The Ancient City
(Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges)
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Two things about the past are simultaneously true. First, that men and women of history, even distant history, were not, in their essence, different from us. The nature of man does not change. Second, that the past is a foreign country, often a wholly alien country. *The Ancient City*, a reconstruction of the development of Greek and Roman social organization in pre-history, certainly shows the latter. Whether the claims of this book are entirely correct, I am not sure. Nonetheless, this is a thought-provoking and mind-expanding work, which attempts to view history through reality rather than ideology, a refreshing change from most modern history writing.

The overarching thesis of this book is that very ancient societies were wholly formed by a specific type of religion and the necessary implications of that religion, rather than by economics or reason, the sources to which we tend to ascribe the origins of social governance today. This religion, however, which pre-dated writing, bore little resemblance to religion as we think of it, and almost as little resemblance to the Classical pre-Christian religions with which we are familiar from mythology. Nor was it based on the worship of the forces of nature, often seen as the earliest religions. Instead, it was wholly based on ancestor worship, and most particularly on the idea that the ancestors of a family continued to inhabit the graves in which they were placed on a family's land. From this religion flowed all law and social organization, which lasted until a series of revolutions, also carefully parsed by the author, overthrew this internally-coherent view of the world and everything in it, leading ultimately to modern ways of thinking and social organization.

The author, Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, a Frenchman, published this book in 1864. His fundamental technique is a searching read in Greek and Roman authors of a later period, to determine what they said that is relevant to earlier religious forms and political organization, drawing multiple lines of connection among those two past eras. He combines this with linguistic and etymological analysis. This technique is radically different from what a similar study would look like today—it would doubtless draw heavily on archaeology, a discipline

in its infancy in the nineteenth century, and something that Fustel de Coulanges entirely ignores. Instead, he offers voluminous citations of Classical works, from Pericles to Cicero, to develop and buttress his claims (though, admittedly, I did not check any of them, even though I own the entire five-hundred-volume Loeb Classical Library, on the assumption that in the past 160 years someone else would have noticed if Fustel de Coulanges made it all up).

He begins with an explanation of why he chose the Greeks and Romans. One reason is that they "were two branches of a single race." By this he means they were Indo-Europeans, the group that, in its many branches, has always racially and linguistically dominated the Eurasian continent outside of the Far East, probably originating in a location in what is now western and southern Russia. Early Indo-European languages included Mycenaean Greek—that is, Bronze Age Greek—as well as Archaic Latin. (I have a vague understanding that Indo-Europeans are a politically-weighted topic in some circles, due to the radical success of Indo-Europeans in world history relative to all other peoples and thus implications of racial superiority, but none of that appears in this book.) The other reason Fustel de Coulanges focuses on the Greeks and Romans is that only for them do we have enough writings that refer to and rely upon earlier unwritten customs. How the Celts behaved in the Bronze Age, by contrast, is opaque to us, outside of archaeology, as interesting as it might be to add them or other groups to this analysis (though in several spots the author refers to Vedic law, also of Indo-European origin).

Fustel de Coulanges proceeds on the premise, reasonable enough, that all peoples in pre-history believed that the life of man did not end with his death. But they did not believe, at this early point, in metempsychosis (the migration of spirits) or in larger realms of reward and punishment such as Tartarus or the Elysian Fields. Instead, they believed the spirit remained with the body, even after death, and was from that position able to deal both good and evil to the living. Thus, to propitiate the dead, burial customs inevitably involved leaving grave goods useful to them, and periodic feasts that fed the dead in their tombs. When the Greeks leave Troy, Achilles is dead, but his betrothed, the daughter of Priam, Polyxena, is sacrificed at his demand so she will join him (an episode not found in Homer, but found in other very early poetry and sculpture).

The worst fate, both for the dead and the living, was to have a wandering spirit, not properly buried in a grave tended to by one's descendants. And to be properly buried, the correct rites must be performed at the burial, and maintained forever thereafter.

Given this bedrock conception, it necessarily followed, for the living, that it was their primary duty in life to satisfy the needs of the dead and to transmit to future generations the worship of the dead. Failure to satisfy their needs would anger them and lead to them doing evil; proper action would lead to them doing good. Failure to transmit the worship would lead to the entire family line becoming worshipless. Thus, it was obligatory for descendants to perform the rites. Not doing so was the grossest impiety. Those rites, and all ancient prayers, prioritized form over content. What mattered was never deviating from the rites, in language, gestures, or other actions. Impiety consisted in failure to conduct the rites properly, even when not only the reasoning, but the words themselves, had lost all meaning to those conducting the rites.

