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## THE AMERICAS

### I. FROM ALASKA TO THE TIERRA DEL FUEGO

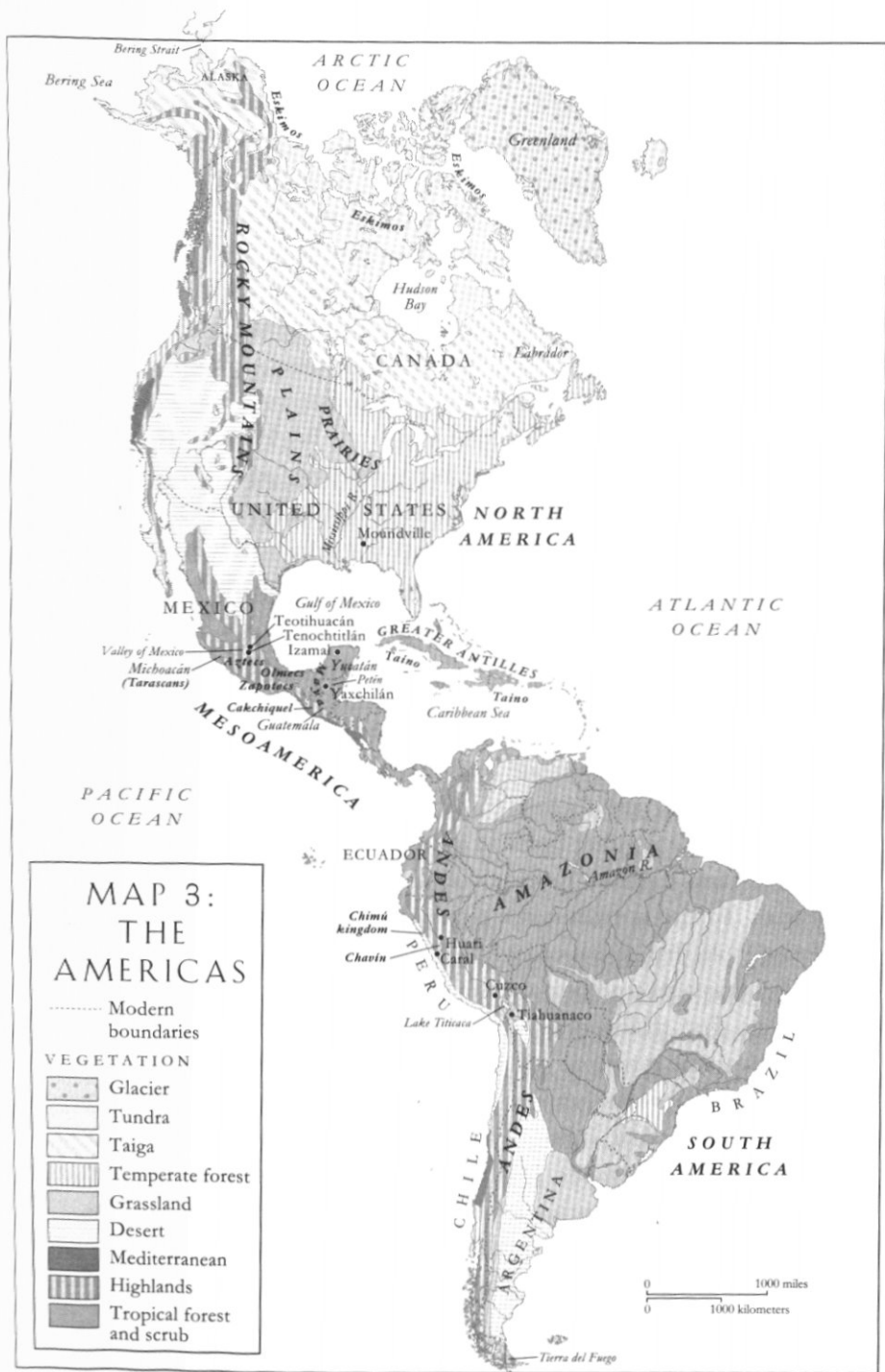
Their arrival in the Americas in the late Pleistocene brought humans into a world with a layout very different from that of Australia. Whereas Australia is an island, South America is permanently joined to North America in the present geological epoch, and North America in turn is joined to Asia during ice ages. Just as striking is the contrast in climatic range. Australia is confined to temperate and tropical bands within a single hemisphere; North America extends far into the Arctic, while the tip of South America comes within some hundreds of miles of Antarctica. But the advantages in intercontinental competition are not all to the Americas. Although the Americas are far richer than Australia in terms of the number of climatic bands they contain, none of these bands has a length comparable to those of Eurasia. This matters, because innovations—most obviously domesticated plants, but other things too—spread more easily within climatic bands than between them. Land may stretch continuously for some 8,500

miles from Alaska to the Tierra del Fuego; but from east to west, the dimensions of the Americas are far less impressive—around 3,000 miles where each continent is at its widest. This distinctive layout does not in itself tell us much about the habitat humans would find when they reached the Americas, but it does yield a first approximation. We can already start to wonder how human societies would fare in such an environment.

But before we introduce the human element, we should sketch in the geography of the Americas a little further (see map 3). Our primary concern is with the Holocene (before that conditions were rather different). Since the picture is very roughly symmetrical, let us begin in the middle. Here, just as in the Old World, we find a broad tropical band that includes large expanses of rainforest (though there would have been much less of it in the more arid conditions of the last ice age). The distribution of the tropical band between the two continents is, however, very unequal. South America gets the lion's share, since this continent extends on both sides of the equator and is at its widest in the tropics; whereas only the southernmost part of North America lies within the tropical band, and at this latitude the continent is at its narrowest.

North and south of the tropics, each continent has its temperate band; this may be forest, grassland, or desert, depending on the rainfall. In North America the temperate belt falls where the continent is at its widest, and we encounter substantial amounts of all three kinds of terrain: forest in the east, grassland in the middle, and desert in the southwest. The makeup of temperate South America is similar, but the continent is much narrower at these latitudes (though somewhat wider in an ice age).

Beyond the temperate bands lie the Arctic and Antarctic regions of the two continents. North America has a large amount of land as far north as the Arctic Circle, and this territory is similar in character to the Arctic regions of the Old World: as one goes north, a belt of Arctic forest—the taiga, in Old World parlance—gives way to a bare, open wilderness—the tundra. South America, by con-



trast, stops well short of the Antarctic Circle, and possesses only small areas of taiga and tundra.

The single most important thing missing from this sketch is the mountains. Unlike Australia, the Americas have their share of geologically recent mountain chains. These run from north to south, against the grain of the climatic bands, and are located along the western side of each continent (where the seafloor is being subducted under the edges of the American continental plates). In the north the highlands are broad but not particularly elevated; the best-known component of the system is the Rocky Mountains. In the south the Andes tend to be both narrower and higher—but where they form two parallel ranges with a plateau in between, they provide a kind of corridor running north and south. These highland areas confuse our simple picture of climatic bands, but they matter enormously.

### *The Peopling of the Americas*

Like Australia, the New World was uninhabited by humans (or any species of ape) until the late Pleistocene. A glance at a map shows that they were most likely to enter the Americas from the far north, since any other point of entry would have required a willingness and capacity to cross oceans with few island stepping-stones. To the northeast the distances between islands were less formidable than at lower latitudes, but still demanded a seafaring ability that appeared only with the Vikings (alias the Norsemen) in the late first millennium A.D.; and even they had no discernible impact on the mainland of North America. That leaves the northwest as the obvious gateway from Asia to the Americas, though a rather peculiar one. It had to be negotiated in two stages. First, the prospective immigrants had to wait for an ice age so that the Bering Strait would turn into a land bridge and give them access to Alaska. Then they had to wait until the ice age was over so that glaciers blocking their movement to the south should melt. This

makes the end of the Pleistocene a plausible context for the human occupation of the Americas.

We have no direct indication that this is what happened, but the indirect evidence fits. With regard to the route, genetic testimony points strongly to affinities between the populations of the Americas and those of Asia, especially Siberia. The date is more of a problem. It is clear that northeast Asia was inhabited by 13,000 B.C. In Alaska the oldest known sites go back to 11,000 or 12,000 B.C. Farther south there is no dispute about the presence of humans by 11,000 B.C. But earlier dates from various parts of the Americas have their champions, and may yet prevail, though at this point they remain controversial. Of these earlier dates, that currently taken most seriously would place the appearance of humans in the southern cone of South America at about 12,500 B.C., implying a yet earlier date for their initial arrival in North America. But the difference, though highly significant for specialists, is hardly mind-blowing for the rest of us. Whatever consensus develops, there is no real doubt that the occupation of the Americas was a much later event than that of Australia.

So what did these relatively recent immigrants make of the Holocene window in the Americas?

### *American Hunter-Gathering*

The first thing that stands out is the prominence of hunter-gatherers throughout the pre-Columbian period. In contrast to the Australians, they did not have either continent to themselves; but relatively speaking they continued to occupy far more territory than their counterparts in the Old World.

The northern half of North America offers an obvious example. At a latitude at which the peoples of northern Asia were tending domesticated reindeer, those of North America hunted caribou. Since caribou and reindeer are close enough to be considered the same species, the explanation of the difference is proba-

bly to be sought on the human side. Perhaps the Old World development was a case of stimulus diffusion: the peoples of the Eurasian Arctic were exposed to pastoralists tending herbivores in the grasslands to their south, whereas, for a reason we will come to, those of the American Arctic were not.

Farther to the south, much of what is now the western United States was occupied by hunter-gatherers, and many tribes of the plains and prairies, though practicing some agriculture, lived primarily by hunting and gathering. Temperate South America presents a similar picture on a smaller scale. Most of the land was left to hunter-gatherers; they hunted the guanaco, the wild ancestor of the llama, but did not domesticate it. Likewise, hunter-gatherers were to be found here and there in the tropics.

As in Australia, the persistence of the hunter-gatherer way of life did not mean an absence of change. In the far north, for example, the arrival of the Eskimos—or their “Palaeo-Eskimo” predecessors—from northeast Asia within the last few thousand years marks the appearance of a culture specially adapted to Arctic hunting. From Alaska they spread eastward to Greenland, and westward back into the northeast corner of Asia—thus becoming the only American population to colonize the Old World. They were likewise the only pre-Columbian people in whose tool kit iron had a place; they must have obtained it from meteorites and from trade with northeast Asia or the Vikings of Greenland. To the south of the Eskimos, we encounter two families of languages occupying vast territories, Athapascan in the west and Algonquian in the east; the existence of these incontrovertible families points to expansions within the last two or three thousand years, and it does so far more clearly than Pama-Nyungan in Australia. What powered these expansions we do not know. Turning to South America, we find pottery dating back to about 6000 B.C. in the eastern part of the tropical region; this was made by groups exploiting aquatic resources, but innocent of farming (rather as in Jōmon Japan).

Of course, not all hunter-gatherers of the Americas lived in, or

took effective advantage of, environments that allowed such developments. The American Antarctic, for example, was no mirror image of the Arctic. Though neither as poor in resources nor as harsh in climate as the Arctic, the tip of South America was inhabited by societies as simple as any in the world; their canoes, for example, were far less seaworthy than those of the Eskimos. There was an obvious reason for the disparity: in contrast to the Arctic, this Antarctic world was a very small one, and completely isolated from similar territories on other continents. Yet overall, the American hunter-gatherer scene was as changeable as that of Australia.

Why did hunter-gatherers, however simple or complex their societies, continue to occupy so much of the Americas? The answer lies not in any distinctive strength of their way of life but rather in the relative weakness of American farming.

### *American Farming*

Old World farming typically has two domesticated components: plants and animals. The first thing to note in the Americas is the much less prominent role played by animals. Such domesticated animals as there were tended to be small, like the turkey in Mesoamerica and the guinea pig in the Andes. The only domesticated herbivores were the Andean camelids, the llama and the alpaca, and they did not spread to other parts of the Americas. Overall, the problem was not lack of grass or, initially, of herbivores. But just as in Australia, the arrival of behaviorally modern humans was followed by massive extinctions among the larger animal species of both continents (the evidence for the role of humans being much more specific in the American than in the Australian case). The result was that, by the time farming developed, few suitable animals remained to domesticate; this left large areas of the American grasslands to the hunter-gatherers.

In the realm of domesticated plants, one major limitation relates to the techniques of cultivation. Whereas the farmers of the Old World used the plow, those of the New World depended

on the digging stick—a difference obviously related to the lack of oxen in the Americas. This made New World agriculture a labor-intensive affair—“horticulture,” as it is often called. It also meant that some potentially very fertile land could not be cultivated with the prevailing technology; again this land was left to the hunter-gatherers.

The Americas were also less fortunate than the Old World in the plants that were available for domestication. The most widespread package was a combination of maize, beans, and squash that originated in Mexico. Maize in particular came to be cultivated as far north as Canada and as far south as Argentina, a remarkable success, given that it had to diffuse from one climatic zone to another. Other domesticates, like potatoes in the Andes and manioc in Amazonia, did not spread beyond the types of environment to which they were initially adapted. The relative disadvantage of the Americas became clear when the coming of the Europeans brought Old and New World crops into competition. Several New World crops, like maize and the potato, were widely adopted in the Old World; but the colonization of the New World by Old World domesticates was a much more extensive process.

The relative weakness of New World farming is reflected in the story of its emergence. Currently there are two rival chronologies in the field, a long one and a short one. The long chronology places the beginnings of plant domestication in the early Holocene, with dates going back to 10,000 B.C. The short chronology prefers dates no earlier than the fourth millennium B.C., a good five thousand years later. The choice turns in part on how hard or soft the evidence has to be. Yet for our purposes there is little need to choose between the two chronologies. On the short one, domestication started some five thousand years later in the New World than in the Old; on the long one, it started just as early in both, but brought about no radical change in New World societies for the next five thousand years. Whichever is the case, the upshot was that the Neolithic revolution got under way much later in the

New World. Real villages do not appear in the Americas before the short chronology would lead us to expect them.

Within the New World the cases of the two continents are somewhat different. In North America the only region in which successful farming emerged independently was the Mexican highlands with its classic package of maize, beans, and squash. Maize at least was domesticated in or by the fourth millennium B.C., though village life appears only in the second millennium.

From the Mexican highlands this package, and maize in particular, spread northward over considerable distances to two regions of what is now the United States. One was the southwest, a territory with no earlier domesticates. Here farming arrived in the second millennium B.C., but did not become predominant for another couple of millennia. The other region was the southeast, where maize arrived in the first millennium A.D.; this region had possessed some marginal local domesticates since the third millennium B.C., but it was not until some time after maize had been adopted that farming brought about major changes in society. In due course maize cultivation diffused widely in the eastern half of the United States.

As we have seen, maize also spread to South America; it was cultivated in Ecuador in the second millennium B.C. But by this time farming was already well established in the central Andes. Here the domestication of the main plants and animals had probably happened in the fourth millennium B.C. The major crops in the Andean region were a grain called quinoa and the potato; the major animal was the llama. The impact of farming on society is clearly visible in the third millennium B.C. The walls that appear in figure 2 are in fact located at Caral in the coastal lowlands of Peru; here domesticated crops and monumental architecture date from about 2600 to 2000 B.C.

Amazonia is the joker in the pack, since in tropical forests good archaeological evidence is hard to come by. Domesticated manioc may—or may not—have as long a history as Andean crops. The

tropical horticulture of the Amazonian lowlands was most successful when practiced on or near the floodplains of the major rivers of the region, which in turn provided obvious avenues for its diffusion. Indeed, farming peoples with canoes seem to have moved not just down the rivers of northern South America but also through chains of islands offshore. Thus the linguistic affiliations of the Taíno, who occupied the Greater Antilles at the time the Spanish arrived, point to an origin deep in the interior of tropical South America.

### *American Civilization*

If the weakness of American farming was good for the conservation of the hunter-gatherer way of life, it was bad for the emergence and spread of civilization. At the point at which the Old World and the New came into definitive contact in 1492, civilizations occupied a vast territory in the Old World, but only a small part of the New. In fact, just two areas in the Americas supported civilizations, though both had done so for a considerable time. One was Mesoamerica, a region combining the Mexican highlands with the adjoining lowlands. The other, if we overlook the absence of writing, was the central Andean region, including the coastal lowlands—roughly the modern country of Peru plus some territory to the north and south of it. Though the peoples of this region lacked writing, they did have something less satisfactory in lieu of it (as we will see in the final section of this chapter). Outside these two regions there were no writing systems at all, no cities, and no states. The richer farming societies might be ruled by powerful figures whom we can comfortably, if a little vaguely, call chiefs. In the southeast of the United States, for example, some of the large mounds of earth that survive to this day are known from early European testimony to have had chiefly residences on top of them. Moundville in Alabama has some twenty major mounds dating from the thirteenth or fourteenth century A.D.; these earthworks attest the considerable power of chiefs to mobilize the labor

of their subjects. Similar societies were to be found in South America, notably in the northern Andes. But none of them were in the same league as the Aztec or Inca states.

A basic fact about the two civilizations of the New World is the absence of relations between them, whether by land or by sea. This did not preclude the diffusion of a couple of important innovations from one region to the other. As we saw, maize (but not writing) reached the Andean region from Mesoamerica; and a measure of metalworking (but not the llama) spread in the opposite direction at a much later date. Yet there were no direct relations between the two civilizations, and they would appear to have been ignorant of each other's existence. One reason for this was the relatively low level of New World maritime technology. On the Pacific we hear of canoes, rafts, reed boats—but nothing to compare with the ships that enabled the Spanish to link the two regions in the course of a mere fourteen years. Another reason for the lack of contact was that the civilizations of the Americas were separated by latitude, not by longitude as in the case of Eurasia. Hence any linkages between the two regions had to cut across the climatic bands.

This means that the context of the New World civilizations was marked not just by the absence of technologies taken for granted in the Old World but also by a much greater degree of isolation. It may be worth reviewing a few features of these civilizations against this background.

We can start with something that in itself needs no special explanation: the absence of a strong tradition of long-term political unity in either of these multi-ethnic civilizations. In Mesoamerica the Spanish found an uneven patchwork when they arrived. The Aztec empire in the highlands was extensive, but there were significant territorial gaps in it; the Mayan lowlands lay outside it, and were divided into a large number of small states. There were precedents for both configurations. In the highlands the Toltecs were remembered to have ruled an empire a few centuries earlier (it may have fallen in the twelfth century), and archaeology sug-

gests that the city we know as Teotihuacán was the center of an empire in the first centuries of our era. In the lowlands the Mayan inscriptions of the first millennium A.D. demonstrate a political fragmentation comparable to that encountered by the Spanish. In short, large-scale political organization seems to have been intermittent, and a feature of the highlands rather than the lowlands. The Andean region looks very different to us because the arrival of the Spanish coincided with the zenith of the Inca empire, a massive and centralized imperial state that had recently conquered the entire region, highlands and lowlands. But we have no reason to think that a state of such dimensions had ever arisen there before, though there had certainly been states of considerable size and power.

A more interesting, because more distinctive, feature of the New World civilizations is that in neither case was there a core ethnic group identified as the originators or continuing proprietors of the civilization as a whole. It is likely that the pioneering role in the development of Mesoamerican civilization was played by a people of the western lowlands whom modern scholars have chosen to call the Olmecs. Olmec culture was already taking shape toward the end of the second millennium B.C., considerably earlier than comparable developments elsewhere in Mesoamerica (though the first evidence of writing comes not from the Olmecs but from the Zapotec area in the highlands, where it dates from the middle of the first millennium B.C.). But Olmec culture lasted only about a millennium, and no memory of it was preserved among the historically known peoples of Mesoamerica. Instead, at the time the Spanish arrived, the civilization consisted of a loose family of cultures, each of which was embedded in its own ethnic context, and no one of which played a central role. There was no such thing as a shared classical language, for example; and we have no reason to think that matters had ever been very different. In the Andean region the highland Chavín culture of the first millennium B.C. might be seen as playing the part of the Olmecs (though monu-

mental architecture goes back to the third millennium). But again, there is no later memory of the culture, and no clue to the ethnicity of those who developed it.

This brings us to a final feature of the New World civilizations that is worth considering here: the relative shallowness of their historical memories.

