United Kingdom had not chosen, in a 2016 referendum, to withdraw that nation from the European Union? Would that nation’s banks or fishing industry be better off or worse today? What about its people?

For that matter, what if Japan had not attacked the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor in 1941? Or what if the terrorists who crashed airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, had been stopped before they could board the planes? Think about the lives that would have been saved and the grief that would have been averted. Imagine the years since. What would have been different?

In the case of the World Trade Center, U.S. troops wouldn’t have been sent to Afghanistan, for one thing. That invasion turned into a two-decades-long conflict, the United States’ longest war. And if the Trade Center had not fallen, would there have been that other U.S. war in the Middle East — the one in Iraq? We can’t know for

sure, but we know that many lives changed because of that tragic 2001 attack.

## ***Footpath to Expressway: Building on Humble Beginnings***

Human beings used to be hunter-gatherers. There may be a slim chance that you're still living that way, getting all your food from the natural world around you. I doubt it, though. Instead, you're a student, an office worker, or perhaps a truck driver. Maybe you write code, or you're an IT specialist. You perform any of thousands of occupations unimagined by early humankind. You use tools like cellphones and GPS navigation — things hardly dreamed of even when I was born in the middle of the 20th century, let alone at the dawn of civilization. Yet here I am, clacking away on a computer keyboard, checking my meager investments online, and listening to my streaming playlist just like a modern human being.

In a way, here too are the people of 30,000 years ago, my ancestors and yours. They may have thought a lot about berries, seeds, insects and grubs, shellfish, and calorie-rich bone marrow from fresh or scavenged kills. But they were endowed with the same basic biological equipment we have today. They were big-brained, tool-using bipeds with opposable thumbs, and after tens of thousands of years living hand to mouth from what they could find or kill, some of them spread across the world.

Either pushed by circumstance (climate change, for example) or inspired by new opportunities, they traveled from the lush forests, savannahs, and seacoasts of Africa to face the harsh challenges of virtually every

