CHARLES FREEMAN

EGYPT, GREECE, & ROME

Civilizations of the Ancient Mediterranean

THIRD EDITION

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In memory of my mother Winefride (1914–2006) who scrambled up with me to the Iron Age fort on Wardlaw Hill, Dumfries, in August 1957 and so set off my fascination with the ancient world, and my father John Freeman (1913–86) who loved the Mediterranean and its peoples.

FOREWORD TO THE THIRD EDITION

By Oswyn Murray

The first edition of this work came out in 1996, the second in 2004; it is a great pleasure to welcome its appearance in a third edition. Each time Charles Freeman has revised large sections of the work to take account of recent discoveries and new ideas, so that his book remains the best and most up-to-date survey of the history of the entire ancient Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world.

As I said in the prefaces to previous editions, Charles Freeman has tried to give a narrative account of the main events within each period, but also to highlight the developments in cultural and social history, and to show something of the evidence on which his judgements are based. He has indicated where the evidence is uncertain, or where his interpretation may be controversial; but he has not avoided the responsibility of making decisions about the evidence in order to present a clear account. The aim of all of us who struggle to write in that most difficult of historical genres, the introduction to the study of a period, must always be to combine the current state of information with the excitement of new discoveries and encouragement to study the subject further. History aims at producing narratives and explanations, but it is the methods by which these aims are achieved that constitute the most interesting aspect of being a historian; and making historians is at least as important as writing history. For history is a creative activity that must be renewed in each generation: there will never be a fixed and final narrative, partly because our evidence is incomplete and growing all the time, and partly because our explanations of events and the ways they interconnect reflect our own interpretation of our present world, and so are always changing. As the philosopher and ancient historian R.G. Collingwood insisted, it is not the facts that are interesting in history, but the questions and their answers—and these can never be fixed.

There is an intrinsic merit in the wide sweep of Freeman's book that makes it stand out among its competitors. He has consulted the experts in each area of the ancient world: although he makes up his own mind and judiciously steers between the various hypotheses with which experts tend to play for the sake of argument, he is always in touch with the latest thinking in each area. And therefore, just as Fernand Braudel did a generation ago with his work on the Mediterranean and on world history, he reminds us all, professionals and amateurs, of the importance of the wider perspective. The largest school for the study of ancient western history is no longer situated in Europe or North America, but at Nankai University, Tianjin in the People's Republic of China. As Mediterranean and Near Eastern history find their place in world history, and as the Far East begins to confront the history of the West, more than ever before Charles Freeman's synthesis of specialist researches is needed to point the way forward for the next generation.

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

The writer Callimachus, who flourished in Alexandria in the third century BC, was famed for his aphorisms of which one, *mega biblion, mega kakon*, 'big book, big mistake', haunts me as I begin this preface. It may have been a dig at his literary rival Apollonius Rhodius for his large epic on Jason and the Argonauts but Callimachus, an elitist and refined writer in the later tradition of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, is right in suggesting that things can get out of hand. My defence is that the history of the ancient Mediterranean is a large subject and I feel that it needs to be taken gently if its values are to be appreciated.

Luckily, I have got away with it so far and I am delighted that Oxford University Press has commissioned a third edition of *Egypt, Greece and Rome*. I have even been allowed an extra fifty pages which means that I have been able to restore the 'legacy' chapter at the end that was squeezed out in the second edition as well as add in other important developments in scholarship and archaeology since the last edition.

The ten years since the appearance of the last edition have been ones in which I have been able to travel more widely in the Mediterranean (children leave home eventually!) and run study tours to Italy and classical Greece and Turkey. I was also delighted to be asked in 2005 to be Historical Consultant to the revived Blue Guides, thirty-five years after I had written a letter to my parents from Delphi saying that it was taking me a long time to get round the site because I had been lent a Blue Guide that seemed to have something to say about every stone! This was the celebrated Stuart Rossiter edition and I was moved to be asked to contribute to the seventh edition (2008). My experiences with the Blue Guides have made me think more deeply as to how to present the ancient world to travellers and resulted in my *Sites of Antiquity: Fifty Sites that Explain the Classical World* (Taunton, UK, 2009), which might be seen as a companion to this book.

Egypt, Greece, and Rome remains what it has always been, an introductory but comprehensive text for the general reader and those students who need a foundation before going further. No one can be unaware of the enormous interest in ancient history at a popular level but increasing specialization and the rise of 'companion' volumes of essays means that it is increasingly difficult to find a full overview in one place. I hope that by keeping these three major civilizations together in one volume, together with other important but lesser-known ones, I have created a book that can not only be read as a whole but used to fill in gaps and relate events and periods to each other. I have put in new material, rewritten several chapters completely, broken up one or two chapters, and added one or two extra 'interludes'. General further reading recommendations are now grouped at the back with more specific recommendations linked in to the text. I have also taken the opportunity to completely revise the illustrations. I hope that this will sustain the work for a further ten years.

Charles Freeman

December 2013

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Egypt, Greece and Rome was conceived in 1994 as a result of a recommendation by Oswyn Murray, with whom I had been working on another classics project, to Hilary O'Shea, head of the Classics Department of Oxford University Press. Now, twenty years on, Oswyn Murray is still at hand to provide another Foreword and Hilary is still, if only just, before retirement, in her same role at OUP. I thank them both for their continued support. I am sure that the high reputation that the OUP Classics Department enjoys in the international academic community had done much to sustain the survival of this book into yet another edition. Hilary allowed me 'not more than fifty extra pages' for this edition but her staff generously failed to measure the text I sent in and I have to admit to having gone rather further than this—the word checker announced a final total of 345,000 words! Oswyn has also provided me with news of exciting new developments, both archaeological and textual, that I have also been able to squeeze into the text.

The first edition of this book owed much to a team of advisers and I would like to repeat, yet again, my thanks to these: Averil Cameron, John Drinkwater, Amélie Kuhrt, John Ray, John Rich, Nigel Spivey, and Ruth Whitehouse. Paul Cartledge, John Ray, and Michael Scott have provided ideas and information for the new edition and Paul Cartledge and Alan Lloyd have read large parts of the text and contributed many helpful comments. Both felt able to provide endorsements and I must thank Paul in particular for his consistent support not only of myself but others who work on the ancient world outside the walls of academia. Michael Scott and Richard Miles, both of whose work in presenting documentaries on the ancient world I much admire, were also kind enough to provide endorsements.

Those who entrust themselves to my Mediterranean tours allow me to travel much more widely and often around the sites. Long may they continue to sign up and provide their own insights into the civilizations we explore. Annabel Barber and Tom Howells at the Blue Guides have forced me to think how to describe the historical background of important sites to an educated audience and, as I have said in my Preface, it is moving to be involved so closely, as Historical Consultant, with a series I first encountered 'in the field' forty-five years ago.

This new edition was taken in hand at OUP by Taryn Das Neves and, when she left to return to South Africa, by Annie Rose and Kizzy Taylor-Richelieu. They have done an extraordinary job in keeping a very complex project in good order and it has been a pleasure to see it evolve into book form. Edwin (again!) and Jackie Pritchard provided firm but judicious copy-editing and the final proofreading was done by Carolyn McAndrew. Tracking down and assembling pictures was a major project in itself as I wanted to rethink many of the illustrations. Fo Orbell succeeded in tracking down almost everything with impressive competence, Annie Rose kept it all together in

beautifully organized folders, and Jonathan Bargus completed the final page design. Many thanks to all.

In the last edition I reported that my mother was still able in her eighty-ninth year to visit the Anglo-Saxon site of Sutton Hoo with me. Alas, time finally caught up with her and she will not see this new edition but it remains dedicated to my parents who, from their own very different approaches to the romance of the past, first got me reading and exploring these fascinating civilizations.

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1 Approaching the Ancient World

The Acts of the Apostles contains one of the most vivid accounts of travel from the ancient world (Chapters 27–8). The apostle Paul had exercised his right as a Roman citizen to appeal directly to the emperor and so needed to travel by sea from Caesarea, on the coast of Palestine, to Rome. Paul, accompanied by a centurion, as he was officially in custody, set out in the autumn, probably of AD 60. The two first made their way north up the coast to the ancient Phoenician port of Sidon. Next, to avoid unfavourable winds, the ship worked its way around the northern coast of Cyprus and then westwards across the open sea, past Cilicia and Pamphylia, now south-eastern Turkey, to reach the thriving port of Myra. Here Paul and the centurion transferred to a ship that had made its way north from Alexandria. This battled its way along the coast to Cnidus, on the south-western tip of Asia Minor, before giving up in the face of contrary winds and heading south to pass along the southern coast of Crete. It was now well into autumn and Paul hoped they would winter there. However, his guard and captain thought otherwise and the ship continued across the open sea towards Sicily. Paul's fears were justified. A gale blew up and it was only after a terrifying fourteen days of storms that they managed to beach the ship on the coast of Malta where its stern broke up. They had to wait until the spring when another ship from Alexandria, which had been wintering on the island, set off to take them to Syracuse on the east coast of Sicily and then round the southern heel of Italy and so up the coast to Puteoli (the modern Pozzuoli) where the grain ships from Alexandria docked. Paul continued on to Rome.

So much has changed in the Mediterranean since two thousand years ago but it is still possible to follow the route of Paul's journey by sail, pass the same landscapes and contours of the shore, and encounter the same frustrations with contrary winds. In 2007 four of us followed part of the same journey in a 38-foot sailing cruiser we had chartered. Our projected passage was from Göcek in the Gulf of Fethiye in southern Turkey, westwards, to Cnidus. It was early spring, the shores had hardly begun to awake to a new season, and the bays where we anchored were still empty of other craft. The winds were fickle, usually light or non-existent, and we had to abandon our hope of not using our motor in order to make progress. The frustration was as great as it would have been two thousand years ago unless one was a grandee with a hundred oarsmen at hand.

As we made our way westwards, it was easy to see the remains of the civilizations of the past. We were not far from Göcek when we anchored in the so-called Tomb

Bay from where we were able to clamber up the hillside to find deserted tombs carved into the face of the rock. This was the wild and mountainous coastline of ancient Lycia. The Lycians were cut off from their neighbours inland by mountain ranges and had their own language and history. They fought ferociously to defend their autonomy within, successively, the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman empires. The Romans were shrewd enough to give Lycia the status of a province of the empire. Ancient ruins were scattered all along the coastline and it was common to come across isolated sarcophagi with the distinctive Lycian pointed lids. The hillside tombs of Tomb Bay were probably from the Lycian city of Cyra that flourished in the fifth and sixth century BC.

At the western entrance of the Gulf the secure and deep anchorage of Kizilkuyruk sheltered us as it had done shipping for thousands of years. A path led up from the bay and eventually came out on to a small plain where the ruins of the city of Lydae were spread out. Two mausoleums, perhaps from the Hellenistic period (see Chapter 20), survived and the site as a whole was marvellously evocative in its isolation, typical of the vast numbers of classical cities in Turkey that are today virtually inaccessible except on foot and hardly excavated. It was easy to scrape away on the surface and reach an original pavement, possibly of the *agora*, the market-place. This was probably one of those Greek-speaking cities that flourished under Roman rule (see Chapter 29) and survived into Byzantine times. Yet apart from a mention in the *Geography* by the second century Ptolemy of Alexandria, it has vanished from the literary sources.

Beyond the modern port of Marmaris, there were reminders of the difficulties of sailing in the ancient world. At Serce Limani, there is what appears to be a perfect enclosed harbour ('limani' is Turkish for harbour) but within it there are no ruins. Why had it never been settled? The answer was provided by a shipwreck discovered by George Bass, the doyen of underwater archaeology and excavator of the famous Uluburun shipwreck of 1300 BC (see p. 36). It was of a Byzantine ship loaded with Islamic glass and Byzantine metals that had sunk at the entrance to the harbour in the eleventh century AD. Its position suggested that it had tried to seek refuge in the harbour but had been caught by the shifting winds that are still prevalent at the entrance there today and had been driven on shore. Experienced sailors, especially those manning the more cumbersome merchant ships of earlier times, had learned not to risk it.

A far better entrance was to be found in the next bay to the west, now called Bozuk Buju, and this is where larger Greek and Roman fleets had assembled over the centuries. Perhaps the most famous was that of Demetrius Poliorcetes, 'the taker of cities', who had gathered forces and siege engines here in 305 BC before, in the struggle for dominance in the east following the death of Alexander the Great, he had attempted to take the island of Rhodes. Despite a siege lasting a year, the Rhodians held out and celebrated their victory by building the Colossus, a statue of the city's patron god, Helios, which stood alongside the harbour as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The finest survival in this bay is the fort on the headland. Its carefully fitted stone walls had been assembled without

mortar and still stand well above ground. Again it is probably a construction from the Hellenistic period. There were breathtaking views from the summit along the coast and across to Rhodes so that any raiders would have been spotted long before they arrived.

