Antiquity: From the Birth of Sumerian Civilization to the Fall of the Roman Empire.


NORMAN CANTOR, a professor of history, sociology and comparative literature at New York University, set himself an ambitious goal; to present the first several thousand years of recorded history in a concise, readable fashion. That he succeeds in an even-handed manner is a testament to his ability to distill complicated and controversial historical scholarship into clear, precise prose.

Part One of Antiquity, barely 50 pages, is a brief overview of the ancient world. It is the "fundamental knowledge about antiquity every educated person should possess." In fact, it is so basic that one is tempted to stop reading. Fortunately, Part Two explores these basics in more detail and is much more interesting. The general topics are Egypt, Ancient Judaism, Athens, Roman and Christian Thought.

The chapter on Egypt gives a case history of country's growth, reaching its peak under Rameses II in the 13th Century, B.C. Subsequently Egypt sank into decadence due to the laxity and dishonesty of its officials, as well as the Iron Age which left Egypt out since it had no iron ore.

The chapter on Ancient Judaism presents familiar material, mostly biblical references, but also includes recent scholarship on the sociological and psychological pressures on Orthodox Jews. As Cantor points out, historically there is little empirical data to support the biblical stories during the first thousand years. Even King David and Solomon were only small-time, moderately successful Near Eastern monarchs, and Authentic Jewish history begins with a decline; the split into two kingdoms and the exile to Babylon. An understanding of Jewish history depends upon “theodicy,” the justification of the way God treats man, and “historicity,” the Jewish view of himself as part of a long continuity from the patriarch to the present. The emphasis on the community resulted in a distinct ethnic, genetic, and spiritual group identity. The community identity was perhaps also bonded by a pessimism about the difficulty of performing God's covenant.

The chapter on Athens, the intellectual and cultural center of Greece, best describes its development through its philosophers, playwrights, and historians. Athens' central contribution to Western culture was its critical consideration of the nature of man and the human condition. Athenian gods did not provide divine revelations (unlike the God of the Jews and Christians), and thus allowed the Greeks the opportunity to reflect on the human condition in terms of their direct human experience.

Roman domination was accomplished by a series of bloody wars starting within Italy and expanding throughout the known world. The Roman experiment with republican government ended when Julius Caesar assumed the role of dictator. The Pax Romana established by Augustus was partly an excuse for the Roman aristocracy to rule the world, but it also provided stability and order, and enforced the peace. Roman law became the foundation for the legal systems of all the European continental states and its influence persists into the present.
Another enduring Roman legacy was the aristocratic way of life - the model for the today's lifestyles of the rich and famous.

Early Christian thought is admittedly complicated. It is a topic that is continually researched and Cantor handles this by focusing on Augustine (d. 430) and even further expanding his comments through an imaginary conversation with Augustine's contemporaries. It seems unsatisfactory, but Augustin's sympathies with the Roman law and Latin language were clearly highly influential in the development of the church. A chapter on civil law and how the Roman judiciary became the basis for the European legal system is well written. The primary flaw in such a system is the lack of independence of the judiciary - a separation currently under attack in America.

A final chapter "Remembering Antiquity" puts the period into perspective. The good part was the heritage of political, ethical, literary, and philosophical values. The downside was the opportunism of the strong over the weak - going to war just to defeat a neighbor. Likewise, domestically the strong dominated the weak, the rich exploited the poor, adults ruled children, and men oppressed women. It is a complicated and mixed heritage, indeed.