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Protection and civilization

How shocking events left their mark
on human history



Uitgeverij Aspekt

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1 The first attempts to protect oneself against shocking events

1.1. Protection against natural catastrophes

Five million years ago the first hominids appeared in the hot and dry regions of Africa. They were small and vulnerable, but adapted themselves well, because they were able to walk great distances, communicate by means of language, use tools, gather animal fat food and master fire. To obtain and use the high-fat foods, they had to be able to hunt and save part of the loot. This required a long learning period, both in their common evolution and in each separate human life. When this learning process was successful, they started to live in a highly knowledge-intensive niche with high-quality food.

The first hominids were almost twice as large as chimpanzees, they lost their coat of hair, started to walk upright and divided the tasks of hunting and gathering between men and women. They learned to cooperate in large groups and they acquired brains that were almost three times larger than the brains of chimpanzees. The food was needed to survive, but also to feed their growing brains that used an increasing percentage of the energy demanded by the body (currently 20%). Quality food was the main energy source, but fairly soon it was joined by a second source of energy, crucial for the survival of the human species and its dominance over other species, namely fuel.²⁰

The mastery of fire has been superbly described by sociologist Johan Goudsblom. He shows the importance of this energy source as a survival strategy at this stage of

human existence, even though initially it could hardly be considered a deliberate strategy.²¹ Fire occurred as a wild force of nature in forest and grass fires. Very likely attracted by the fire, groups of people discovered its many benefits. Initially it was the roasted meat that remained after a fire. They probably discovered that roasted meat was more tasty and could be preserved longer. When they were finally able to keep fire burning and to limit its range, they could exploit other benefits, such as heat and light, deterring wild animals, burning forest areas for hunting, and heating and cooking of food. Cooking helped digestion and also gave access to new sources of food. It stimulated the reduction of the intestinal tract and thus allowed the brain to grow. Fire also killed parasites.

The benefits of fire could only be used after great effort. It required the free use of hands and walking upright, mastering various skills and passing this knowledge on to future generations. It was not only a technical but also a mental challenge: to overcome recklessness and fear, which could only be successful by cooperating together. It is striking that no other animal has succeeded in mastering fire.

The lead in resilience compared to other hominids and species that could not control fire was getting bigger and bigger. Groups that controlled fire were larger and stronger because of their greater productivity and their ability to use fire for attack and defense. Eventually, only groups that were willing and able to control fire survived and no human being could live without fire anymore. Thousands of years later fuel as the main energy source would provide the basis for the agricultural and industrial regimes with their huge increase in energy use and food production.

The power to control fire was invaluable. Owing to this, mankind established dominance over other species

and people could live in much larger and more resilient societies. This achievement stimulated cooperation and self-restraint, which in turn increased mutual understanding and sensitivity to each other. Fire gave people a means to exercise power. With fire they could defend themselves against all kinds of dangers and expand their technological skills and access to food. Fire played an important role in myths and stories, such as the acquisition of fire, or fire as punishment in representations of hell and at the stake. Fire would become indispensable for craftsmen, such as potters and blacksmiths, and particularly at times of war. However, the threat of fire had not gone. In domesticated form in human societies and in conflicts between and within societies it could manifest its destructive power even more intensively.

The settlement of the first human beings in fixed locations in the mountain ranges in the Middle East was made possible by the rising temperature on earth.²² More sunlight and higher temperatures allowed more plants to grow and more animals to stay alive. This allowed people to survive in groups of forty to fifty in one place. Soon they were able to select larger seeds from wild grains and to plant them, so that the yield increased and the population grew.

The early settlements were faced with a major disaster: the melting of the ice caps in North America. Lake Agassiz, a lake of half a million square kilometers was formed. When the ice dams around the lake broke in 10,800 BC, the water flowed into the sea. The seawater cooled and the temperature on earth dropped. The cold period would last 1,200 years and many settlements fell apart. People died of malnutrition or had to learn to live from hunting again. In terms of scope and duration it was the greatest catastrophe in human history. All the disasters that would follow were

dwarfed by this disaster. However, in the sparsely populated areas the number of victims was limited.

