Chapter 1 – Investigating the Past

How do social scientists interpret the past?

Section 1.1 – Introduction

Welcome to the world of ancient history. Studying history involves investigating what happened in the past and why. Ancient history concerns the distant past, from the earliest humans through the first great civilizations.

Prehistoric paintings of bulls were found in a cave in Lascaux, France

How can we learn about events that happened so long ago? People who study history are a lot like detectives conducting an investigation. They ask questions, study the evidence for clues, and form hypotheses (educated guesses).

Our investigation of the ancient past starts near the very beginning of human history. What was life like long, long ago?

One amazing clue about life long ago was discovered at Lascaux (lah-SKOH), France, by four teenagers. On September 12, 1940, the boys found a cave. Covering the walls and ceiling of the cave were paintings of animals. The paintings seemed very old. Who had created them? What did they mean?

How would you solve a mystery like this one? The clues are centuries old, and the witnesses are long gone. You might need the help of an expert detective, but who would that be?
In this chapter, you’ll meet three kinds of experts who study the past. Then you’ll look at some fascinating examples of cave art to see what this evidence can teach us about life long ago.

**Section 1.2 - Detectives Who Study the Past**

Scholars who study human society are called social scientists. Many social scientists can help us study the past. Among these “history detectives” are **archaeologists**, **historians**, and **geographers**.

**Archaeologists: Digging Up the Past** Archaeologists study the past by examining objects that people have left behind. These **artifacts** are anything made or used by humans, such as clothing, tools, weapons, and coins. When archaeologists discover a place that has artifacts, they ask questions like these: Who lived in this place? When did they live here? What were they like? Then archaeologists study the artifacts for clues.

**Historians: Recording the Past** Historians are the recorders of the past. Human beings have been around for such a long time that historians tend to focus mostly on the last few thousand years, when people began leaving written records. Historians want to answer this question: What happened in the past? To find out, they study all kinds of artifacts and documents. They read diaries and letters. Besides asking what happened in the past, historians try to understand why events happened the way they did.

**Geographers: Mapping the Past** Geographers study the natural **features** of Earth, such as water, landforms, plants, and animals. Geographers also look at human-made features, such as towns, roads, bridges, and dams. These scientists help us answer such questions as: Where did people live? How did they use their **environment** to survive? Geographers often create maps to
show what they have learned.

Social scientists who study prehistoric history face a unique challenge—a lack of evidence from this period. In fact, huge gaps of time have no evidence at all. Therefore, scientists may come up with different answers or theories about how humans came to be.

**Section 1.3 - Cave Art: Treasures of the Past**

Cave paintings like those at Lascaux, France, provide clues about what life was like in prehistoric times, before writing was invented. Caves with paintings thousands of years old have been found all over the world. Some paintings show what kinds of animals roamed the Earth and what methods people used to hunt them. Often, the paintings offer hints about people’s beliefs.

Many of the rooms decorated with paintings are deep inside the caves. Scientists guess that cave artists used torches to work in these dark places. Some paintings are very large in size and taller than a person’s height. Some paintings are found on high ceilings. Scientists guess that prehistoric artists built scaffolding, or planks raised above the floor, to reach the highest places.

Caves have also provided clues in the form of artifacts. Scientists have found bits of rope, lamps for burning animal fat, and tools for painting and engraving. Cave paintings and artifacts are amazing treasures that can help answer many questions about how humans lived in ancient times. But, as you will see, these treasures also raise new questions for scientists to puzzle over.

**Section 1.4 - Cave Painting of a Human**

This hunting scene may show items used in special ceremonies. Notice the man’s bird mask and his bird on top.

This painting was found inside the cave at Lascaux, France. It was painted between 11,000 and 18,000 years ago.
The painting shows a scene from a hunt. The man is about to be gored (pierced by the horn of an animal). The animal, a woolly mammoth or a bison (a kind of buffalo), is wounded. There is a spear in its side, and the animal’s insides spill to the ground. The man lies in front of the wounded animal. He wears a mask that looks like a bird. Next to the man is a long stick with a bird on top. The stick is probably a spear thrower, a kind of handle used to hurl a spear.

Paintings of humans are rare in cave art. Notice the simple drawing of the man, like a stick figure. The animal is much more realistic.

Many social scientists think that this painting was created as part of a hunting ritual. The artist may have been asking for a successful hunt. It is also possible that the painting is a record of an actual event, or it may simply be a decoration.

**Section 1.5 - Cave Painting of Animals**

*Look at the bull in the center of this painting. Do you see how the neck stretches out, as though the bull were running away?*

This image is a copy of one found at Lascaux. The real painting lies in a part of the cave that has been closed to protect the art.

The painting was created about 17,000 years ago. It shows many prehistoric animals, such as bulls, bison, and horses.

The painters used the cave’s uneven walls as part of their composition. At the lower left, a ledge juts out from the wall. The artists painted the horses to look as though they were running along it.

