

Ethan Beach

Christopher Jensen

Human Evolution

March 8, 2011

10,000 BC: A Life Much Like Ours (According to Warner Bros. Pictures)

The 2008 Roland Emmerich film “10,000 BC” details the plight of a tribe in an undisclosed location (likely Africa) and their journey in fighting for the sanctity of the tribe, and their people’s freedom. The film was a big-budget “Hollywood” film, very much a corporate product, with a reported budget of \$105 million and a release by Warner Bros. Pictures (a subsidiary of Time Warner, a multi-billion dollar conglomerate) on over 3,400 screens in the United States and countless more across the world. [Internet Movie Database] I am pointing this out to add context, to show that this film is clearly a work made for the purposes of capitalism, and likely not intended to be art or education. It is a product, as the majority of Hollywood films are. This is likely the reason why there are so many factual inaccuracies in the film: it was made to entertain, to provide this entertainment as a good and thereby make money, not to accurately represent human history. However, there are many, many things that Emmerich, the director, has misrepresented about human history in the film. This paper will provide a run-down of all of the inaccuracies that I, personally, observed while viewing the film, and how they compare to the actual historical events. I will also make note of the aspects that may have some historical truth to them, or at least would seem plausible (there are not as many of these as there are falsehoods). I will then relate these concepts to this point in the evolution of human beings, and how accurately they represented the year 10,000 BC in our evolution as human beings.

A rundown of the plot is difficult, as the movie was confusing and all over the place. The plot went from event to event, all of them treated with a great amount of significance, so that none of it seemed important. I referred to the Wikipedia page as a reminder of the following synopsis: The film takes place in 10,000 BC, in what seemed

like it could have been a number of different locales (and appeared to be Africa), but the Wikipedia page says it was set in the Ural Mountains of Russia. We follow a tribe called the “Yagahl”, and the two leads of the film: “D’Leh”, a male hunter, and “Evolet”, his female love interest, whom D’leh has won for marriage. Another rival tribe of people on horseback attack the Yagahl people, and then proceed to kidnap and enslave Evolet. D’Leh and some other Yagahl peoples go on a mission to save her. Along the way, they get attacked by some dinosaur-like birds, saber-toothed tigers, and woolly mammoths, and then eventually find the rival tribe, by foot. They end up in a location remarkably similar to ancient Egypt, with massive groups of slaves building enormous pyramids for great leaders whom wear jewelry and decorations also very similar to Egyptians. It was ultimately unclear where this actually was taking place, though. The Egyptian-like people have a mystical leader named “The Almighty” who says some mumbo-jumbo about constellations and destinies of the characters. It all gets a little confusing at this point. The two groups, the Egyptian-esque peoples and the Yagahl, all end up battling each other, and of course, the Yagahl win and get their people back. Evolet dies in the battle, but then a mystic woman from the opposing tribe says a chant and she comes back to life, and it ends happily ever after, in front of a picturesque sunset.

The first and most glaring inaccuracy of the film is the language. The humans, who based on the time period and their full mobility and intelligent minds can be assumed to be homo sapiens, speak full and proper English. Not only do they have a fully developed language, but they speak almost exactly as we do now, save for a few missing connecting words, like “will” or “is” or “am”. We do not know when exactly humans began to speak, but I think it is not likely that they were speaking the exact same English

language that we speak now, especially considering the film is set in some sort of Russian/African hybrid location. According to archaeologist Steven Mithen, language arose in the last 200,000 years, as what he describes as a “utilitarian spoken communication”. [“Rise of the Modern Mind”] Therefore, it could theoretically be possible that humans were indeed speaking a fluid language at this time. I researched the history of the English language to see when it appeared, and, according to Suzanne Kemmer of Rice University, the earliest form of English arrived in England in the 5th and 6th centuries A.D., thousands of years after the film’s titular date, and came from Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands. It was also a much different version of the language, referred to as “Anglo-Saxon”. [“A Brief History of English, with Chronology”] So, the English language was not around in 10,000 BC in any form, much less in its current fully-developed form, and the English language was also likely not found in Russia or Africa, as the previously-mentioned European countries are a considerable distance away from either Russia or Africa. However, the characters did speak with English accents, so at least the director knew where the language did eventually end up.

The film depicts many different animals all living together in the same period amongst humans. The humans encounter saber-toothed tigers, many woolly mammoths, and dinosaur-like bird creatures, which, according to Wikipedia, were “terror birds”, a flightless dinosaur-like (in appearance) large bird. These “terror birds” were at one point thought to be alive up to 10,000 years ago, but have now been determined to be about 2 million years old, according to Professor Brian MacFadden and BBC News, and therefore could not have existed in this time period. [“How Realistic is 10,000 B.C.?”] The woolly mammoths and the saber-toothed tiger may actually have coexisted

amongst the humans, as, according to the Illinois State Museum, these two animals both became extinct around 11,000 years ago. So, of the three animals encountered, it is surprising to find out that two of the animals could have plausibly lived amongst these humans, and one may have at least been thought to have lived amongst them when the screenplay was written in 2005. [“Warners goes on time trek”] This co-existence with extinct animals (other than the silly-named “terror bird”) is one of the few things in the movie that could plausibly be true, and the homo sapien species could very well have lived alongside these animals at this point in human evolution. The Illinois State Museum also posits that humans may have been responsible for the later extinction of these animals, so it may be a case of our evolution, our need for hunting and food, was what ended up killing any further propagation of these animals (this is just a theory, though, and there is no concrete proof that human hunting was actually responsible for their extinction; it could have been a variety of factors).