The settlements recovered when the climate improved, but many dangers remained. Dangers within the settlements were fires, diseases and lack of food. Outside the settlements there were attacks by wild animals, insect and snake bites, drowning, cold nights, forest fires or, as Jared Diamond pointed out, falling trees or falling from a tree. They did not always lead to death, but the lack of medical facilities caused many disabilities, injuries and infections resulting in permanent damage. This explains the very conservative, risk-averse behavior of hunters.²³

Three horsemen of the Apocalypse were a constant threat: epidemics, famines and wars. Wars were accompanied by looting or had looting as a purpose. The warm areas – usually kept wet by irrigation – were hotbeds of infection and infectious diseases, and by the unstableness of the weather famines were a constant threat.²⁴ In those circumstances it was essential to keep stocks for hard times and protect them against pillage, gluttony or rot.

The people in these societies responded to the many dangers by establishing resilient, better organized units and smarter energy use. According to Johan Goudsblom one could not survive without specialized knowledge about sowing, harvesting, storage and distribution of food.²⁵ Gluttony, which is highly contagious, had to be curtailed by allowing it only at special festivities. One solution was to put the knowledge in the hands of priests, who claimed to have a special contact with the gods. By interpreting signs of the gods' wishes, they pretended to know when to sow and how the harvest should be divided. They allowed some of the food to be eaten at great sacrificial parties and kept the remainder under their supervision in the temples they built in honor of the gods and for the benefit of themselves.

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The temptation to steal food was effectively punished in their eyes with divine intervention in the form of diseases and other calamities. The sacrificial rituals also offered the opportunity to immerse oneself in the intoxication of being together, without falling into chaos or ecstatic violence.²⁶

Because of their need for grandeur priests and their temple households gathered luxury goods, which usually had to come from afar. However, the formation of a surplus for an elite evoked the problem of how to deal with those who could not share in the surplus. In other words, wealth created the problem of poverty. The poor could passively and humbly wait for their share, but also organize uprisings and demand their share. If they were banished, they could plunder or destroy surrounding fields. Every society with a surplus had to make arrangements for the poor in its community and to take care that this did not attract too many poor from elsewhere. According to Abram de Swaan, the contribution of the community had to be so big that the poor were satisfied with what they got, and did not weaken too much, so that they could be deployed as work force, if necessary.²⁷

As human influence spread around the world, the chance of catastrophes caused by humans increased. Examples are erosion of areas that had been burned or exhausted by human activity resulting in famines, deforestation by burning and intensive use of wood as fuel or construction material, epidemics by dense population and pollution of the settlements, crop failures due to incorrect planning or defective protection against pests, spoiled stocks or stocks that were robbed, accidents within the settlements or on the roads between them and especially the wars and lootings. The farmers in the settlements became more and more dependent on warriors who could defend the settlement and surrounding land with weapons. They

themselves did not have the time, resources or training for this and could not quickly enough mobilize an army. According to Goudsblom, farmers and warriors started a long symbiosis: farmers were productive and vulnerable, warriors destructive and resilient. Warriors could protect farmers, but could also subject, exploit, extort or enslave them.²⁸

The warriors developed into a powerful class of violence specialists, experts in murder and arson, and their leaders into kings or military leaders. They acquired their skills by means of long-term physical and mental training. Mental training, focused on perseverance, discipline, self-control and courage, was just as important as physical training in agility, endurance and strength. The main threat to the king were his relatives or a competitive family clan who could murder him and take his place. Some kings killed their relatives or competing clans preventively to secure their reign and succession.

Kings consolidated their position with a display of power in the form of an extensive entourage, visible wealth, ceremonies and bodyguards. A king could force landowners to cede a portion of the proceeds or to join the army. For their services he could reward them with pieces of land or important positions in the realm. To collect regular income taxes he needed an organization that was staffed by people who could calculate and collect. With the money he employed craftsmen and experts in art and science. All this created an extensive network around the king, where new ideas could emerge, especially in experts who were in frequent contact with other cultures or tradesmen who travelled a lot.