Eventually we arrived at the site of Cnidus on the end of a peninsula. We had passed the cliff top base of a monument possibly built to commemorate the victory of the Athenian mercenary admiral Conon over the Spartans in 394 BC. The massive lion that had topped it had been taken off along with many other statues from Cnidus in 1859 by the archaeologist Charles Newton and is now in the British Museum. Cnidus is an especially nostalgic place for me as I worked on the excavations there in 1968 (when I was 20). The Cnidians had created a double harbour by building a causeway between the mainland and an island in the fourth century BC when the site was first occupied. The smaller of the two, 'the trireme harbour', as the first century AD geographer Strabo called it, was big enough to take twenty warships (in 1968 we used to sit on the beach there watching the sun set each evening). The larger harbour still had its original breakwaters and it is a magnificent experience to sail into it, passing the original theatre on the shoreline with the deserted terraces sloping up towards the city's acropolis.

Creating the new harbours was a shrewd decision by the Cnidians. They provided ample space for ships to anchor while they were waiting for the prevailing winds from the north, the *meltemi* of the summer months, to change and so there would be good business to have from the visitors. The most famous, or, to some, notorious, treasure of the city was the life-size nude Aphrodite created by the fourth-century BC sculptor Praxiteles. It shocked the Greek world for its impudence in showing the goddess naked but the Cnidians exulted in the scandal. It soon became a tourist attraction. Its fame soared when an admirer assaulted the goddess leaving his semen on its thigh to be shown off to inquisitive onlookers. The statue has long since vanished. It was probably taken north to Constantinople in the fourth or fifth century AD where it is believed to have been destroyed in a fire. The excavations on the site have, however, revealed a circular pavement on a northern terrace of the city that answers to the ancient descriptions of the shrine.

So Cnidus became wealthy. It is an important site for archaeologists because it was never built on and simply decayed, perhaps as a result of the drying up of its water supply but more likely as the result of the disappearance of trade in the seventh and eighth centuries AD. Its remains are still laid out on its terraces. There was a residential area on the former island and theatres and temples among the houses on the mainland. Much of its original walls survive. Cnidus had famous citizens as well. The fifth-century BC Ctesias, who probably came from an older settlement of the Cnidians along the coast, was a historian of Persia and of India. He provided the earliest account of India known in the west. Eudoxus (*c.*410–*c.*350 BC) was one of the great mathematical astronomers of the Greek world and after a distinguished career across the Mediterranean world was said to have built his own observatory in the city. He was the first astronomer to attempt a mathematical model of the planets. Sostratus, claimed by some as the architect of the famous lighthouse of

Alexandria, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, also called Cnidus his native city.

Soaking up the fragmentary remains of the ancient Mediterranean is a fundamental experience for those studying classical civilizations. Anyone travelling to Athens or Rome or any number of other classical sites (see my *Sites of Antiquity*, Taunton, 2009, for examples) will be following in the footsteps of those pioneers who rediscovered this world from the fifteenth century onwards (see further Chapter 36). However, traditionally, the academic study of the ancient world has been not of its ruins but of its literature. Latin had always survived as the language of the western church but from the fourteenth century the classical style of Cicero was championed, his texts rediscovered, and Ciceronian Latin became the medium of scholarship. The study of Latin, and from the sixteenth century Greek, texts became a symbol of intellectual elitism and at the core of any traditional education. These were 'the classics'.

The word 'classic' itself is derived from the Latin *classicus*, 'of the highest class' of the five into which the Roman citizenry were divided when meeting in the assembly known as the *comitia centuriata*, and the term refers not only to a work picked out for its enduring excellence (as often in 'classical music') but for Greek and Roman civilization as a whole, as if it represented a peak of human achievement. (The first recorded use in this sense is, in fact, in the second century AD.) However, linking the mastery of surviving classical texts to social status led to a formalized rite of passage. Homer and Virgil, Demosthenes and Cicero made up the initiation, with young scholars then progressing to the famous Greek tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and, next, to Aristophanes and, in Latin literature, Terence, Lucretius, Horace, and Juvenal. Plato and Aristotle followed. The historians Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Caesar, Livy, and Sallust were also part of the canon of texts. (See Françoise Waquet, *Latin, or the Empire of a Sign*, London, 2001, for this curriculum. All these authors are described in the following chapters—see their Index entries.)

By 1900 the examination system in the public (i.e. private) schools of England had become ossified. I still have the papers sat at Winchester College by my great-uncle Kenneth Freeman in 1901 when he was 18. There were twelve papers dealing with classical subjects and they were mostly concerned with translations to and from texts. So, in the Divinity paper, Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians had to be translated from the Greek. English texts, including one from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, had to be translated into Greek verse or Latin elegiacs. It was possible to achieve a 100 per cent as young Freeman managed for his translation of a passage from Thucydides. (Quite how this was marked is unclear but Kenneth was a top scholar going on to win the Senior Chancellor's Medal in Classics at Cambridge before dying, tragically, at only 24.) Most of the other questions concentrated on the specific use of language and grammar (and even in the 1960s when I was 'construing' texts this remained the case). There was virtually nothing on history or the broader understanding of classical civilizations. Nor was there, at this pre-university level, anything from the works of Plato or Aristotle. One had to wait until

Oxford or Cambridge to read Plato's *Republic* or Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, staples of the curriculum.

The core texts known since 1500 (including the authors noted above) have hardly been added to and so have been subject to ever more meticulous study among those classicists seeking to reach the top of their profession. The scrutiny to which they were subjected is astonishing. Sir Kenneth Dover (1920–2010), widely regarded as the finest Greek scholar of his generation (not least for the way he opened up the serious study of Greek homosexuality), describes a commentary he made of Books VI and VII of Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*. It involved him 'in some six thousand hours of work altogether, much of it in the minutiae of chronology, grammar and textual criticism'. On one occasion he looked up 'all six hundred examples of a certain common preposition of Thucydides in order to elucidate the precise sense of one passage'. Another fine Oxford classicist, Jasper Griffin, remembers, in the 1950s, a course of three lectures a week covering three terms on the text of a single play by Euripides which did not even reach the end of the text. One might ask how such a painstaking approach to ancient texts achieved anything of significance. Could one imagine an English scholar applying the same dedication to a Russian or French work of history? Yet as recent work on *The Histories* of Herodotus shows (in a number of scholarly commentaries published by Cambridge and Oxford University Presses in recent years), there is still much fascination in decoding that great historian's sophisticated use of language.

As Dover's work suggests, one result of there being so few surviving texts was to give them a sacred quality. The pioneering Moses Finley, who brought the fresh air of anthropology into classical scholarship in Cambridge in the 1950s and 1960s, complained that 'sources written in Latin and Greek occupy a privileged status and are immune from the canons of judgement and criticism that are applied to all other documentation'. Another bias was towards believing that the Greeks and Romans themselves privileged the written word. Yet this was primarily an oral culture where rhetoric was considered one of the supreme arts (see Interlude 4). The philosopher Plato noted that one cannot engage in debate with the written word: 'If you ask them [words] anything about what they say… they go on telling you the same thing over and over again forever.' Plato emphasized his point by presenting his arguments as dialogues in which his participants argue down an issue until they reach philosophical bedrock.

Yet the studied texts are among a tiny coterie of survivors. The amount of ancient writing which has been lost is staggering, and it may be the best of what was written. Geoffrey Lloyd, the leading expert on the history of Greek science, suspects that much of the finest work in Greek science and mathematics was discarded because it was simply too difficult for later generations to grasp. The logician and physician Galen and the astronomer Ptolemy, both working in the second century AD, gained such authority that much work from before their day was considered inferior and not preserved. There are hundreds of recorded commentaries from Late Antiquity on earlier Latin authors but none survives (unlike many Christian commentaries that we still have). Sophocles is considered one of the finest

playwrights of western literature and wrote some 130 plays, but only seven, some 5 per cent of the total, survive. How would we assess Shakespeare if we had only *Twelfth Night, Hamlet*, or any one other of his plays to know him by? The picture we have of the achievements of the ancient world is therefore distorted, and it is tempting to think how it might have been affected if a different pattern of texts had survived—the later books of Tacitus' *Annals* instead of the earlier ones, or the earlier books of the fourth century AD historian Ammianus Marcellinus instead of the later ones.

So the voices of the vast majority of the Greek and Roman populations and their subjects have vanished unheard. In his study of Roman slavery, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge, 1994), Keith Bradley records only one freed slave, the philosopher Epictetus, who actually describes the indignities of slavery from the point of view of one who had endured them. Women's voices have also been lost. There are the few surviving poems of Sappho but then virtually nothing until the Christian era and the diary of the martyred Perpetua (see p. 596). Any assessment of the position of these disenfranchised groups has to be decoded from the texts that survive.

There is now much greater sensitivity towards the wider contexts within which texts are created. This is partly because more are being discovered in settings outside the monasteries where most of the originals were preserved. One can now cite the gradual publication of the vast papyri cache (100,000 fragments) from Oxyrhynchus in Egypt that dates from the Hellenistic and Roman periods. (Well covered in Peter Parsons, *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish: Greek Papyri beneath the Egyptian Sand Reveal a Long-Lost World*, London, 2007.) Its discovery has helped revise the rigid picture of ancient literature that had prevailed since the Renaissance. There are over a thousand fragments from Homer, an indication of his immense popularity as a 'classic' throughout the Greek and Roman era. These show how variant readings were gradually reduced in favour of a finalized text by the end of the second century BC. Homer is not the only author who had achieved such a high status; the tragedian Euripides was second to him and, interestingly, the twenty most popular authors in the cache were all writing before 200 BC. In other words we are dealing with a literate culture at home with a favourite set of earlier 'classic' texts. The second-century AD Plutarch may have derided the people of Oxyrhynchus as 'barbarians', but they were reading his sophisticated works within a generation.

Books provided solace for many living in remote Egyptian villages. 'If you have already copied the books, send them, so that we have something to pass the time, because we have no one to talk to', reads one letter. Quite apart from what the Oxyrhynchus cache tells us of 'colonial' culture, an immense amount of background knowledge has been added. A tragedy by Aeschylus, *The Suppliants*, had long been considered one of his first and used to make statements about the early nature of tragedy until a text from Oxyrhynchus showed that it was actually relatively late! The finds from Egypt also show the slow adoption of the *codex*, sheets of papyrus bound in book form, at the expense of the papyrus roll. The *codex* appears in the first century AD but only 1.5 per cent of texts are presented in this form. By AD 300 the percentage is 50 and by AD 500, 90. The roll gradually becomes obsolete as the

book takes its place. (Recent work shows that the *codex* first developed in Rome but was then adopted by Christian communities in Egypt. See Roger Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt*, Princeton and Oxford, 2009.)

As will be seen, the climate of Egypt is ideal for the preservation of papyrus and much else besides but it is not the only source of new texts. A whole library of philosophy found in charred and brittle form in the opulent Villa dei Papyri in Herculaneum, a casualty of the volcanic eruption of AD 79 that also buried nearby Pompeii, may eventually be deciphered. Then there is the remarkable selection of human voices surviving from wooden writing tablets found preserved in waterlogged pits at the Roman fort of Vindolanda, near what was to become Hadrian's Wall in northern Britain. These letters not only bring the reader face to face with life as it was lived in a frontier garrison at the end of the first century AD but provide details of economic life, the organization of the army, the Latin language at its most vernacular, and the extent of literacy.

The most abundant source of new texts comes from inscriptions on stone, pottery, metal, or, in rare cases such as Vindolanda, wood. Possibly half a million inscriptions from the Greek and Roman world have now been published. Epigraphy, which is concerned not only with the recovery, translation, and editing of ancient inscriptions but with the placing of them, like other texts, in the political and social context in which they were written, is now a major specialism in its own right. Not only is the range of epigraphic texts much wider than those of the traditional canon of literature, but inscriptions are often discovered in their original settings, on the walls of public buildings, for instance. Some have provided a key to a whole civilization. The decree inscribed in three scripts and two languages on the Rosetta Stone, now in the British Museum, led to the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics. Many have a direct historical value (the 'Decree of Themistocles' discovered in 1959 at Troezen or the Athenian Tribute Lists, for example, discussed in Chapters 13 and 16 respectively). Others give a flavour of city life, the dates of buildings, and the names and status of those who built them. (The city of Aphrodisias in south-western Turkey has been especially abundant in public inscriptions.) Some of the more personal (although the 'personal' nature of any 'public' inscription needs to be judged with care) reflect marital harmony and commitment as in the famous *Laudatio Turiae*, a Roman funeral eulogy from the first century BC for one Turia by her husband who praises her constancy during the upheavals of the civil wars. (Childless, she even offers to divorce him so that he can beget heirs, a proposal he angrily rejects.) (See further John Bodel (ed.), *Epigraphic Evidence: Ancient History from Inscriptions*, London and New York, 2002. Those in Rome should visit the superb new museum devoted to epigraphy in the former Baths of Diocletian.)

Archaeology is primarily concerned with the recovery of material culture and buildings and their interpretation as evidence of past human behaviour. (Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn, *Archaeology, Theories, Methods and Practice*, sixth edition, London, 2012 covers in detail all the points made here.) Traditionally the archaeologist has dealt largely in stone, pottery, and metalwork, as these are the materials most likely to survive in a temperate or tropical climate. In recent years a much

wider range of materials, in particular those relating to plant and animal life, has proved recoverable, and so much more can be said about agriculture and diet, for instance. So the archaeologist is preoccupied with the vulnerability of the materials he deals with (archaeological excavation necessarily involves the destruction of the context in which artefacts are found), as the recent looting of sites in the Middle East reminds us. Virtually every bronze statue from the ancient world has been melted down, many for the value of their metals, others because, as 'pagan idols', they offended Christian sensibilities. It was only in the Renaissance that the urge to preserve an item because of its antiquity or aesthetic quality becomes a powerful force in Europe again with the result that ancient art begins to be idealized (see Chapter 36). Yet human destruction sometimes works in the archaeologist's favour. The burning down of the palaces of the Ancient Near East hardened the clay tablets that were piled in their archives so that they have survived to be read! Even so the archaeologist is still normally left with only a small and unrepresentative sample of what originally existed.