In the Mesoamerican case the issues are murky, but scholars tend to see the peoples of the region at the time of the Spanish conquest as in possession of historical memories reaching back to perhaps the tenth century A.D. Thus in the highlands the chronicles of the Aztecs preserved an impressive record of their own history going back about a century. They also knew something in historical, and not just legendary, terms about events going back a few centuries before that; and though much of this material was likewise about their own history, they had some conception of the role of the Toltecs as well. Yet they had nothing to tell of the people who created the imperial city of Teotihuacán, let alone their predecessors; our only information there is archaeological. In the lowlands the Maya of the early sixteenth century preserved a record of events comparable to that found in the highlands, but the detailed, if fragmentary, information we possess on Mayan history in the first millennium A.D. is overwhelmingly derived from the monumental inscriptions of the period, and not from chronicles still in circulation when the Spanish arrived.

In the Andean region historical memory was significantly shallower. The Incas put a great deal of effort into remembering their own history, in effect establishing foundations to preserve a record of the life and deeds of each of the Inca rulers, at considerable cost in revenues and personnel. This was not a disinterested activity: Inca history was closely related not just to the prestige of the Inca state as a whole but also to that of the particular Inca lineages associated with each ruler. Not surprisingly, the Incas had no interest in extending this high-maintenance historiography to their predecessors. Thus Tiahuanaco in the southern highlands, a plau-

sible imperial center comparable to Teotihuacán and of roughly the same antiquity, is likewise known to us only by its ruins, and the same goes for Huari farther north. The rule in the Andean region is that the only state history we possess is Inca history. The sole exception to this is the state of Chimú in the coastal lowlands, a highly centralized kingdom conquered by the Incas about 1470. The Incas did nothing to preserve its history directly, but they did allow the dynasty to continue to exercise a measure of power under their overlordship, and as late as the beginning of the seventeenth century the royal family still retained a role under Spanish rule. It is doubtless to this survival of the dynasty that we owe the short, but valuable, account of its history that has reached us through the Spanish sources. In the Andean case, moreover, writing was not available to counteract the fading of historical memory in pre-Columbian times.

As we already indicated, it seems likely that a common thread in the background to these features of the New World civilizations is their isolation. Neither was in contact with other civilizations that could have served as models or rivals, and thereby acted as a stimulus to political unification and a heightened sense of identity. Indeed, in each case the idea of a single overarching civilization is a product not of the native cultures themselves but of our modern understanding of them. This understanding, however, is not obviously wrong. In fact the next section will show that, in the case of one key institution of Mesoamerican cultures, our understanding is unquestionably right.

## II. MESOAMERICAN CALENDARS

We take our calendar for granted and do not usually think much about it. The result is that we tend to have little sense of its history, or of the way in which it relates to the set of all possible calendars, or even of the importance of having a calendar at all. One way to stop taking our calendar for granted is to see it against the back-

ground of a calendar type that once prevailed over much of the Old World. The elements are familiar: days, months, and years. What is unfamiliar to us about this type of calendar is its insistence that the length of the month be keyed to the phases of the moon. The major problem this creates lies in the relationship between the month and the year: twelve lunar months do not contain enough days to make a year, but thirteen contain too many. The solution is to vary the length of the year, so that roughly one year in three has thirteen months, while the rest have twelve. If you do not like this variability, you have to break the relationship between the lunar month and the year. The Muslims are unique in that they made this break by dispensing with real years: they take a block of twelve lunar months and choose to call it a "year." The Europeans, following the ancient Egyptians, take another tack: they divide the year into twelve units that bear no relationship to the phases of the moon, but persist in calling them "months." There is obviously a certain inertia at work here. Once you have severed the link with the moon, there is no good reason why the number of your pseudo-months should continue to be twelve, or their length to approximate that of a real lunar month.

Another system of timekeeping that we take for granted is the week, a cycle of 7 named days; this too was widespread in the Old World long before modern times. What does not occur to us is to take two such cycles and run them concurrently. For example, suppose we were to set up a 2-day cycle and a 3-day cycle. Call the days of the first cycle "1" and "2," those of the second "red," "green," and "amber," and run the two cycles together for 6 days:

|        |   |       |
|--------|---|-------|
| Day 1: | 1 | red   |
| Day 2: | 2 | green |
| Day 3: | 1 | amber |
| Day 4: | 2 | red   |
| Day 5: | 1 | green |
| Day 6: | 2 | amber |

Here the simple 2- and 3-day cycles generate a complex 6-day cycle in which each of the 6 days has a distinct designation ("1 amber" and the like). This way of doing things may seem strange, but it is well established at the eastern end of the Old World. The Chinese, in particular, combine a 10-day cycle with a 12-day cycle to generate a 60-day cycle (60 being the lowest number divisible by both 10 and 12). This cycle is vital to accurate chronology in Chinese history: the months slither around, but the 60-day cycle has been working like clockwork since time immemorial.

We are now equipped to take on the calendars of Mesoamerica. Since life is governed by the seasons, in the New World just as in the Old, it makes sense to look for a recognizable Mesoamerican concept of the year. Reassuringly, we have no trouble in finding it: a year of 365 days, just like that of the ancient Egyptians. Of course, in astronomical terms this is very slightly too short, a problem Julius Caesar more or less solved for us with his leap-year system; but the Mesoamericans lived with this discrepancy. Assuming that their minds worked like ours, we would then expect them to divide their 365-day year into smaller units; and again they oblige. Just like the ancient Egyptians, they set aside 5 days at the end of the year; this is a good idea, since 360 is a nicely divisible number. What the Egyptians did with their 360 days was divide them into twelve 30-day months—an unimaginative choice, but a distinctly tidier system than the one we have today. The Mesoamericans, by contrast, divided the 360 days into eighteen units of 20 days each. Among the Maya of Yucatán, for example, the 7th of Pop is the 7th day of the 20-day "month" called Pop. The number 20 was very much in place in Mesoamerica because the counting system was vigesimal (in other words, the base of the system was 20, not 10 as it is with us). Though the resulting structure of the 365-day year may strike us as a little bizarre, it is not baffling.

But the Mesoamericans did not leave it at that. Alongside their 365-day year, they had a cycle of 260 days. This cycle was complex: it was generated, like the hypothetical 6-day cycle set out above, by

running two simple cycles concurrently. One of these was numerical, and ran from 1 to 13; the other was a cycle of 20 day names. So 7 Coatl, in the calendar of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, was not the 7th day of a "month" called Coatl; Coatl was not a "month" of any kind, but rather the 5th in the cycle of the 20 day names. You get to 7 Coatl by running both cycles until 7 and Coatl come together, which happens on the 85th day of the 260-day cycle.

Despite their having quite different internal structures, the 365-day year and the 260-day cycle can be used conjointly. One way to do this involves the relationship between the 260-day cycle and the beginning of the 365-day year. The key point is that for any given Mesoamerican calendar there are 52 and only 52 days out of the 260 on which the beginning of a year can fall (if you like this kind of thing, you can work out just why this is so). The upshot is that for 52 years, we can distinguish each year by the day in the 260-day cycle on which it starts; once 52 years are up, we are back where we started. So we now have a grand cycle of 52 years (or 73 cycles of 260 days, or 18,980 days). The use of this cycle in historical records lies behind the hard-edged chronology of the accounts of recent Aztec history that were composed after the Spanish conquest; there is no such precision in the corresponding narratives of recent Inca history. For more ancient history, of course, the system does not work so well—Mesoamericanists are forever worrying about which 52-year cycle a given event should be assigned to (did it happen in 1204 or 1256 or 1308 . . . ?).

This analysis has presented Mesoamerican calendars as if they were purely functional. In fact, they trailed large amounts of cultural baggage that brought the calendar into relation with Mesoamerican religion and cosmology. In the Aztec area each day of the 20-day cycle had its supernatural patron, and each day of the 260-day cycle was coded lucky, unlucky, or neutral. A particular day might be both lucky and unlucky for different reasons; it took a professional diviner to resolve such complexities (no doubt

for a fee). The 5 leftover days at the end of the year were dangerous; it was a good time to stay at home. There were similar conceptions among the Maya; thus days in the 260-day cycle might be spoken of as if they were intelligent beings. Incidentally, the 260-day cycle survives among several Mayan ethnic groups today, complete with widely diverging ideas about which days are lucky, unlucky, or neutral. All this is comparable in its arbitrariness to the traditional English superstition about Friday the thirteenth, but far more systematic.

The basic shape of the calendar did not vary greatly from one Mesoamerican people to another. In the west the Tarascans at the time of the Spanish conquest lacked the 260-day cycle. In the east the Maya of the first millennium A.D. used a "Long Count," which gave absolute dates in an era starting (for no known reason) in or around 3114 B.C., thus avoiding the long-term ambiguity of the 52-year cycle. But these are unusually large deviations. For the most part the divergences are of a kind one would expect, given the expanse of space and time over which this calendar type prevailed—the surprise is rather that its basic structure should have been so uniform. Given this relative uniformity, and the fact that the Mesoamerican pattern has no precise parallels elsewhere in the world, it is clear that we have to do with a case of diffusion. Like Australian subsections, this is a system that must have originated at some particular place and time, and subsequently spread to other regions. It is in character with Mesoamerican civilization at large that we have no idea when or where to place these origins (though we know from inscriptions that a calendar of the relevant type was already established in the Zapotec area of the Mexican highlands in the middle of the first millennium B.C.). Nor do we know how to imagine the process by which the system spread. What we can say is that in each case the calendar as we know it seems to be pretty much at home in its local ethnic environment. Thus where names of days or "months" are involved, each people has its own. And the calendars of the various ethnic groups were in no way

synchronized; even within the Valley of Mexico, those of different towns seem not to have been in phase in Aztec times.

This family of calendars provides a good example of a phenomenon widespread in human cultures. Few societies can do without a calendar of some kind, and a complex society needs a reasonably precise one. Once it possesses such a calendar, it may have to adjust it from time to time, but there is no need to embroider it. Our own calendar is a case in point: it works, and for the most part that is enough for us. But cultures have a way of picking on some aspect or other of their pragmatic arrangements, and elaborating them in respects that have no obvious utilitarian justification. This seems to be the case with Australian subsections; it is undoubtedly so with Mesoamerican calendars. What we see here is again a human propensity for gratuitous cultural embroidery. The reason the example is a good one is simply its dramatic visibility to anyone coming from a Western culture: it so happens that our restraint in calendric matters contrasts sharply with the extravagance of the Mesoamericans.

Yet these same calendars can also be used to illustrate the limits of cultural diversity among humans. A Mesoamerican calendar is immediately recognizable for what it is—a calendar, not some exotic practice bearing only a faint resemblance to what in our culture is called a calendar. Moreover, it is quite obviously a calendar developed by people living on the same planet as ourselves: it takes the day for granted as the basic calendric unit and constructs a year of 365 days. Where we have trouble grasping the workings of these calendars, the reason is merely that they are intricate and unfamiliar; they are far from being so deeply alien to us that we do not know how to begin to understand them.

The fact remains that Mesoamerican calendars stand significantly apart from those of the civilizations of the Old World. The Old World calendars resemble each other more than any of them resemble those of Mesoamerica. This is interesting: it suggests that Old World calendars owed more to each other than we can

ever hope to prove from the specific evidence available in particular cases. By the same token, the distinctiveness of Mesoamerican calendars suggests the effects of the emergence of a civilization in isolation from others.

### III. THE QUIPU

Unlike Mesoamerican calendars, the object from the Andean region shown in figure 12 is purely utilitarian. The material of which it is made is string and nothing else, which makes it easy to carry around—several such objects can be stuffed into a cloth bag. At the top is the main string, to which in this case over ninety pendent strings are attached; some of these in turn have substrings tied to them. The result is elaborate, but hardly a work of art. Normally such an object would not survive when no longer cared for by its owner, but this one (like a good many others) owes its excellent state of preservation to the aridity of the coastal lowlands of Peru, an environment in which ancient textiles also survive in some quantity. The object is a quipu and was doubtless taken from a late pre-Columbian burial—even Inca rulers were buried with quipus.

The message of a quipu was in the knots. Beyond this, only two things seem reasonably certain about the way quipus worked: that they recorded numbers, and that they did not record words. The recording of numbers was relatively straightforward. Several distinct knots were used to encode them, and they did so in the same decimal system that we use. This is not speculation. We sometimes find what is called a top cord grouping a set of pendent strings; in such cases, the number on the top-cord checks out as the total of the numbers on the pendent strings, thus confirming our reading. By contrast, neither the quipu we have in our hands nor the accounts left by Spanish observers support the idea that the knots were a form of writing—that what they did was reduce spoken language to a visual code.

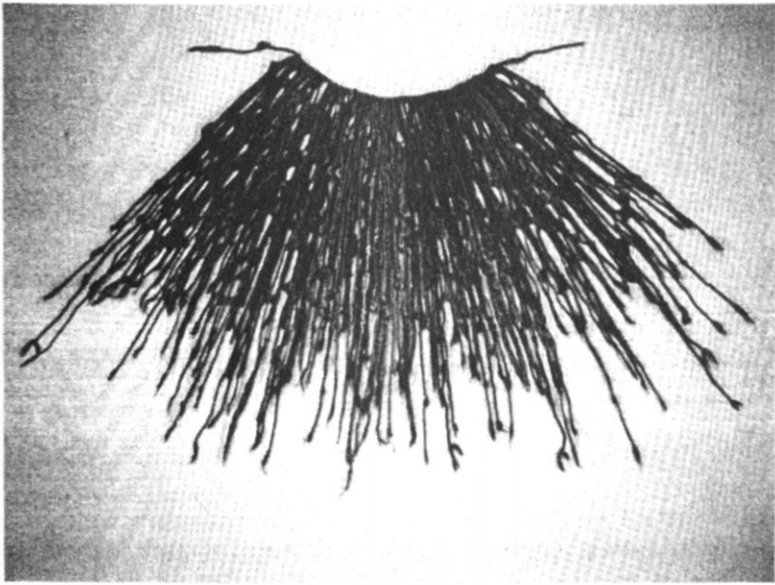


Fig. 12: A quipu.

Unfortunately this leaves us with a large gray area. One might imagine that a quipu contained nothing but numbers, and that its owner had to rely entirely on his memory to know what each number referred to. But this is unlikely. Pendent strings are attached to the main string of a quipu in a certain order; substrings are attached to some pendent strings but not to others; above all, many quipus (including the one shown here) have strings in a variety of colors. All this presumably meant something to experts. But does this mean that such coding enabled any expert to read any quipu even if he had never seen it before? This is hard to imagine, and one Spanish source tell us explicitly that it was not the case. In other words, it seems that understanding the numerical contents of a quipu required memory specific to that quipu.

This does not preclude the idea that quipus could have been used as devices to prompt memory of nonnumerical material—a highly elaborate version of tying a knot in one's handkerchief. In this connection many Spanish sources mention the use of quipus in connection with the recording of historical narratives, and they may well be right. What we cannot tell, of course, is exactly how much of the information in an oral rendering of the narrative could actually have been encoded on the quipu. Still less do we have any understanding of the code itself.

One thing that is abundantly clear is that quipus were essential to the functioning of the Inca state. They were used to record the many kinds of statistical information needed for administrative purposes: census data, labor services, quantities of goods in storage along the roads, and the like. One early Spanish observer asked a chief to explain the system to him; the chief showed him quipus recording all the goods he had delivered to the Spanish since their arrival.

The Incas do not seem to have invented the idea of the quipu, and it certainly outlived them. Decades after the conquest, quipus remained in use for administrative purposes within the native society. In fact, the quipu was still alive in remote areas in the last century—for example, on the islands of Lake Titicaca. But once the Spanish had introduced writing to Andean society, the quipu was bound to lose ground.

What is interesting about the quipu is precisely this inverse relationship to writing. According to Chinese tradition, knotted cords were used for administrative purposes in early China, but the sages later replaced this practice with writing. Society in the Andean region—or, more particularly, the Inca state—had likewise reached a level of complexity at which it needed to collect and conserve large amounts of information, far more than people could comfortably carry in their heads. Unquestionably the most effective solution would have been writing, the technology adopted not just in China but in all Old World societies at a comparable level of

complexity (not to mention those of Mesoamerica). But Andean civilization had no access to an already existing writing system, and it did not invent one for itself. Instead, it made do with a workable system for recording numbers, but one that in other respects must have placed a significant burden on the memories of those who operated it. In short, the Incas lacked something they needed.

This lack was not confined to the immediate needs of the bureaucracy. It was also apparent in another domain we have touched on, the recording of historical information. Around 1600 an author writing in Quechua, the language of the Inca empire, lamented the previous absence of writing among his people in these terms: "If the ancestors of the people called Indians had known writing in earlier times, then the lives they lived would not have faded from view until now. As the mighty past of the Vira Cochis [the Spanish] is visible until now, so too would theirs be." This author naturally made his point by drawing a contrast with the Spanish; but he could also have referred to Mesoamerica. It is thanks to the fact that the Maya had writing that they are the only American people whose history in the first millennium A.D. did not permanently fade from view.

In sum, the quipu is a lot less stimulating to the cross-cultural imagination than Mesoamerican calendars, but it has a significant, if by now familiar, implication. It demonstrates the effects of isolation. Isolation can make for interesting diversity, as in the case of Mesoamerican calendars: they are refreshingly different from Old World calendars, and they are not on balance any the worse for it. But isolation also insulates a culture from a wider field of competition and stimulus; and in the long run this is unlikely to be to its advantage. Thus all the early Old World civilizations possessed writing, whereas only one of the two American civilizations had it. What this surely reflects is the interconnectedness of the Old World, even in very ancient times, and the isolating geography of the New World throughout its independent history. The fact that the one civilization that ever developed in the Southern Hemi-

sphere neither invented nor acquired writing shows how hard it was to make history in pre-Columbian America. No wonder Atahualpa, the last Inca emperor, was fascinated by the ability of the Spanish to read and write. It is said that, during his captivity before his execution, he devised an experiment to establish whether this ability was innate or acquired; he went to his death knowing that the skill was culturally transmitted.

# AFRICA

## I. THE AFRICAN CULTURAL GRADIENT

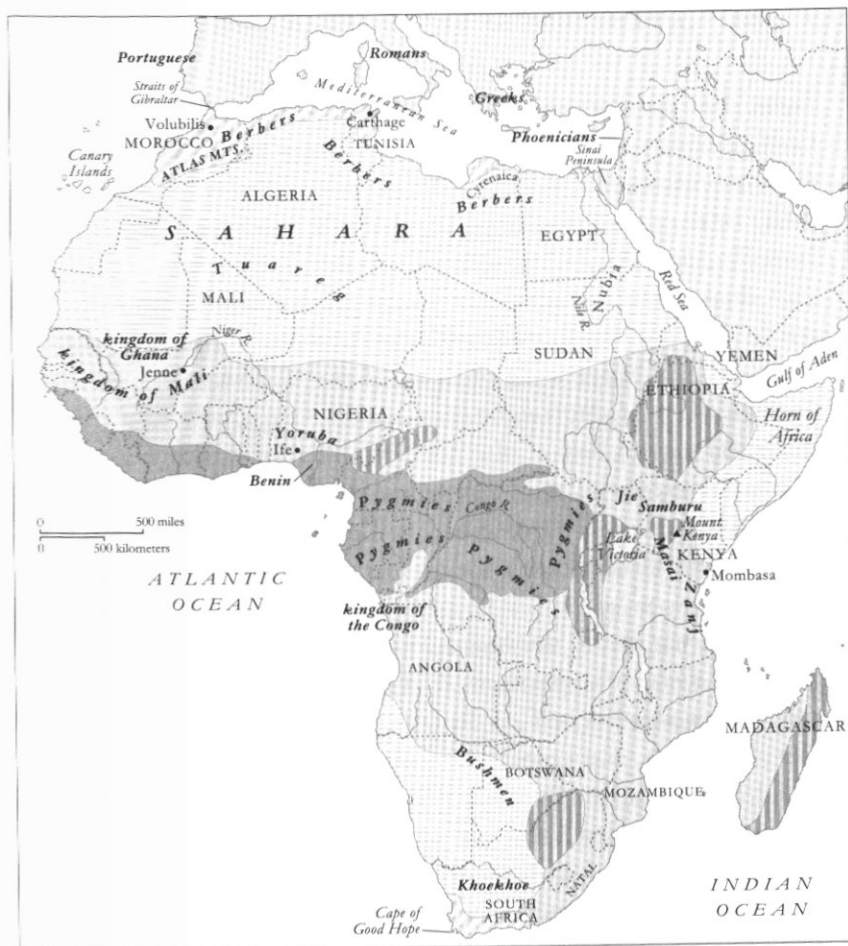
Africa is the one continent where we do not have to wrestle with the date of the arrival of modern humans: they evolved there. South of the Sahara this antiquity carries with it a much greater genetic diversity than is found among the human populations of the rest of the world. This diversity includes the most drastic, or at least the most conspicuous, physical adaptations of any human populations to climatic conditions: the short stature of the Pygmies in the hot and humid rainforest, and the tall, thin body build of a scattering of peoples of the hot and dry savannas. Yet in Africa, as elsewhere, the prime factors explaining the diverse trajectories of human societies are more directly environmental. What sort of an environment does Africa provide for humans?

