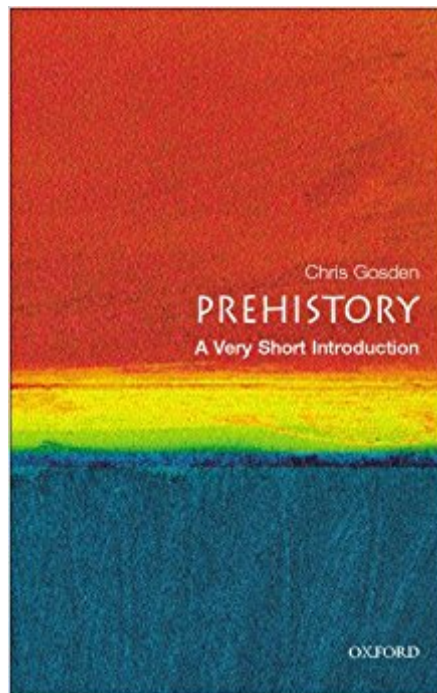




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Prehistory: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions)



Synopsis

This VSI to prehistory will introduce the reader to four and a half million years of human existence. Many of the familiar aspects of modern life are no more than a century or two old, yet our deep social structures and skills were in large measure developed by small bands of our prehistoric ancestors many millennia ago. Chris Gosden invites us to think seriously about who we are by considering who we have been. The idea of prehistory owes its origins to Darwin - suddenly any description of human life on Earth had to take account of a much longer timespan than ever before. What new views of ourselves has this new timespan opened up? Chris Gosden's fascinating new book asks: What relationships did our distant ancestors have with the natural world, with each other, and with the objects and values they created? And as humanity hurtles into a future of virtual interaction and genetic manipulation, what can the darkest recesses of our past teach us about our future?

ABOUT THE SERIES: The Very Short Introductions series from Oxford University Press contains hundreds of titles in almost every subject area. These pocket-sized books are the perfect way to get ahead in a new subject quickly. Our expert authors combine facts, analysis, perspective, new ideas, and enthusiasm to make interesting and challenging topics highly readable.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The author being a museum curator, it is not surprising that he concentrates on physical artifacts and the ways in which early humans used them to relate to their environment and each other. His main thesis is that our relationship with objects, and the way we relate to other humans by use of objects (trading, giving, repaying, etc) is what defines us as humans and is the central dynamic of cultural evolution. He also claims that this intimate relationship with objects has been the evolutionary driving force behind human intelligence. Indeed, he attempts a new definition of intelligence which has little to do with intellectual ability as normally perceived but has to do with our interaction with the physical world around us. This is no doubt politically correct and allows us to describe the most moronic athletes as geniuses, but it leaves us with no definition of intellect, so we are back where we started. Are we to reserve judgement on Einstein's intellectual abilities until we know if he could kick a ball straight? I won't even ask about Stephen Hawking. Where many researchers would emphasize language as being central to what makes us human and what enables us to evolve sophisticated cultures, Gosden always comes back to objects. He does mention language. In describing the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis he acknowledges that it is 'controversial within linguistics', but then goes on to talk of it as if it were proven fact. I thought it had been thoroughly discredited long ago. But for the most part, language is ignored in favor of objects. Of course, this is understandable in someone who spends his time sifting through pieces of flint rather than poring over ancient manuscripts. I cannot blame him for ignoring literary evidence when prehistory, by definition, has none. But just because physical evidence is all there is, it does not mean that that was all that was involved in our species' extraordinary rise to prominence. Language may have more to do with intelligence, and those together may have more to do with cultural evolution, than Gosden gives credit for. There is considerable overlap with two other entries in this series: Social and Cultural Anthropology by Monaghan and Just, and History, by Arnold. Both of those are excellent. There is also one called Human Evolution, which I have not yet read but which has received good reviews. Probably, if you read those three, you could safely skip this one. To finish on a positive note: the book is valuable in that it demonstrates that prehistory is not simply 'the distant past'. It is undocumented history, and some societies have passed from their prehistory in relatively recent times. The book encourages the reader to approach prehistory from a sociological or anthropological perspective rather than in terms of a simple timeline. If early Man is a special interest of yours, then you will want to read this book as well as the other three mentioned above.

I was expecting a brief overview of prehistoric events and discoveries, but this book is more of a primer on theoretical philosophies of archaeological thought and society in general. Not particularly interesting, I really had to push myself to finish it.

If you want a very quick to read yet interesting text book on human prehistory, this is the book for you. This book is a great, to the point history book that also captures your attention with images of ancient monuments and artifacts.

I've had mostly good experiences with books from this OUP series. This one was somewhat disappointing because, for such a brief book the author spends too much space on his own views and too little on information about prehistory, which is what he was supposed to do.

I bought this hoping for an interesting basic account of the major prehistoric cultures and technologies that have existed throughout the world, some discussion of which major genetic markers appeared where, a bit of linguistics, and an account of attempts to show how these might all relate and what story this tells about human migration and development. Instead it was mostly an essay of repetitive musings on the philosophy of anthropology, but often scarcely related to prehistory, spending several pages on topics like: the meaning of 'intelligence', with a long discussion of David Beckham, paragraphs which start with "Transformations are manifest in connections..." and continue in the same vein for a while, several pages which start with "I leave the most contentious issue for last: that each continent has its own set of myths." Much of the end consists of quaint anecdotes from his social life on the field. There's even a weird paragraph where he refers to his student's work and says he's sure she'll do a great job presenting, even though she's nervous...The series claims to be the 'thinking man's Wikipedia. I'd say this is grossly unfair to Wikipedia. If you are looking for what I was looking for, a few detailed Wikipedia articles would be a good starting point for references. Nonetheless, the writer is certainly a well-informed and experienced archeologist (or 'prehistorian'), and as a brief treatise composed of avuncular anecdotes and some quite interesting views, it had a certain charm. And there were certainly some broad facts and interesting case studies (Papua New Guinea,) I imagine he is thoroughly entertaining in lectures.

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