There are certain features of life that are poorly documented in the texts—houses, the details of everyday living in the streets, the uses of public spaces and developments in technology are just three of them—and here the work of archaeologists has proved indispensable. Excavations and surveys along the borders of the Roman empire have revealed the successive programmes of fortification there as the empire came under the pressure of invasion. It has even proved possible to say something about political developments. Excavations in the Roman Forum have shown an increase in the space reserved for the public assemblies as the tribunes became more influential in the mid-second century BC, and a corresponding diminution in this space at the expense of that given to the senate house under the dictator Sulla. On the other hand, the impression given in Greek texts that cities were walled and graced with public buildings from early times has been shown to be false. It was often more than a hundred years after its foundation that a city acquired its first set of walls, and the spaces set aside for public buildings were then often still unfilled.

In a typical excavation layers of occupation are uncovered, the older ones below the more recent. If these layers can be dated—from coins, for instance—so can other material, such as pottery, found in the same layer. Similar pottery uncovered in other contexts can then be used for dating a layer of occupation. This has been particularly important in the study of pre-dynastic Egypt and the deep stratified pits of the Ancient Near East. The recent find of a sealed layer of eighth-century BC pottery and other material at Methone in the northern Aegean (see p. 155) is a textbook example of the datable site.

Coins provide some of the most useful archaeological evidence, often confirming or disputing other forms of evidence such as written texts. Coin hoards in Germany correspond almost exactly with details of the composition of such hoards given in Tacitus' *Germania.* The distribution of coins helps plot trade routes or the passage of armies, their content is an indication of the resources available to the minter, and hence his patron, their reliefs show buildings that may have vanished. The way that emperors used coins as a means of propaganda is a field of study in itself. Occasionally, as in the

discovery of a coin at Chalgrove in Oxfordshire, UK, in 2003, they might provide the only record of an emperor, here 'Domitian II', a figure who appears to have briefly proclaimed himself an emperor on the northern frontiers of the Roman empire in AD 271. (See Christopher Howgego, *Ancient History from Coins*, London and New York, 1995, for an excellent introduction to the subject.)

A particularly important development has been underwater archaeology. It is an expensive and sometimes hazardous business, and added to the costs of excavation are those of the preservation of artefacts when on dry land, but the expansion has been spectacular, not only in the number of wrecks that have been plotted but the depths at which they can be identified, now up to 850 metres in the Mediterranean. The pioneering work of George Bass, founder of the Institute of Nautical Archaeology in Texas, has resulted in sophisticated ways of removing sediment, creating 3-D plans of hulls, and lifting heavy artefacts to the surface. The scale and direction of trade, which was mostly carried by water, can then be plotted. Harbours, among them Caesarea Maritima in Palestine and Alexandria in Egypt can also be explored. (See *The Oxford Handbook of Maritime Archaeology*, Oxford and New York, 2011, for a survey of developments. Seaborne trade in the Roman empire is covered below, pp. 528–31.)

Advances in scientific techniques have made the evaluation of evidence more precise. While radiocarbon dating has become ever more sophisticated and is now the best way of dating perishable materials, other methods have emerged. Trace elements in metals allow their origin to be pinpointed. Lead isotope analysis from lead, copper, and silver ores enables a particular find to be traced back to where it was originally mined. The distinctive 'oxhide' shape copper ingots of the Late Bronze Age found in many sites in the Aegean were made of metal mined in Cyprus. The earliest Athenian coins were made of silver from Thrace, not, as might be expected, from the Laurium mines near the city. The analysis of residues found in Roman amphorae has enabled their contents to be identified, while comparison of the stamps on the amphorae themselves has been used to map trade routes. (The wine amphorae of one potter, Sestius, whose name was stamped on the rim, were distributed probably from an estate in Cosa in Italy throughout central and southern France.) Dendrochronology, the analysis of tree rings, is an effective way of exploring climate from one year to the next and it has even been shown that the year 218 BC was a mild one, which helps explain why Hannibal was able to progress through the Alps into Italy that year!

The sophistication of, but also the difficulties presented by, such methods can be shown in the attempts to provide a date for the eruption on the Aegean island of Thera, which buried the thriving Minoan port of Acrotiri (luckily preserving it as fully as Pompeii). It is not merely a historical question—the eruption has been linked to legends of a vanished Atlantis that has inspired so many fantasies about 'lost civilizations'. At first a date of around 1500 BC was proposed. This was supported by datings from the pottery sequence and from pumice apparently from the eruption that had been found in a distinct Egyptian archaeological layer of this date at Tell el-Dab'a in the Nile delta. (For the excavations at Tell el-Dab'a see Chapter 4.)

However, radiocarbon dating on samples from Thera and the Aegean tended to suggest an earlier date—to between 1627 and 1600 BC with a 95 per cent probability that these dates were accurate. Then a dendrochronology based on tree rings from Californian bristlecone pines (the effect of the eruption would have been felt even this far afield as the dust in the atmosphere affects solar radiation) was used to fix a date specifically 1628–1626 BC and there is some evidence to support the same dates from tree rings in Anatolia. A major new programme of radiocarbon-14 dating for Tell el-Dab'a was then launched and this has produced some earlier dates that may eventually allow the consensus of scholarly opinion to settle on the last quarter of the seventeenth century BC. (For the wider historical context of the eruption, see p. 118 below.)

Traditionally the focus in classical archaeology has been on the large city sites or, in the Greek world, sanctuaries. In fact much of nineteenth-century European 'archaeology' was preoccupied with the rediscovery of the major sites (the German financier Heinrich Schliemann's assault on the site of Troy, launched in 1871, was one of the best publicized, while the German excavation of Olympia 1875–81 with its 500 workers set the model for the 'big dig') and the transport of their treasures to national museums in London, Paris, or Berlin. The Germans were able to carry off 350 tonnes of material from Pergamum, then sited in the decaying Ottoman empire, to Berlin as late as 1880.

Although much of value has been found—how could one write the history of Rome or Athens without extensive excavation on the sites?—the concentration of popular monuments or periods of history left important areas unresearched. There has been a shift of emphasis from the city to the countryside (where, after all, the majority of the population continued to live). The field survey (based on the collection of surface finds) has proved a relatively economical and efficient way of plotting the nature of settlement across a wide area. An important field survey was that carried out by the British School at Rome in southern Etruria. (It was prompted by the widespread destruction of the ancient landscape by modern farming methods and new building.) One result of this and other surveys of Republican Italy was to challenge the view put forward in the literary sources that peasant plots had disappeared in Italy in the second century BC. Field surveys in Greece have shown how small and unpredictable the surpluses of produce were, and how precarious, as a result, was the survival of city life. Evidence of the planting of olives has proved a good indicator of political stability as the trees take several years to mature and therefore are only planted when their maturity can be hoped for.

On urban sites the geophysical survey is particularly useful in plotting the traces of buildings. A good example is the major survey of the Roman city of Wroxeter, the fourth largest city of the province of Britannia. The city has never been reoccupied and it has proved possible to plot its outline, including industrial and market areas, and even to accumulate evidence, through discordant magnetic feedback, of destruction by fires, without any disturbance of the soil. Satellite archaeology is giving more sophisticated analyses of site, with many more being discovered in Egypt and

throughout the Roman empire. (See the work of Sarah Parcak at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.)

Field surveys, insofar as they are concerned with collecting and interpreting material, are carried out within the parameters of conventional archaeology. In the past thirty years, however, archaeologists have become much more ambitious in their objectives. The traditional approach was to accumulate evidence, describe it, and then use it to piece together a picture of the past. This inevitably produced a rather static picture of a society and one in which people often seemed less important than the objects they had left behind. The so-called 'New Archaeology' (a term originating in the United States in the 1960s) adopted a more proactive approach. The 'New Archaeologists' moved into the areas traditionally covered by anthropology. They were concerned to understand how individuals within a society related to each other and to the outside world and, in particular, how cultural change took place. They went to live among hunter-gatherer societies to observe patterns of living that might help explain the evidence left by similar societies of the past. They set up hypotheses and then examined a number of sites specifically to find evidence to support or disprove these hypotheses. They then attempted to put forward 'laws' of human behaviour. ('In such and such circumstances human societies turn from hunter-gathering to farming', for instance.)

The 'New Archaeologists' focused overwhelmingly on the environment, which they believed to be the main instigator of social change. (For example, new patterns of social cooperation might emerge if different food sources had to be exploited.) Their approach earned the name 'processual', from the emphasis given to isolating and studying the different 'processes' that conditioned social change. More recently, some archaeologists, particularly in Britain (Ian Hodder has been the pioneer), have found the 'processual' approach too functional. They claim that the emphasis on the environment underestimates the capacity of societies to make their own values and to sustain them, in particular through the manipulation of the cultural symbols that are important to them. This new approach has been termed 'post-processual'.

One risks losing sight of the traditional concerns of archaeology under the weight of these conceptualizations (and often they were promulgated in jargon which was incomprehensible to all but the most determined readers), but perhaps a synthesis has emerged which shows a deepened understanding of how societies create their own ideological framework within which cultural change takes place. So one might see how a new Roman emperor ensures his legitimacy by using symbols from great emperors of the past, one reason why Constantine, for instance, incorporated reliefs from monuments in honour of the earlier emperors Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius into his own triumphal arch in Rome.

A fine example of how cultural symbols might be used in the Greek world is provided by Andrew Stewart in his *Art, Desire and the Body in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, 1997) which reflects on the way in which the body was presented in sculpture and painting to the onlooker in order to reflect specific political and social ideals. There are ways of showing political heroes, the 'ideal' citizen or philosopher, and

the warrior hero. Even nudity had its own cultural contexts, being the 'costume' in which a hero, whether a victorious athlete or a challenger of tyranny, could be portrayed. A more focused use of art as propaganda is explored by Paul Zanker in his *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor, 1998). Zanker shows how certain images of traditional Roman life—the grand public building, for instance—were used by the emperor Augustus to sell himself as the restorer, not the destroyer, of the Roman republic. Every statue of himself was composed so that even the scenes on the breastplates (see the Prima Porta statue, below, p. 455) had a cultural significance which tied him to the past, while in the *Ara Pacis*, the Altar of Peace, Augustus is shown as a simple family man, offering sacrifices to the gods as his republican ancestors might have done. Political change could be achieved through the manipulation of cultural symbols, many of which held enormous emotive power. The term 'cognitive archaeology' has been coined to describe the attempt to create the mentality of the past from its surviving cultural objects.

This recovery of 'mentality' is one of the most difficult, if most fascinating, challenges for the ancient historian. What were the parameters within which thinking took place? It is a particularly difficult area in that it is virtually impossible to discard our own prejudices and cultural preconceptions enough to enter fully into the world of another. What did it mean for an Athenian to sit and listen to a tragedy and how far would he, or she, use the experience for emotional release or to more fully understand the ethical challenges that faced the city? To what extent did a citizen feel he was genuinely part of his city community—or was his public behaviour adopted for show, a series of learned experiences so that he would appear a perfect citizen to his fellows (see the example of Lucian in Chapter 29)? Why did the classical world have to wait so long before a writer felt able to explore his innermost thoughts as Augustine did in his *Confessions* in the AD 390s? How far, in general, could personal feelings be shown and if one felt emotionally disturbed how should this be dealt with? In his fine study *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford, 2000), Richard Sorabji shows how the Stoic philosophers were all too aware of the threat of stress in public life and how they evolved means of dealing with it. The study goes further to show how the impact of the outside world was transformed by Christians into specific temptations. Yet in what ways did Christians think differently from their pagan contemporaries? Are the *Confessions* of Augustine evidence that they did so or are they unique to their author?

There have been attempts to understand the mentalities of the ancient world through its surviving Greek and Roman mythologies. As every child knows, these are rich and varied. There remains, however, immense controversy over what myth can tell us about the society that produced it. There is some hesitation in using the myths of any culture to provide universal meaning—the search for understanding of a myth must start with the specific context in which it grew. (In other words Freud's universalization of the Oedipus myth, taken from Sophocles's play *Oedipus Rex*, must be treated with suspicion as there is no evidence that it shows a typical pattern of family behaviour in Greece, let alone any other culture.) The French anthropologist Claude

Lévi-Strauss, and his fellow 'structuralists', proposed that the world picture of any studied society could be mapped ('structured') in terms of defined objects and categories whose meanings and significance are expressed and defined through myth. A 'Paris school' led by J.-P. Vernant and P. Vidal Naquet has made elaborate interpretations of Greek myths, teasing any possible nuance of meaning from the surviving versions. A 'British school' has tended to be more pragmatic and less willing to assume that a story must have a purpose and every detail of a story a significance.

