

**SOCIAL
STRUGGLES
IN ANTIQUITY**

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Social struggles in antiquity by M. Beer & H. J. Stenning

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M. BEER & H. J. STENNING

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INTRODUCTION

I. *The Meaning of the Term "Antiquity."*

FROM the purely chronological standpoint, world history is commonly divided into antiquity, the middle ages, the modern times and most modern times.¹ When looked at closely, this historical division proves to be inadequate, as it tells us practically nothing. When we speak of antiquity, we think of the empires of Mesopotamia and Egypt, and of the old Hebrews, Greeks and Romans. But had the Kelts, Teutons and Slavs no antiquity? And had the ancient peoples no middle ages, and no modern times? World history is not the record of a homo-

¹ *Antiquity*, from the earliest times to the dissolution of the Roman Empire; *middle ages*, from the fourth century to the discovery of America; *modern times*, from the fifteenth century to the French Revolution; *most modern times*, from the eighteenth century onwards.

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geneous humanity, which had remained in the period of antiquity until the time of the migration of races, and then entered upon the consecutive stages of the middle ages, and modern times. It treats rather of different States, Empires, Races and Peoples, all of which passed through their own stages of development at different periods, without waiting for others to reach the same level. It does not inform us, for instance, how it could come about that modern ideas may be discovered in antiquity, or that the beginnings of the Renaissance in Europe were mentally connected with ancient Greece, and that we moderns must often revert to ideas and opinions which were enunciated by the ancients more than two thousand years ago. Were these thinkers superior to time and space, and did they receive their wisdom through inspiration?

We shall get nearer the truth if we assume that "antiquity" did not form a mental and historical unity. Even the old Hebrews, Greeks and Romans had their period of antiquity, their middle ages, and their modern times. It was only that they appeared on the stage of human history earlier than the Teutons and Slavs, and they

likewise passed through their different periods, evolved certain institutions and ideas, which everywhere corresponded more or less to these periods. Thus the various peoples follow each other in the order of time, but their social and mental development follows a parallel course, with the exception of the most modern period which the ancients did not pass through, having been unable to produce the Industrial Revolution on the application of science to industry. If, therefore, the Latins and Teutons in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had mental affinities with the Greeks of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., this happened only because the Greeks of that time, having left their antiquity and their middle ages behind them, were living in the epoch of their renaissance, and this period brought forth corresponding mental products.

Each of these periods has its specific social, economic and intellectual features. In antiquity, or more correctly in the youth of peoples, men are everywhere linked together by blood relationship in the clan and the tribe, and live in common, on the basis of equality, knowing neither private property in land, nor monogamy, nor towns; mental life is very primitive; custom and habits

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dominate the simple life, which is mostly nomadic, and in any case not bound up with specific territories. Chiefs, judges or "kings" are at the head of the people. The art of writing is unknown, and the tribes in question do not themselves describe their social institutions. For our knowledge of this period we either have to thank travellers from a country on a higher level of civilisation who visit the district of the primitive tribes, such as, for example, Cæsar and Tacitus in respect to the old Teutons, the discoverers of America in respect to the Indian tribes, or we moderns reconstruct the original institutions from the old legends and traditions as well as from the remains of the old institutions which have survived into the time of recorded history. And as we have discovered that there is a certain regularity in the development of peoples, we are justified in making a generalisation or devising a theory that all peoples in the primitive social stage were unacquainted with individual property in land, lived on the basis of equality, and were organised in tribes.

The primitive period ends when the tribes become settled, and are gradually organised on a territorial basis (in communities, villages,