It makes some sense to think of Africa as a southern continent. Its current position on the globe is to the south of western Eurasia, and in origin it is the largest fragment of the old southern supercontinent of Gondwana. Yet Africa is not as southern as we

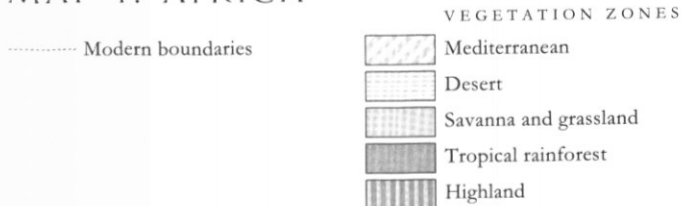
tend to think. It actually extends slightly farther to the north of the equator than it does to the south, and it is about twice as wide in the north.

This location gives Africa a climatic symmetry comparable to that of the Americas, but considerably more limited in scope (see map 4). As in the Americas, there is a substantial tropical belt around the equator characterized by rainforest, though the amount of it is far less generous. To the north and south of this band there is open country, which may be grassland where the summer rainfall is adequate or desert where it is not. On the northern side the grassland forms a belt immediately to the north of the rainforest; still farther north lies the Sahara, the world's largest and hottest desert, stretching continuously across the continent at its widest (though this region was significantly more hospitable several thousand years ago, when the Holocene climate was warmer than it is now, and consequently wetter). On the southern side of the rainforest the desert areas are in the south and west. Beyond the deserts lie the two extremities of the continent that enjoy a Mediterranean climate, with its winter rainfall. To the north Africa ends in a long coastline; while about half of this is desert, the other half has enough rainfall to share the climate of the Mediterranean at large. To the south a small region at the bottom of Africa has a climate of the same Mediterranean type.

As with the Americas, this picture of climatic bands is confused by the presence of mountains. But there the resemblance ceases. Africa is a relatively undisturbed piece of continental crust, remote from subduction zones except on the north, so it is generally flat. Such mountains as it has are concentrated in two regions. One is the northwest, where the Atlas Mountains are of the same recent vintage as the Alps, and result from Africa's collision course with Europe. The other, much larger region is East Africa, where the formation of mountains is associated with the splitting of the earth's crust that has given rise to the rift valley. The rifting runs from north to south, and is one branch of a massive system of



## MAP 4: AFRICA



As with many of the maps in this book, the peoples and places that appear here relate to a variety of periods. Thus the kingdoms of Ghana and Mali were not contemporary with each other, and the Berber populations of our own day are much less widely distributed than is shown on the map.

faults; the two most conspicuous branches of the system are the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. So whereas the Americas have their mountains in the west, Africa's are mostly in the east; and their size does not bear comparison with the massive ranges of the New World.

A final major feature of African geography runs from south to north: the Nile. Unlike such rivers as the Amazon or the Mississippi, the Nile brings water to a part of the world that desperately needs it. The Mediterranean is markedly stingy with its rainfall along the eastern half of the northern coast of Africa; Egypt, if left to the mercy of the Mediterranean, would be an unrelieved desert. What the Nile does is to give Egypt a transfusion of East African rainfall that has its origin in evaporation off the Indian Ocean.

Several features of this layout are crucial to the place of Africa in history. One is the proximity of the northern part of the continent to the western half of Eurasia. Africa is joined to it at the Sinai Peninsula, and comes close to it at the Straits of Gibraltar and the mouth of the Red Sea. Moreover, what separates northern Africa from western Eurasia is mostly the Mediterranean, which has been a zone of high maritime interaction over the last few thousand years. This means that the northern end of Africa is far from isolated, in sharp contrast to Australia or the Americas. Not so the southern end. This too shares a climate with other regions in its hemisphere—central Chile and western Australia—but it is utterly remote from them. Until the development of navigation on the oceans, any contacts between the southern fringe of Africa and a wider world had to cross the climatic bands of the continent. Here the open grasslands are good for interaction, but the deserts and the dense rainforest are not. We can add to this that the mountains of East Africa are not a corridor comparable to the Andes. In short, we can expect the history of the continent to be marked by a steep cultural gradient, with the advantage going to the north. And this is indeed what we find.

### *Hunter-Gatherers and Farmers in Africa*

In southern Africa numerous small hunter-gatherer populations still survive, or did so until recently. In the open country are the Bushmen, brown rather than black populations such as the G/wi of Botswana—the “/” in their name is a dental click, such as English-speakers use to express annoyance. These groups are widely scattered, but much more frequent in the desert areas of the center and west than in the grasslands of the east. Their languages share the frequent use of clicks like “/”—a phenomenon unknown outside southern Africa. This is reminiscent of the common features of the languages of Australia; and in the same way, the languages of the Bushmen cannot convincingly be reduced to a single family. This suggests that Bushmen have been in the region for a long time, and from any historical perspective we can think of them as aborigines. To the north of the Bushmen are the Pygmies, the equally aboriginal hunter-gatherers of the tropical forest. Some twenty different groups are known; presumably they once had languages of their own, but they now speak those of farming populations with whom they have or once had relations. To the east are numerous small hunter-gatherer populations in the East African highlands. Taken as a whole, these scattered hunter-gatherer populations of southern Africa look like residues of a time when the region was as much a preserve of hunter-gatherers as Australia before the eighteenth century. As we will see, that time, though not so recent as in the case of Australia, was not more than two or three thousand years ago. Against this southern pattern we can set the virtual absence of hunter-gatherers from northern Africa, even in ecologically similar regions. They hardly existed in modern times, and they have not been conspicuous for some thousands of years.

Unsurprisingly, the origins of African farming lie in the northern half of the continent. One development that may have taken place very early is the appearance of domesticated cattle in the Sahara, then a more benign environment than it is today; in the

eastern Sahara this may go back to around 7000 B.C. As we saw in chapter 2, this could have been an independent domestication. On the Mediterranean coast to the north of the Sahara, it was the Near Eastern farming package that spread, though at a somewhat later date. In the savanna belt to the south of the Sahara, domesticated animals were introduced from the north, but in a region of summer rainfall the plants had to be local domesticates; here the establishment of farming seems to have taken place within the period 4000–1000 B.C. Farther south, in the tropical forest, a pattern of agriculture appeared that was centered on the cultivation of domesticated yams; but as in Amazonia, the chronology remains murky. Thus the appearance of farming in Africa shows some clear instances of diffusion from the Near East, but often it is hard to decide between stimulus diffusion and independent development. By contrast, an aspect of material culture in which the African savanna had clear priority over the Near East was the development of pottery around 9000 B.C. (as against about 7000 B.C. in the Near East).

The story of the spread of farming to southern Africa is a much more recent one. Here there is no sign of independent domestications, with or without external stimulus. In one way this is surprising: the savannas of eastern and southern Africa are the only part of the world in which the wild herbivores of the late Pleistocene still survive on a significant scale. But for whatever reason, none of them were suitable for domestication. Instead, domesticates entered the region from the north. Two distinct processes were involved: the colonization of the south by farmers from the north, and the adoption of northern farming by hunter-gatherer populations already in the south.

The first process is the better known. The evidence for it comes from two sources, archaeology and linguistics. The archaeological record shows that by the second century A.D. there was a farming population between Lake Victoria and the East African coast that also practiced iron metallurgy. This population then spread rapidly

down the east coast of Africa, reaching Natal in less than two centuries. It stopped there, presumably because its crops were adapted to the summer rainfall of the tropics, as opposed to the winter rainfall of the south coast. Gradually this or similar populations moved into the interior of southern Africa, including eventually the west; but this last part of the process is very little known.

The linguistic evidence consists in two points. First, virtually all the languages spoken by the black populations of southern Africa are closely related, belonging to a single subfamily known as the Bantu languages. This is quite unlike the situation farther north in sub-Saharan Africa: there the language map of black Africa shows no such homogeneity, and extensive groupings of languages are much harder to establish with confidence. Second, there is good reason to place the homeland of the Bantu languages in this northern region, more precisely in the northwest near the Atlantic coast. It is here that Bantu itself is most deeply differentiated and that the non-Bantu languages most closely related to it are found. Taken together, these points strongly suggest that the Bantu languages entered southern Africa from the north in the relatively recent past, perhaps within the last couple of thousand years.

So the arrival of the iron-using farmers and the spread of the Bantu languages look like two sides of the same coin. But this conclusion, though it may be irresistible, does raise a problem. The archaeological evidence agrees with the linguistic evidence in suggesting a movement from north to south; but whereas archaeology points to an origin in the northeast, linguistics points to the northwest. How do we bring them together? We can reduce the gap a little by noting that an iron-using culture appears to the west of Lake Victoria earlier than it does to the east. But to bridge the rest of the gap, we are reduced to positing an early eastward migration of Bantu speakers in the direction of Lake Victoria, a movement for which evidence is otherwise lacking. Be this as it may, we are still on firmer ground than with Pama-Nyungan.

The other aspect of the spread of farming to southern Africa

concerns its adoption by hunter-gatherers already living in the region. Pastoralism (but not cultivation) was at some point adopted by people of the same physical type as the Bushmen. Such brown pastoral populations are known as the Khoekhoe peoples; they are still a significant presence in the central and western regions of southern Africa, and they were more extensive in the past. They speak click languages of a family to which a number of Bushman languages also belong. Archaeologically they are not well known, but their way of life seems to go back a couple of thousand years. The origins of their pastoralism must lie in northern Africa, whence their livestock derives. The simplest hypothesis would be that the ancestors of these pastoralists obtained their livestock from the iron-using black farmers. But there are indications that their pastoralism may have reached the south by a different route.

### *Literate Culture in Africa*

If one major southward movement was the spread of farming in southern Africa, another was the spread of literate culture in northern Africa.

Africa was the home of what was probably the world's second-oldest civilization, that of ancient Egypt. For most of its prehistory, Egypt had been rather a backwater. Farming is not attested in the Nile Valley until the sixth millennium B.C., and it is only in the fourth millennium that Egypt becomes a place to watch. But the development that then took place was rapid, with archaeological evidence of increased social stratification culminating in the emergence of the Egyptian state toward the end of the millennium. From that point on there was a tradition of Egyptian monarchy that was still in place in the fourth century B.C. and survived in a residual form into Roman times.

This monarchic institution played a remarkably salient role in Egyptian civilization, or at least in what we know of it. Like the Narmer Palette (see figure 10), the remains of ancient Egypt give us a great deal of information (or disinformation) about the

doings of kings, but tell us much less about anything else. The major exception is the Egyptian way of death, as we will see in the final section of this chapter; but even there, much of what we learn, particularly in the early period, is about the death of kings. At the same time, the roll call of the Egyptian kings lay at the core of Egyptian historical memory. Manetho, an Egyptian priest who wrote an account of the history of his country for the Greeks in the early third century B.C., still had at his disposal an authentic historical record going back to around 3000 B.C.—a time depth that could have been matched only in Mesopotamia. But the tradition of monarchic rule was not, in practice, unbroken. It was interrupted every few centuries by periods of disunity, and more seriously it was increasingly subject to episodes of foreign rule. No such episodes had occurred in the third millennium, and only one in the second; but in the first millennium they became so numerous as to make foreign rule the normal condition of the country. This in turn sapped the foundations of the high culture that had been associated with the Egyptian state. Already in retreat in the time of Manetho, within a few centuries it was dead.

One might have expected a civilization that lasted over two and a half millennia to have found many imitators beyond its borders. Yet this was not the case. As we will see in later chapters, civilizations vary enormously in the degree to which they export themselves, or are imported by others; that of ancient Egypt was more or less confined to the home market. For the peoples of the Near East it seems to have been in some way less eligible than its Mesopotamian competitor. For the peoples of Africa it was not very accessible. The Nile Valley is flanked by desert on two sides, and desert dwellers do not have much use for civilization. Farther up the river to the south were the Nubians, who unlike the desert dwellers did have a need for a high culture; and in contrast to the peoples of the Near East, they were a captive audience for the Egyptians—sometimes literally so. So the Nubian adoption of the culture of their northern neighbors, with or without ethnic

customization, has a long history. But Nubia was a dead end; it was not on the way to other territories where Egyptian civilization might have been in demand, such as the grasslands to the south of the Sahara. It may be possible to find traces of Egyptian civilization here and there in sub-Saharan Africa, but there was no instance of the transfer of the culture as a whole.

It was in the first millennium B.C. that literate cultures began to appear in parts of Africa other than the Nile Valley. The origins of these cultures lay outside Africa altogether, and the process that brought them to the continent was colonization. It began when the Phoenicians, maritime traders of the Syrian coast, founded the city of Carthage in what is now Tunisia. Carthage preserved a Phoenician culture (complete with its alphabetic script) from its foundation in the ninth century until its fall in the second century B.C. Toward the end of this period kingdoms were emerging among the native population of the hinterland, and one of these adopted Carthaginian culture. As a result of this interaction a version of the Carthaginian script came to be widely used for inscriptions in the native languages of ancient North Africa; this script was preserved down to modern times by the Tuareg nomads of the Sahara, among whom it was traditionally taught by the women. But there was no lasting native adoption of Phoenician literary culture.

Another example of the process takes us to the Ethiopian highlands in the middle of the first millennium B.C. In this case the colonists had crossed the sea from Yemen, bringing with them their language and culture, which likewise included an alphabetic script. This time the colonial culture was not imitated by independent African societies, and thus did not spread beyond Ethiopia; but thanks to its association with a resilient monarchic tradition, it has survived down to the present day in a distinctly Africanized form. The core of the Ethiopian population still speaks languages derived from that of the Yemenite colonists and

uses a version of the script they brought with them from Yemen, where it died out more than a thousand years ago.

Meanwhile, along the Mediterranean coast, the Phoenicians had been followed by the Greeks and Romans. The Greeks began to colonize Cyrenaica, to the west of Egypt, in the seventh century B.C., and thanks to Alexander the Great they occupied Egypt itself in the fourth. The Romans occupied North Africa and took over Egypt in the course of building their empire in the last centuries B.C. The ruins and Latin inscriptions of Volubilis in what is now Morocco date from the early centuries A.D. and show members of a native tribe living a literate urban life in Roman style.

Yet of all the outsiders of premodern times, none had so far-reaching a cultural impact as the Arabs. The rise of Islam in the seventh century A.D. led to the Arab conquest of the northern coast of Africa, from Egypt to Morocco; ultimately it is due to this expansion that Arabic literary culture prevails throughout this area today. But the Arabs also had something that their predecessors had lacked: they were a desert people for whom the Sahara was territory of a familiar kind. They did not in general make it their business to send armies across the desert, but they did establish a degree of trans-Saharan contact that cannot have been witnessed for several thousand years. When we peer through the eyes of the Greek and Latin authors of antiquity, we catch only the most fleeting glimpses of the world beyond the desert; but with the appearance of the Arabs, for the first time in recorded history the Sahara becomes transparent.

An immediate effect of this is to reveal the existence among the black populations of the savanna of a kingdom called Ghana. It was already there in the eighth century; we have no way to know when it was founded, or what predecessors it may have had, though there is archaeological evidence of urban life in West Africa by A.D. 300. In an eleventh-century source Ghana still appears as very much a pagan kingdom: we hear of idols and sor-

cerers, and of royal burials in which the dead king was supplied with grave goods and accompanied by the men who used to serve his meals. A reminder that we are in Africa, where matrilineal kinship systems are common, is the rule of succession: the kingship went not to the dead ruler's son but rather to his sister's son. There is no sign of any tradition of literacy in the native language. But like many rulers of societies lacking literate culture, those of Ghana clearly saw a use for it. The king's treasurer, and most of his ministers, were Muslims, and presumably literate in Arabic. There was also a Muslim town a few miles from the pagan capital; its existence doubtless reflected the role of Muslims from the north in the trans-Saharan trade.

In the long run the pagan Africans of this region themselves converted to Islam. Thus Mali, a major West African kingdom in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, was already a Muslim state. Its people were not, perhaps, very good Muslims. A Moroccan traveler visiting West Africa in the mid-fourteenth century, who comments on the degree of respect shown to women, was shocked when a local Muslim judge casually introduced his girlfriend; she laughed at the traveler's embarrassment. A century and a half later a ruler who took Islam to heart was perturbed by the fact that all the prettiest girls in the city of Jenne walked about naked, even the daughters of Muslim judges. But the people of the West African savanna were now part of the Muslim world, and under pressure to assimilate its mores.

While Islam came to West Africa by land, it reached East Africa by sea. Here too the Muslim Arabs went farther than their predecessors—their accounts of the region reach far into the Southern Hemisphere. As in West Africa an early result of this is to give us vivid images of societies that we could otherwise hope to know only through the veil of archaeology. A tenth-century source describes an East African kingdom among the Zanj in what is now Mozambique; we hear that an unjust ruler would be killed and his descendants barred from ruling. The king had a cavalry force of

three thousand men mounted on cattle—an entirely credible report, since this practice is known elsewhere in southern Africa at a later date. In this region south of the Horn of Africa, the interaction between native pagans and foreign Muslims did not result in a general conversion to Islam, but it did lead to the emergence of a Muslim African population along the coast.

### *What's in the Middle?*

This coverage of the African past has done something for the northern and southern parts of the continent, and something for the east coast. But what about the middle? Here we have neither the dramatic confluence of archaeology and linguistics that we found in the south nor the literary sources that illuminate the north and east. Yet two phenomena are perhaps worth highlighting.

One is the pastoralism of the East African highlands. Pastoralists appear on the plains of northern Kenya as early as the middle of the third millennium B.C. In the next section we will take up an aspect of their social organization in recent centuries; though by no means typical of Africa as a whole, it has some interesting things to tell us. At this point what is worth noting is the contrast between the East African highlands south of Ethiopia and the New World at the same latitude. Unlike the Andes, these highlands did not support intensive cultivation, relatively advanced metalworking, urbanization, or state formation, and were not integrated into the long-distance trade of the coast. The main reason for this is no doubt the aridity of the region.

The other phenomenon we should glance at is the evolution of urban life on the margins of the tropical forest in the region of the lower Niger—at first sight an unpromising environment, particularly in the absence of a maritime commercial scene comparable to that of the east coast. Yet the region is famous for some very fine bronze work dating to the centuries before the arrival of the Portuguese. At this time there was already a substantial kingdom in the

region, that of Benin; and if we can judge by oral traditions and later political patterns, there were also smaller dynastic city-states, of which one of the few known to us archaeologically is Ife. Just why this area should have supported more complex societies than were found in comparable regions to the east or west is hard to say; it is tempting to compare these West African city-states with those of another people who lived on the margins of a tropical rainforest, the lowland Maya.

Overall, the most distinctive feature of the African scene remains its pronounced north-to-south cultural gradient. To take just one example: in the south, the G/wi in the last century still made do with a number system comparable in its simplicity to that of the Aranda; in the north, by contrast, the Egyptians were already compiling handbooks on methods of mathematical calculation in the early second millennium B.C. Though each culture could be said to have had what it needed for its purposes, the difference in purposes is telling. Africa contrasts with the Americas in showing not just the costs of isolation but also the benefits of being connected.

## II. THE AGE-GROUP SYSTEMS OF EAST AFRICA

We take it for granted that people of different ages behave differently and that this is appropriate. For example, we feel that a man in his thirties should act his age and not behave like an adolescent or an old man. Equally we expect that, as they go through life, people of the same age will in some ways understand each other better than people of different ages.