Yet myths do say something about the culture that produces them, and myths shared across scattered communities sustain cultural cohesion. In some cases myths are used to rationalize behaviour. The myth of Prometheus' trick on Zeus provides a reason for preserving the meat from sacrifices for the participants to eat rather than dedicating it to the gods. Other myths, particularly those relating to the foundation of a city, may contain historical information. Others again portray the dilemmas of everyday life (whether loyalty to a family should come before loyalty to a city, for instance), presenting them in a 'distanced' form that might be easier for an audience to assimilate and assess. It is impossible to say, however, how far myths had the power to condition the way individuals behaved in their everyday lives.

One of the finest scholars of 'mentalities', here in the period known as Late Antiquity (*c.* AD 284–650), is Peter Brown, who transformed the study of the period with his *The World of Late Antiquity*, which first appeared in 1971. Brown's extraordinary work in uncovering the liveliness of late Roman society (though perhaps at the cost of downplaying the wider political contexts) has continued to this day. His studies, in particular of the religious personalities of the age, not least among them Augustine where Brown's biography (second edition, Berkeley and London, 2000) is probably the most intuitive of this brilliant but complex Christian intellectual to have been written, have extended to an exploration of the relationship between 'the body' and 'society' and the rise of 'the holy man' in this period.

Brown's achievement has recently culminated in *Through the Eye of the Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550* AD (Princeton and London, 2012). In this magisterial study, Brown turns an acute eye on the relationship between wealth, immense at the elite end of society, and Christian attitudes to it. He is particularly expert at placing each of his key figures, Ambrose of Milan, Paulinus of Nola, and Augustine among them, in their social context, always alert to the minute gradations of late Roman society and how traditional pagan attitudes of wealth overlapped with Christian approaches. He sifts through the surviving voices to highlight every nuance of feeling. No one has probed the interactions of the intellectual and social elite of this period with more insight into their relationships with each other and with their own selves.

In conclusion, there is one book that can be recommended as a preliminary to approaching the ancient world. Its subject is Bactria, one of the least known of the Greek kingdoms that emerged in the east after the conquests of Alexander. The kingdom was in what is now Afghanistan. Frank Holt, in *Lost World of the Golden King: In Search of Ancient Afghanistan* (Berkeley and London, 2012), explores what

is known of Bactria from the surviving sources. The earliest material evidence, of what was always a shadowy kingdom, came from a few coins, notably those of a king Eucratides the Great, who appears to have ruled the kingdom between the early and mid-second century BC. As a band of nineteenth-century enthusiasts explored the sites and accumulated ever more coins from Afghanistan (including a single example of the largest gold coin ever minted in the ancient world, the so-called Eucratidion, now in the Bibliothèque Impériale in Paris), there were attempts to create not just a sequence of kings (some forty names were eventually found recorded) but the relationships between them and even their personalities from the way they presented themselves on these coins. Imagination ruled supreme. A particularly speculative history, complete with devastating battles for which no evidence existed, was created by the Scottish classicist, W.W. Tarn (1869–1957), well known for his idealization of Alexander the Great. Tarn filled gaps in the record with complete, if unjustified, confidence.

The first lesson Holt tells us, therefore, is how easy it is to invent history from limited sources, breathing life into fragments of evidence that may themselves have been poorly interpreted. It is a telling point. At any stage in the study of the ancient world, interpretations depend on limited evidence and even when new discoveries are made, they are often made to fit existing frameworks rather than providing the possibility of rethinking the whole issue. Gradually more evidence of ancient Bactria has been accumulated. There have been excavations in Afghanistan, of course, notably of the modern site Ai Khanoum, carried out by the French archaeologist Paul Bernard between 1965 and 1978. Ai Khanoum (its ancient name is still unknown) occupied a strong defensive position on the border of Bactria but also became prosperous from the fertility of the surrounding land and mineral wealth. There is no doubt that this was an important city and had a core of fine Greek buildings and inscriptions but, Holt would argue, there has been a tendency, in the tradition of Tarn, to play up its 'Greekness' and to present it somehow as a beacon of civilization. This approach was put into reverse in 1979 when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and, in their own excavations, refused to follow the imperialist model, preferring to reconstruct the history of the region in terms of its ethnic peoples rather than highlighting the 'civilization' brought by the Greeks. So does politics frame the presentation of the past and even the way resources are directed towards its rediscovery. The past is always defined by the present.

Ai Khanoum succumbed to invaders, possibly nomads, at what appears to be the final years of king Eucratides, about 145 BC. Stories that there had been a great defeat of Eucratides in battle are not upheld by any evidence of destruction on the site, which appears, rather, to have been abandoned. Since the excavations the city has again fared badly through extensive looting. Holt charts with dismay the destruction of Afghanistan's heritage since the 1980s and the continual rumours of newly found hoards of ancient coins which, stripped from the context in which they were unearthed, appear coin by coin on the open market.

One of the most interesting initiatives that Holt takes with the ancient coins that survive for inspection is to analyse them through what he calls 'cognitive

numismatics', the study of who made the coins and how they were used. He shows, for instance, that the planning of the designs of coins was often rudimentary. Even the lettering on the great Eucratidion was poorly placed. Then there were numerous mistakes in the Greek that continued uncorrected. The conclusion was that the whole process of making coins was badly supervised and in some reigns supervision seemed to lapse completely. Did this suggest a kingdom losing its vigour or does it highlight the high number of non-Greek speakers who were responsible for minting the coins? This cognitive approach allows a whole range of new questions to be explored which may provide a deeper understanding of a kingdom that still lurks in obscurity. There is much to learn from Frank Holt's book about how the past is, at any one moment, a provisional construction owing as much to ideology and speculation as to the detached assembly and interpretation of the different types of evidence.

The ancient Mediterranean remains a place of great cultural complexity and its re-creation in the hands of historians has become all the more of a challenge as a mass of new evidence emerges to displace the primacy of the major classical texts. The danger is that increasing specialization will isolate different disciplines from each other so that the wider picture of the foundations of the western world becomes fragmented. It is the hope of this book to hold together, even if only at an introductory level, the picture as a whole.

2 The Birth of Civilization

The Ancient Near East, 5000–1200 BC

The word 'culture' is one of those terms that needs to be handled with caution. Its definition has varied over time and with context. In a very broad sense it concerns shared values and traditions that are passed on in some coherent form from one generation to another in a society. These might include a body of knowledge and beliefs, including moral behaviour, styles of art, patterns of relationships, and ways of conducting government, the specific aspects of a society by which it may be distinguished from another.

Cultures are seldom frozen—it is simply not possible for a culture to remain unaffected by changing political and economic conditions—but often cultural symbols, such as specific gods or rituals and depictions of kingship, are used again and again by rulers or ruling classes in order to reassert authority or establish their legitimacy. These symbols become important rallying cries when a culture is under threat. It is normal, however, for cultures to be in a tension between forces for change and forces for continuity. In some areas, as with an open sea like the Mediterranean or one with many trade networks, there is continuous cultural interchange. Incoming cultures can be welcomed and adapted by their recipients or emphatically rejected by them. Cultures can collapse completely or be transformed into something virtually unrecognizable from what went before. Massive if slow transformations of the Mediterranean world took place, for instance, with the expansion of the Roman empire and, later, with the coming of Christianity and Islam as life was shaped to new purposes. A crucial, and challenging task for the historian is to understand how and why cultural change takes place. This becomes particularly difficult when there is only the chance survival of artefacts, pottery, or metal goods, whose original purpose, purely functional, perhaps, or ritualistic, is impossible to recover.

Just as a clear definition of what is meant by a 'culture' is not easy to make, so it is difficult to say what gives a particular culture the status of a 'civilization'. The word 'civilization' suggests cultural and political superiority, an attitude adopted by the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans as they compared themselves to other 'barbarian' peoples around them. Yet as every culture tends to think itself superior to its neighbours, it is important to move beyond such value judgements to give a broader definition of 'civilization' that can provide the setting for the cultures discussed in this book. Crucial to the notion of 'civilization' is political and cultural stability and this

normally means a state, a defined territory over which a king, a religious ruler, or some other form of government, claims control. From earliest times civilization and city life have appeared to be inseparable, although what sustains urban living varies. A city may be founded as a religious centre, the focus for the worship of a god, or as the setting in which a ruler displays himself, often through monumental buildings. Many settlements gain their energy from trading, and so exist primarily as centres where people meet to buy and sell, where goods are unloaded from water, or where trade routes cross. Often functions overlap—a capital may become a port or a ruler draw his authority from the ancient religious meaning of a site. In a trading city there are opportunities for craftsmen to transfer raw materials into textiles, metal implements, or works of art for the elite, so manufacturing quarters grow up, often close to the market-place, and there are finished goods to be sold back to visiting traders. In short, civilizations usually show social complexity and specialized skills.

In order to survive the inhabitants of cities spawn creative solutions. They have to, in order to deal with the administration of day-to-day survival, when so many have to be fed and given fresh water, and their waste (and dead bodies!) safely removed. The rules of trading need to be regulated, order imposed through a defined authority, the ruler, his officials, or even the people themselves. Records have to be kept and so means of transferring information into a permanent, comprehensible form, writing, develops. The one who does the writing, the storehouse keeper or an elite class of scribes, and the functions of writing vary from culture to culture. The city reinforces its own status through its buildings. Its walls may be as much a mark of its power as a means of defence. (This was certainly true of ancient Mesopotamia where the normal and often exaggerated boast of conquerors was that they had destroyed an enemy city's walls even if archaeological evidence shows that they had not!) As many examples from Egypt and the Near East show, walls provide an excellent setting for reliefs that can proclaim the power of a ruler or his gods. Yet a city is more than its rulers. The interaction of the people themselves encourages the exchange of ideas and their diffusion. So begins the lively interchange of cultures that will be such an important theme of this book.

No city can exist if it does not draw on surpluses of food and in most cases this comes from the surrounding land. Civilization and the control of food surpluses go hand in hand, but the process of accumulation can occur in different ways. A state may have control over valued sources, tin, silver, iron ores, which it can trade for food. It may win resources through war and then use them to fuel further expansion. It may simply develop a highly efficient bureaucracy centred on the king that channels surpluses up to his court in 'taxation' (as in ancient Egypt). One of the underlying questions that has to be asked of all the civilizations in this book is how surplus was accumulated and used to sustain the civilization discussed.

For the Mediterranean world the beginnings of civilization are normally placed in the Ancient Near East. (The term is generally used by scholars of these ancient cultures, despite the preferred Middle or Near East today.) The Ancient Near East is defined here as covering the area which now stretches from Turkey eastwards across to the Caspian Sea and southwards from there to take in modern Iran and Iraq. In

the south-west it includes the modern Syria, Israel, Jordan, and the Lebanon. In the period covered here and in Chapter 6 there were major centres of civilization in Mesopotamia, Palestine, Phoenicia, to the north of Palestine (the modern Lebanon), Syria, and Anatolia, on the central plain of modern Turkey. Egypt, although comparatively isolated within the Nile valley, was in continuous interaction with the area. As its civilization had many unique features it will be dealt with separately.

The legacy of this area both to the other civilizations of the ancient world and to the modern world is immense. It includes the earliest examples of settled agriculture, the first cities and temples, and with them systems of administration that fostered the emergence of writing. The alphabet originated in the Levant in about 1500 BC. The world's first kingdoms and empires, the beginnings of metalwork, and building in brick are found in Mesopotamia. Three major world religions, the only monotheistic ones, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have originated in the area. As the civilizations of the Ancient Near East were not isolated from each other nor from the outside world, all these developments spread to the Mediterranean world and beyond. The extensive records kept by Babylonian mathematicians and astronomers entered the Greek world in the third century BC and the data allowed the plotting of the movements of the stars over time. Even so one must be careful not to see the cultures of the Ancient Near East as inevitable precursors of western civilization. The complexity of the relationships over centuries of interaction will be stressed throughout this book.

The landscape of the Near East is a varied and often formidable one. In southern Iraq there were marshes (although much of the Iraqi marshland has been drained in recent years), in Jordan and Syria desert, in Iran mountains topped with snow. In southern Mesopotamia there is a flat plain rich in silt brought down by the Tigris and Euphrates (the name Mesopotamia itself comes from the Greek for 'between two rivers'). To the north and east of the plain lie mountain ranges, whose melting snows provide these two rivers with their annual floods. There are high plateaux—Anatolia, 500 metres above sea level, and Iran with its inhospitable central deserts—and more mountain ranges, north and south of Anatolia and along the Lebanese coast. These different environments have hosted both sophisticated city-states and nomadic peoples whose relationships with each other have added to the complexity of the area's history. The more resilient Near East economies combined cereal production, and thus a settled population, with pastoralism, the husbanding of goats, sheep, and cattle. Typically, successful city-states of the Ancient Near East grasped a territory around them and consolidated their position through the control of trade, often over routes that remained unchanged for centuries. It was a precarious existence, there were few easily defensible borders, and many states collapsed after only a century or two. However, it was probably just this changing pattern of cultures that made the area such a rich source of innovation.