According to psychologist and linguist Steven Pinker, in societies of hunters and gatherers and settlements without a centralized state, the proportion of people that died by

violence was more than 15%.²⁹ This percentage is much higher than the figure of 0.7% in the centralized states of the twentieth century, which is considered a violent century. If all the people killed by man-made disasters in the twentieth century be taken into account, including famines by warfare, this is no more than 3% of the total population.

Much violence originated from honor and revenge killings, from theft, adultery, abduction of women and alleged enchantment. Torture was very cruel, such as cutting off limbs, heads, scalps and genitals or slowly skinning a captured enemy. Women who were married off frequently acted as spies to inform relatives of the tribe from which they came, about war plans of the tribe they lived with.

1.2. The example of Sumer

Around 5,000 BC human habitation had been extended to the basin of the Euphrates and the Tigris, now Iraq. It was a dry area with little rain, but where much water was available because both rivers flooded regularly. The technique of digging canals and ditches and building sites for food storage had developed so far at that time, that the residents were able to maintain a big city and build a civilization, the Sumerian civilization. Their system was much more productive than the agriculture in the hilly regions and it enabled a complex society with temples and priests.

In Sumer there was already a form of long-distance trade. Products have been found from Afghanistan (lapis lazuli), Anatolia (silver) and Iran (stone axes). In 3,000 BC, the Sumerians had already invented the wheel and they harnessed oxen in front of carts, but for long journeys they made use of pack mules and sailing vessels in the Persian Gulf. The remains of vessels with water buffalo inscriptions

from the Indus valley have been found in the Persian Gulf. The ships met in Bahrain (Dilmun in Sumerian).³⁰ After 3,000 BC, increasing drought forced them to work under a central administration. By making obligatory the voluntary donations to the temple, the Sumerians invented the first system of taxation.

The temple household was the core of society. The territory of the temple was surrounded by privileged households employing agricultural laborers and slaves. According to the Gilgamesh epic the possessions of the temple included one third of the city of Uruk. From 3,500 BC Uruk on the Euphrates, the longest of the two rivers, was the center of a large network of relations. Around 3000 BC the city counted more than 50,000 inhabitants. The Sumerians called their land *ki and gir*, the land of the civilized rulers.

The people in the small villages came under the influence of this great network and they had to focus on it, by either the exchange of goods or by subjection, taxation, lease and robbery. Within the temple household specialized craftsmen could find work and luxury goods could be manufactured. From the perspective of the Sumerians, the gods could be pacified by bringing offerings which prevented famine, epidemics and robbery. However, the origin of the resilience lay in the connections between the towns and villages. With the exchange of goods, information, people and techniques, they could distinguish themselves from people who were not bound by such a close-knit network of relations. McNeill and McNeill point in their study of the development of the World Wide Web to the importance of the connecting network between societies, which gave the people who were part of it access to more resources and better weapons to protect themselves against raids of nomads.³¹ In this respect

more interdependence was accompanied with increased resilience.

In the elite's view the system of irrigation distinguished the Sumerians from "barbaric nomads" who "knew no barley" and it showed an "ordered world, a cosmos that had its origins in the gods at the dawn of history." Cane was used for roofing, flooring, drainage and boat building and clay as building material and as raw material for the famous clay tablet. As to irrigation, people depended on the spring flood and "its blessings always came back in omens, wishes and fate."³² The water had to come in the right quantities and in time to prevent devastations. In Sumer, a creeping disaster occurred, caused by salinization. Even though the Sumerians replaced wheat with barley, which was salt-resistant, they could not stop the salinization because population pressure did not allow for leaving the land fallow, which was necessary for the soil to recover. This decline meant that the Akkadians could invade weakened Sumer in 2,370 BC.

1.3. The rise of the first big resilient network of relations

The rise of the first big resilient network of relations took place in the Mediterranean. According to Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, this area is highly varied and unstable. In a number of places, such as southern Italy, there is much volcanic activity and in Greece earthquakes are quite common. The area is prone to landslides, erosion, formation of sludge in estuaries, and fires. Some areas, such as the Syrian and Arabian deserts and parts of Egypt and Libya, are very inhospitable. The sea is dangerous because of unexpected storms and numerous rocks near the coasts. Rain usually comes unexpectedly and on land causes