

After the Ice – A Global Human History 20,000-5000 BC by Steven Mithen.  
Weidenfeld and Nicolson 2003.

Professor Steven Mithen is an eminent archaeologist and Professor of Prehistory at the University of Reading. *After the Ice, A Global Human History*, is, in the author's own words, a book for those who like to think about the past and wish to know more about the origins of farming, towns and civilisation. It is written by a fine scholar whose desire to engage with a popular readership does not encourage him to 'dumb down' or patronise in any way.

Mithen traces the history of the 15,000 years' period in the title, the changes in human life that occurred, the development of different types of human existence and the birth of key institutions and attitudes that have influenced human life ever since. He analyses human communities on all the earth's continents, often seen through the eyes of a hypothetical modern observer, seeing but unseen, who flits from age to age and continent to continent for the reader's benefit. This voyeur, named John Lubbock after the Victorian polymath of the same name, helps readers to see ancient life as it was lived rather than forcing them to extrapolate from the dry specific finds of archaeologists. It is a device which largely works, though occasionally fails to rise above its ultimate artificiality.

Of particular interest to those who have a fascination for the ancient Middle East and that part of it known as the Fertile Crescent, are the sections detailing the development of human society in the Jordan Valley, the birth of agriculture, the domestication of animals, and the evolution from hunter-gatherer to sedentary home dweller that took place.

Shadowing this entire work, however, is the issue of global warming; Mithen most persuasively details the way in which the fluctuations in the earth's temperatures dramatically altered human existence as the earth's own topography changed during the period under examination: and in a final, chilling chapter, as John Lubbock returns to England in 2003 and contemplates what he sees around him, offers some deeply disturbing thoughts on the impact on our future of the global warming that is inexorably gathering pace.

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