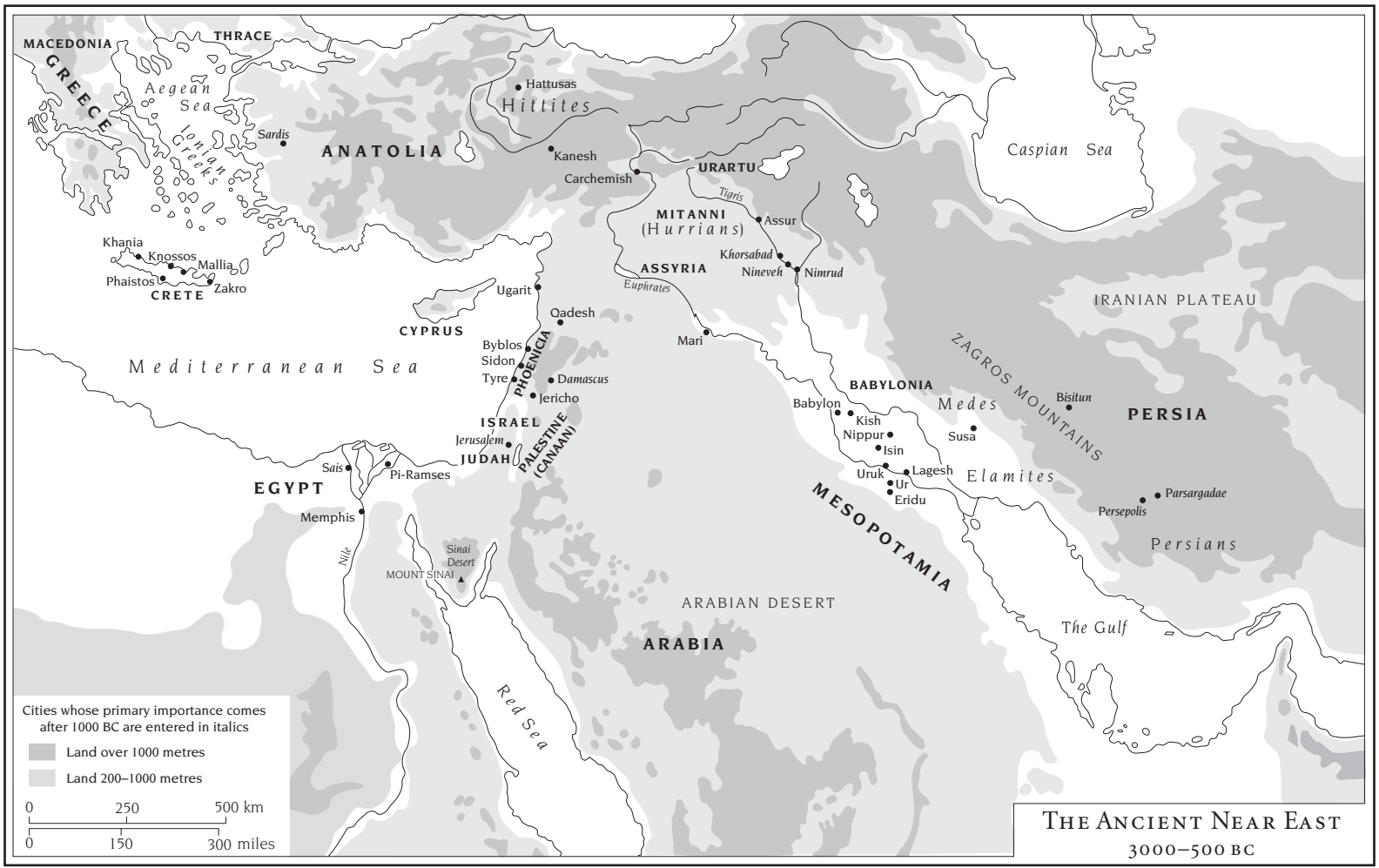
The rediscovery of the Ancient Near East by the west began in the nineteenth century. The pioneers were a mixture of European diplomats, gentleman scholars, soldiers, and colonial administrators, and this was when these ancient cultures were

appropriated into a story of 'western civilization'. (The late Edward Said has explored this appropriation critically in his influential *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London, 1978.) The motives of the pioneers were varied but among the most important were the determination to prove the truth of the Bible through finding evidence for its accuracy as history and to accumulate collections of treasures for their own national museums. The great palaces of Assyria, Khorsabad, Nimrud, and Nineveh, were stripped of their magnificent reliefs, which are now to be found in British and French museums.

One of the major discoveries, by British archaeologists in the second half of the nineteenth century, was the vast library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal at Nineveh with its collection of Mesopotamian literature. The cuneiform script in which the tablets were written was eventually deciphered from a trilingual inscription carved by the Persian king Darius on a rock at Behistun by an Englishman, Henry Rawlinson (1810–95). The literature and complex history of the region could now start to be unravelled. A decisive moment came in 1872 when George Smith, working on Assyrian tablets in the British Museum, found a text describing a great flood and instantly placed the biblical texts in a wider cultural context. Now the ever-increasing numbers of tablets and a more sophisticated understanding of the contexts in which they were written has added immeasurably to our knowledge of the region and its history.

Sites in Mesopotamia may have been occupied over 6,000 years and the accumulated remains are enormous. The citadel of one city, Nineveh, is so huge that it is estimated that it would take another 6,000 years to excavate it according to modern methods. It also became obvious that concentrating digs on such massive sites gave a false impression of Mesopotamian culture especially when there were still traditions of 'treasure-hunting', that highlighted prestige finds over the more mundane debris of everyday living. The impact of a broader, more anthropological, approach pioneered by American scholars such as Robert Braidwood in the 1940s forced archaeologists to concentrate on what it was actually like to live in ancient Mesopotamia. Surveys of larger areas showed how individual cities and settlements were linked to each, often through canals. Here the American Robert Adams was a pioneer with his survey of 8,000 square kilometres of Diyala province in eastern Iraq in the 1960s. In the cities themselves, meticulous examination of ordinary houses, such as the Abu Salabikh project in southern Iraq, a relatively small but well-preserved city site from the third millennium BC, is shifting interest towards ordinary lives.

In recent years, major irrigation and building projects have threatened the survival of many sites. A major blow, the full extent of which is still unknown, to the history of the Ancient Near East, has been dealt as a result of the looting on ancient sites in the aftermath of the invasions of Iraq and the breakdown of order in other states. (According to one survey, the holes in Iraq add up to 3,700 acres of destruction.) Major museums in the region have been looted; even some of the treasures of Tutankhamun in the Cairo Museum were damaged or disappeared in January 2011. Sites are hard to protect and small antiquities easy to dig out and smuggle out to unscrupulous dealers. With the sequence of events and details of daily living of so


MACEDONIA
THRACE
GREECE
Aegean Sea
Ionian Greeks
Sardis
ANATOLIA
Hattusas
Hittites
Kanesh
Carchemish
URARTU
Caspian Sea
Tigris
MITANNI
(Hurrians)
Assur
Khania
Knossos
Mallia
Phaistos
Zakro
CRETE
Khorsabad
Nineveh
Nimrud
ASSYRIA
Euphrates
Ugarit
Qadesh
IRANIAN PLATEAU
CYPRUS
Mari
Byblos
Sidon
Tyre
PHOENICIA
Damascus
Jericho
Mediterranean Sea
ZAGROS MOUNTAINS
BABYLONIA
Babylon
Kish
Nippur
Isin
Medes
Bisitun
PERSIA
Susa
ISRAEL
Jerusalem
JUDAH
PALESTINE (CANAAN)
Sais
Pi-Ramses
Uruk
Lagesh
Ur
Eridu
Elamites
EGYPT
MESOPOTAMIA
Parsargadae
Persepolis
Memphis
Nile
Sinai Desert
MOUNT SINAI
Persians
ARABIAN DESERT
The Gulf
ARABIA
Red Sea
Cities whose primary importance comes after 1000 BC are entered in italics
Land over 1000 metres
Land 200–1000 metres
0 250 500 km
0 150 300 miles
The Ancient Near East
3000–500 BC

Map 1

many of these cultures still obscure, this is a devastating loss. Work on many important projects has been interrupted and only now, 2012 at the time of writing, are the first archaeological excavations being resumed in Iraq.

Mesopotamia and the First Cities

Mesopotamia is a loose term that denotes the region that covers the watersheds of the rivers Euphrates and Tigris as they flow down to what is now the Persian Gulf. It was at the southern end of the Mesopotamian plain that the earliest of the city-states appeared. The Akkadian (Akkadian was a Semitic language used in the area from about 2600 BC) word for this part of Mesopotamia was *Sumerum* and this gives the name Sumerian to this early civilization and its language. There are problems. Sumerian, a language of monosyllabic words, is hard to place as it seems unrelated to any other language of the region and its origin is unknown. Again, it is difficult to distinguish specific features of Sumerian culture that isolate it from others, so here Sumerian will be used broadly to define the world of the city-states of this region that emerged in about 3500 BC and lasted until 2300 BC. (For general background reading for this chapter, see 'What to Read Next', pp. 683–4.)

At first sight the plain did not appear to be a likely home for a stable civilization. There were few natural resources, no timber, stone, or metals. Rainfall was limited, and what water there was rushed across the plain in the annual flood of melted snow. As the plain fell only 20 metres in 500 kilometres the beds of the rivers shifted constantly. Yet this impelled the inhabitants to organize their irrigation effectively, by building canals and preserving water before it flowed onwards. Once this was done and the silt carried down by the rivers planted with crops, the rewards were rich: four to five times what rain-fed earth would produce. It was these conditions that allowed an elite to emerge, probably as an organizing class, and to sustain itself through the control of surplus crops that could be used in exchange for the raw materials that it lacked. In short, the need to survive forced innovative responses.

The mountains of accumulated remains that mark ancient sites are known as *tells*. An especially prominent one is Eridu. The site was/is close to the Euphrates but at the intersection of marsh, desert, and alluvial soil that gave it access to both farmland and fishing with some scope for pastoralism. It had a constant supply of water that was accumulated in a depression in the ground. This lake appears to have given it a sacred quality. As excavators dug down through the *tell* in the 1940s they began uncovering a sequence of temples, one superimposed on the other. They eventually found a small 'chapel' built of sun-dried brick on a base of undisturbed sand. It was dated, astonishingly, to 4900 BC. Each subsequent temple was larger than the one before and the final temples, of the third millennium BC, had massive platforms, with open courts in the centre surrounded by rooms. The corners of the buildings were orientated to points of the compass and the mudbrick walls supported by buttresses. The period that ends in about 3500 BC is known as the Ubaid, from a site of this period excavated in the 1920s, Tell Ubaid, near Ur. (These names

for periods tend to stick even when more important sites from the same period are discovered.)

The sequence of buildings implies that once a site had been given religious significance this was reinforced from generation to generation. The larger and later temples showed that they had been centres of ritual worship and that worshippers had brought simple offerings such as fish (again perhaps reinforcing the sacredness of water and all it gave life to) and other agricultural produce as offerings or for exchange. Pottery dishes suggested that communal meals had been part of the rituals. The god worshipped at Eridu appears to have been Enki, the creator god who shaped the world and who embodied wisdom. Well might later Babylonian texts talk of the creation of Eridu as the first city, 'the holy city, the dwelling of their [the other gods] delight'.

A cemetery was found close by the temple complex and the excavation of graves dating from about 3800 BC suggests that it was reserved for an elite. Their grave goods were well crafted and some, such as obsidian beads and the intensely blue stone, lapis lazuli, had come long distances. Older burials had been marked and preserved. The assumption is that this elite was somehow associated with the maintenance of the temples and gained privileges and veneration after death as a result. Eridu, which was the southernmost of the Mesopotamian settlements, may have been, in fact, primarily a centre for pilgrimage. Its mythological links to creation and its association with permanent supplies of water, so yearned for in the desert, preserved its status so that modern Iraqi governments still see it as the founding city of their civilization. More recent excavations of other sites suggest, however, that similar shrines were to be found at other centres of the period. This was a culture that enjoyed some uniformity in religious practice. Pottery too is decorated in similar styles across the Ubaid culture.

Eridu could hardly be called a city in the full sense of the word but its neighbour Uruk, to the north-west, has a better claim. The most significant period in Uruk's transformation is between 3800 and 3200 BC. From about 3500 its population was too great to sustain itself from local resources and so there must have been some coercive control of other areas. This was helped by climate change that led to less flooding and the release of fertile land for cultivation. The opportunities were grasped by an enterprising elite. Uruk's rise in status is reflected in a mass of monumental building, in stone and a primitive concrete for some periods, in mudbrick for others. This suggests a disciplined workforce working over long periods. Bevelled-rim bowls of fixed capacity are abundant and may have contained the agreed daily rations for a worker.

What is remarkable is that architectural styles change when rebuilding takes place—there is no attempt to perpetuate the same style of building—although there are enduring design features such as attractively coloured clay cones which were set into walls and pillars. So this was a people who were happy to innovate, and hand in hand with this goes evidence of more sophisticated bureaucratic skills. Officials had their own seals, their individually chosen designs inscribed on cylinders that could then be rolled across damp clay to identify goods of which they were owners

or for which they were responsible. Their quality confirms that they were incised by trained craftsmen. A primitive form of writing, again inscribed on damp clay, was used to record goods, administrative decisions, and the use of labour. Some signs were simply representations of the commodity itself, an ear of corn, water, or numbers of containers (these are known as logograms). The evidence that this was an ordered society is reflected in the Warka (Warka is the modern Arabic name for the site) vase in which a procession of naked men carry containers of goods in some form of ritual procession probably associated with Inanna, the goddess of love and war. Other depictions from cylinders show captives paraded before kings.