Scientists have many ideas about why animal paintings were created. One idea is that the artists were trying to capture the “magical powers” of certain animals. Another idea is that the painters believed in the spirit world and were creating art to honor or influence their gods. Some scientists speculate that caves were places of worship and that paintings were used in rituals or ceremonies.
Section 1.6 - Cave Painting of Shapes and Handprints

The handprints seen in this cave painting are very small. Prehistoric people were probably smaller in size than people are today.

This painting is in a cave in Argentina, South America. It shows a circular shape, a sticklike animal, and several handprints.

Paintings of shapes and handprints are fairly common in cave art. Their meaning, though, is a bit of a mystery. Many scientists believe that handprints were a way for artists to sign their paintings. Some scientists think that geometric shapes had special meanings in rituals.

Researchers tried singing inside one painted cave in France. They discovered that the sound was loudest in the painted areas. Their guess is that those areas were used for special gatherings.

Section 1.7 - Spear Thrower

This prehistoric spear thrower was found in France. Made from a reindeer antler bone, it measures 10 inches long. It was probably made about 18,000 years ago.

The spear thrower has a leaping horse carved into the top. The artist engraved, or carved, hundreds of tiny dashes to show details in the horse’s head. The artist must have cared a great deal about decorating this important hunting tool.
The horse carved on this spear thrower looks full of energy.

Some scientists believe that the artist carved the horse for decoration. But the carving may have been a good-luck charm to protect the hunter or make him or her more successful. It may have had some relation to the hunter’s name. Or it may have been a way of identifying the clan that the hunter belonged to.

**Section 1.8 - Clay Sculptures**

These clay sculptures may offer clues about the people who made them and their reasons for creating them.

These clay sculptures of two bison were found in a low room, deep inside a cave in France. They were made about 10,000 to 14,000 years ago. They measure 23 inches in length. The artist
sculpted them from gold-colored clay. Carved lines show details such as the animals’ faces, coat markings, and the fringe of fur below their powerful necks.

Scientists have two main ideas about why these sculptures were created. One idea is that the sculptures were a sign that the cave belonged to a certain clan. The other idea is that the sculptures were used in an important ceremony held deep inside the cave. Perhaps it was a coming-of-age ceremony to show that a person had passed from childhood to adulthood. One clue that supports this idea is that footprints of young people have been found near the sculptures.

**Section 1.9 - Cave Art Tools**

Prehistoric materials and tools include colored, rock-hard minerals and a grindstone used for grinding the minerals. Other tools include a sculptor’s pick and an engraving tool.

Scientists study tools like these and try to guess how they were used. For example, scientists believe that cave artists made paints by grinding colored minerals into powder. They probably mixed the powder with animal fat or vegetable oil to create various colors.

You’ve already seen how prehistoric artists engraved some of their art. For painting, they may have used brushes made of moss, fur, or human hair. They may even have blown paint through hollow bird bones to create softer **textures**, such as shaggy winter coats on horses.
Summary
In this chapter, you’ve learned how social scientists investigate the past by using clues they find to form hypotheses.

Detectives Who Study the Past Social scientists might be archaeologists who examine artifacts that people have made and left behind, historians who study the written records that people began to leave in the last few thousand years, or geographers who look at the natural and human-made features of Earth.

Cave Art Caves have provided clues to the past for social scientists. Cave paintings and sculptures thousands of year old have been found all over the world. Artifacts also have been discovered in caves. The art and artifacts provide information about how people lived long ago.

Cave Art Tools Cave artists used sharp stones to grind colored minerals into powder. They mixed the powder with animal fat to create paint. They may have used moss, fur, hollow reeds, or their own hair as paintbrushes.

archaeologists: an expert who studies the past by examining objects that people have left behind
historians: an expert who studies and records the past
geographers: an expert who studies and creates maps of Earth’s natural and human-made features
artifacts: an object made or used by people in the past
features: an important part or characteristic of something
environment: all of the physical surroundings in a place, including land, water, animals, plants, and climate
prehistoric: before written history
ritual: relating to a ceremony, such as a religious ceremony
geometric: having a form composed of one or a number of simple shapes, such as triangles, squares, or circles
researchers: someone who searches for information on a particular subject
textures: the characteristics of an object’s surface that can be identified by feeling or viewing it

Enrichment Activity - What Is History?

What is history? This question may seem really easy, even silly. Most people would say that history is the study of the important people, dates, and events of the past. This answer is true as far as it goes. But who decides what people, dates, and events are important? And why should we bother learning about them?

Let’s dig a little deeper into the question “What is history?” First of all, history is an important way of thinking about the world. To see what this means, imagine waking up tomorrow and not
being able to remember a single thing about your past. You can’t remember your name or who your parents or family members are. You can’t remember the rules to your favorite game or anything you ever learned in school.

Without a knowledge of your own past, you might feel lost and lonely. You wouldn’t even know who you are. And you would have a hard time making good decisions about what to do next.