Each family had a family hearth, which held a sacred fire embodying the spirits of the dead. This fire was ritually maintained and kept from impurity, including exposure to those outside the family. As a result, at the beginning, "Religion was purely domestic." There was no religion larger than that of the family, and the household ancestors had no relation with anyone outside the family. "Thus a powerful bond was established among all the generations of the same family, which made of it a body forever inseparable." The dead were thus in effect deities, found modified in later Roman thought as the Lares and Penates, the household gods.

Because each family lived and worked on its own land, where the ancestors also still were aware in their graves, the family religion suffused all aspects of life. From this flowed all rules of social organization. None of these rules survived in their original form at the time of the earliest written legal codes of which we know, though we have only fragments—the laws of Solon in Athens and the Twelve Tables in Rome. But signs of earlier laws remained in both, and Fustel de Coulanges analyzes these connections in great detail.

When a daughter married, she left her family's hearth fire, and adopted that of her husband. She changed her household gods, and this was reflected in the rites. The solemnity of this was so crucial that

polygamy was unimaginable; only one man and one woman could be united in such a bond. Continuity of the family was everything, because if the family failed, so would the worship of the dead, leaving them eternally unhappy. Thus, failure to marry was not permitted. Divorce, given the centrality of marriage, was extremely difficult—but allowed in cases of a woman's failure to bear a child, and if the husband were sterile, a male collateral relative was held to be his child, "and continued his worship." A widow was required to marry a close male relative, whose son would likewise continue the worship. Failing this, adoption was permitted to continue the family line, but only to a man who had no other son.

Naturally, this meant that for any man, having a son as a descendant was crucially important, because a daughter would ultimately abandon the family worship. Over time, as men had multiple sons, the family inevitably expanded—the family as defined by agnation, traced through the male line to a common worship. This expansion was the ultimate cause of the failure of this system, but we will return to that. Kinship was not simply by blood—the children of two sisters were not regarded as having any relationship at all to each other, because they had different worships.

Religion similarly dictated the rules of property. Land was what mattered; moveable goods such as crops might even be held in common, but land was never held in common, because that would be a contradiction in terms. The land of a family was sacred and bounded, surrounded by an impenetrable spiritual barrier, marked by sacred boundary stones or trees, representing the family gods (the origin of the later Roman god Terminus) and containing the family tomb. Real property could not be sold or otherwise alienated; such an action was inconceivable.

Wills were not allowed. The firstborn son necessarily inherited everything, without exception, whatever he or his father wanted. He inherited all the land; he also inherited the duties of worship, to lead the worship for the entire family. His brothers participated in the family worship, but without leading the worship or owning the land; they became in essence dependents of the eldest brother. Women could inherit nothing, because they would leave the family, and the worship—but if only a daughter survived the father, she would marry a male relative, who would continue as leader of the worship.

The ruler of the household was not the man who led the worship, but the family gods themselves. As their chief propitiator, that man was absolute head of the family. He had great authority, including the right to sell members of his family to others (not as slaves, but their labor). The only magistrate who could judge a member of the family was the head of the family; public magistrates did not exist. But this power was circumscribed—for example, religion forbade adopting a son if a man already had a son.

As a direct consequence of this view of life, morality in pre-history was very different from ours. To those outside the family, no duty whatsoever was owed. Adultery by women was forbidden because it might destroy the family worship by, unknown to all, introducing a child not of the family's blood (the main reason, other than physical defect, the father was given the right to reject a child born to his wife). Justice and morality meant what benefitted the family, nothing more.

All these rules bound the extended family tightly together. This was not a patriarchal tyranny, but a series of interlocking rights and duties, crystal clear to all members of the family. Moreover, other household members not related by any blood tie were part of the family, including slaves and freed slaves. The system also swept into the family circle clients, those not of the blood but dependent on the family in some way. All these also participated in, and were protected by, the family worship. Again, the consequence was an inevitable expansion of the family group.