The development of Uruk, a site that eventually covered some 550 hectares, about half the size of Rome at its height in AD 100, goes hand in hand with the diffusion of artefacts that appear to have originated in Uruk, such as the distinctive bevelled-rim bowls, far beyond southern Mesopotamia, into southern Anatolia and northern Syria. There were also trading links with Egypt that provided cultural models at a time when different groups in Egypt were consolidating their control of the Nile valley (see further p. 40). What does this tell us about the nature of Uruk society? Did the opportunism that led to the exploitation of agricultural resources transform it into an imperialist state that set up colonial outposts in the north that acted as centres for the control of trade? Uruk settlements include Habuba Kabira, a totally new foundation on the Middle Euphrates, and Hacinebi Tepe where a Uruk enclave existed alongside an Anatolian culture for 400 years. Or was it a state whose economic structure was more egalitarian, with relatively little in the way of a hierarchy, which simply organized its trading activities more efficiently than its rivals, so 'dumping' surplus food in return for metals, luxuries, or slaves? (Slavery is impossible to track in the archaeological record but, as will be seen later in this book, was endemic in the ancient world.) The easy access to the ceremonial buildings and the generous open spaces in the centre of the city do suggest a relaxed society. The contrast with the enclosed temple sanctuaries of Egypt is marked. Nor was there any attempt to reuse traditional styles of architecture as a means of ensuring continuity with the cultural symbols of earlier eras.

So Uruk was home to an innovative society that was dedicated to promoting and sustaining an economy based on exchange, possibly using its public spaces for rituals celebrating the fact. Surviving 'lists of professions' show a hierarchy of officials and defined professions, priests, potters, and jewellers among them. Of the two leading administrative officials, one was a man (*en*) and the other a woman (*nin*). Perhaps Uruk's greatest achievement was to find ways of sustaining its economic vigour over centuries. However, in about 3100 BC its trading links disappear, perhaps, it is suggested, because the water supplies around Uruk began to dry up or the land was so intensively cultivated that the rural economy necessary to support the city collapsed. Outlying cultural outposts such as Habuba Kabira simply disappear and the older cultural traditions of northern Mesopotamia reassert themselves. Yet the precedent for city life had been set and as Uruk contracted, many smaller city-states emerged, each exploiting its own access to water and surrounding land.

The use of writing had now become a feature of many of these Mesopotamian city-states. As suggested above, the earliest script was based on logograms, symbols that are used to express a whole word. Two thousand logograms have been recorded from these early centuries of writing and insofar as many represented what it was wished to record (an ear of corn for corn, for instance), they were relatively easy to read and could be comprehensible across different language groups, an important consideration so far as a trading state such as Uruk was concerned. About 3000 BC, however, writing is found expressed in Sumerian. As already noted the origins of the Sumerians are obscure and their language has no links with any other known language but it clearly had some kind of status so that for centuries texts written in Sumerian were considered superior to those in other languages.

Hand in hand with the adoption of Sumerian came an important development, the use of Sumerian words of one syllable (which was common in the language) in longer words where the sound of that syllable was needed. To take an example: the Sumerian word for 'head' was *sag*. Whenever a word including a syllable with the sound *sag* was to be written, the sign for *sag* could be used to express that syllable with the remaining syllables of the word expressed by other signs. So, in a first move towards the limited number of symbols of an alphabet, the number of signs required had been reduced, to 600 by 2300 BC, and the range of words which could be expressed had widened. Complications remained. Scribes had to make clear whether the *sag* sign was the whole word 'head' or part of a longer word. Texts dealing with economic matters predominated, as they always had done, but now works of theology, literature, history, and law appear. The writing was no longer incised (on damp clay tablets) with a pointed stylus but one with a wedge shape at its end. (The Romans called the shape *cuneus* and this gives the script its name of cuneiform.) Gradually the signs diverged from their pictorial roots and became more abstract but it is remarkable that the changes spread uniformly between cities suggesting the continuing importance of trade links between them. Texts found in a large cache of tablets at Shuruppak, north-west of Uruk, show that six neighbouring cities of the period worked well together, even raising men from each to work on communal projects and allowing each other's citizens free access to their territories. Cuneiform could be used to express any language, just as Latin script can be used today for different European languages. (See Andrew Robinson, *Writing and Script: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, 2009, for these early scripts and Dominique Charpin, *Reading and Writing in Babylon*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2010, for a wide-ranging study of the writing process.)

Analysis of the texts from Shuruppak suggests a conservative society. A father exhorts his son not to drink or consort with prostitutes or even to speak in public to a woman he is not married to. He should respect those of higher social status, protect his family, and work the land carefully. In other texts there is an emphasis on lists—of fish, birds, plants, officials, or even mathematical terms. These lexical lists, as they are known, were arranged according to the relative status of subjects (higher officials before lower ones, the sheep as the highest of animals, this

suggesting the importance of wool in the community). They reflect the desire to define order, the imposition of an ideal of society that would have been absorbed by all those being trained to write. So writing here transcends administrative functions and becomes a means of transmitting an ideology.

Other innovations of the late fourth millennium include the wheel, probably developed first as a more efficient way of making pottery and then transferred to transport. A tablet incised about 3000 BC provides the earliest known example, a roofed box-like sledge mounted on four solid wheels. A major development was the discovery, again about 3000 BC, that if copper, which had been known in Mesopotamia since about 3500, was mixed with tin, a much harder metal, bronze, would result. Bronze was far more successful than copper in creating sharp edges to cut anything, from crops and wood to human bodies, and it had the extra advantage that its melting point was very much lower than that of copper and the solidifying point of the molten metal even lower than that. This made it much easier to cast. The period from 3000–1000 BC (when the use of iron becomes widespread) is normally referred to as the Bronze Age. Bronze-working spread right across Europe and, even when iron replaced bronze for weapons and tools, bronze remained important for statues and ceremonial goods. The Greeks achieved an extraordinary proficiency in statuary by the fifth century BC.

The use of bronze requires access to copper and tin sources and these now became important. The people of Sumer probably imported their tin from mines in central Asia. It was one strand of a busy network of trade routes, some running north and south along the rivers, others eastwards through the city of Susa on the edge of the Iranian plateau to Afghanistan, the source of lapis lazuli. Timber and aromatics came from the mountains of Turkey and Syria, granite and dolerite from Egypt, cedarwood from the mountains of Lebanon. The sophistication of Sumer's society can be seen in the finds made in the so-called Royal Cemetery of the city of Ur by the British archaeologist Leonard Woolley in the 1920s and 1930s. (Woolley was able to exploit Britain's administrative control of Iraq after the collapse of the Ottoman empire and the best finds were transferred to the British Museum.) The richest of the graves, which date from around 2500 BC, contain what appear to be cult figures of men and women (there is no firm evidence that they are actually kings or queens), buried with other bodies around them. There is a mass of finely crafted goods, harps and lyres fashioned in inlaid wood, gaming boards, drinking cups, and jewellery in gold and silver. The so-called Standard of Ur, one of the finest discoveries, is a two-sided sounding box with scenes of war on one side and peace on the other, beautifully inlaid with shell and lapis lazuli. The relationship between the elite corpses and those around them has been the subject of fierce debate. Woolley constructed an elaborate explanation based on royal attendants being drugged and then laid alongside their masters in a single ceremonial burial. More recently it has been thought that the cult figures had such prestige that others wished their bodies to be buried as close to them as possible at the time of death (as, later, Christians would do at the shrines of saints and martyrs).

The plains of Mesopotamia were not peaceful. Ceremonial weapons of gold were found among the finery of the Royal Graves of Ur, suggesting a high status for those successful in war. On the so-called Vulture stele from the city of Lagesh (like the Royal Graves dated possibly to about 2500 BC), a king is portrayed first in a wheeled battle-wagon leading ranks of helmeted infantry and then a second time with the infantry striding over a defeated enemy. The city leaders were not necessarily all war chieftains—some of the terms used to describe them refer to them as religious or administrative rulers—but there is no doubt that this was an age of increasing inter-city rivalry and conflict. The emergence of war leaders is associated with northern Mesopotamia where the Euphrates and the Tigris come closest to each other, the later Babylonia. The riverbeds are stable and land routes well established. It was control and defence of this area that was vital and this required new forms of leadership. The city of Kish, well placed between both rivers, has one of the first recorded kings, one Mesilim, who ruled in about 2600 BC. He is given divine parentage and is recorded as having demarcated a territory.

So it is that palaces now become more prominent in the cities. At Kish, the entrance of the palace was fronted by fortified towers and surrounded by a perimeter wall. There is evidence of growing inequality in society notably in the contrast between the houses of the rich and the poor, and a system of rations appears in which the amount given out depends on the status of the recipient. Slavery makes its first appearance in the written record, with female slaves recorded as working as spinners and weavers in the temple workshops. There are documents from the courts in which slaves dispute their status. (A good overview of the fragmentary evidence is to be found in Daniel Snell, 'Slavery in the Ancient Near East', in Keith Bradley and Paul Cartledge (eds.), *The Cambridge History of World Slavery*, i: *The Ancient Mediterranean World*, Cambridge, 2011.)

As seen in Chapter 1, one of the trends of epigraphy has been a shift from a literal translation of documents or inscriptions towards more nuanced interpretations of them as public relations exercises. Texts from Sumer in the late third millennium were often inscribed on slabs or statues and displayed in temples for all to see. They evoke an image of society in which the ruler is upheld as the chosen one of the gods, who maintains peace and security for all and sustains prosperity, not least as an overseer of irrigation. Cities flourish under his rule and the population grows under his 'shepherding'. (This image of the Good Shepherd reappears throughout the ancient world and is eventually incorporated into Christianity.) This may well have been idealization but the first law codes suggest that there may have been some reality in the picture of the benign ruler. The earliest surviving code, that of Urukagina, ruler of Lagesh about 2350 BC, seems aimed at restricting the power of the bureaucrats and wealthy landowners. The poor are protected against their excesses and there is evidence from Sumer in general that a system of law operated, with courts and respected local citizens sitting as judges.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* (see further below) contributes the idea that the king is a superior being created as such by the god Ea and the Mother Goddess.

Ea opened his mouth to speak, saying a word to the Lady of the Gods: 'You are Belet-ili, the mistress of the great gods. You have created man the human. Fashion now the king, the counsellor-man. Gird the whole of his figure sweet. Make perfect his countenance and well formed his body!' The Lady of the Gods fashioned the king, the counsellor man. They gave to the king the task of doing battle for the great gods. Anu gave him his crown, Enlil gave him his throne, Nergal gave him his weapons, Ninurta gave him his corona of splendour, The Lady of the Gods gave him his features of majesty, Nuska commissioned counsellors, stood them before him. (Translation: Andrew George)

The rise of an ordered kingship was a development with immense implications for later history. Throughout the following centuries, with the Hellenistic kingships, the pagan Roman emperors, and then the Byzantine emperors, this emphasis on the ruler as the chosen of the gods, whether pagan or, in the case of the Byzantine emperor, Christian, reasserts itself. In each case success in war is intrinsic to the rulers' survival, as it clearly is here.

The Akkadians

Continuing conflict between the cities was debilitating and made the southern plains vulnerable to outsiders. In about 2330 BC southern Mesopotamia was conquered by history's first recorded emperor, Sargon of Akkade. Sargon's origins were among the Semitic-speaking peoples of the north. (One legend records that his mother, a priestess, placed him in a wicker basket and left him to float downstream where he was rescued. There are obvious parallels here with the story of Moses, an indication of how these legends spread and reappear within the Near East. Another tells of his having come to power as the result of an upheaval in the palace at Kish where he was serving as a royal cupbearer.) The site of Sargon's capital, Akkade, lay possibly at the junction of the Tigris and Diyala rivers, in a suburb of modern Baghdad. It seems to have acted as a focus for trade routes and attracted a cosmopolitan population. The text of the so-called Curse of Akkad talks of 'foreigners cruising about like unusual birds in the sky' and monkeys, elephants, buffalo, ibexes, and sheep 'jostling each other in the public square'. At the height of the city's prosperity it abounds in gold, silver, copper, and tin and 'blocks' of that most precious commodity of all, lapis lazuli.

From this bustling metropolis Sargon created an empire that stretched as far north as Anatolia and east as the Iranian plateau. Uruk was among the cities subdued by his armies, its walls broken down and its ruler, Lugalzagesi, taken off north in triumph. The walls of Ur too were destroyed. Sargon and his successors idealized kingship by presenting themselves in reliefs as dominant over their enemies who are shown as tiny in comparison to their semi-divine conquerors (compare the Narmer Palette, p. 42). Akkadian, a Semitic language, eventually became the dominant language of the empire and most surviving cuneiform documents are written in it. Sumerian remained distinct as the language of the priesthood and religious texts.