All this is part of the fabric of our social life, but it is not something that we embody in formal institutions governed by hard-and-fast rules. If we wanted to describe our society, we could think of childhood, adolescence, maturity, and old age as "age-grades" that anyone blessed with a normal life span has to pass through. But if

we so desired, we could easily come up with a somewhat different series, particularly in the middle; and within reason we could place the boundaries between successive age-grades where we wanted. Our society simply does not formalize such things. In the same way, we could describe the set of people currently in a given age-grade (for example, adolescents) as a group—an “age-group”—on the basis that such people feel they have something in common. But it would be a pretty insubstantial sort of group in comparison to a football team.

There are some exceptions to this. At the university at which I teach, and in many others, students pass through a series of four age-grades, starting as freshmen and ending as seniors, before graduating into the terminal age-grade, that of alumni. Different formal (and informal) rules apply to each age-grade. At the same time, the set of students currently in a given age-grade is an age-group—the “class of '07,” or whatever—which passes successively through the age-grades. In this setting there is little ambiguity about who is assigned to what age-group, who is currently passing through which age-grade, and, in certain respects, what behavior this calls for. But our society as a whole does not work this way, nor does any other within the broad spectrum of modern societies.

In the premodern world, and residually in the modern world, a considerable number of societies operated age-group systems of the kind that we lack. Examples of these systems were to be found in most major regions of the world. But in terms of their number and their importance in social organization, they were particularly prominent in two regions: Africa and Taiwan (where they were characteristic of the aboriginal, not the Chinese, population). In Africa they were common in several parts of the continent, one of them East Africa. Here the tribes with age-group systems were largely but not exclusively pastoral, or from a pastoral background. As an example we can take the Samburu, a pastoral tribe living to the north of Mount Kenya, as its traditional way of life was

described in the late 1950s. These tribesmen were divided into clans; they had no real chiefs, but each clan had its elders. In language and culture they were closely related to the notorious Masai, though they lacked their reputation for military ferocity.

In the Samburu system there are three principal age-grades: boyhood, moranhood, and elderhood. As the first term already suggests, females are not part of the system. Turning to the second term, a moran is a young, unmarried man in his physical prime; before government came to East Africa, he and his likes would have been the warriors of the tribe. Entry to moranhood is clearly marked by a cluster of events. First, a boy is circumcised, typically at the age of fifteen or so. This is a very stressful occasion, not so much because of the actual physical pain, but rather because any sign of flinching will bring disgrace on the boy, his family, and his clan. Soon afterward a ceremony takes place within the clan known as the *Ilmugit* of the Arrows, and at this time the boy swears to his mother that he will not touch food seen by any married woman—one reason why he will now spend much of his time out in the bush. He is now a junior moran, and can apply red ochre to his head and body. A few years later, when he is about twenty, a second *Ilmugit* takes place; this is the *Ilmugit* of the Name, and marks the transition to senior moranhood. At this time the age-group to which our moran belongs chooses a ritual leader from among its members, and the age-group itself is given a name. Several years later, when our moran is about twenty-six, a third *Ilmugit* takes place, the *Ilmugit* of the Bull. No moran should marry until he has killed his ox for this ceremony (though if he is socially successful, he will previously have had a girlfriend). Typically a man will be about thirty at his first marriage; he is now settling down and becoming an elder. When he is thirty-four or so, the elders of the clan will bless him and his wife; at this point he ceases to observe the food tabus of a moran and has unquestionably become an elder himself. At some time in these years, when the majority of his age-group have married, a final *Ilmugit* is held,

the Ilmugit of the Milk and Leaves. Just as there are subgrades for the moran (junior and senior), so also there are subgrades for the elders (junior elders, firestick elders, senior elders), but for the most part we can leave them aside.

We have followed the career of an individual male through the early age-grades, but it is evident from this account that in becoming a moran he joins a continuing age-group within his clan. The age-mates go through the Ilmugits together, not as individuals—though it is as individuals that they finally leave moranhood. Membership of the group has a strong effect on social relations: age-mates interact with each other as equals, whereas they are expected to show respect for members of older age-groups. One senior age-group in particular exercises a kind of authority over a junior age-group passing through moranhood, namely the group two subgrades above it. The members of this senior group are the “firestick elders” of the junior group, moral guardians equipped with the sanction of a highly potent curse.

This is roughly how the system is described among the Samburu. Doubtless no two systems were exactly alike, even in East Africa; they could be set up in different ways and used for different purposes. Equally there was probably no people with such a system that could not have done without it. There is no known environment in which humans cannot live without an age-group system. This does not, of course, mean that these systems served no purpose. It certainly makes sense to see age-groups as having important social functions, such as channeling the aggressiveness of young men and mobilizing a military force for the tribe. But pastoral (and other) societies elsewhere in the world do not seem to have found it difficult to achieve such purposes in other ways. The medieval Mongols, for example, had no age-groups, but in military terms they were hardly outshone by the Masai. So we have here yet another example of human cultural diversity, and of the way in which societies tend to seize unpredictably on some particular feature of human life and elaborate it in a manner that is in

some sense gratuitous. We also see once more the power of neighborhood in setting such cultural trends: whereas in many parts of the world an age-group system would have been an unusual thing to have, in pastoral East Africa it would have been unusual to lack one.

But something more calls for attention here, and it arises from a rule found among the Samburu that relates the son's age-group membership to his father's. This takes us back to the formidable curse that sanctions the moral authority of the firestick elders. Since it stands to reason that these elders would be reluctant to apply such a curse to their own sons, it makes sense to try to exclude these sons from the junior age-group in question. To this end the Samburu insist that a youth must be enrolled in an age-group junior to that to which his father is a firestick elder, even if this often means that he must wait till well over the age of twenty to become a moran.

Seeking such a relationship was typically, indeed peculiarly, East African. Rules relating the age-group membership of father and son are virtually unknown to age-group systems elsewhere. The role of neighborhood is particularly salient here: as with Australian subsections and Mesoamerican calendars, we clearly have to do with something that must have had a unique beginning and then spread, despite the fact that the region affected had neither ethnic nor political unity.

This spread is remarkable, because in the long run an age-group system that includes such a rule is in principle unworkable—or can be made to work only with messy adjustments. Part of the problem has already surfaced in our account of the Samburu: some youths had to wait several years to enter moranhood, a situation that sets culture at odds with biology. The source of the problem is the simple fact that men father sons at a variety of ages. Take two men of the same generation. The first has a son at the age of twenty, and this son in turn has one at the same age. The second man has a son at the age of forty. The two sons are now effectively

of different generations, while the grandson of the first man and the son of the second are age-mates. Yet if we want to maintain a straightforward relationship between the age-groups of a man and his son, it is the two sons whom we want to place in the same group. So when do we form the group? If we delay its formation until the son of the second man is ready to join, the son of the first man will be well past his prime. But if we arrange things to suit the son of the first man, then the fun will be over before the son of the second man is ready to join. If we prefer to split the difference, we will have both problems on a smaller scale: one son will be a bit too old, the other a bit too young. And whichever we choose, the problems are set to get worse with the passing of the generations. In one Ethiopian tribe we hear of initiation ceremonies at which infants and eighty-year-olds joined the same age-group.

The ethnographic record shows that these problems were endemic in East Africa, though for some reason it was in southern Ethiopia that they led to the most serious disarray. We also have evidence that the problems bothered people and that tribes resorted to a variety of devices to resolve or contain them. They might seek to delay the age at which men married, or to prevent them from fathering children after a certain age; some tribes even resorted to infanticide to implement such rules. Or they might loosen the rules a bit, as the Samburu did by allowing a son to enter *any* age-group junior to that to which his father is a firestick elder; this solved the problem of the son born late, though not that of the son born early, who still had to wait.

So far as we know, none of these East African societies had professionals whose role it was to take care of such problems. One tribe whose system was in trouble planned to send to another for advice; but in the end most, if not all, the tribes must have been in the same boat. Like the Aranda, they had elders. Elders can be experienced and wise, but they are not professionals. In this respect the difference between the Samburu and the Aranda was simply that the Aranda were not trying to operate a system with an

inherent flaw. The Mesoamericans, by contrast, do seem to have had experts who understood the mathematical and astronomical foundations of their calendar. Presumably it was the business of these experts to advise in the event that the calendar went awry—just as expert opinion was crucial to the making of the executive decisions that gave us the Julian and Gregorian calendars. But in the East African case it is hard to see what even professional experts could have done, beyond a more judicious application of the various corrective devices that were already found among the tribes.

All in all, East African age-group systems reveal more than just the diversity of human cultural choices. They also provide a striking demonstration of the tenacity with which a society can adhere to an unworkable project that it has devised for itself.

### III. *SHABTIS* AND THE EGYPTIAN WAY OF DEATH

If there is an afterlife, it may be more or less similar to the life we have now, or it may be utterly different. If the second is true, there is little we can do to imagine it, let alone to anticipate what we will need in it. But if the afterlife is reasonably close in character to our present life, we can plan ahead to maximize our future comfort in it, just as prudent people do for old age. The Tarascan king who took with him his chambermaid, his cook, his feather dresser, and so forth clearly believed in such an afterlife, or at least thought it worth betting on. So did Egyptian kings; we have already encountered the slaughter that accompanied some early royal deaths in Egypt. In fact, anyone who is rich and powerful in this world seems likely to need servants in the next world; civilization means inordinate amounts of hard work, and the afterlife would be grim if one could not continue to delegate it. Meketre<sup>c</sup>, an Egyptian noble who lived around 2000 B.C., was buried with a fine array of



Fig. 13: A typical *shabti* with the spell written on it.

model servants made of wood. His real servants had the good fortune to survive him.

It would therefore be natural to assume the Egyptian statuette shown in figure 13 to be of the same type. Such objects are known as *shabtis*, a word of obscure origin. They begin to be found in tombs of the first centuries of the second millennium B.C., but they differ from the models just mentioned in a couple of respects. They are dressed as mummies, not as living people, and they may be inscribed with the title and name of the person in whose tomb they are placed. It appears, then, that their role is to stand in for the deceased—but in what capacity? Fortunately for us, it seems that

*shabtis*, like servants in general, could not entirely be trusted and that magical means had to be used to ensure that they did their job. Starting in the eighteenth century B.C. we find *shabtis* on which a spell is inscribed, and in the following centuries this became common practice. What the spell highlights is a prospect even more disquieting than having to toil to make a living for oneself: the deceased might be called upon to perform labor services in the domain of the god of the afterlife, be it cultivating the fields, irrigating the shores, or transporting "sand of the west or of the east." Should this happen, the *shabti* is to report for duty in place of the deceased, saying, "I will do (them); here I am." From the fifteenth century onward, *shabtis* were further equipped with the necessary agricultural tools. This *shabti* spell is also familiar to Egyptologists from elaborate collections of useful spells for the afterlife that came to be written on papyrus rolls and placed in tombs with the dead. It is the contents of such rolls that we (but not the ancient Egyptians) customarily refer to as the Book of the Dead.

*Shabtis* remained a key element in a decent Egyptian burial for many centuries. Their numbers multiplied enormously, with the result that today they are among the most common of ancient Egyptian antiquities. They came to be mass-produced, with adverse effects on their artistic quality. Instead of being buried with just a single *shabti*, the deceased would be provided with whole teams of them. One document dating from the early first millennium B.C. shows a son purchasing 401 *shabtis* from a temple for his father's tomb: 365 ordinary *shabtis* (making one for each day of the year) and thirty-six foremen. But in the period after the end of native Egyptian rule in the fourth century B.C., *shabtis* gradually disappeared.

Every human society has to have a way of death, and even the Samburu were no exception. But they did not make a big deal of it. Even when an influential elder died, there was no elaborate ceremony; the disposal of the corpse was simple and discreet. So it is

unlikely that Samburu practices will leave much for future archaeologists. Fortunately for us, the ancient Egyptians took an extravagantly different view of things; indeed, their remains suggest to us that they spent their lives obsessed with death. There is, of course, an element of illusion here. The Egyptians led their lives in the agricultural lands of the Nile Valley, where ancient remains survive badly, but moved in death to the adjoining deserts, an archaeological paradise. Yet without any question, they took their afterlife very seriously.

The contrast we see here between the Egyptians and the Samburu relates not just to the funerary practices of the two peoples but also to their politics. Whereas the Samburu still did without chiefs in the twentieth century, the Egyptians already had kings five thousand years ago. Their anxiety that even in the afterlife the authorities might still subject them to peremptory demands for labor tells us something significant about their experience of being ruled by a state.



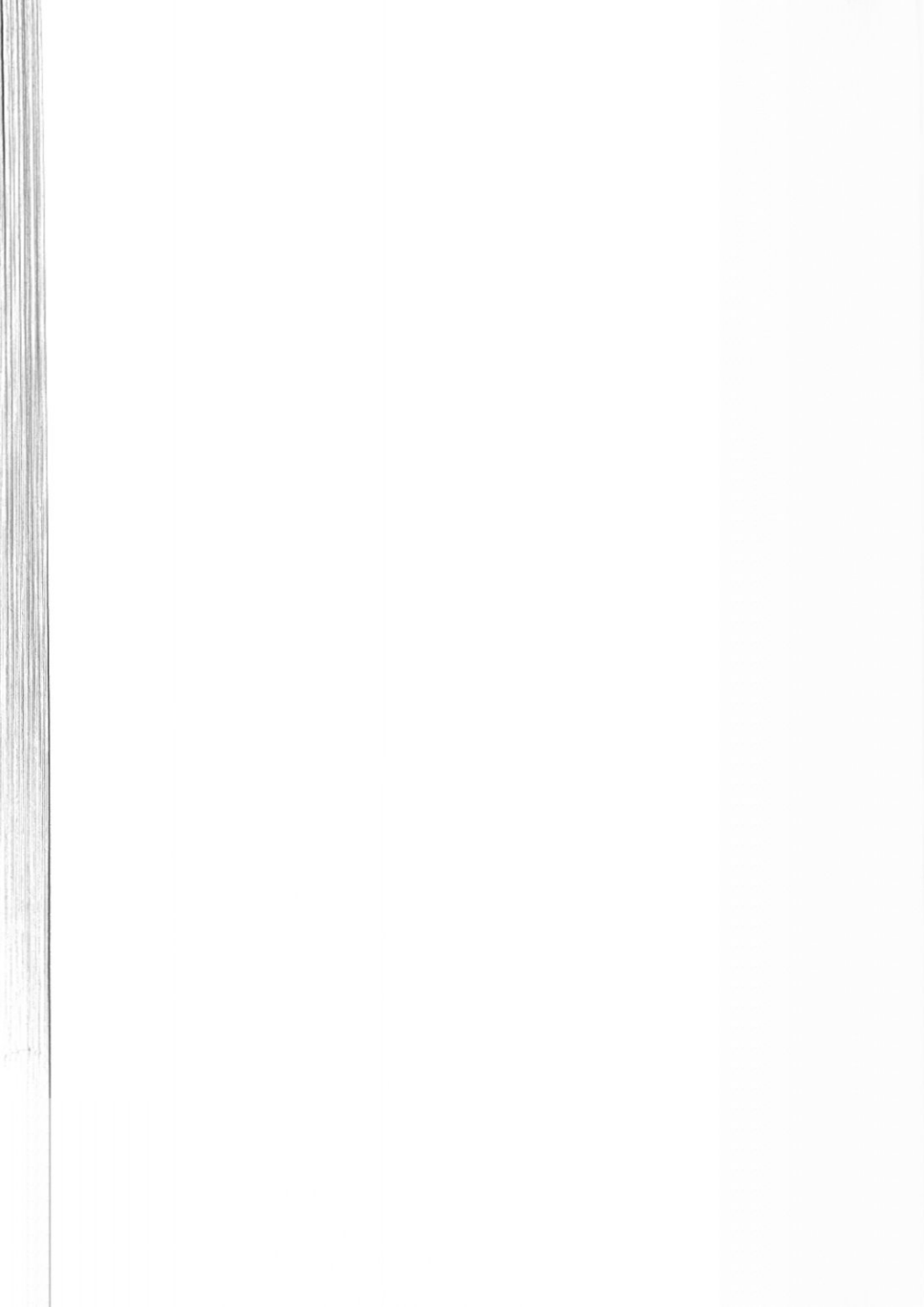
PART THREE

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THE  
EURASIAN  
LANDMASS





# THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

## I. THE LIFE AND DEATH OF THE WORLD'S OLDEST CIVILIZATION

In the last few chapters we looked at the continents one—or even two—at a time. We now come to a landmass far larger than any of them, Eurasia. Because of its great size, and its even more salient role in history, we need to take it region by region. Conventionally it is divided into the two adjoining continents of Europe and Asia. But for most of our purposes this familiar division is unhelpful. Instead, we should probably start with a crude distinction between the cold regions to the north and the temperate regions to the south. For the present we can think of the cold north as offstage. People lived there, things happened there, and this activity could have drastic repercussions farther south, but the north was not the site of the development of the classic Eurasian civilizations. The onstage regions to the south stretch in a rough band across Eurasia, with the Near East in the middle. To the east are India and China, and to the west are the Mediterranean world and—partly

overlapping with it—western Europe. The views to the east and west are far from symmetrical, but we can leave this asymmetry aside while we concentrate on the Near East.

The primary geological event in the making of the Near East was a collision between two continental plates. This collision, an event of the last fifty million years, joined Eurasia to the northeastern edge of what was then a greater Africa. From this to the familiar outline of the region today was a matter of only two steps. The first was a real geological event, the opening of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea over the last twenty million years or so; this partially separated the Near East from the diminished Africa we know today (for reasons of convenience, I am excluding Egypt from the Near East). The second step was just a superficial change, the formation of the Persian Gulf as a result of the high sea levels of the Holocene. In all this the most significant event was undoubtedly the collision of the two plates. The join runs from the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean near the island of Cyprus to the Gulf of Oman on the edge of the Indian Ocean. This line is of more than geological interest: it divides the Near East into two parts with significantly different characteristics.

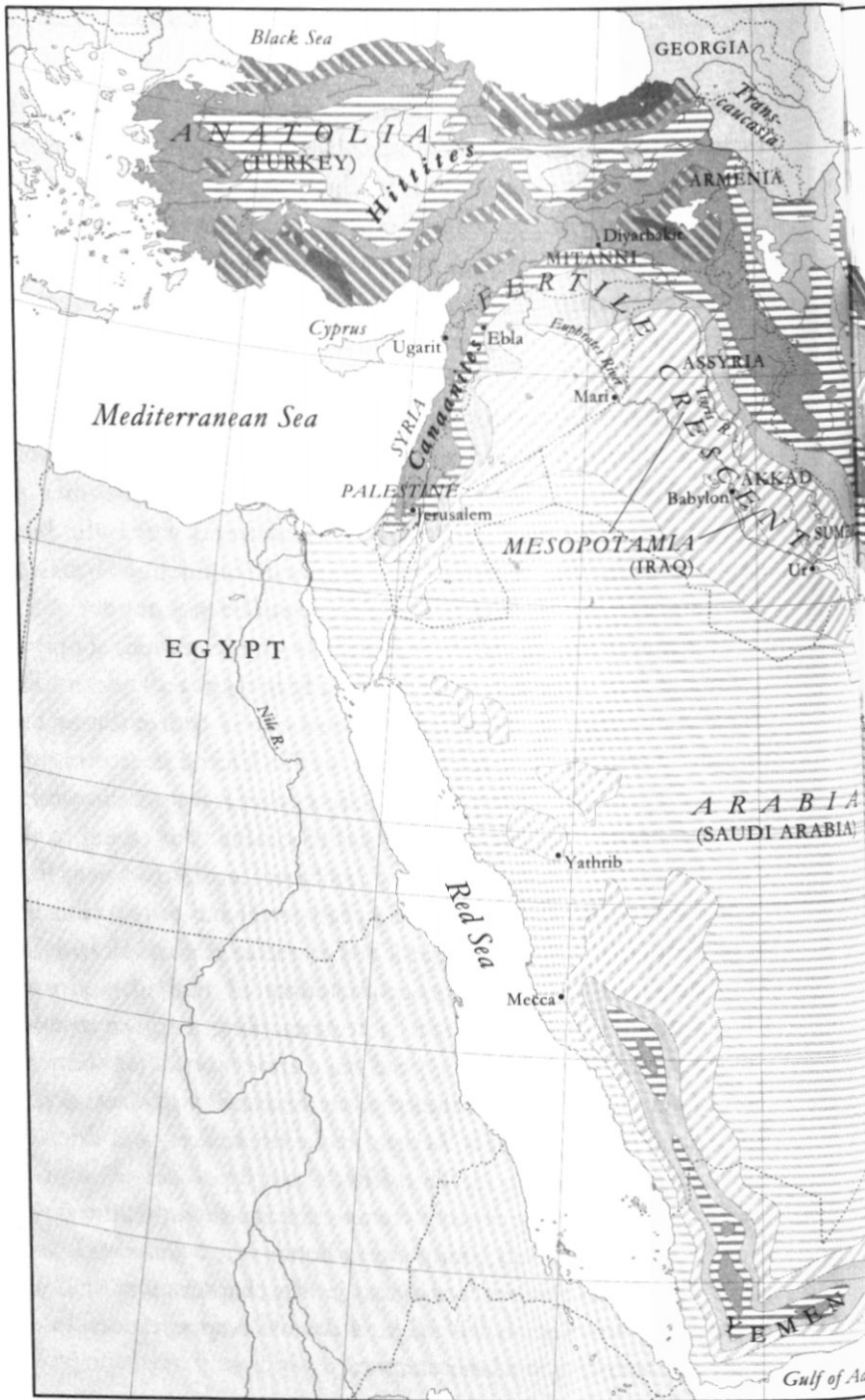
The southern Near East consists of Arabia and the Fertile Crescent, the latter made up of geographical Syria (the eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean and its hinterland) and Mesopotamia (roughly the modern Iraq). Like the African plate of which it was originally part, this region is predominantly flat. Where it is mountainous, this is largely a consequence of the rifting system that extends into the southern Near East from East Africa. Since the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden are branches of this system, it is no surprise that Yemen, the adjoining part of Arabia, is mountainous in the same fashion as the Ethiopian highlands. Farther north yet another branch of the system runs up the middle of Syria, where it is associated with two parallel mountain ranges. But in general the southern Near East is a land of plains.

