

PREFACE

Mixed Harvest is a collection of stories about the deep past and those who lived through millennia of exploration, hardship, and uncertainty during the evolution of farming. In the space of a few thousand years agriculture dominated the earth. We live with it all around us. History began, cities soared, the landscape was crisscrossed with roads.

These stories were inspired by a trip to the Neolithic settlement of Çatalhöyük, which began with a total solar eclipse and ended with a devastating earthquake. Both were natural consequences of celestial physics and plate tectonics, explanations unavailable in the deep past.

A first encounter with Çatalhöyük can horrify: hundreds of small, cramped dwellings were built right next to each other; they are gloomy, darkened by smoke. The only opening was a hole in the roof which served as both entry and chimney. The ribs of skeletons were blackened by carbon. I was aware of my own prejudices in favor of twenty-first century comforts, but I couldn't help wondering why anyone would consider living in such conditions.

A series of seminars at Çatalhöyük on the role of religion in the emergence of the city introduced a more complex and nuanced understanding. This agglomeration of small dwellings on the Konya plain in Anatolia did not appear out of nowhere; it was the consequence of many stories, many decisions that came before. Still more stories are buried here, and many more followed. Collectively they make up an imagined mosaic of our deep past and the myriad of small changes that brought us today's crowded and troubled world.

Religion continues to play a role. So does climate, with its rhythms both natural and unnatural. Intelligence and dexterity at making tools gave the human species a confidence that all too often has led to arrogance. People are adaptable and clever. They migrate and alter, organize, cooperate, and fight. They have remade the world, and in so doing changed everything about themselves, their diet, ways of seeing and understanding the world, how families and societies are organized, what they believe.

The stories here describe how this happened in Europe and the Near East. They do not intend to suggest that human prehistory occurred only there: life was gathering a very different set of experiences in Australia and Asia. Nonetheless, the arc of prehistory still bent, to one degree or another, toward farming.

Archaeology and prehistory are moving targets. New finds, data, and interpretations appear almost daily. Not long ago the disappearance of the Neanderthals was dated to twenty-nine or thirty thousand years ago. Now some push that back to more than forty thousand. Modern Humans first appeared in Europe forty-five thousand years ago, or sixty thousand, or, in the Near East, one hundred and twenty-five thousand years ago, or even one hundred and eighty thousand. Modern humans evolved two hundred thousand years ago or, as more recently suggested, three hundred thousand. More firmly identified dates would not alter the stories. The deep past is, at least for now, exempt from calendric accuracy.

Each story is prefaced by a short introduction and followed by some context in order to stitch the narrative together. Some stories are linked, but most are independent. The stories are gathered into three chapters: "Shelter," "House," and "Home." These represent a progression in where we lived, a series of transformations in technology and consciousness. Once prehistory might have been called a civilizing process, but in light of farming's unintended consequences the term has acquired more complex, less positive connotations.

"Shelter" takes place in Europe and the Near East during the Paleolithic, the Old Stone Age, when anatomically modern humans first encountered Neanderthals, developed large-scale hunting, and painted realistic images of the animals of their world in the depths of nearly inaccessible caves.

"House" moves into the New Stone Age, or Neolithic, in the Near East. People began building square dwellings that lasted for many generations. They planted crops and domesticated animals. The landscape began to change, dotted with the remains of villages, emptier of trees, ever less wild.

"Home" begins with a brief introduction to prepare the way for cities. The stories in this chapter trace the rise of urbanization, organized professional religion, and writing in what is now southern Iraq. Cities grew, and the people who lived in them came to define themselves as city dwellers, members of a special place. Large-scale agriculture managed by complex social structures surrounded the city in ever expanding rings. The wild was driven away for good.

The stories conclude with the emergence of the city. What followed—the rise and fall of empires and the rapid spread of humanity—is well known.

A brief Afterword sums up the meandering course we followed, and what it means today. Above all, *Mixed Harvest* is a plea to pay attention to the past in order to prepare for the future.