The extent of surviving written texts for the Akkadian empire marks an important moment in history, when a civilization is known more fully through its texts than its archaeology. These texts contain a dating system, a year being marked by a major event that took place in it. Yet while Akkade is well represented in the texts, its site is still unconfirmed and it is hard to distinguish a distinct Akkadian culture through artefacts. There are tales of conquests and campaigns but the structure of control is obscure. Sargon's empire was based primarily on personal conquest and needed to be continually reinforced through battle against both internal and external enemies. The evidence suggests that some defeated kings were allowed to continue in post as provincial governors but the number of local revolts suggests that this approach did not work well. The empire eventually fell apart seventy years later during the rule of Sargon's great-grandson, Shar-kali-sharri, when invaders, the Gutians, swept down the Zagros mountains to destroy the rich city of the plain. The Curse of Akkad tells how the god Enlil withdrew his protection from the city and the Gutians destroyed the trade routes and scattered the flocks. 'For the first time since cities were built and founded, the vast fields did not produce grain, the inundation ponds produced no fish, the irrigated orchard yielded neither syrup nor wine.'

The beneficiaries of this collapse of power in the north were the southern cities of Mesopotamia, now able to regain their independence (a sign in itself that Akkadian control had not been crushing). After some decades of turmoil, the Sumerians achieved one final burst of glory. In the so-called Third Dynasty of Ur (*c.*2150–2004 BC) a highly efficient bureaucratic state emerged in southern Mesopotamia under one Ur-Nummu and his son Shulgi. Shulgi glorified himself. 'When I sprang up, muscular as a cheetah, galloping like a thoroughbred at full speed, the favour of the [sky-god] An brought me joy.' The dynasty is remembered for its ziggurats, massive stepped platforms ascended by ramps. It is possible that they were symbolic homes of the gods, whose preservation high in shrines above any conceivable flood ensured the psychological well-being of all. Even though the upper layers of the ziggurats have now disappeared they were well built with an outer layer of baked brick steeped in bitumen to give it strength and rush matting placed between layers to spread the weight of the brick and absorb moisture. The ziggurats speak of the dominance of the gods who are used by the rulers to ensure their survival. The so-called royal hymns from Ur stress the respect shown by rulers for the gods and their role in leading the main ceremonies of the city, some of which were probably held on the summits of the ziggurats. Like most religious texts they were written in Sumerian and may even have been used as a ritualistic means of preserving distance between ruler and ruled. One of the most attractive features of the hymns is the value given to musical accomplishment.

The extent of the surviving texts is vast and varied. The literature of the Dynasty included the earliest recorded epic, that of Gilgamesh, a warrior king of Uruk. (Although the epic dates from this time, the version that survives is several hundred years later and it is not certain what transformations of the text took place during these years.) The *Epic of Gilgamesh* relates the relationship, first of antagonism and then of comradeship, of Gilgamesh and a wild creature, Enkidu. Their

adventures together end when Enkidu slays a monster and is killed in retaliation by the gods. Gilgamesh, now haunted by thoughts of death, goes on a quest to find immortality. *Gilgamesh* was a favourite of the Sumerians and was translated into other languages of the Near East, including Hittite and Hurrian. Some scholars have suggested that it may have been an influence on Homer's epics. (Parallels have been drawn between its opening sentence and that of the *Odyssey*, and with the way similar themes of mortality are dealt with in the *Iliad*.) Among the stories recorded is that of a great flood, and excavations at Ur itself do contain a layer of undisturbed clay some 2.5 metres thick that Leonard Woolley believed was that of the great flood of the Bible. It has been a difficult claim to sustain as the plains of southern Mesopotamia were so close to sea level that flooding was common and many cities were either lost or abandoned as the river courses shifted closer or further away from them. Yet one flood recorded at Shuruppak was survived by 'a wise man' who took to an ark when the god Enlil unleashed his wrath on the city. (For a well-received translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, see the Penguin Classics edition by Andrew George, London and New York, 2003.)

The 'Royal' burials at Ur suggest a society in which some women are given high status in their own right. Another famous text from this period tells the story of the priestess Enheduanna who had been appointed to an elite position in the religious life of Ur by Sargon. (She enjoys the honorary title 'daughter of Sargon'.) After a later revolt by Ur against Akkad, Enheduanna, not surprisingly, loses her position and is expelled from the city, whose local god Nanner is restored to prominence. Enheduanna retaliates by linking herself to the goddess Inanna, from the nearby city of Uruk, who is related to the Akkadian goddess Ishtar. She manages to return to Ur and persuade the populace that An, who has supremacy among the gods, has given judgement in favour of Inanna, who now supplants Nanner in the city. Some later texts even imply that Inanna enjoyed love-making with the king of Ur. The story suggests that women of exceptional ability such as Enheduanna were able to exert influence, especially through the manipulation of the gods in their favour. Yet women as a whole had no special status. Alongside the story of Enheduanna is a text describing the textile workers of Ur, who are listed as the humblest workers of all, and then, as in many parts of the world now, made up of women and children.

Control of the Dynasty's subjects was much more complete than under the Akkadian empire. The central government conscripted labour. Relationships with local governors were strengthened by marriages with the ruler—Shulgi is recorded as having nine wives, several from prominent local families. Provincial governors acted as judges and supervised the canal system. They were supported by local military leaders even though in foreign policy the aggressive tactics of the Akkadians appear to have been replaced with diplomacy.

By 2000 BC the power of the Third Dynasty was faltering. The fertility of the land was being undermined by an influx of salt brought down in the annual floods. The bureaucracy of the state had become so complex—it is known that sesame oil was classified in four grades, while a single sheep's existence is found recorded on three separate tablets—that there may have been a stifling of initiative. There is a sense of

internal disintegration that left the state vulnerable when external enemies appeared. The collapse was sudden. Ur was sacked by invading Elamites in 2004 and *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur* records the razing of the residential areas. The devastation was contrasted with an ideal state in which the rivers watered the lands and farmers went about their business in joy with all protected by the care of the gods. Other conflicts followed as another powerful city, Isin, struggled to hold Nippur, the most prestigious religious centre of Sumer, against outside attack.

The Old Babylonian Period (2000–1600 BC)

The most important conqueror of the following period was Hammurabi, a king of the city of Babylon. As the deeper layers of the site of Babylon became waterlogged and irrecoverable there is virtually nothing remaining from this period and Hammurabi's rise to power is obscure. He seems to have begun his career cautiously in the 1790s, strengthening his own kingdom through canals and fortified cities and working in alliance with other kings. Then, in the 1760s, he broke free and defeated the major cities of the southern plain, Isin, Nippur, Ur, and Uruk, thus making himself overlord of the region. He now expanded east to the Tigris, gaining control of the trade routes through to the Iranian plateau, and then in 1761 captured the major trading city of Mari, further north on the Euphrates, whose walls he demolished. Following the sack of Mari, Hammurabi moved westwards, until he came up against the border of the major state of Yamhad.

Hammurabi is best remembered for his 'law code'. It has been found beautifully inscribed in a stone stele at Susa, apparently looted and taken there by Elamite kings in the thirteenth century where French excavators found it. (It was believed originally to have been in the temple of the sun god Shamesh in Sippur, an important trading city on the Euphrates north-west of Babylon, and its removal shows the symbolic power of such steles.) It is written in literary Akkadian. As with many such texts, its purpose is now seen as royal propaganda rather than a system of laws *per se*. There are no references in other Babylonian law cases to the code, for instance. Rather, the laws on the stele represent actual cases where the king believes he has acted wisely. Hammurabi wishes to proclaim himself as a benign ruler who has secured justice for his peoples. ('I am indeed the shepherd who brings peace, whose sceptre is just,' as he states). In particular he shows himself untangling a mass of tricky problems associated with marriage and inheritance.

Other than his law code the most important legacy of Hammurabi's reign is the massive palace archives from the defeated city of Mari. Most of the 25,000 tablets are now published. They provide a vivid picture of the precarious survival of numerous small trading states who find themselves in competition with each other. They have to be open to the outside world to exploit the possibilities for trade, yet this same dependence on open trade routes makes them acutely vulnerable. The Mari archives are full of accounts of raids on the city's territories by outlaws and nomadic tribes. Borders were difficult to hold and there was continual interaction

between the palace and the herding peoples of its outlying regions who could be given land or manufactured goods in return for their loyalty and availability for military service. Relationships between neighbouring states were maintained through a series of shifting alliances in which dynastic marriages or the exchange of goods (tin was a favourite for Mari) were used to maintain security. At the same time the economy had to be fostered. The palace itself encouraged trade, oversaw the irrigation of crops, and managed the production of textiles (in which even the queen took part). Alongside royal activity other landowners and traders helped to sustain the prosperity of the state. The archives are important also for their documentation of religious life with details of local prophets (on the model of Israel) and the skilled art of liver divination, even the rituals of the river ordeal by which guilt or innocence was 'proved' when no witnesses to an alleged crime were available. The accused, or a substitute chosen by him, could prove innocence by swimming for a defined length in the river. There are numerous other states mentioned in the texts, and the names of some 500 cities, for some of which there is no other documentary or archaeological evidence. For instance, the state of Yamhad is given great prominence, yet its capital Halab, now under the modern city of Aleppo, has never been excavated, a reminder that the study of the history of the Ancient Near East remains in its infancy.

Despite the break-up of Hammurabi's empire Babylon survived as an important city and was to have revivals of power and prosperity for many centuries to come. It appears from surviving records of private contracts, loans, and property sales that Babylonian society allowed more freedom of enterprise than that of Sumer. Trade was conducted by individuals rather than the state and landowners were free to exploit their land. A major source of information for this period is the archive from Sippur. Here a group of women, known as the *naditu*, drawn from some of the city's wealthier families, lived in a segregated area of the city, the *gagum*, as a sort of religious order. They were described as betrothed to the god Shamash but their sexually ambiguous position allowed them to openly engage in commerce. They traded in land and cattle and even, through intermediaries, commodities such as tin. Whatever their relationship with the god, it did not require asceticism. Juniper oil, myrtle oil, and other perfumes were sought in exchange for silver.

These centuries were a time of prosperity and also a period of rich cultural and intellectual development in Mesopotamia. In literature the story of Atrahasis, 'outstanding in wisdom', outlines the doings of the gods in a way, which finds parallels in Homer's *Iliad.* In both works the gods are described as drawing lots to parcel out the heaven, earth, and the sea between them. The Babylonian epic of creation, the *Enuma Elish* (scholars differ as to whether it was composed in the fifteenth or twelfth century), talks of the oceans as being the first creations before heaven and earth—an idea that was possibly taken up by the Greek philosopher Thales of Miletus as the basis for his own cosmogony (see p. 192).

The Babylonians excelled in astronomy and mathematics. They developed a calendar, based on the moon with regular additions of months to keep it in line with

the solar year. Their calculations became so exact that eventually the Babylonian astronomer Kidinnu (*c.*380 BC) calculated the length of a lunar month to within one second of its true length. The Babylonian calendar later passed to the Jews (at the time of the Babylonian captivity: see below). On tablets from the period 1800–1600 BC there is evidence of multiplication, division, the calculation of squares and cubes, and even some logarithms. The Babylonians were able to calculate the value of the square root of 2 to within 0.000007 and it now seems certain that they knew of Pythagoras' theorem a thousand years before the followers of Pythagoras discovered it (although there is no evidence that they would have been able to prove it deductively as the Greeks were able to do). Mathematics was linked to the practical needs of engineering and surveying, and instructions survive for calculating the areas and volumes of different figures. The most striking innovation was positional notation, two numbers following each other (as in 12, the 1 standing for the base of ten, the 2 for the extra units). The Babylonians used 60 as their base. Seventy, for instance, is one base unit of 60 plus 10 extra units. The use of 60, a number useful because it can be divided by so many others, still survives to measure time—seconds in a minute, minutes in an hour—and angles. It arrived in the west through Hindu-Arabic intermediaries. Another innovation of the Babylonians, the musical scale, seems to have appeared about 1800 BC and passed via the Phoenicians to the Greeks in the first millennium BC.

The Invention of the Alphabet

Far to the west of Babylon lay the land of Canaan, the ancient name given to Palestine (the earliest recorded use of the name to refer to this region is to be found in Herodotus' *Histories*, fifth century BC). Here another important contribution to the western world was being made, the invention of the alphabet. Cuneiform and, to a much lesser extent, hieroglyphs were used in Syria and Palestine as early as the third millennium BC but they were unwieldy and took many years of training to master. By the beginning of the second millennium new independent city-states appeared in the region and they began to experiment with their own simpler ways of writing. One script originated in the important coastal town of Byblos. Only about a dozen examples survive, but these are enough to show that it was syllabic and consisted of about a hundred signs. Some of these were possibly borrowed directly from Egyptian hieroglyphs (see pp. 41, 58 below). The solution to an alphabet did, in fact, lie with hieroglyphs. The Egyptians had already evolved some signs that were exclusively consonantal (for instance, when they wanted to create a 'd' sign, they drew the hieroglyphic sign for a hand, *ad* in Egyptian). The step the Egyptians failed to take was to extract all the consonantal signs and create an alphabet from them. This was done by a Canaanite about 1500 BC. This innovator took an Egyptian hieroglyph and used it to express a consonant in his own Semitic language. The Semitic word for 'water' is *maym*. The scholar took only its first consonant *m* and found the Egyptian hieroglyph for 'water', which happens to be a wavy line. He then

assigned this sign to the sound *m*. Similarly with 'house', in Semitic *bet*. To get a sign for *b,* the scholar took the Egyptian hieroglyph for 'house', a bilateral, and assigned it the sound *b*. Once the concept was grasped that consonantal sounds could be written down and that any word could be written using a selection from just over twenty consonants, any culture could evolve its own signs to represent each consonantal sound. In the Syrian town of Ugarit on the Mediterranean coast, for instance, writing had been traditionally expressed in Babylonian cuneiform. Once the concept of the alphabet was grasped in Ugarit, it was written with cuneiform signs. By the thirteenth century BC the writers of Ugarit were using only twenty-two consonants. At some point (scholars have put forward dates as early as 1300 BC and as late as 1000 BC), the Phoenician cities developed their own alphabet, and probably transmitted it to the Greeks in the ninth or eighth century BC. Perhaps because they wished to use the alphabet primarily for the recording of poetry, the Greeks introduced vowels. (See further below p. 132.)