The northern Near East, by contrast, is the region that bears the

scars of the intercontinental collision. The result is less impressive than the Himalayas, but Iran and Anatolia (roughly modern Turkey) are generally mountainous in character. The main exceptions are the relatively flat plateaus found in the center of each.

To understand the Near Eastern climate, we should first note how the region is sandwiched between two major landmasses, Africa and northern Eurasia. On the African side this proximity exposes the Near East to hot air from the Sahara, of which the Arabian desert is in effect an eastward extension. On the Eurasian side the equivalent is cold air from Siberia. Since these are among the world's most effective heating and cooling systems, they do much to explain the extremes of temperature to which the Near East is subject. But there is one thing that continental airmasses, whether hot or cold, tend to have in common: they are dry.

This means that if the Near East is to enjoy a decent supply of rainfall, it has to obtain it from the adjoining seas. Here we can think of the region as sandwiched between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. Of the two, the Indian Ocean is at first sight the more promising. It is vast, it has very high evaporation rates, and it generates enormous amounts of rainfall. But owing to the direction of the prevailing winds, the Near East derives very little benefit from its proximity to this ocean—which is why Arabia is a desert and not a tropical jungle. The Near East is thus left with the Mediterranean, a far less generous source of rainfall, and even then only in winter. The main factors enabling a region to draw on this source are proximity and the possession of mountains. The effect of these is to establish a marked aridity gradient across the Near East: overall it is wettest in the northwest, and driest in the southeast (see map 5). Thus only about 3 percent of the surface area of Turkey is desert, whereas for Saudi Arabia the figure is more like 97 percent (things were better a few thousand years ago). This makes Arabia so arid that in this chapter most of it will be offstage—though it will make a dramatic appearance closely linked to its aridity in a later chapter.



Black Sea

GEORGIA

ANATOLIA  
(TURKEY)

Trans-Caucasia

Hittites

ARMENIA

Diyarbakir

MITANNI

Cyprus

Ugarit

FERTILE  
CRESCENT

Ebla

Euphrates River

Mari

ASSYRIA

Mediterranean Sea

SYRIA  
Canaanites

AKKAD

PALESTINE

Babylon

Jerusalem

MESOPOTAMIA  
(IRAQ)

SUMER

Ur

EGYPT

Nile R.

ARABIA  
(SAUDI ARABIA)

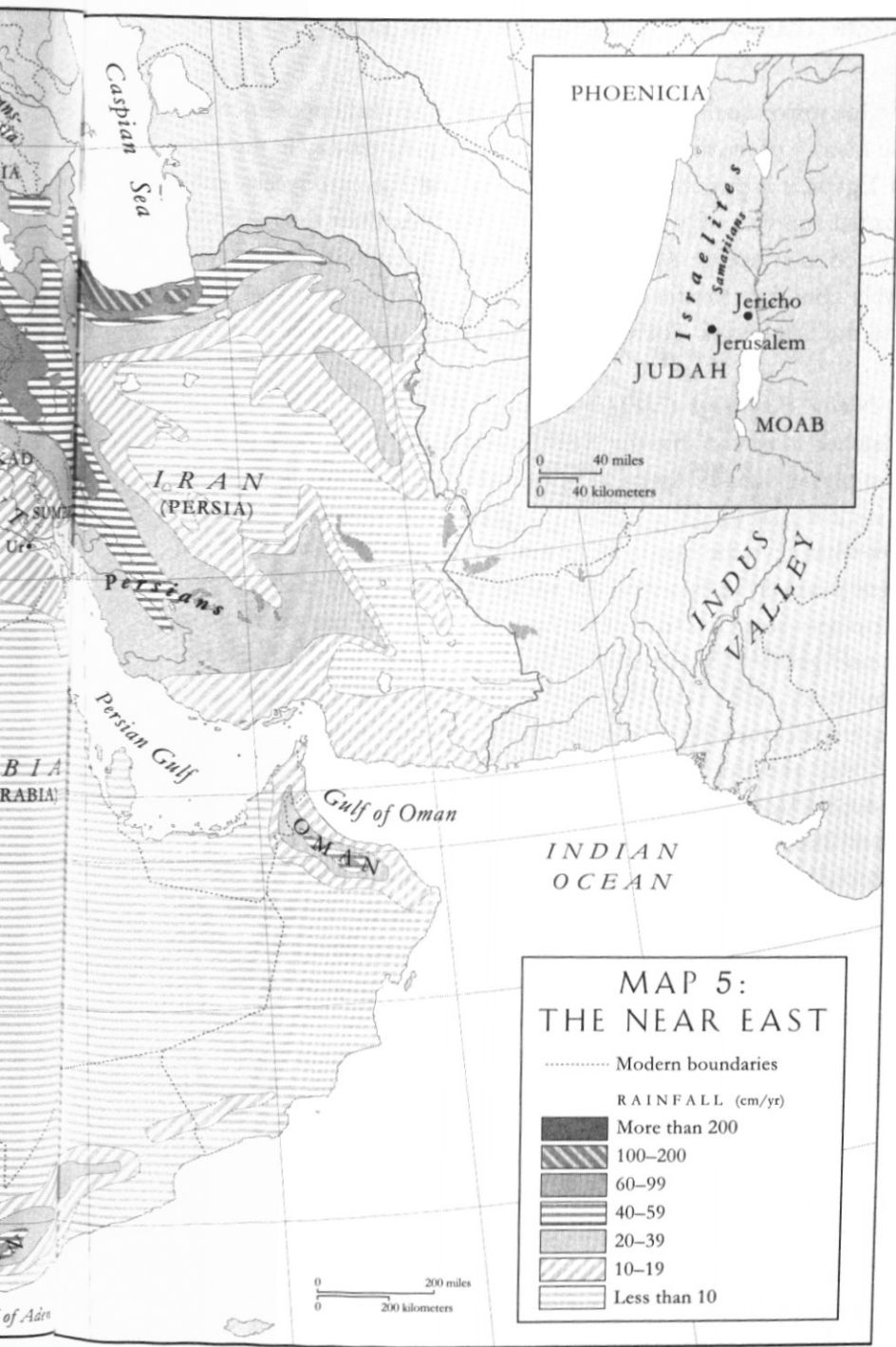
Yathrib

Red Sea

Mecca

YEMEN

Gulf of Aden



One major qualification to this picture is of vital importance for the history of civilization in the Near East. As we saw in the case of Egypt, it is possible for an otherwise arid region to receive substantial supplies of water by river. In the Near East the region so blessed is southern Mesopotamia, which benefits from the relatively abundant winter rainfall of the north, thanks to the Tigris and the Euphrates. There is nothing like them in Arabia.

### *Near Eastern Civilization*

It stands to reason that the Near East is likely to have been the earliest region outside Africa to be colonized by modern humans, and it is clear that they were present at least forty thousand years ago. Yet what gave the region its central importance in history was not their relatively early arrival but rather their precocity in developing farming—so much so that we have no record of the existence of hunter-gatherer populations in the Near East in the last few thousand years. Add to this the rapidity with which the advent of farming transformed Near Eastern society. Figure 14 conveys a sense of this transformation: it shows what part of an Anatolian Neolithic settlement with a population of several thousand may have looked like in the seventh millennium B.C. There are no streets; entry to a building was through a hole in the roof. By our standards, let alone those of hunter-gatherers, this is an extraordinarily claustrophobic way to live. It may indeed have seemed that way to the inhabitants of the settlement at the time, but it had one distinct advantage: it presented a blank wall to the outside world. Long before this the inhabitants of Neolithic Jericho had apparently felt it necessary to surround themselves with fortifications, thereby becoming one of the earliest gated communities. It was clearly very important to keep people out. The life of the hunter-gatherers of the day may have been brutish and short, but that of the Near Eastern cultivators showed a new nastiness.

This precocity of the Near East also does much to explain why the earliest known civilization should have emerged there. It does



**Fig. 14: A tentative reconstruction of houses at the Neolithic settlement of Çatal Hüyük.**

not explain why this development should have taken place in southern Mesopotamia. That region, like Egypt, was a late starter in the Neolithic world. Again like Egypt, it was made up of a stark combination of river and desert. This environment gave to these lands an unusual combination of advantage and disadvantage. The advantage was that irrigation could generate a more substantial and accessible agricultural surplus than rainfall agriculture. The disadvantage was that other critical resources were lacking, and could be procured only through long-distance trade. In the case of southern Mesopotamia, these included materials as basic as timber, metals, and even stone. Thus in the fifth millennium B.C. the hapless cultivators were using clay sickles; later these were replaced, first with flint and then with copper—both of which had to be imported. In one way or another the earliest civilizations, and that of Mesopotamia in particular, can be seen as social and institu-

tional responses to such imbalances. A noteworthy feature of the archaeological record in this connection is the greatly expanded commercial horizons of southern Mesopotamia in the centuries leading up to the emergence of civilization.

It was the Sumerians who played the key role in this emergence. They lived in a political framework quite unlike that of ancient Egypt: instead of forming a unified kingdom, they were divided into some thirty city-states. After a millennium or so the Sumerians themselves faded away; they were no doubt assimilated by their neighbors, as happens often enough in history, though we have no idea what caused it in this particular instance. But by then their civilization had been adopted by other peoples, notably the Akkadians to their northwest. The tradition the Sumerians initiated was to remain the culture of Mesopotamia down to the second half of the first millennium B.C.

Since Mesopotamian civilization, like that of Egypt, was fated to die out, none of its literary remains have been transmitted to us directly. As with ancient Egypt, we derive most of what we know from chance finds or archaeology. In the Egyptian case our main debt is to the desert conditions that have preserved large quantities of ancient papyrus. In the Mesopotamian case papyrus would not have survived, and it is our good fortune that the prime material used by cuneiform scribes was clay. Once fired, whether deliberately or by accident, clay tablets can survive as well as pottery can. The result is to give us a fragmentary, but very diverse, body of ancient Mesopotamian sources. Much of it is the product of more or less meticulous administration, but there is also material of many other kinds, including one textual tradition of considerable literary appeal, the *Gilgamesh* epic.

In political terms this civilization never did develop a tradition of a unitary Mesopotamian state. There was, however, a tendency for the scale of political organization to increase over time. In the third millennium B.C. city-states were the norm, while an imperial episode in the twenty-fourth and twenty-third centuries was the

exception; in the first millennium B.C. the city-states were gone, and empires like those of the Assyrians and Babylonians had become the norm.

As was mentioned in the preceding chapter, Mesopotamian civilization proved far more exportable than that of ancient Egypt. Indeed, it is likely that Mesopotamian influences played some part in the formation of the nearby civilizations of Egypt and the Indus Valley. But what concerns us here is a more straightforward process, the undisguised adoption by other peoples of the literary culture created by the Sumerians. Already in the third millennium the neighboring Akkadians had done this, as had the people of Ebla in northern Syria. An example of the same phenomenon from the second millennium is provided by the Hittites of Anatolia. Typically what such peoples did, at the level of literary culture, was two things. They adopted the Sumerian literary tradition, with the result that Sumerian became the world's first classical language, still cultivated by the educated long after it had died out as a language of everyday life even in its own land. And at the same time they took steps to adapt the cuneiform script to the writing of their own languages, thus giving us our earliest direct knowledge of the Semitic and Indo-European language families—Akkadian for Semitic, and Hittite for Indo-European.

As we will see in the third section of this chapter, a remarkable feature of this literary tradition was its unprecedented awareness of its own continuity. But by the first millennium B.C., in Mesopotamia as in Egypt, this continuity was beginning to have an archaic ring to it. The world had changed.

This change was most palpable at the level of political power. Like Egypt, Mesopotamia was exposed to the risk of foreign invasion, and thanks to its much less sheltered location the danger was often more pressing. It suffered a significant intrusion in the third millennium B.C., and matters were much worse in the second. Sometimes the intruders were the hill tribes of western Iran, as with the Gutians of the third millennium and the Kassites of the

second. Sometimes they were the pastoralists of the southern Near East, as with the Amorites around 2000 B.C. and the Arameans a millennium later. But something all these invasions, large and small, had in common was that the newcomers as yet posed no threat to the cultural continuity of Mesopotamian civilization. The Amorites, for example, are described as a people who dwell in tents and have no knowledge of houses or grain. If such people successfully established their power in Mesopotamia, they soon found that they needed the appurtenances of civilization; and since they lacked one of their own, they adopted that of their subjects.

In the first millennium B.C. it might have seemed as if the pattern would continue as before. In the sixth century Mesopotamia was again invaded from Iran, this time by the Persians, who went on to devise a cuneiform script for their own language, and to use it in their royal inscriptions. But there was a difference: Mesopotamia was now only one of several cultural provinces of a very large empire. There was worse to come. In the fourth century the Greeks overthrew the Persians, and this time the invaders brought with them an urban civilization of their own.

There was also a subtler subversion at work that had its origin in Syria. Unlike neighboring Egypt and Mesopotamia, Syria was neither embellished nor weighed down by a third-millennium cultural tradition. Instead, the keynote of Syrian cultural history was instability and innovation. In the third millennium Ebla shows us a typical local adoption of the Sumerian literary tradition. Yet by the middle of the second millennium Syria had broken with the cumbersome script of Mesopotamia and adopted the alphabet. This new technology proved immensely attractive and spread far and wide. Thus it was received in Yemen, even though this remote region had shown no interest in earlier writing systems. But what concerns us here is the use of the alphabet to write Aramaic, the language that in the course of the first millennium B.C. displaced the older Semitic tongues of Syria and Mesopotamia in daily life.

Unfortunately for us, alphabetic writing in Mesopotamia was normally done on perishable materials, not on clay, with the result that little of it has survived. But it seems that even in Mesopotamia the old cuneiform tradition was losing ground to the new alphabetic culture. And it was Aramaic, not Akkadian, that was to be used as the primary written language of administration in the Persian Empire.

### *From the Persians to the Muslims*

There is a millennium of Near Eastern history between the formation of the Persian Empire in the sixth century B.C. and the rise of Islam in the seventh century A.D. Like much else in this book, it will be shortchanged; but we can at least identify its major themes.

One is the political dominance throughout the period of peoples coming broadly from the north. Often they originated in Iran, as with the Persian Empire from the sixth to the fourth century B.C., the Parthian empire from the third century B.C. to the third century A.D., and a second Persian Empire from the third to the seventh century A.D. But they might also come from outside the Near East altogether, as with the Greeks from the fourth century B.C. and the Romans from the second century B.C. Of all these northern peoples, it was the Greeks whose cultural impact on the Near East was the greatest at the time.

The second theme is the eventual displacement of the ancient polytheism of the region by a monotheist faith, Christianity. This religion was an offshoot of a monotheist cult developed by a minor, but innovative, Near Eastern people, the Israelites. The emergence of Israelite monotheism is accordingly the subject of the next section of this chapter. But the fact is that as long as this phenomenon was confined to the Israelites and their ethnic heirs, the Jews and Samaritans, it was of no great historical importance. What made an idiosyncratic ethnic tradition a major ingredient of world history was its subsequent metamorphosis into two world religions, Christianity and Islam; their combined adherents cur-

rently amount to about half the world's population. We will inevitably come back to both of them in later chapters.

The final theme, unsurprisingly, is the demise of the ancient civilization of Mesopotamia. Like that of Egypt, it survived the end of native rule by some centuries. The last datable cuneiform tablet we possess is an astronomical almanac relating to A.D. 74-75. We cannot pinpoint the final extinction of Mesopotamian civilization, but by the third century A.D. it must have been effectively dead. In that century Mani, a Mesopotamian religious reformer, created a grand synthesis of the religious traditions of his world. Christianity and Buddhism were recognized, as was the Zoroastrian tradition of Iran. But the religious beliefs of ancient Mesopotamia found no place in Mani's new religion. It was as if they had never been.

## II. DOWNSIZING THE PANTHEON

According to Muslim tradition, some pagan Arabs of Mecca once expressed their sense of the absurdity of the mission of the prophet Muhammad by asking him, "Muhammad, do you want to turn the gods into one god? What a weird idea!" Whether it is weird or not, the idea has achieved wide currency and shaped the course of history. It emerged from the polytheism of the ancient Near East, though just why it did so is hard to say.

How old is polytheism? Archaeology has unearthed abundant indications of the religious proclivities of prehistoric humans. In the Upper Palaeolithic there are well-attested cases of burials with grave goods. In the Neolithic the evidence is much richer. There are, for example, spaces clearly set aside for religious activity; several of the units shown in figure 14 have been identified from their contents as shrines. But the archaeology of preliterate peoples can never tell us what they actually believed. The invention of writing breaks this silence: for the first time we can be certain that we are

dealing with gods—and, better still, we can learn something of the myths associated with them.

From the beginning this record shows that the peoples of the ancient Near East believed in many gods. This is hardly surprising. Anyone who thinks that the world is run by divine will has to take account of the fact that the results, though not chaotic, look a bit disorganized; this suggests the involvement of more than one god, and that the gods are sometimes at cross-purposes. Moreover, the idea of a single god taking care of all aspects of the life of the universe seems rather impractical. For example, it is not obvious how the roles of a war god and a goddess of love could be combined felicitously. People living in a reasonably complex society would surely prefer to think in terms of a division of divine labor. All this, of course, sets out from an assumption: that the gods are rather like us. But who else would they be like?

The narrative of the Babylonian creation epic ends with a divine banquet attended by the fifty great gods and numerous others. They have gathered to celebrate, but there is also a political agenda: the gods swear an oath confirming that Marduk, the god of Babylon, is to exercise the kingship of the gods. They had in fact agreed to this rather burdensome arrangement at a previous banquet. On that occasion a generous supply of liquor had certainly helped to overcome any reservations they might have had. But there was a more pressing reason for their submission: they were in mortal danger, and Marduk was their only hope of deliverance. The problem was an ugly divine civil war that had broken out after the persistent rowdiness of the younger gods had alienated their primeval forebears. In the course of the struggle these younger gods became thoroughly demoralized. It was Marduk's ruthless and successful prosecution of the war that cemented the new regime, to such an extent that the gods then spent a year shoveling and making bricks to build the city of Babylon for him (it was there that the celebratory banquet took place). This, at least, was how the Baby-

Ionians told the story. When the Assyrians adopted the epic, they customized it by transferring the leading role to their own national god, Assur.