As stated previously, the film is apparently set in a Russian mountain range called the “Ural Mountains”, but the lead characters in the “Yagahl” tribe travel on foot to a country that looks a great deal like Egypt, or at least some part of Africa. The geography of all these places seems out-of-place to me, but, I would like to focus on the aspects of the locales that relate to human evolution. Namely, when they arrive in this Egyptian/African country, they encounter something very close to the Egyptian pyramids, complete with armies of slaves building it under the guidance of a grand leader. Since this country is unnamed in the film, I will assume it is in fact Egypt. National Geographic states that the earliest known pyramid is from around 2630 BC, and that pyramids only really started being built around the 2600s. Thus, the film is off by about 7,400 years,

and they could not have been in this era of Egypt. National Geographic says that communities in Egypt did not even appear until around 5500 BC, so clearly the Egyptian people had not evolved to this point yet, and their society was not yet this developed, at the level wherein armies of slaves are building pyramids for grand leaders. [“Egypt: Secrets of an Ancient World”] Furthermore, the tribe likely could not have walked from their home in Russia to Egypt, thousands of miles away, in what seemed to be a few weeks in the film’s timeline. I know this based purely on my own sense of logic, as a human would have to run full speed for likely many weeks to ever reach Egypt from a mountain range in Russia, and that still seems unlikely. Not only that, the tribe in the film would have had to have an impeccable sense of direction, because according to map historian Jim Siebold, the earliest known map is a clay tablet made by the Babylonians in 6,200 BC. [“The Earliest Known Map”] The Yagahl tribe from the film probably did not have a map, then, and one can assume that man’s sense of navigation was not likely to be more advanced then than it is now; most humans nowadays could not walk in a few weeks from Russia to Egypt with no navigational assistance. Humans were not likely to be able to make that journey then, and they still probably cannot today (by foot).

One could likely write hundreds of pages about all of the factual inaccuracies in this film. Some of the other dubious aspects of the human being’s society in the film included: domesticated horses, full sets of clothing including colored dresses for the women, shiny white teeth on nearly all of the humans, equality in the tribes among races and genders, prehistoric translators (humans who knew multiple languages of the time), mystical healing powers, and astrology-based spirituality. Clearly, the film “10,000 BC” does not accurately depict the year 10,000 BC in terms of the evolution of human

beings, and takes many liberties in the service of making an entertaining film. The filmmaker could have corrected all of these aspects very easily. The humans could have still communicated, but perhaps with a primitive grunt-based language, which we could interpret via subtitles. They could have simply cut out the “terror birds” from the film, and replaced them with another extinct animal of the time, such as the intriguingly-named “giant beaver”. [“The Late Pleistocene Extinctions”] At least that would have added some much-needed levity to this overly-serious film. They could have cut out the Egyptian people from the film entirely, and had the tribes visit somewhere else in Russia, and perhaps fought an entirely-made up tribe, one of less grandiose ambition. They could have made everyone look even dirtier, filthier, less hygienic as the people of that period likely were. There are so many things the filmmakers could change to make the film more representative of that time period for human beings, but chose not to, in service of making a film that they determined to be more appealing. “10,000 BC” poorly represents the year 10,000 BC in human evolution and society, and is not a fair depiction of the people of the time.

Appendix:



[concept art for the pyramids from the film]



Appendix cont'd:



[This film is available for purchase on DVD from Warner Bros. Pictures at any major home entertainment retailer]

Works Cited

"10,000 BC (2008) - IMDb." *The Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*. Web. 8 Mar. 2011.

<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0443649/>>.

"10,000 BC (film)." *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*. Web. 08 Mar. 2011.

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/10,000_BC_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/10,000_BC_(film))>.

"Egypt: Secrets of an Ancient World." *National Geographic - Inspiring People to Care About the Planet Since 1888*. 1996. Web. 08 Mar. 2011.

<<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/pyramids/timeline.html>>.

Kemmer, Suzanne. "A Brief History of English, with Chronology." *Rice University Web Calendar*. Web. 08 Mar. 2011.

<<http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~kemmer/Words04/history/index.html>>.

"Late Pleistocene Extinctions." *Welcome to the Illinois State Museum--Illinois State Museum*. Web. 08 Mar. 2011.

<http://www.museum.state.il.us/exhibits/larson/lp_extinction.html>.

McClintock, Pamela. "Warners Goes on Time Trek." *Entertainment News, Film Reviews, Awards, Film Festivals, Box Office, Entertainment Industry Conferences - Variety*. 31 Jan. 2006. Web. 08 Mar. 2011.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117937113?categoryid=1236&cs=1&s=h&p=0>>.

Siebold, Jim. "The Earliest Known Map." *Henry Davis Consulting - New Products and Marketing Consultants*. Web. 08 Mar. 2011.

<<http://www.henry-davis.com/MAPS/Ancient Web Pages/100mono.html>>.

Smith, Cameron McPherson. "Rise of the Modern Mind." *Scientific American Mind*

(2006): 70-77. *Lecture Human Evolution*. Web. 8 Mar. 2011.

<<https://lms.pratt.edu/mod/resource/view.php?inpopup=true&id=39428>>.

"'Terror Birds' Never Met Humans." *BBC News - Home*. 31 Jan. 2007. Web. 08 Mar.

2011. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/6313741.stm>>.

Wilson, Chris. "Is 10,000 B.C. Realistic?" *Slate Magazine*. 17 Mar. 2008. Web. 08 Mar.

2011. <<http://www.slate.com/id/2186730/>>.