**Another Voice Podcast with Eric Nelson**

**to accompany Strayer/Nelson, *Ways of the World*, Third Edition**

**The Nature of History Before Writing (Chapter 1)**

**SLIDE 1.1**

This chapter has covered 95% of all human history in thirty-six pages—that works out to around 6,000 years per page. This alone would seem ambitious enough, but there’s more. This chapter also examined the Agricultural Revolution, the single most transformative development in human history before the Industrial Revolution. Everywhere, agriculture led to remarkable changes in human societies and in some regions underpinned the emergence of civilizations.

**SLIDE 1.2 [Image: The Statues of Ain Ghazel]**

 So how was it possible to cover so much in so few pages? It certainly helped that we know remarkably little about the first several hundred thousand years of human history. I like to think of it as a period when history was largely devoid of events. That is not to say that no events took place in the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods. They most certainly did. But evidence of very few specific events survived in the historical record.

**SLIDE 1.3 [Images: Otzi the Iceman illustration and photo of the Iceman Skeleton]**

This is not surprising. Over time evidence is destroyed and thus one would expect earlier periods to be less well documented. But perhaps equally important is the lack of written sources for these earlier periods. Historians draw heavily on written records and these only emerge around 6,000 years ago. Before that historians rely primarily on physical artifacts unearthed by archeologists and the work of anthropologists who study groups of modern humans who live in similar ways to our distant ancestors.

Every once in a while archeologists uncover remains that provide windows into moments in the past. This was the case with the remarkable Otzi (ɶtsi) Ice Man examined in the “Thinking through Sources” feature for this chapter. Discovered in 1991 frozen in a glacier in the Italian Alps, a gash in his hand, a flint arrow lodged in his back and a blow to his head all speak to his violent end. Moreover, the removal of an arrow shaft from his body may provide evidence of an assailant’s effort to hide his or her identity. But even this evidence raises more questions than it answers, for his remains reveal only how, not why, he died high up in a mountain pass. He tells us as much about the world that he lived in through such evidence as the items found with him and the content of his stomach, as he does about his own life.

**SLIDE 1.4 [Image: Paleolithic Art]**

Given the fragmented surviving evidence, it might be better to think of the history of the Paleolithic and Neolithic eras as based on a set of often slightly blurry snapshots revealed by the chance survival of material objects like bones, tools, campsites and gravesites and by the persistence of small groups of people into the modern era who still live as gatherer hunters. This sort of evidence is best suited to discussing long-term processes. The specific lives of individuals or groups are largely missing from the historical record.

**SLIDE 1.5 [Image: Nok Culture]**

History without events lacks the richness and texture of history in later periods where it is possible to reflect on broad developments through the experience of individuals who lived through them. It serves to remind us of the important role of written documents and also oral traditions in the writing of history. For the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods, information about individual lives are nearly all now lost. But the long-term processes that took place during this early period are essential for understanding the course of the last 6000 years of human history. Despite some limitations of our knowledge, it is worth your attention.