In a similar way, history helps us make sense of the world. History is the memory of communities, peoples, and nations. Without history, individuals and whole countries would lose their sense of direction. The next time you watch the news on TV, notice how often reporters, politicians, and others mention something about the past. Humans constantly use their knowledge of the past to make sense of what is happening today.

History is also an academic discipline. It is a systematic way of using evidence to make sense of the past.

When you think about it, the past is not an easy thing to study. After all, it’s not here any longer for anyone to observe directly. So historians turn to many kinds of evidence to describe and understand the past. Old documents, maps, tools, ruins, and many other kinds of evidence fascinate them. They want to know who created them, what they were created for, and what they can teach us about the past.

**History as an Ongoing Argument**

To make sense of the past, historians must weigh the available evidence and try to figure out what the facts are. Then they need to stitch the facts together to answer the questions that interest them. In doing this, they must use their judgment. And that means their own viewpoints come into play.

As a result, historians argue all the time. They argue about what the facts really are. They also argue about how to interpret the facts.

History, then, is much more than a listing of “facts.” Some people have even described history as an ongoing argument about the past. Why does the argument go on?

Sometimes historians find new evidence, such as an old document or the ruins of an ancient city. Discoveries like these may lead them to rethink old explanations. Sometimes historians take a fresh look at existing evidence and see things that others have overlooked. As they do so, they may explain events in a different way.

**Reading History**

Our discussion leads to some key points about how to read history. You can’t just assume that what you’re reading is the final truth. If you read more than one version of history, you are likely to find differences. So when you read history, ask yourself these questions:

- Who wrote this document?
- When was it written?
• What kinds of evidence does the author use?
• Is the evidence reliable?
• Is the author trying to promote a particular viewpoint?

An Example of a Historical Argument

Let’s look at one example of a historical argument. In History Alive! The Ancient World, you will learn about the Roman Empire. This was the greatest empire of the ancient world. It stretched across much of Europe, North Africa, and western Asia. People in the empire thought of its capital city, Rome, as the center of the world.

Protected by its armies, the empire lasted for about 500 years, from about 31 B.C.E. to 476 C.E. Then a dramatic change happened. The western half of the empire was overrun by tribes of people the Romans called barbarians, meaning “uncivilized.” In 476, the last Roman emperor in the west was forced to give up his throne. The western half the empire broke up into separate kingdoms ruled by the barbarians. Although the empire’s eastern half survived for another 1,000 years, the mighty Roman Empire of old was gone forever.

The breakup of the empire shocked people throughout the Mediterranean world. A great argument began that continues to this day. How could such a powerful empire disappear? What caused Rome to fall?

Edward Gibbon’s Explanation

In the 1700s, an English historian named Edward Gibbon became fascinated by these questions. He gave his answers in a famous work called The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.

Gibbon certainly did his homework. His work was so huge that it was published in six volumes over a period of 12 years.

So why did Rome fall, according to Gibbon? He mentions a number of causes, but two of them stand out. The first was the pressure from the barbarians outside the empire. The second was a kind of decay inside the empire itself. The Romans, Gibbon said, became soft. They became too fond of luxury, and they lost their sense of public spirit. They forgot the virtues of strength and citizenship that had made Rome great.

The Argument Goes On

Modern historians still admire Gibbon’s work. Most of them, though, would say that his explanation of Rome’s fall was overly simple. They argue that many causes worked together to bring down the empire. In addition to the moral decay that Gibbon wrote about, they point to a number of economic, social, military, and even environmental problems. These problems range from high taxes that hurt the economy to lead poisoning. (The Romans used lead in their pottery and water pipes.) Many other causes have been named as well. One historian lists more than 200 of them!

Historians don’t yet agree on which causes were the most important. In part, that’s because new
generations of historians bring fresh thinking and new discoveries to old problems. For example, the study of economics was in its infancy in Gibbon’s time. Today historians are much better equipped to look at economic problems as a possible source of Rome’s troubles. In addition, different historians’ viewpoints may lead them to notice different aspects of a complex story.

The argument also goes on because history is a way of thinking about the present, not just the past. Every generation finds its own lessons in the events of history. Gibbon, for example, lived in a time of great progress and prosperity in Europe. He was fascinated by Rome partly because he wanted to know whether the Europe of his own day might decline and fall, too.

Similarly, many people today compare the powerful Roman Empire to the United States. Like Gibbon, they want to know whether there are lessons in Rome’s story that might apply to their own time. No doubt the historians of the future will have their own reasons for asking once again why Rome fell.

**Conclusion**

We started with a simple question: What is history? As you have seen, this question has many answers. History is a study of the past. It is a way of making sense of the world. It is an academic discipline. It is a combination of facts and interpretations of facts. It is also an ongoing argument that changes with new evidence and new thinking. And that is the most exciting thing of all, because it means that history is very much alive.

**Enrichment Activity**

Answer these 5 questions:
1. What is history?
2. Is history just a listing of the facts?
3. Why might two historians come up with different versions of the past?
4. Why are historical interpretations subject to change?
5. How does the example of the fall of Rome show why it is important to question and evaluate the history we read?