Therefore, Fustel de Coulanges acknowledges, the nuclear family worship he describes is not the social organization that we see, even in the glimpses we have of pre-history. Rather, we see larger groupings—the *gens*, tribes, and cities. The *gens* was the extended family traceable to a common ancestor and common tomb (perhaps, in many cases, notionally or fictionally). Members of the *gens* could all inherit from each other. A *gens* could be very large and was on the continuum with what we would today call a tribe. It might include several thousand people. Over time, different *gentes* came together to form a *phratry* (Greek) or *curia* (Roman), groups that adopted some elements of a common worship, while still retaining their individual family worships. *Phratries* and *curiae* are today obscure in the historical record, but Fustel de Coulanges interprets them in this manner, and that these groups were the equivalent of tribes. His claim is that these derived from the earlier structures he describes.

It is at this point that history begins to merge with pre-history. New forms of religion became extant, starting with the gods of physical nature, while at the same time the worship of the family gods of certain powerful families began to attract worship from those outside the family. More or less at the same time, when more than one tribe agreed to associate together, while maintaining their specific family religions, cities began to be formed, always at a location chosen by the gods. Using more rites, they created a new, joint sacred fire and adopted a new common religion, traced to some god that could be deemed common to all—often a hero of legend, such as Aeneas, or a god of nature, ultimately focusing more narrowly into ones known to us, such as Jupiter. But the Jupiter of one city was originally a different god entirely than the Jupiter of another city; they shared a common name and some common characteristics, but were not the same god at all. Moreover, within the cities, each *phratry* or *curia* remained an individual unit, which governed all matters within that extended family. The early city was a confederation, not a new type of sovereignty.

The city had its own worship, overlaying the household worships, conducted by priests using sacred rites similar to the original family rites. These were written but kept secret; not a single instance has survived, despite numerous mentions of their existence. Allowing a non-citizen to see them would both be impiety and a danger to the city. Rites included not only prayers, but many public joint meals and festivals, all designed to propitiate the city's gods, most of all that they not betray the city to its enemies. A citizen was one who participated without fail in these rituals; failure to do so meant being struck from the roll of citizens, and losing all rights. For rights, from property rights to any ability to appeal to public justice, were only for citizens. Non-citizens had exactly zero rights (though to be sure visitors were usually given "a good reception, both for commercial and political reasons"). This city religion was very different from what we conceive of as religion, but that does not mean that it was created as an artificial means of keeping the people in line. Quite the opposite—religion dominated the state, not vice versa. "We greatly deceive ourselves on the nature of man if we suppose a religion can be established by convention and supported by imposture."

The first kings were the first priests, the equivalent of the family head who offered the worship. A king had political authority only because

of, and only to the extent he had, religious authority. Force was not the relevant criterion; it was not warriors who became the first kings, but those recognized as being in charge of the worship. In later years, when kings were overthrown and monarchy was only restored at a later time, the subsequent rulers were *tyrants*, meaning not that they were bad rulers, but that the religious function had become separated from the political function. Lesser magistrates developed in the same way, as men tasked with some sub-function of the worship, and through that function also adopting some measure of political power. And as with the family, city law derived from the premises of the religion, including laws of marriage and inheritance. Fustel de Coulanges remarks, for example, on the Spartan *harmosts*, men sent to administer conquered cities, and that they found it difficult to "maintain themselves for any great length of time" because they were outside a city's worship.

Individual liberty as a right in itself was nonexistent. "They did not believe there could exist any right as against the city and its gods." Man enslaved himself to the state. Exile was the supreme punishment, because it cut a man off from the collective worship. Cities sometimes associated with each other, creating a common worship, forming a larger confederation—the origin of the government of Attica, dominated by Athens, for example. Conversely, a city might be defeated and its religion extinguished, often along with the city itself, as well as its inhabitants.

This could not, and did not, last forever. The details are lost to us; "All that is certain is that from the seventh century before our era, this social organization was almost everywhere discussed and attacked." This inaugurated the era of revolutions, of which Fustel de Coulanges says there were four, all ultimately deriving from a combination of change in ideas and pressure put on the system by men who found themselves outside the system. Naturally, every city had many people outside the system. Each had its lower classes, those who counted for nothing in the religion or politics of the city, and often those classes substantially outnumbered the citizens.