Matters were not so different in northern Syria, to judge by fourteenth-century texts from the city of Ugarit. The language of these texts is a form of Canaanite written in an alphabetic script; but fortunately for us they were inscribed on clay tablets. Here too the gods assemble, eat, and drink. In the Ugaritic pantheon the king of the gods is El, but he does not rule with the same authority as Marduk. Brutal conflicts unfold between Baal, the rain god, and two of his peers: Yamm, the god of the sea, and Mot, the god of the dry season. In the course of these brawlings El is not always treated with the respect that might be thought his due. Baal at one point stands in the divine assembly and spits; on another occasion a war goddess who is in love with Baal puts pressure on El by threatening to beat him up. (The sex between the divine lovers, incidentally, is as vividly described as the violence.) In each of these conflicts Baal proves to be the victor. In recognition of the status he has now achieved, El at last addresses a long-standing complaint of Baal's: an appropriate residence is built for him. This time, however, the hard work is left to the craftsman god.

It was a few centuries after this and a few hundred miles to the south that monotheism, or something close to it, emerged among the Israelites. In tracing this new departure, we are largely dependent on the Bible. This book is a collection of writings, mostly in Hebrew, which like Ugaritic is a form of Canaanite. Again the script is alphabetic, but it was written on perishable materials; we owe the survival of these writings not to archaeological good luck but to continuous literary transmission. The Bible, in fact, is the only body of ancient Near Eastern texts that has reached us by such a route, and we should be duly grateful for it. Yet this mode of transmission has problems of its own. Unlike an assortment of clay tablets from an archaeological site, such a corpus is likely to be the product of a prolonged process of later winnowing and edit-

ing. In the case of the Bible the key roles in this process must have been played by committed monotheists, with the result that allowances have to be made for the likely tendentiousness of the Biblical account of the Israelite past. So it may be better to try to reconstruct the emergence of monotheism by starting at the end and working back.

In 587 B.C. the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and deported its Israelite or, more precisely, Jewish population to Mesopotamia. In a part of the book of Isaiah written a few decades later among the Jewish exiles in Babylon, there are several divine affirmations of the form "I am Yahweh and there is no other," "I am God and there is no other" (e.g., Isaiah 45:18, 22). What these assert—and they seem to be more than just rhetoric—is that other gods do not exist. At first sight this is counterintuitive: political and military disaster is strong *prima facie* evidence that other people's gods are alive and well. But on the basis of this and other texts, we can be reasonably confident that by the sixth century B.C. a full-fledged monotheism had appeared.

It is also clear that this unqualified monotheism is not the standard message of the Bible. In the words of the Ten Commandments, God tells the Israelites that "you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3), not that other gods do not exist. In fact, numerous passages speak plainly of the existence of other gods. For example, in the story of the exodus from Egypt, God says, "on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments" (Exodus 12:12). We even see him sitting in the assembly of the gods: "in the midst of the gods he holds judgment"—though the gods are then told that they will die like mortals (Psalms 82:1, 7). In this conception the relationship of the Israelites to God is analogous to a marriage: if you enter into a monogamous marriage, you renounce all other potential partners, but nobody expects you to deny their existence. What we have here is not exactly monotheism but rather monolatry, the worship of one god to the exclusion of others.

How early in Israelite history did this monolatry emerge? As far

as the Bible is concerned, it had been there as far back as Abraham, which takes us to pre-Israelite times. But the Bible also tells us that the Israelites kept backsliding. Solomon, who in the tenth century built a temple for the national god "to dwell in forever" (1 Kings 8:13), also established cults of other gods for his foreign wives, and apparently participated in them himself (1 Kings 11:5-8). The prophet Jeremiah in the early sixth century had an exchange with Jews living in Egypt who worshiped the "queen of heaven" (Jeremiah 44:15-19). They told him in no uncertain terms that they would continue to worship her "just as we and our ancestors, our kings and our officials, used to do in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem." The women were particularly insistent—appropriately, since the cult of a goddess was at stake. None of those involved showed the slightest sense that they or their ancestors had done anything improper. Even as a principle, then, it seems that strict monolatry was far from universally espoused in ancient Israel.

What may well have been both old and widespread was a strong—though not exclusive—focus on the national god. In contrast to monolatry and monotheism, a special relationship of this kind would not have been out of place in the ancient Near East. A ninth-century inscription set up by a king of Moab, an eastern neighbor of the Israelites, speaks of Chemosh, the national god, in a tone reminiscent of the older parts of the Bible. Meanwhile, the Bible refers to the Moabites as "the people of Chemosh" (Numbers 21:29), just as it calls the Israelites "the people of Yahweh" (Judges 5:11). Even in Mesopotamia, as we saw, the Babylonians put Marduk in the limelight, while the Assyrians did the same for Assur. This relationship of a people to its national god provides a plausible starting point for the evolution of monolatry and, eventually, monotheism. But the plain fact is that we do not know why so familiar a feature of ancient Near Eastern religion evolved in such an unusual direction in the Israelite case.

We should not, however, overstate the radical nature of the evo-

lution. The monotheist tradition that issued from ancient Israel is in one respect very conservative. It takes for granted that God is a god, as in the Muslim profession of faith: "There is no god but God." Monotheism thus shares with ancient Near Eastern polytheism the premise that there is such a thing as a god; the disagreement is limited to the question of how many there are. It was not in Israel but in Egypt that this unthinking continuity with the polytheist heritage was challenged. There in the fourteenth century B.C. King Akhenaten instituted an exclusive cult of the solar disk. We do not know whether he denied the existence of the traditional Egyptian gods or simply spurned them; we do know that as his reign wore on he became less and less inclined to apply to the object of his cult the old polytheistic word "god." What he worshiped, by implication, was something different. It seems, then, that he came to reject not just the particular gods of his country but the category itself. Some fifteen hundred years after Akhenaten the Egyptians finally abandoned their traditional gods and adopted a zealous Christian monotheism. Ironically, the word they then applied to the Christian god was the same polytheistic term that Akhenaten had discarded.

Akhenaten's cult lasted hardly longer than his reign, but monotheism in its various forms—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and others—is still very much with us today. Why it should have been so successful is a long story that we will touch on from time to time in later chapters, though without ever quite coming up with an answer. But if we are to pick out a single aspect of monotheism in this connection, it might be less what monotheism embraces than what it rejects: other gods and the people who worship them. It is in the nature of monotheism to pick a quarrel. This exclusive spirit is normally foreign to polytheism, and it lies behind a variety of historical phenomena, from the remarkable survival of the originators of monotheism as an ethnic group to the specter of monotheist terrorism that haunts the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

### III. ARCHAISM

Human societies do not appear out of nothing; any society that exists today is a continuation of some earlier one. Naturally the picture is complicated by the fact that societies not only change but also fuse and split. Thus a complete genealogy of an existing society would not go back to the beginning in a single line. But go back it would—we have no reason to doubt that human society has existed continuously as long as the human race.

Of course no existing society can give a remotely credible account of itself on such a timescale. The collective memories of nonliterate peoples, who for most of the human past were the only peoples there were, do not seem to go back more than a few centuries at most. Remembering things is an effort, and the effort is hardly worth making when the things in question are no longer relevant. The Incas offer a case in point: beyond their own dynastic history, they had only a myth of origin. Among the Jie of East Africa, the fact that the successive age-groups had names provided the tribe with a way of tying events into a comparable chronological framework. On this basis one modern historian has traced back their collective memory to the early eighteenth century. But within a few centuries, as we probe the past of a nonliterate people, we reach a point at which there is only myth or amnesia.

This is doubtless how matters were in Mesopotamia before the development of writing, and would have continued thereafter without it. As in Egypt, however, writing eventually made possible an enormous extension of the horizon of collective memory. As we saw in the preceding chapter, Manetho in the early third century B.C. could say who had ruled Egypt since around 3000 B.C. His Babylonian contemporary Berosus, who likewise wrote about the past of his native land in Greek, was probably able to do the same for Babylon, though our very limited knowledge of what he wrote makes it impossible to confirm this.

One result of this expanded horizon was that people could go

back into the past—*their* past—and retrieve aspects of it that had long ago fallen into disuse.

Egyptian culture of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. is marked by a phenomenon known to Egyptologists as archaism. To a far greater extent than in other periods of Egyptian history, kings and members of the elite were not content just to continue their cultural tradition as they had received it. Instead, the art and architecture of their funerary monuments hark back to much earlier models, some as old as the third millennium B.C.; and the language of the associated inscriptions is for the most part a classical Egyptian very different from the language spoken and written in ordinary life. We do not know exactly what the archaizers thought they were doing, because they do not tell us. Were they setting out to restore a glorious past in the present? Or were they just picking and choosing what took their fancy in the ruins that surrounded them? Either way, the distant past was now a resource for them.

What we find in Mesopotamia in the same period is more interesting, precisely because there people occasionally paused to explain themselves.

Restoration was clearly in the air in sixth-century Babylon. The last Babylonian ruler, Nabonidus, has left us a remarkable account of his revival of an institution that had been in disuse for over a millennium. In the twenty-fourth century B.C. the imperial ruler Sargon had installed his daughter (incidentally the world's first known female author) in the office of high priestess and human consort of the moon god Nanna in his temple at Ur. Whether or not Sargon was the first to do this, the practice was followed by other rulers in Mesopotamia down to the eighteenth century; thereafter we hear no more of it until Nabonidus revived it. His claim was that the moon god had communicated his need for a high priestess and that divination then established that she had to be the king's own daughter. But at this point Nabonidus faced a problem. To revive an ancient practice requires more than just a general idea of what it once involved, and in this case, as Nabo-

nidus pointed out, the office had been forgotten for a very long time. Fortunately, he tells us, he was able to uncover relevant materials dating from the reign of a twelfth-century king (did he really find them, or did he only pretend?). Thus he was able to do things just as they had been done in ancient times.

His stated motive for all this was his concern for the sanctuaries of the great gods. We can accept this pious profession, albeit with the qualification that Nabonidus had good reason to make a conspicuous display of his concern: he had come to the throne in a manner that did not bear scrutiny, and was scrambling for legitimacy. What is interesting is that the way in which he manifested his concern was an extravaganza of archaism.

Nabonidus was also an indefatigable excavator, and in this he was not alone among the later Babylonian kings. The context was again his pious concern for the sanctuaries of the great gods: he sought to rebuild ancient temples that had fallen into ruin or disappeared altogether. It was believed at the time that such a restoration would not be valid unless the new temple was erected on the exact site of the old. It was therefore necessary to find the old foundations. But this could still leave a problem: What if one had the wrong foundations, as could easily happen if the precise location of the ancient temple had been forgotten over the centuries? For this reason great efforts were made in the course of these excavations to find the foundation inscriptions left by earlier kings. In one case Nebuchadnezzar had rebuilt a temple in the early sixth century on a site where he had found an inscription left by an earlier restorer. Later Nabonidus discovered a yet earlier inscription in a different place and rebuilt the temple accordingly.

These Babylonian excavations were not archaeology in our sense; what inspired them was a contemporary religious concern, not an academic interest in the past. But it might be going too far to conclude that Babylonian kings had no interest whatever in antiquities for their own sake. Figure 15 shows a statue of the time



**Fig. 15: A statue originally from Mari, around 2000 B.C.**

of a certain Puzur-Ishtar, who was governor (in effect ruler) of the city of Mari, some way up the Euphrates from Babylon, around 2000 B.C. It is a fine museum piece. In fact, it may already have been in a museum in the sixth century B.C.; it was found in a collection of antiquities that seems to have been brought together by Nebuchadnezzar in his palace in Babylon, and added to by his successors.

The new ability to retrieve the past that arises with the creation and survival of literary heritages is more important in human affairs than these first Mesopotamian examples would suggest. Heading back into your distant past can be an ingenious way to circumvent your present. Of course, if you seek something different

from what you currently have, you can always borrow from some other culture. But the advantage of your distant past is that, though very different from your present, it is nevertheless your own. Hence the remarkable power in human history of renaissances, reformations, and fundamentalisms.

# INDIA

## I. WHY INDIA WAS NOT JUST A SUBCONTINENT

Like the southern Near East, India is a part of the old supercontinent of Gondwana that has joined Eurasia. But the sequence of events was different: India separated from the rest of Gondwana over a hundred million years ago, and until it collided with Eurasia, about fifty million years ago, it led the existence of an island. This distinctive history is reflected in the single most obvious difference between the two regions: the Indian subcontinent is a peninsula, not a land bridge. There are nevertheless some broad physical similarities. Like the southern Near East, India overall is relatively flat. Inland from the coastal plains of the south there are mountain ranges arising from the rifting that brought the region into being, and between them are the highlands of the interior. But there is nothing in the south to compare in altitude to the combination of mountains and plateau by which India is closed off to the north. Much as in the northern Near East, this massive uplifting is the product not of rifting but of collision. Yet the scale of the uplift-

ing dwarfs anything the Near East has to show; indeed, there may have been nothing on earth to match it in the last half billion years. By contrast, it is between the northern mountains and the southern highlands that India is at its lowest and flattest, with alluvial plains comparable to those of Mesopotamia.

One of the most significant differences between India and the Near East is climatic: India gets much more rain (map 6). Given the high terrain to the north and the open ocean to the south, this makes intuitive sense; and it is in fact this combination of physical features that generates the monsoon, the wet summer so alien to the Near East. But the distribution of summer rainfall in India is very uneven. The wettest regions are the coastal strip in the southwest and a large area in the northeast; by contrast, the southern highlands are a bit dry, and the northwest shares the aridity of the Near East, of which it is in effect a climatic extension. As a result, the two great rivers that rise in the northern mountains have somewhat different effects on the lands through which they flow. Both of them deliver a valuable agricultural resource, namely silt. But in the northeast the Ganges takes its water to a region of abundant rainfall designed by nature to be a jungle; whereas in the northwest the Indus—like the great rivers of the Near East—brings life to a land much of which would otherwise be desert.

For our purposes, it makes sense to divide the historical India into three major regions. The first is the south, with its coastal plains, modest mountain ranges, and highland plateau; it is by no means lacking in agricultural resources, but they are somewhat dispersed. The second region is the northeast, centered on the Ganges; this has an extraordinary concentration of rich agricultural land. Finally there is the northwest, today Pakistan, centered on the Indus; here irrigated agriculture is possible as in Egypt or Mesopotamia.

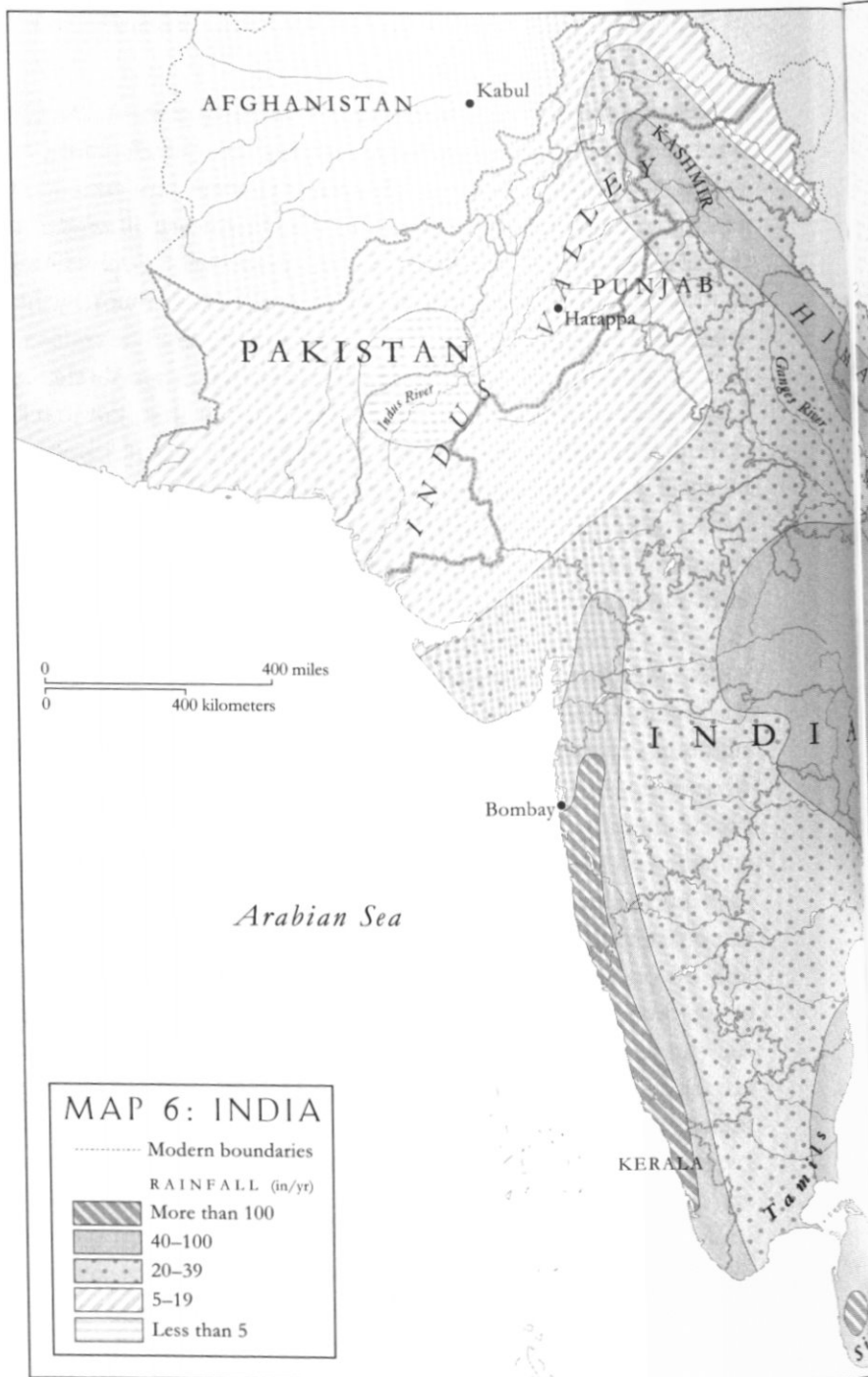
An important respect in which these three regions of India differed in earlier times was their potential for contact with the outside world, with all its costs and benefits. The most remote area

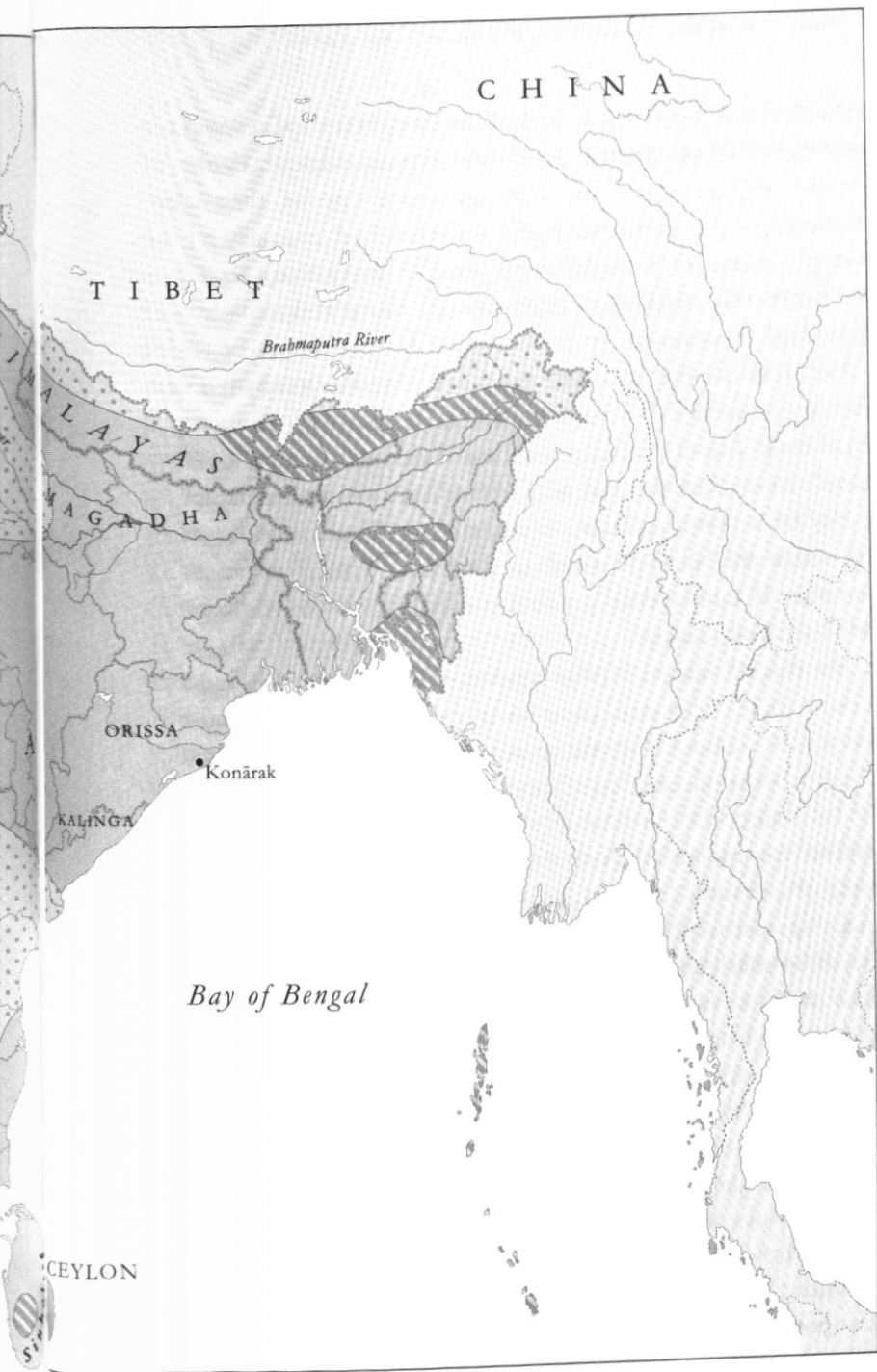
was the south. Until the development of navigation on the open oceans, it had no direct contact with regions outside India, and within the subcontinent its physical character rendered it less accessible than the northern plains. The northeast differed from the south in that it was internally more accessible and adjoined other parts of Eurasia; but it was cut off from them by high mountains in the north and thick jungle to the east. The result was that its contacts with the wider world were routed mainly through the northwest. It was this northwestern region that, until recent centuries, served as the gateway to India—though it was by no means a commodious gateway, in that those who made use of it had to reckon with mountain and desert. But a glance at prehistory suggests that the role of the northwest in the making of India has been fundamental.