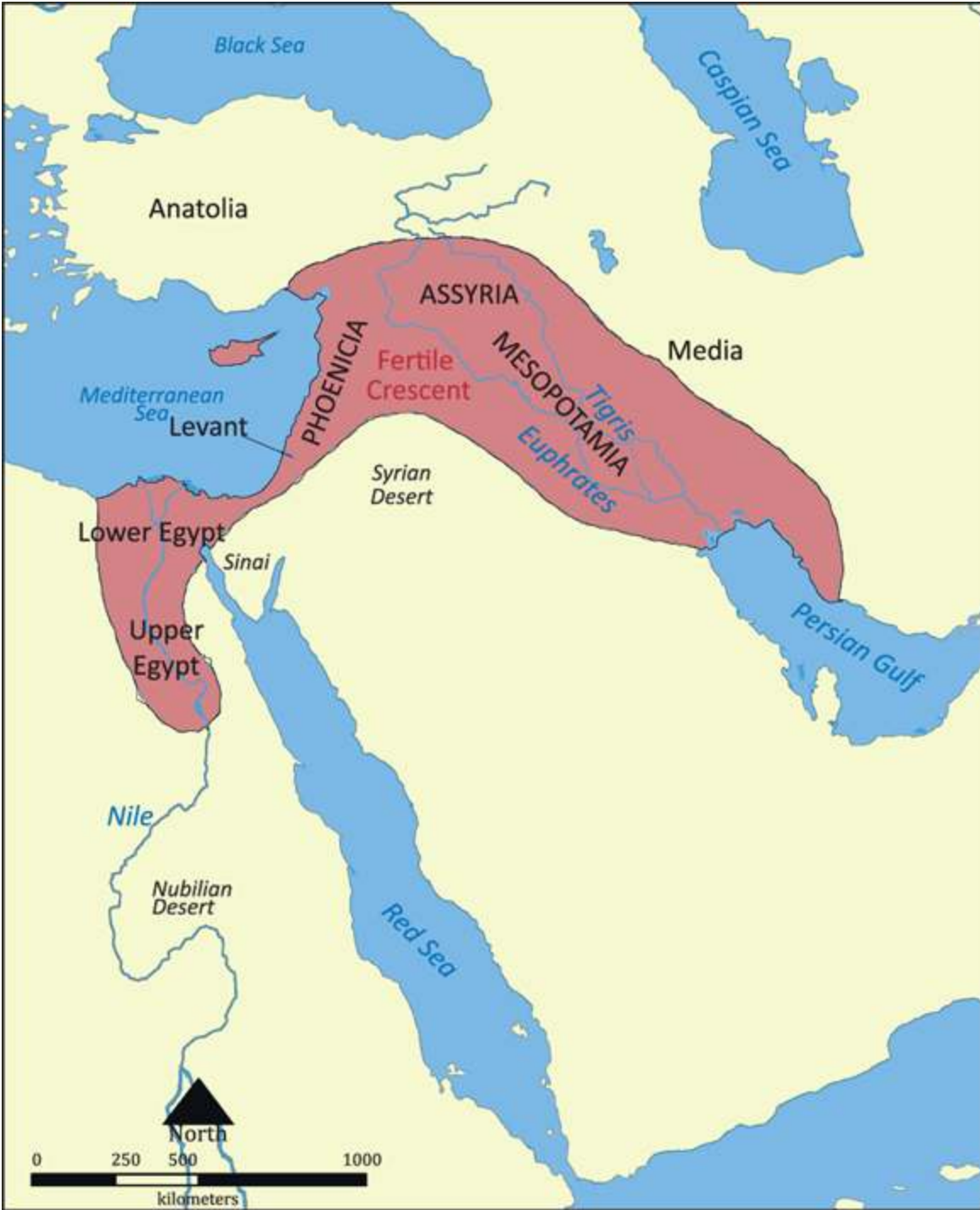
environment on Earth, including mountains, deserts, frozen steppes, and remote islands. Eventually, they traded in stone spearheads and scrapers for tools and weapons made of copper, then of bronze, and then of iron ... and ultimately built things like microcircuits and Mars rovers. Those people traveled and adapted and innovated all the way to today. They are you and me. In a weird way, then is now.

Around 12,000 years ago, not very long after the last Ice Age ended, some people whose technology consisted largely of sticks and rocks settled down. They were discovering that if they put seeds in the ground, plants would come up, and that this process worked best if they stuck around to tend the plants. This realization eventually led to farming.

Scholars point to an area they call the Fertile Crescent (see [Figure 1-1](#)), as a hotbed of early farming. Shaped like a mangled croissant, the Fertile Crescent stretched from what is now western Iran and the Persian Gulf through the river valleys of today's Iraq and into western Turkey. Then it hooked south along the Mediterranean coast and the Jordan River through Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, and into northern Africa and the Nile Valley of Egypt. The crescent is where archaeologists have found some of the oldest cities in the world.

The chain reaction that starts civilizations goes something like this: Agriculture leads people to stay put in exchange for more food, and ample food enables population growth. When a group's population reaches a certain size, there's little chance of going back to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, because there wouldn't be enough food for so many people. Ample food also gives the growing population commodities to trade. Trade

leads to more trade, which leads to more goods and wealth. Not everybody works in the fields. Some folks can specialize in hauling goods; others can construct buildings or perhaps concentrate on making weapons, used either to protect their own wealth or to take wealth away from others. Artisans create jewelry and turn mundane objects (arrowheads, pots, baskets) into aesthetic statements. Society gets multilayered. Buildings rise. Villages become towns. Cities rise. Trade necessitates keeping track of quantities and values, which necessitates a way to record information. Number systems get invented. Writing follows. Prehistory becomes history.



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**FIGURE 1-1:** The Fertile Crescent extended from the Persian Gulf through Iraq and into Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, and into the Nile Valley of Egypt.