

Chapter 1

Origins:

THE FIRST CIVILIZATIONS

How and why did life originate? What is our purpose on earth? How do human beings achieve harmony with the natural world and with each other? Even before the advent of writing, the earliest inhabitants of our planet must have asked such questions, for we know they made vigorous efforts to understand and manipulate their natural and social environments. Their answers come to us in the form of the tools and weapons, the tombs and temples, and the carved and painted images they left behind. The evidence of prehistory—the era before written records—precedes humankind’s first civilizations. Born in the river valleys of Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, and China, these earliest civilizations left written records, as well as material objects: tools and weapons, bronze statuary, and monumental structures that reveal to us how early urban dwellers raised complex cities, how they dealt with each other in peace and in war, and how they explained the experience of natural disaster, illness, birth, and death. While the landmarks of prehistoric and early civilizations offer only tentative answers to some of the same questions we pose today, they reveal how our early ancestors came to master the hardships of nature, the challenge of communal life, and the fear of death and dying.

Figure 1.1
Stonehenge trilithons (lintel-topped pairs of stones at center), Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, England, ca. 3000–1800 B.C.E. Stone, tallest upright 22 ft. (See also Figure 1.7.)

