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A photograph of ancient stone ruins, likely a temple or palace, featuring several tall, intricately carved columns and a large dome in the background. The scene is set outdoors under a clear sky.

***ANCIENT MAN:  
THE BEGINNING  
OF CIVILIZATIONS***

**Hendrik Willem Van Loon**

# **Ancient Man: The Beginning of Civilizations**

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# PREHISTORIC MAN

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It took Columbus more than four weeks to sail from Spain to the West Indian Islands. We on the other hand cross the ocean in sixteen hours in a flying machine.

Five hundred years ago, three or four years were necessary to copy a book by hand. We possess linotype machines and rotary presses and we can print a new book in a couple of days.

We understand a great deal about anatomy and chemistry and mineralogy and we are familiar with a thousand different branches of science of which the very name was unknown to the people of the past.

In one respect, however, we are quite as ignorant as the most primitive of men--we do not know where we came from. We do not know how or why or when the human race began its career upon this Earth. With a million facts at our disposal we are still obliged to follow the example of the fairy-stories and begin in the old way:

"Once upon a time there was a man."

This man lived hundreds of thousands of years ago.

What did he look like?

We do not know. We never saw his picture. Deep in the clay of an ancient soil we have sometimes found a few pieces of his skeleton. They were

hidden amidst masses of bones of animals that have long since disappeared from the face of the earth. We have taken these bones and they allow us to reconstruct the strange creature who happens to be our ancestor.

The great-great-grandfather of the human race was a very ugly and unattractive mammal. He was quite small. The heat of the sun and the biting wind of the cold winter had colored his skin a dark brown. His head and most of his body were covered with long hair. He had very thin but strong fingers which made his hands look like those of a monkey. His forehead was low and his jaw was like the jaw of a wild animal which uses its teeth both as fork and knife.



**PREHISTORIC MAN.**

He wore no clothes. He had seen no fire except the flames of the rumbling volcanoes which filled the earth with their smoke and their lava.

He lived in the damp blackness of vast forests.

When he felt the pangs of hunger he ate raw leaves and the roots of plants or he stole the eggs from the nest of an angry bird.

Once in a while, after a long and patient chase, he managed to catch a sparrow or a small wild dog or perhaps a rabbit. These he would eat raw, for prehistoric man did not know that food could be cooked.

His teeth were large and looked like the teeth of many of our own animals.

During the hours of day this primitive human being went about in search of food for himself and his wife and his young.

At night, frightened by the noise of the beasts, who were in search of prey, he would creep into a hollow tree or he would hide himself behind a few big boulders, covered with moss and great, big spiders.

In summer he was exposed to the scorching rays of the sun.

During the winter he froze with cold.

When he hurt himself (and hunting animals are for ever breaking their bones or spraining their ankles) he had no one to take care of him.

He had learned how to make certain sounds to warn his fellow-beings whenever danger threatened. In this he resembled a dog who barks when a stranger approaches. In many other respects he was far less attractive than a well-bred house pet.

Altogether, early man was a miserable creature who lived in a world of fright and hunger, who was surrounded by a thousand enemies and who was for ever haunted by the vision of friends and relatives who had been eaten up by wolves and bears and the terrible sabre-toothed tiger.

Of the earliest history of this man we know nothing. He had no tools and he built no homes. He lived and died and left no traces of his existence. We keep track of him through his bones and they tell us that he lived more than two thousand centuries ago.

The rest is darkness.

Until we reach the time of the famous Stone Age, when man learned the first rudimentary principles



of what we call civilization.

Of this Stone Age I must tell you in some detail.

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## **THE WORLD GROWS COLD**

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Something was the matter with the weather.

Early man did not know what "time" meant.

He kept no records of birthdays and wedding-anniversaries or the hour of death.

He had no idea of days or weeks or years.

When the sun arose in the morning he did not say "Behold another day." He said "It is Light" and he used the rays of the early sun to gather food for his family.

When it grew dark, he returned to his wife and children, gave them part of the day's catch (some berries and a few birds), stuffed himself full with raw meat and went to sleep.

In a very general way he kept track of the seasons. Long experience had taught him that the cold Winter was invariably followed by the mild Spring--that Spring grew into the hot Summer when fruits ripened and the wild ears of corn were ready to be plucked and eaten. The Summer ended when gusts of wind swept the leaves from the trees and when a number of animals crept into their holes to make ready for the long hibernal sleep.



THE GLACIAL PERIOD.

It had always been that way. Early man accepted these useful changes of cold and warm but asked no questions. He lived and that was enough to satisfy him.

Suddenly, however, something happened that worried him greatly.

The warm days of Summer had come very late. The fruits had not ripened at all. The tops of the mountains which used to be covered with grass lay deeply hidden under a heavy burden of snow.

Then one morning quite a number of wild people, different from the other inhabitants of his valley had

approached from the region of the high peaks.

They muttered sounds which no one could understand. They looked lean and appeared to be starving. Hunger and cold seemed to have driven them from their former homes.

There was not enough food in the valley for both the old inhabitants and the newcomers. When they tried to stay more than a few days there was a terrible fight and whole families were killed. The others fled into the woods and were not seen again.

For a long time nothing occurred of any importance.

But all the while, the days grew shorter and the nights were colder than they ought to have been.

Finally, in a gap between the two high hills, there appeared a tiny speck of greenish ice. It increased in size as the years went by. Very slowly a gigantic glacier was sliding down the slopes of the mountain ridge. Huge stones were being pushed into the valley. With the noise of a dozen thunderstorms they suddenly tumbled among the frightened people and killed them while they slept. Century-old trees were crushed into kindling wood by the high walls of ice that knew of no mercy to either man or beast.

At last, it began to snow.

It snowed for months and months and months.



THE CAVE-MAN.

All the plants died. The animals fled in search of the southern sun. The valley became uninhabitable. Man hoisted his children upon his back, took the few pieces of stone which he had used as a weapon and went forth to find a new home.

Why the world should have grown cold at that particular moment, we do not know. We can not even guess at the cause.

The gradual lowering of the temperature, however, made a great difference to the human race.