### *India's First Civilization*

Archaeology shows that modern humans have been present in the subcontinent for at least thirty thousand years. It does not show by what route they arrived, but if they came from Africa it stands to reason that they would have entered from the northwest. Genetic evidence provides some support for this inference: it points to an early human expansion from the Horn of Africa along the southern coast of Eurasia, starting with Arabia and continuing to India and beyond. The route by which farming first entered India is more directly attested. Domesticated crops appear by around 6000 B.C. in the extreme northwest of the subcontinent, and only later are they found in the rest of India, reaching the south by the third millennium B.C. Toward the middle of the same millennium the Indus Valley civilization emerged. It is unlikely to have been an accident that this first Indian civilization took shape in the part of India that was closest to Mesopotamia and most similar to it—and never spread to the rest of the subcontinent.

Far less is known about the Indus Valley civilization than about that of Mesopotamia. We have no idea what the people in question





called themselves, or what kind of language they spoke; for convenience we often refer to them as Harappans, from the name of a major archaeological site that was once one of their cities. Archaeology shows, for example, that they had unusually regular town planning; but it leaves us to guess at the political structures that made this possible. There are two main reasons why our knowledge is so limited.

First, it is our bad luck that the written records left by this civilization are scanty. We have considerable numbers of inscribed stone seals; but the inscriptions are short, and cannot be deciphered. In marked contrast to the Near East, this region has left us no clay tablets or long inscriptions on stone. The obvious assumption is that the Harappans did most of their writing on perishable materials; if later Indian practice is anything to go by, they may have used palm leaves.

The second reason for our ignorance is as much their bad luck as ours: their civilization came to an end early in the second millennium B.C. There is nothing intrinsically mysterious about such an event—the surprise is, if anything, that early civilizations did not go extinct more often. In this instance the cause could have been environmental (for one thing, the Indus is a notably unstable river); or it could have been invasion. In any case, this early demise works against us in two ways. One is that later Indian tradition retains no memory of the Indus Valley civilization. This does not mean that the Harappans contributed nothing to the India of later times; some features of their culture do not go away, including perhaps a liking for the number sixteen manifested in their system of weights. But there is no equivalent to the historical information that the Chinese tradition preserves on the Shang dynasty. The other consequence of the early end of the civilization is that no outsiders have left us any account of it. There must have been people who could have done this, since there is clear evidence that the Indus Valley civilization was in commercial contact with Mesopotamia; in early Mesopotamian records we even hear of an

interpreter. But it was not until the second half of the first millennium B.C. that ethnography came into its own, and by then it was too late.

### *The Aryans and Their Impact*

At this point it is worth interrupting our narrative to consider the linguistic map of the subcontinent today. It is complicated on the northern fringes by the spillover of languages from adjoining regions, and in the hill country of east-central India by pockets of speakers of what are called the Munda languages, possibly an ancient intrusion from Southeast Asia. But otherwise the picture is remarkably simple. Two and only two language families occupy the great bulk of the subcontinent, Indo-Aryan in the north (e.g., Hindi) and Dravidian in the south (e.g., Tamil). The line separating them runs roughly from southwest to northeast; there is a clean break in the west, but scattered islands of Dravidian in the northeast.

The question we have to address is how this linguistic partition might have arisen. The obvious hypothesis is that the Dravidian languages were there before the speakers of Indo-Aryan arrived, and several things support this. One is that there is no consensus among linguists linking the Dravidian languages to any others outside the subcontinent. Another is that the scatter of Dravidian islands in the northeast invites interpretation as the residue of an originally wider presence (though the Dravidian-speakers of the far northwest may be migrants who arrived there in the last thousand years or so). Last but not least, the oldest form of Indo-Aryan we possess is already marked by the presence of some Dravidian loanwords; and since this was a language spoken in the northwest, these loanwords are a strong indication that this region, too, was once Dravidian-speaking (so it would be a fair guess that the Harappans spoke a Dravidian language). All this suggests that before the appearance of the Indo-Aryan-speakers, the Dravidian languages were spoken over most of India.

The Indo-Aryan languages, by contrast, are very well connected outside India. They form part of the Indo-European language family to which the Celtic, Germanic, Slavic, and several other groups of languages also belong. As we will see in chapter 12, these various groups are likely to have arisen from the breakup of a parent language in eastern Europe. But even without that reconstruction, the fact that only one branch of Indo-European is found in India, while all the others are located outside it, makes the presence of Indo-Aryan in India look like an intrusion.

Languages spread in two ways: people who speak them may move to new areas, and people who did not originally speak them may adopt them. Often both processes may be involved; the problem in such cases is to decide the relative weight of the two. With regard to India two things can be said with some confidence. One is that Dravidian-speakers would not have begun to adopt Indo-Aryan languages unless some Indo-Aryan-speakers had brought them to the subcontinent in the first place. The other is that for the incoming Indo-Aryan-speakers to have had the impact they did, they must have been either numerous, or powerful, or both. The idea that a significant number of people were involved has some support from a limited body of genetic evidence, which points to a marked affinity between high-caste Indians and Europeans—particularly eastern Europeans. The idea that a lot of power was involved is supported by the very fact that it is high-caste Indians who most display this affinity, and also by the finding that it is stronger on the male than on the female side.

Although we cannot hope to pinpoint the arrival of the Indo-Aryan-speakers in India, we can do something to give it a context. The first hard evidence of Indo-Aryan comes not from India but from the Near East. The place is the kingdom of Mitanni, in the region of what is now southeastern Turkey, and the date is the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries B.C. The spoken and written language of Mitanni was Hurrian, a local Near Eastern language; but Indo-Aryan words crop up in such suggestive contexts as royal

names, names of gods, and the technical language of chariot driving. This looks like the residue of an Indo-Aryan military presence at some earlier date—except that these would be speakers of Indo-Aryan who never went to India.

In India itself in this period, and for a long time to come, we look in vain for what the Near East supplies in abundance—contemporary texts archaeologically preserved. Instead, we must work with two sources of diametrically opposed character. One is the mute remains of Harappan civilization and of post-Harappan cultures—an archaeological record without a soundtrack. The other is the oral tradition of the Indo-Aryan-speakers—a soundtrack that is hard to relate with confidence to the archaeological record.

Oral tradition has been a salient feature of Indian religious life for a very long time. In the mainstream Hindu tradition the Brahmins were the priests, and one of their key roles was to memorize and transmit to future generations enormous bodies of textual material related to the cult. The oldest and most prestigious of these texts were the four Vedas, transmitted in a number of recensions by the various Brahmin groups of the different parts of India. Of the four Vedas, the oldest was the *Ṛgveda*, a substantial collection of hymns addressed to the gods. Here, as in many aspects of Indian history, the chronology is vague, but scholarly consensus dates the composition of this material to the second half of the second millennium B.C. The geography is less of a problem: we are in the eastern Punjab, a part of the northwest where the various tributaries of the Indus have not yet joined to form a single river—just where we would expect to find people who had recently entered India through the mountain passes. The subsequent transmission of these hymns seems to have been extraordinarily faithful. One indication of this is the fact that these Bronze Age compositions have not been contaminated by the Iron Age, in which the great majority of those who transmitted them actually lived (by contrast, anachronistic references to iron have seeped into the portrayal of Bronze Age society in the Homeric

epics). The language of the hymns is an archaic form of Sanskrit, the Indo-Aryan classical language of Indian civilization; the *R̥gveda* thus provides our earliest window onto an Indo-Aryan-speaking society in India. In fact, we can call these people by the name they used of themselves: Aryans.

Aryan society had little in common with the urban civilization of Harappa. It was very much a society of pastoralists, proud of its cattle, its horses, its chariots, and its raids; it included kings and warriors alongside its priests, but had nothing we would really want to call a state. This society did not exist in a human vacuum, for alongside the Aryans there appears a dark-skinned people whom they hold in contempt. Thus it would not be hard to imagine this aggressive pastoral population playing a part in the demise of the Indus Valley civilization. What is surprising is the scale of its wider impact on India. It is not just that the language it brought to the subcontinent is now spoken in various forms by the majority of the Indian population. It is also that such rough-edged pastoralists should be at the root of Indian civilization as it has existed for the last three millennia. This is perhaps another instance of a lesson we learned from the ancient Near East: not to underestimate the potential historical impact of pastoral peoples.

Up to this point in our analysis the key role in the shaping of India has been played by the northwest. It was in the early centuries of the first millennium B.C. that this monopoly was finally broken. India was now entering its Iron Age, and iron tools made it easier to clear the jungle and plow the soil of the northeast; this in turn made possible the large-scale cultivation of an East Asian domesticate, rice (perhaps the only item of major importance to enter prehistoric India from the east). The outcome was a fundamental change in the human geography of the subcontinent: within a few centuries its center of gravity had shifted to the Gangetic plains. There the rise of cities toward the middle of the first millennium B.C. was matched by that of states. Our sources enable us to glimpse the existence of numerous states in competi-

tion, and in due course one of them, Magadha, came to dominate the entire region. A few of these states had been tribal republics (there were more such polities to the west, some of them sufficiently well developed to mint coins); but monarchy was dominant. At the same time the northeast was playing the key role in the formation of classical Indian civilization. This was the period in which India reacquired literacy. By the fourth century B.C., and perhaps for some time before, India was using a form of alphabetic writing that owed nothing to the forgotten script of the Indus Valley; this new script, Brāhmī, is the source of all the Indian scripts in use today.

A key development in the northeast around the fifth century B.C. was the emergence of Buddhism. Like other movements of the day that have left less of a mark on history, Buddhism was at heart a philosophy meant for ascetics who—like the Buddha himself—had renounced the world and wished only to be rid of it. For now we can leave aside the doctrinal content of this philosophy. What needs saying here is that the history of Buddhism (and not only Buddhism) highlights the fact that renouncing the world can be an effective technique for flourishing in it. In the first place, Buddhist ascetics were not, for the most part, loners. Instead, the founder left behind him a community of monks (to which he was persuaded, much against his better judgment, to add nuns). The community failed to hold together in the centuries after his death, despite a series of councils; but the various sects into which it split conformed to the same basic organizational pattern. Just as in Christianity, the existence of monks led to monasteries, and monasteries with some embarrassment became centers of wealth and power. What generated the wealth and power was the success with which the monks engaged the world they had renounced. They were adept at securing the patronage of rulers, who for a millennium found Buddhist monks no less eligible than Brahmins as providers of the religious endorsement without which it is hard for a king to look good. At the same time they ministered to the reli-

gious needs and wants of the laity, which was in no more hurry to renounce the world than its rulers were. In these respects the Buddhists were not so much different from their competitors (the Jainas, for example) as more successful; already at the second council, according to tradition, the main issue was whether monks could accept donations of gold and silver.

The Buddhists also did something their competitors did not do: they exported their religion beyond the frontiers of India. Anyone who renounces the world is free to disentangle himself from the parochial loyalties of the society he professes to abandon. Renouncers were thus under no obligation to respect ties of caste, ethnicity, or language. It was the Buddhists who made effective use of this freedom; to spread their religion, they first translated the massive literature they transmitted into several Indo-Aryan languages, and in due course they rendered it into such exotic tongues as Chinese, Tibetan, and Mongol. The Buddha, it was later said, could express everything he wished in any language whatever. At the same time the Buddhist missionaries had no quarrel with the native gods of the societies into which they moved. Hence, as we will see, Buddhism played a prominent role in the export of Indian civilization.

In one crucial respect, however, the emergence of the northeast has the air of a very conservative process. It perpetuated the Aryan tradition of the northwest, as is clear from the prevalence of Indo-Aryan languages in the region, and from the fact that Aryans dominated the caste system. It is not obvious that this had to be so. We could easily imagine some indigenous non-Aryan people combining iron and rice to develop the northeast in a quite different ethnic and cultural style. Had this happened, it is hard to say what future the culture of the Aryan pastoralists of the late Bronze Age would have had; it would probably have been as irretrievably lost as the overwhelming majority of the cultures of the human past. But as it was, the Aryan heritage, filtered through the urban civi-

lization of the Gangetic plains, was now set to become the dominant cultural tradition of the entire subcontinent.

The south was on balance a significantly different story. If the northeast came onstage in the early first millennium B.C., it was only late in that millennium that the process got under way in the south. Here too the emergence of states was a crucial development, and states have uses for civilization. As might be expected, they adopted that of the north; like the Nubians in relation to ancient Egypt, the peoples of the south can scarcely have known any other. This meant large-scale importation of the appurtenances of north Indian culture—notably Brahmins, their Vedas, and their literate skills. There may also have been an element of military invasion from the north. But to judge by the outcome, the deployment of Aryan power cannot have been nearly as oppressive as in the northeast. At least in the areas we now think of as the south, the indigenous peoples retained their Dravidian languages and sooner or later used them to develop literary cultures of their own. They likewise preserved their non-Aryan ethnic identities, and despite the significant roles played by immigrant Brahmins, their political elites were predominantly non-Aryan. Only in Ceylon was a large territory permanently colonized by an Indo-Aryan-speaking people, the Sinhalese; and the key to this may be that they got to the island before the Dravidian-speakers.

This survey should not be taken to mean that the northwest had ceased to matter in Indian history. It remained the gateway to the subcontinent down to the eighteenth century A.D. Through this gateway came a succession of invaders, starting with the Persians in the sixth century B.C. and the Greeks in the fourth. Typically the political domination of these intruders was limited to the northwest, a pattern that still held good as late as the Muslim invasion of the early eighth century A.D. Culturally the impact of such invaders was usually absorbed or contained without serious dislocation. Thus the famous Sanskrit grammarian Pāṇini is likely to have lived

under Persian rule. The Muslim presence was culturally less benign, and from the eleventh century onward Muslim conquest was to become a major threat to the traditional culture of India.

### *Classical Indian Civilization*

Up to the end of the first millennium A.D., we can think of India as the domain of a single civilization. Not everybody in the sub-continent was part of this civilization. Down to the present day there are significant tribal populations that are outside Hindu society, and there were probably more in the past; some of them are hunters and gatherers. Moreover, many aspects of the civilization varied from one part of India to another even at an elite level. Regions differed, for example, as to whether months began at new moon (as in most of the south) or full moon (as in most of the north). At a popular level the regional variations must have been even greater. But there was still an overarching cultural unity. Brahmins, for instance, were quite often on the move; we know of Kashmiri Brahmins from the far north who settled among the Tamils in the far south. Manuscripts also traveled; Sanskrit texts written in the south in the script of Kerala show misreadings that could have arisen only in the process of copying from originals written in the script of Kashmir. By contrast, there was no parallel to this pan-Indian Aryan and Sanskrit role in the ethnic and linguistic makeup of the Mesoamerican cultural zone.

Cultural unity was not, however, matched by political unity. From time to time Indian history had its imperial episodes, as when empires were created and sustained by states based in the northeast. The Mauryas from the fourth to the second century B.C. were the earliest example of this, and the Guptas from the fourth to the sixth century A.D. were another. But these empires did not extend to the far south. The empire builders of the second millennium A.D. did better in this respect—but they were Muslim or British. This meant that some of India at all times, and most of it at most times, was divided among a plurality of regional states. Yet,

as long as these states lavished patronage on the Brahmins, the overarching cultural unity of India was not in danger.

It is a frustrating, but also interesting, feature of Indian history that our knowledge of the fortunes of these states, large and small, is rather poor. For pre-Muslim India we have no equivalent to the rich historiography of China or the Islamic world. Instead, the history of these states must be reconstructed from the evidence of inscriptions, coins, and stray references in the literary sources. Usually this evidence is fragmentary at best, though there is one notable exception: the Mauryan emperor Aśoka in the mid-third century B.C. is a distinctly historical figure. We owe this to the number of surviving rock inscriptions in which this great patron of the Buddhists and their competitors explains himself in an idiom of vegetarian universalism. Thus he tells us that formerly hundreds of thousands of animals were slaughtered daily in the royal kitchens, but that this has now been reduced to two peacocks and sometimes a deer, and that even this will be phased out; he describes his remorse at the mass killing and deportation that had accompanied his conquest of the independent state of Kalinga; and he affirms that it is his duty to promote the welfare of the whole world, and so discharge his debt to all beings. But Aśoka is unique, and his inscriptions, for all their interest, are no substitute for a good chronicle. Why, then, do we have so little in the way of historical writing to inform us about the course of events in India? The obvious explanation would be that Indians did not write it. This would not be unique: the ancient Egyptians did not produce anything that could really be called a chronicle. But a Chinese visitor of the seventh century A.D. refers to Indian officials charged with the writing of history, and the problem may rather have been that Indian society, and more especially its Brahmin cultural elite, did not preserve what these historians wrote once the dynasty they served had come to an end. Given all that the dynasties had done for the Brahmins, it seems curiously ungrateful.

What this society did preserve, and in enormous quantities, was

a literature of a broadly religious character. Since this preservation turned on continuous transmission, the texts available to us today are by and large those of the schools of thought that survived. But the results are nothing to complain of. The tradition of the Brahmins, a key component of mainstream Hindu religion, preserves not just the four Vedas but a great variety of later Sanskrit texts of diverse content; ancient Indian atomism, for example, is well represented (there is nothing specifically modern about the idea that matter is made up of atoms). Buddhism eventually disappeared in India itself, but a large Buddhist literature originally composed there still survives among Buddhists in Ceylon and elsewhere in a variety of languages. Jainism, a religious movement of the same character as Buddhism but slightly older, is today confined to two widely separated communities in India; one of them has preserved a literary heritage reaching back into the first millennium B.C. The documentation for the religious history of ancient India is thus as rich as that for its political history is poor. What this material suffers from, as might be expected, is a certain historical disembodiment. For example, the Buddhist scriptures of Ceylon are in an Indo-Aryan language known as Pāli; it stands to reason that this must once have been the vernacular language of real people living in a real place, but we can only guess where in northern India that might have been.