The position of these lower classes varied widely; we are generally familiar with Spartan *helots*, because of the lurid ill-treatment accorded them, but many other roles existed, including collateral descendants who shared the religion of a family but were excluded from political or religious power, along with many various forms of clientage. Plebians,

as a general term, were those who had no family religion, from bastards to those whose families lacked the organization or intelligence to maintain a family religion. Strangers who sojourned in the city; men without land; those expelled from a family for crimes—all were outside the protection of the city, nor did they share in its power, and they resented it. The number of men who were heads of families, and therefore entitled to complete political power, was always very small. But the dictates of religion meant they monopolized the land and the power, and this structure, in the nature of man, was inevitably going to be ultimately unstable.

The first revolution was removal of political power from the kings, whereupon the aristocracy ruled. The second was the dissolution of the *gens* as an actual organizing unit, along with the disappearance of primogeniture, which fragmented larger family unity. Men who had been dependents and clients became independent members of the political society, somewhat similar to the ending of serfdom in medieval Europe. The third revolution was the plebians becoming part of the city, along with the development of obedience of men to men not based on any religion. These changes were accelerated by money becoming made not only by tilling the earth, tied to family gods, but also by "artisans, sailors, manufacturers, and merchants." Wealth acquired through labor makes men see the world differently, and this was reflected in the changing city. Men who served in the military also demanded political rights as a reward. The concept of public interest, as opposed to religious interest, became dominant in public discussion. Fustel de Coulanges closely analyzes all these changes for more than a hundred pages, complete with many interesting passages, such as an exposition of the development of the Roman tribunes of the plebs.

The fourth revolution was increased suffrage and various types of democratic rule, leading to frequent violent conflict and alternation with forms of dictatorship, as well as the requirement that every citizen spend much of his time involved in affairs of the city (which is why "Aristotle says, very justly, that the man who had to labor in order to live could not be a citizen"). Philosophers, exalting reason, rejected the ancient rites of religion entirely, and they fell into desuetude, becoming mostly liminal memories preserved in bits and fragments. Rome came to dominate the entire area, and the Classical municipal system

disappeared entirely. And then came Christianity, so very different than the ancient religion Fustel de Coulanges describes.

I am not sure I believe all this. It has a little bit of the feel of a just-so story. Certainly, a historian such as M. I. Finley would totally reject Fustel de Coulanges's analysis, though Finley was a Communist, so his opinion should automatically be downgraded to some degree. I find it very difficult, for example, to believe that Indo-Europeans never practiced polygamy, something in which powerful men have almost always engaged. Fustel de Coulanges argues, in effect, that concubines were allowed but polygamy was not. Perhaps so, but polygamy served important functions, such as uniting warring clans, and no powerful man seeking an alliance would be likely to hand over his daughter as a mere concubine. And how could these burial rites, tied to a specific piece of land, have been applied to a pastoral people, as the Indo-Europeans originally were? What Fustel de Coulanges also describes is something very far from what Thomas Hobbes described as the state of nature, even if he exaggerated. We know that primitive tribes engaged in constant brutal warfare, and it seems unlikely that a nuclear family could simply live in peace on its land, finding it unnecessary to ally with others in order to avoid predation.

There are also interesting overlaps here, which I am not qualified to explore, with the thought of Julian Jaynes. His theory was that men in pre-history, at the period on which Fustel de Coulanges focuses, were mentally different from us, in that they experienced auditory hallucinations resulting from what he called the bicameral brain. Thus, they quite literally heard instructions they interpreted as coming from gods. If true (and I doubt it), this would explain the persistence of ancestor worship. A man would not only pray to his gods for guidance, but receive explicit guidance in return, even though that guidance was merely generated by his own brain. Fustel de Coulanges says, "It [the god] is in us; it does not quit us; it speaks to us at every moment. If it tells us to obey, we obey; if it traces duties for us, we submit." Maybe this is even more true than Fustel de Coulanges thought.

None of this seems to have much direct application to the present, but many other fruitful analyses by comparison could be attempted. For example, how does Rene Girard's theory of scapegoating as a social binding mechanism fit with Fustel de Coulanges's claims? Nonetheless,

one certain takeaway from this book is that reality, as filtered through the mind of man, what man believes with absolute certainty, is ever-changing. How will we mentally see the world around us ten thousand years from now? It would be fascinating to know. Along similar lines, I sometimes wish that I could see, just for a moment, a glimpse of the land on which I live ten millennia from now. A fantasy, to be sure, though with luck I will be able to see it from the hereafter, if I am still interested.