The survival of Indian Buddhist texts outside India brings us to the final theme of this survey: the spread of Indian civilization to regions beyond the subcontinent. This did not involve conquest. The northwest, in fact, has always been a gateway through which foreigners invade India, and never the other way around. Instead, the process seems to have been rather similar to the reception of north Indian culture in the south. We see it at work in two very different areas in the early centuries of our era: the Asian interior and Southeast Asia.

The enduring legacy of Indian influence in the Asian interior was the spread of Buddhism to China, and thence to other parts

of East Asia. China, however, already had a civilization of its own, and so was in no need of borrowing India's. But it was just such a process of borrowing that had brought Buddhism from northwest India around the top of Tibet to the borders of China. In this region we have evidence from the second century A.D. of culturally Indianized states among peoples that had previously lacked literate culture. Several centuries later something similar was to happen in Tibet.

In roughly the same period, a century or two after the turn of our era, Indian civilization began to make its influence felt in parts of Southeast Asia. The precondition for this was the rapid development of long-distance trade on the Indian Ocean, dramatically illustrated by the presence of Roman artifacts at Go Oc Eo in what is now Vietnam (including a gold medallion of the emperor Antoninus Pius dating from A.D. 152). As in southern India, the process meant a dramatic increase in employment opportunities for Brahmins of fortune. A fifth-century Chinese source mentions the presence in one Southeast Asian kingdom of over a thousand Indian Brahmins, to whom the local people would give their daughters in marriage. But there seems to have been less Indianization of society at large; thus, unlike the peoples of the Indian south, those of Southeast Asia do not have well-developed caste systems. So it was primarily the elites and rulers of the region who had a use for Indian civilization. This use was nevertheless considerable. Inscriptions attest the emergence of Indianized states from the third century A.D., and by the end of the millennium numerous such states had appeared on the mainland and some of the islands.

We can end this survey by noting an interesting asymmetry about the export of Indian culture: it achieved its successes to the east, and not to the west. To the east, peoples whose geographical locations gave them a choice between Indian and Chinese culture overwhelmingly chose Indian. The Tibetans provide a further example of this preference: we know that they were at one time interested in both cultures, but they later dropped the Chinese option.

By contrast, there was no such spread of Indian culture to the west. The Near East, of course, already had literate culture, just as China did; but the massive spread of Buddhism in China has no parallel in the Near East, even though Mani respectfully included the Buddha in his synthesis.

## II. THE NAMBU DIRI BRAHMINS OF KERALA

Kerala is the rainy coastal strip of southwestern India. To the east lies the Tamil country, of which it was formerly a part; Malayalam, the Dravidian language of Kerala, began its life as a Tamil dialect. The society of Kerala is a highly differentiated patchwork of castes and subcastes, so much so that the region has been described as a "madhouse of caste." One small, intriguing, and formerly very prestigious element in this patchwork was the Nambudiris; they numbered about sixty thousand in the middle of the last century. Taking a closer look at them is one way into the labyrinth of caste.

The Nambudiris are Brahmins and, as such, the distant heirs of the Aryan ritual tradition of the Bronze Age Punjab. Those Nambudiris who maintained their Vedic traditions did so much more faithfully than most Indian Brahmin communities of modern times. They had an educated knowledge of Sanskrit; between them they transmitted three of the four Vedas, together with a large amount of associated cultic material; and they performed complex Vedic rituals. All this took a great deal of training. A Nambudiri boy embarked on the memorization of his family's Veda, whichever it was, at a tender age. The boys later learned to recite their texts forward and backward in elaborate patterns; the effect was to ensure the continuing oral transmission of an unchanging text. This fidelity was not in vain. Comparative philologists have inferred the existence in the Indo-European mother tongue of a raised accent that has disappeared in all surviving daughter lan-

guages; the only place where it lived on was in a special form of Nambudiri Vedic recitation. Less dramatic, but of interest to Indologists, is the fact that the Nambudiris transmitted a recension of the *Ṛgveda* that was preserved nowhere else.

Yet the Nambudiris of the last century were not just a living fossil. They were distinctive among Indian Brahmins not only for what they preserved but also for what they had become. They had customs that diverged from those generally accepted by Brahmins elsewhere in India (one of them, as we will see, fundamental to their relationship with the indigenous society of Kerala). The standard view of such customs was that in principle there could be only one correct way for Brahmins to do things all over India; but in practice regional divergences existed and had to be accepted, as with the meat-eating Brahmins of Kashmir. The Nambudiris were said to have sixty-four such practices (note, incidentally, the multiple of sixteen). Moreover, in some respects they had assimilated quite drastically to the Keralan milieu. Malayalam was their mother tongue, and it deeply influenced their pronunciation of Sanskrit (far more so than Tamil did among the Brahmins farther to the east). In many such ways they belonged far more to contemporary Kerala than to the pastoral Punjab of the *Ṛgveda*.

How did the Nambudiris succeed in becoming an organic part of Keralan society without losing their Aryan heritage? It is always possible to combine two cultures; the problem is to ensure the long-term stability of such a combination. Here history short-changes us. We do not know when the Nambudiris arrived in Kerala, though they were there by the ninth century A.D., or where they came from, though directly or indirectly it was doubtless from somewhere to the north; and we are not sufficiently informed about their early life in Kerala, though it is clear that royal patronage, and the agricultural wealth it placed in the hands of the Nambudiris, was crucial to their success. But traditional Nambudiri society as known to us in modern times had solved the problem of cultural stability in an ingenious manner, and the elements of the

solution were certainly old. One of the peculiar customs of the Nambudiris was that only the eldest son was allowed to contract a legal marriage; this meant that only he could marry a Nambudiri woman, so only his children could be Nambudiris like their father. This was crucial, since only Nambudiris would inherit the family land. The effect was to ensure that the transmitters of the Vedic tradition were an endogamous lineage guaranteed the wealth they needed to lead a life of cultured leisure. Or at least this was the effect until the system was undone in modern times.

This solution left two groups at an obvious disadvantage. One was the younger sons. But fortunately the system provided for them in a slightly irregular way. The Nambudiris enjoyed good relations with a respected indigenous military caste, the Nayars, who were prepared to give them access to their daughters; and unlike other Brahmin groups, the Nambudiris were willing to countenance this. The resulting matches were properly a form of concubinage, not marriage. Children born to the couple were not recognized as Nambudiris; instead, they were Nayars, belonging to the same matrilineal group as their mother. They would not, of course, inherit Nambudiri land, nor would they participate in Nambudiri rituals (it is not for a Nayar to recite, or even hear, the Vedas). From the point of view of the younger son, this arrangement had its inconveniences: strictly speaking, the rules of ritual purity prevented him from eating food cooked by his Nayar consort, or from eating or bathing with his Nayar sons. But an arrangement of this kind was a lot better than nothing. In fact, in traditional Kerala it was a way to develop valuable connections with prominent Nayar families, and it was in considerable measure through such arrangements that the Nambudiris cemented their position in Keralan society. As one Nambudiri summed up his own family's relationship with a Nayar family in the 1960s, "The women were pretty, they fed the husbands well [!], and they were useful people to be close to."

The other group adversely affected consisted of the Nambudiri

girls, who faced a dearth of potential husbands. Here, of course, no analogous arrangement could be made, since it would have been out of the question for the Nambudiris to give their daughters to men of a lower caste. This did not, however, mean that surplus daughters were condemned to spinsterhood: a Nambudiri eldest son might have up to three wives at a time, and a girl could always be married off to an old man one of whose wives had died. But one senses that the lot of a Nayar concubine may have been happier than that of a Nambudiri bride. The Nayar concubine continued to live with her own family, and to be very much a part of it, whereas the ties between a Nambudiri woman and her original family tended to be severed at her marriage, leaving her isolated among her in-laws. Moreover, the Nayar concubine, unlike the Nambudiri wife, could have several consorts at once, and within certain limits she had considerable freedom in choosing them; but this practice, as might be expected, went out of fashion in Victorian times.

We have here one small example of the workings of a caste society. Some of its themes are specific to the relationship between the Nambudiris and the Nayars, but others are part of the bundle of features that tend to appear together in any account of an Indian caste system. Society is divided into named castes, apart from groups like mountain or forest tribes that are outside the system altogether. The system, while encouraging a remarkable degree of social diversity, tends to be strongly hierarchic: as we have seen, the Nambudiris were a higher caste than the Nayars, who in turn outranked many other castes in Kerala. Membership is determined by birth: you cannot choose to join a caste, or be elected to one (though you may be expelled from one). Marriage is constrained by caste, with many castes being endogamous. Occupation is linked to caste, albeit often loosely: Nambudiris are priests, Nayars are warriors (there are even criminal castes in India, just as there are criminal gods). Conceptions of purity and pollution play a key role in keeping castes apart: as we saw, a Nambudiri

is not supposed to eat food cooked by a Nayar, and such a rule commonly obtains between higher and lower castes. In fact, each of these features could be paralleled many times over in the Indian context.

Alongside these recurrent features must be set a fact of a different order: the underpinning of the system by religion. According to an ancient tradition going back to the Vedas, society was divided into four classes (literally "colors"). At the top was the priestly class (the Brahmins), then came the warrior class (the Kṣatriyas), and then the economically productive class (the Vaiśyas); all these were Aryan. At the bottom was the non-Aryan servant class (the Śūdras). This schema may once have been a more or less straightforward description of a particular society, but this was not why it mattered for most of Indian history. What it provided was rather an archetype in terms of which Indians at different times and places could understand, criticize, or justify the particular caste systems they lived in. For example, the multiplicity of actual castes was explained as the result of a variety of irregular crossings between the four original classes. It was not just Brahmins learned in the Vedic tradition who made use of the schema; Kabīr Das, a late medieval poet in a popular religious tradition who had not the slightest use for the Vedas, articulated his message by singing of a land in which there is no Brahmin, no Kṣatriya, no Vaiśya, and no Śūdra.

How uniquely Indian is caste? Bīrūnī, an eleventh-century Muslim observer, contrasted the Indian caste system with Muslim religious egalitarianism, which recognizes interpersonal inequalities only in piety. He remarked that this difference was the greatest barrier interposing between the Indians and Islam. It is easy for someone socialized into the secular egalitarianism of the modern West to react in a similar way. But if we go back to the bundle of features typically associated with the system, it is evident that none of the underlying ideas is peculiar to India. We are used to societies containing a variety of groups that vary in prestige. Such groups

may be linked to birth (you can hardly choose to become a Gypsy if you are not one already) and to occupation (a Boston Brahmin does not make a living by cleaning toilets). They also make a difference to marriage (you are more likely to encourage your daughter to marry a member of a high-ranking than a low-ranking group). Though it is impolite, it is not unknown for people in many societies to speak of other groups as dirty. So at this level we could hardly claim that the elements of the Indian caste system are beyond our understanding.

There are, moreover, some significant, though partial, parallels to the workings of the system in other societies. These tend to be most visible at the extremes, as with aristocracies of blood at the top and outcaste groups at the bottom; it is no accident that the two Indian caste terms that have entered standard English vocabulary are "Brahmin" and "Pariah" (the Paraiyan being a Tamil outcaste group that traditionally played drums at funerals to keep evil spirits away). Here let us focus on the outcastes. In terms of the orthodox schema they ranked below the Śūdras. Members of one such category in ancient India were not allowed to live in the same settlements as Aryans, and had to eat from broken vessels; they were so polluting that they came to be required to warn Aryans of their approach by striking a wooden clapper. In more recent times outcastes have represented some 15 percent of the Indian population and, like everyone else, have been divided into numerous castes of their own. Thus in Kerala the Pulayas, who traditionally could be bought and sold, were obliged to call out every few paces when walking along a path to warn others of their polluting presence; if they heard an answer in a higher-caste voice, they had to step down into the ditch. But at least they were better than the Nayadis—even to see a Nayadi was polluting to members of superior castes. Now, if we leave aside such details, it is not hard to find groups in other societies to which we could readily apply the term "outcaste" in the same spirit, in order to convey the exclusion and humiliation to which they are subjected. A famous East Asian

example is the group traditionally known in Japan as the Eta; a similar population in Korea has attracted less attention. In Europe the Gypsies are as good an example as any.

What, then, makes India different? The answer seems to be two things. The first is that the familiar elements have been put together into a formal system that shapes the society from top to bottom. In Japan, by contrast, it is taking a certain liberty to call the Eta "outcastes," since there is no broader set of castes for them to be out of; and in general the non-Indian parallels tend to leave us with the sense that they are fragmentary and incomplete. The second thing that distinguishes India is the depth of the traditional religious underpinning of the caste system. What, then, is the relationship between these two things? It is certainly possible for them to exist apart, as is shown by the contrasting cases of two islands. One is the neighboring island of Ceylon or, more precisely, the Sinhalese highlands of the interior: here caste is alive and well as a social institution in a population of Indian origin, despite more than two thousand years of Buddhist doctrinal indifference to it. The other island is Bali in Southeast Asia, with a population of a quite different origin: despite its long-established Hinduism, it has only the semblance of a caste system. But over the mass of the Indian subcontinent, the association of caste as a social system with the Hindu religious tradition is ancient and intimate; and though the two can now live apart, they give the impression of having evolved together.

The obvious question that remains is why the social structure of India should have developed in this distinctive way. To this, as to so many such questions, we do not have the beginnings of an answer. The one thing we can say is that the rather isolating geography of the subcontinent lends itself to the evolution, spread, and preservation of cultural idiosyncrasies not shared by the rest of Eurasia. So we have no reason to be surprised that Indian society should have gone off in a direction of its own. But why that direction rather than some other?

### III. OF GODS AND COURTESANS

At Konārak in Orissa, a large and imposing temple of the sun god was built in the thirteenth century A.D., and has since come to be known as the Black Pagoda. This temple is famous, or notorious, for the unabashed sexuality of its sculptures. In itself, erotic sculpture is nothing unusual in the decoration of an Indian temple; couples are freely represented in more or less intimate embrace. But by common consent the Black Pagoda takes the prize. In its days of glory, however, its sculptures may have fought a losing battle for the attention of male worshipers. Medieval Indian gods kept court in the same style as medieval Indian kings, which meant that they had to be attended by beautiful and accomplished courtesans. These courtesans would sing and dance before the god, and might also be willing to bestow their favors on his worshipers. So when a general in the south founded a temple in memory of his mother around A.D. 1100, he equipped it with quarters for the most exquisite courtesans. Likewise, the temples of medieval Kerala, which were bastions of Nambudiri wealth and power, were well provided in this respect. Perhaps, then, the sculptures at the Black Pagoda were an advertisement for the temple's courtesans. Or perhaps they were edifying symbols of mystical union with the divine. Or perhaps they were both. The fact is that we cannot tell, since those who installed the sculptures have left us no record of their intentions. Once again we lack a soundtrack.

Before we go looking for one, we should return for a minute to the long and ramified history of Indian religion. As a first approximation it helps to think of this in terms of three major developments, two of which are already somewhat familiar.

The first was the Vedic tradition transmitted by the Brahmins. This, as we have seen, went all the way back to the second millennium B.C., and it remains alive today. Its keynote was ritual. Those who like such things can derive tremendous satisfaction from faithfully reenacting every detail of an ancient cult, even one

whose original meaning may have been forgotten long ago. To others a tradition of this kind may seem intellectually meaningless and spiritually empty.

The second development was the philosophical style of religion that emerged in the first millennium B.C. on the Gangetic plains. This new way of thinking arose within the broad mainstream tradition transmitted by the Brahmins, but it also took the form of new religious movements, notably Jainism and Buddhism, that cut free from the Vedic heritage. Initially at least, such religions tended to offer their adherents materialist accounts of the world in which the role of the gods was somewhat trivial. The bad news they conveyed was that life is an endless cycle of rebirths; the good news was that if you renounced the world and practiced a suitable asceticism, you might eventually be able to end your participation in this tedious cycle and achieve extinction. This way of thinking provides a systematic cosmic vision on a grand scale, something missing from the original Vedic heritage, and for anyone who yearns to be extinct it is purpose-built. But again, not everybody feels this way; most of us would readily settle for a better deal in the next life, be it as a film star or an Olympic athlete.

What both these forms of religiosity tended to lack was emotional warmth. This was to be the central contribution of the third major development in the history of Indian religion, the rise of the Hindu devotionalist cults in the first millennium A.D. In this process the south played a leading role, though its roots went back to developments in the north in the preceding millennium (they include a religious poem that in modern times has become famous even outside India, the *Bhagavad Gītā*). The adherents of such a cult loved their god, so much so that often they would worship no others; and their god loved them in return, so much so that he would forgive their sins and even become incarnate for their sakes. This, then, is another case of monolatry, and it could accordingly develop a virulent strain of intolerance. One thirteenth-century devotee of Śiva refused even to set eyes on those who were not

members of his sect, let alone touch or talk to them; he held that books referring to Śiva in derogatory terms should be burned without hesitation and their authors killed. Both the devotion and the intolerance are familiar from Christianity; perhaps the main difference is that whereas a Hindu god may endure incarnation repeatedly out of love for his followers, for the Christian god once was enough.

Not surprisingly, profane love provided a ready model for imagining divine love. But profane love comes in various shapes and sizes; which, then, is the appropriate model? Devoted Christians, for example, adore Jesus, but they do not flirt with him, let alone aspire to sleep with him. Some early Tamil devotional poetry would fit quite well with a Christian (though not a feminist) sensibility: the worshiper is represented as a woman who lives forgotten and loves forlorn, pining for her absent lover. The profane world invoked by the poet is thus one in which "those born as women see much grief," and there is little they can do but sigh and endure it.

In a later devotional tradition, however, we encounter a quite different sensibility. The poems in question were composed in Telugu, another Dravidian language of the south, in the fifteenth to the eighteenth century. Two rather extreme examples will make the point. In one poem, with the refrain "Handsome, aren't you?," the woman tells the god that he may be the prince of playboys, but that he is still not going to get her on credit: "You can make love like nobody else, but just don't make promises you can't keep. Pay up, it's wrong to break your word." In another, she tells him that he may enter her house, but only if he has the money. She then sets out her tariff; "total union" is the most expensive item, and for this she requires to be bathed in a shower of gold. Here the profane reference is not to the tedium and constraint of respectable womanhood but to the sexual freedom of the courtesan. This is no accident, for it was in the first instance the courtesans in the temples who sang these Telugu poems. Later the genre was taken up by the courtesans at the royal court, an easy slippage since the

kings of the day were considered divine. In either setting the poems could be taken on more than one level. Perhaps there was something a bit similar at Konārak.

How exotic is all this by European standards? As we already noted, we need look no further than Christianity for the analogy between sacred and profane love. What is different about the Telugu poems is that they are very sexy—as only profane poetry is expected to be in a Christian society. This in turn is related to the institutional setting. Courtesans as such are, of course, in no way an Indian monopoly. But temple courtesans, with their dual role as companions of gods and men, merge the sacred and the profane in a way that is more unusual. Not that such arrangements were unique to India: temples provided comparable amenities in the ancient Near East. There were male temple prostitutes (doubtless for men, not women) in the temple in Jerusalem until King Josiah destroyed their houses in the later seventh century B.C. (2 Kings 23:7). In the same vein the Bible prohibits the profession of temple prostitute to Israelites, male and female alike (Deuteronomy 23:17); yet the very terms it uses for such prostitutes imply a sacred status. Even in Christianity and Islam, going on pilgrimage remained a good strategy for a man interested in spending time away from his wife. But there is no parallel in the later monotheist world to the full-blooded confluence of the sacred and the profane around a medieval Indian temple.

# CHINA

## I. THE MAKING OF CHINA

Like many parts of the world, China is geologically an assemblage of bits and pieces. North China is one block, and an appropriately ancient one—some of the oldest rocks in the world are to be found there. South China—or, more precisely, central and southern China—forms another block, itself the product of a merger. But these elements had become part of what is now Eurasia well before the breakup of Pangea into Laurasia and Gondwana, so that in this sense China, unlike the southern Near East or India, is an original part of Laurasia. It has nevertheless been strongly affected by the arrival of India through the uplifting of the Tibetan plateau, which like India it adjoins. The fact that both regions back onto Tibet means that they have a number of features in common; but as we can see by comparing them, the differences are just as important, and in one respect go back to the heterogeneous origins of China.

A first comparison concerns boundaries. India is pretty well delimited by the combination of mountains to the north and