The Assyrians and the Hittites

The northern boundary of Babylonia was normally Gebel Hamrin, the Red Mountain. Beyond this mountain ridge another state, Assyria, emerged at the beginning of the second millennium BC. Ashur was set on a limestone cliff and given natural protection by the Tigris flowing round it. There was fertile land nearby and easy access to a trade route through the Zagros mountains into Iran. The early prosperity of Ashur rested on its success as a trading centre whose tentacles reached into Anatolia for silver, into Babylonia for textiles, and perhaps as far east as Afghanistan for its tin. The early Assyrian kings appear to have made Ashur a centre that the merchants of the cities of southern Mesopotamia could visit to buy supplies of precious metals. They paid in fine textiles that were then taken north to Anatolia by donkey caravan to exchange for more metals. Although the Assyrian kings of this period were important ceremonial figures (described in formal texts as vice-regents of the god Ashur) day-to-day administration of Ashur was apparently in the hands of a committee of the heads of the merchant families. Anything to do with prosperity of the city, from taxation to relations with neighbouring states, was under their control. The Assyrian merchants had their own quarters in the cities of northern Syria and Anatolia and their rights here were negotiated by the Ashur committee with the local Anatolian princes. The records, in cuneiform, of one of these communities, found at Kanesh in central Anatolia and dated to between 1900 and 1830 BC, illustrate the sophistication of the traders and include calculations of their prices, profits, and turnover, and even arrangements for credit. A common practice was for the merchant to be based in Anatolia while his wife stayed in Ashur supervising the collection and production of cloth. It was accepted that while abroad the merchant could acquire a local wife so long as both his wives were supported, and back in Ashur many of the wives seem to have retained the profit from their own activities.

In the early eighteenth century BC this network of Anatolian trade was disrupted by power struggles between rival Anatolian princes. An important moment seems to have been the overthrow of Kanesh by another principality, Kussara. The dynasty of Kussara then appears, about 1830, to have taken over the ruined city of Hattusas and transferred their archives here. This was the genesis of what became the empire of the Hittites, or the 'people of the Land of Hatti' as they called themselves. The word Hittite is that used in the Bible, but only of a period when the Hittites had been reduced to a tribal people after the collapse of their civilization in 1200. It was only in the late nineteenth century that it was realized that the predecessors of the biblical Hittites had controlled a great empire in the second half of the second millennium. Much about the Hittites remains obscure and the history of the empire is continually being rethought, especially as much new material is being discovered in excavations at Hattusas. (The expert on the Hittites is Trevor Bryce who has written a number of accessible introductions such as *The Kingdom of the Hittites*, new edition, Oxford, 2005, and *Life and Society in the Hittite World*, Oxford, 2004.)

One classification of the Hittite empire defines two phases, the first 1600–1400 BC, the Old Kingdom, the second from 1400 to 1200 BC, the New Kingdom, when the Hittites became a major player in the Ancient Near East, but this risks ignoring the continuities between two phases and the survival of the kingship throughout both. The Hittite capital remained Hattusas (the modern Boghazkoy) in north central Anatolia throughout the period. It was a rocky and easily defended site with one of the few good sources of water in what is an arid region. The records of the Old Kingdom show intense rivalries between branches of the royal family interspersed with, and often linked to, periods of military triumph or disaster. The tenacity of the Hittite kings was one the most remarkable features of their rule. They seldom had enough manpower to launch major campaigns while their vassal states were often restless and they were jostled continuously by rival states on their borders. Their survival depended on the adept use of diplomacy and compromise rather than aggression.

The Hittites emerged at the same time as a number of stable and powerful states in the Ancient Near East. A dynasty of the kings of the little-known Kassites held Babylonia between 1595 and 1155. In the fifteenth century the Hurrians united in the state of Mitanni in northern Syria. In western Asia Mitanni was equalled in strength only by New Kingdom Egypt although its capital has not yet been found. Mitanni was the first casualty of a successful expansion of Hittite power that begins in the reign of Tudhaliya I at the end of the fifteenth century. Tudhaliya controlled the rich copper deposits of Isuwa that had traditionally been subject to Mitanni, and the Hittites soon appear as players on the wider diplomatic scene. There was more to be done to consolidate the state. It was only under the rule of Suppiluliuma I (*c*.1380–1345) that the Hittites fully overcame Mitanni and installed a puppet ruler there, using the state as a buffer between themselves and Assyria, which by now had revived and become the most powerful nation of northern Iraq. They also subdued large tracts of Anatolia and it is possible that one of the peoples they came into contact with, the Ahbijawa, were the Mycenaean Greeks (see Chapter 8). As the Hittites

expanded southwards into Syria towards the Euphrates they met the Egyptians. The two states clashed at the major Battle of Qadesh (1275 BC, see p. 74). The outcome was the consolidation of a border between Egypt and the Hittites in southern Syria.

This was typical of Hittite strategy. Once territory had been won, the empire was sustained by a series of treaties between the king, whose semi-divine status was emphasized by a great ceremonial complex constructed in Hattusas (which had been strongly fortified by Suppiluliuma I), and his defeated rivals. The territory of each was strictly defined and the supremacy of the 'Great King' was underlined by recounting how fortunate the subject king was to enjoy his mercy. Each had to come in person to Hattusas once a year with his tribute, supply troops when needed, and report any disturbances in his region. The Great King cemented his own relationships with his people through frequent travel in central Anatolia where he would preside at major festivals to emphasize his own close relationship with the gods. While alive he was their representative, on death he became a god himself.

The Hittites were also remarkably open to neighbouring cultures. In the royal archives of their capital Hattusas there are texts in eight different languages. This was a truly multilingual empire (although an Indo-European language known as Nesite, usually referred to as Hittite, was the language of imperial administration) and it was also multicultural in that it seems to have borrowed freely from the other cultures around it and it may have in its turn transmitted its borrowings to the eastern Mediterranean. The Hittites adopted cuneiform writing for their language, and their concept of law may have been influenced by law codes from Babylon and elsewhere. Some of their religious beliefs—the worship of a powerful sun goddess, for instance—also show Mesopotamian influence. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* has been found at Hattusas in Akkadian, Hurrian, and Hittite versions. The Hurrians were a particularly strong influence. The most important Hittite epic, that of Kumarbi, is borrowed directly from the Hurrians. (Kumarbi was a Hurrian god.) The epic is remarkable for describing sets of gods following on from each other in generations: Anu (heaven) is overthrown by his son Kumarbi, the father of the gods, who becomes a king and is overthrown in his turn by Teshub, a weather god. A similar story of conflict between gods is found in the *Theogony* of the eighth-century Greek writer Hesiod (see p. 139). In both cases a father god is castrated by his son, and it is assumed that the Kumarbi epic is yet another of the Near Eastern myths which filtered westwards into Greece.

Despite the varying fortunes of these states, they had much in common. All were centred on opulent palace capitals that controlled, or attempted to control surrounding territory. In this the Egyptian capitals of El-Amarna and Per-Ramesse (see Chapter 4) were typical and the same model might be seen in the Mediterranean in the palace-citadels of Mycenae and Tiryns. Even a small state such as Ugarit had an impressive palace complex and like the other cities of the period an extensive archive. Another common feature of these city-states was the adoption of chariots. Chariots were expensive and horses were not always easy to find so they become the military weapon of the elite, later the chosen means of the Homeric heroes entering battle. Yet it was precisely this common culture that seems to have

led to restraint, the drawing of boundaries after the Battle of Qadesh, for instance (see below, p. 74). There is extensive evidence of gift exchange between rival kings and commerce over far-flung trading networks.

Just how extensive these were at the time of Hittite power can be seen from one of the most exciting underwater finds of the past, a shipwreck from this period from Uluburun, near Kas in southern Turkey, which dates from the late fourteenth century BC. (Dendrochronoloy and radiocarbon datings reinforce each other to suggest a sinking in *c*.1304 BC.) The wreck is of a cargo ship which may have started its journey in the Levant and engaged in a circular voyage which took it northwards up the coast of the Levant, across to Cyprus, along the southern Anatolian coast, possibly on to Mycenaean Greece before taking advantage of the prevailing winds to head south to Crete, across to Egypt, and then back to the Levant. This time disaster struck on the Anatolian coast. The ship carried an extraordinary variety of goods. The cargo included ivory, glass (first invented about 1600 BC but still a precious commodity), cylinder seals, and pottery that came from throughout the Near East. Alongside these were copper ingots from Cyprus, ebony from south of Egypt, and bronze tools of Egyptian, Levantine, and even Mycenaean Greek design. The quantity of copper was matched by that of tin in the combination needed to form bronze. This is trade conducted at a sophisticated level with commercial acumen and mature systems of credit. (There is a good survey of the shipwreck in Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn, *Archaeology*, 6th edition, London, 2012, pp. 370–1.)

Yet a hundred years later this complex network of trade and traders was disrupted. The end of the thirteenth century BC saw a cataclysmic collapse of the societies of the eastern Mediterranean. The fortified cities of Mycenaean Greece were destroyed as were settlements on Cyprus. About 1200 Hattusas itself was burned. Although Hittite principalities remained in Syria, the capital was abandoned and parts of the Anatolian plain deserted. So Hittite civilization disintegrated. The Egyptians appear to have been forewarned of the unrest and successfully fought off a collection of invaders, Libyans, 'northerners coming from all lands', and the mysterious 'Sea Peoples' who attacked the Delta. In the dislocation that followed Egypt withdrew to its heartland in the Nile valley. The economic networks of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East were broken up so comprehensively that a so-called 'Dark Age' set in.

The Egyptian texts that describe the invasions imply that the 'Sea Peoples' were some kind of invading force. More careful analysis of the evidence suggests that these wandering bands may have been the result of the breakdown of order rather than its instigators. Others may have been mercenaries fighting for Egypt's neighbours, the Libyans and others. Scholars are now exploring the possibility that the intricate trading relationships between the peoples of the region had become overextended, that taxation had alienated rural peoples on whose produce the civilizations ultimately depended and that this was a collapse of a whole system of interlocking cultures. Whatever the cause, the world that emerged from the 'Dark Age' that followed would be very different. (See Chapters 6 and 9 especially.)

3 Pyramids and Power

The Creation of an Egyptian State, 3500–1500 BC

When the Roman emperor Titus (ruled AD 79–81) was portrayed on a temple wall in Egypt, one of the provinces of his empire, he was shown standing with a mace raised menacingly in his right hand. An earlier ruler of Egypt, king Narmer, had been portrayed in the same pose some 3,000 years earlier. The worship of the Egyptian goddess Isis can be traced back to 2400 BC, 2,000 years before the rise of Rome. The cult still had enough vitality for worship of the goddess to spread throughout the Roman empire (there was a temple to Isis as far west as London), with her temple at Philae on the upper Nile closed by the emperor Justinian as late as AD 536, sixty years after the Roman empire had 'fallen' in the west. Egyptian religion, in short, entered its most expansionist phase when it was already far older than Christianity is now. Many of the distinctive features of Egyptian civilization were in place a thousand years before the pyramids were built. These are striking reminders of the longevity and continuity of early Egyptian history. This does not mean that Egyptian society was always stable—behind the ordered façade there were often moments of panic or disarray—rather there were consistent forces that gave enduring vigour and prosperity to Egyptian life.

The most persistent of these forces was the unique set of circumstances arising from the ecology of the Nile valley. While rainfall across the region had once been abundant, by 3000 BC the valley had virtually none. The water for its irrigation came down the Nile in annual floods, most of which originated in summer rains in the Ethiopian mountains. With the floods came silt, and the combination of fertile soil and ready water could produce yields of crops three or four times those from normal rain-fed soil. As important as the wealth of water and soil was the regularity with which the floods came. The Nile started to rise in May, and from July to October was high enough to flow out over the flood plain of the valley. This was *akhet*, the time of inundation. Four months later, by the beginning of November, the waters had begun to fall. The refertilized land could be marked out and ploughed and sowed. This was *peret*, the time 'when the land reappeared'. The final four months of the year, *shemu*, from March to June, brought the harvest. The peasants of Egypt would wait to see the height and extent of each flood with some anxiety—it might be insufficient or overflow and flood their villages—but when they were lucky the fields along the Nile produced a large surplus of grain, probably three times as much as was needed for a healthy diet. Effectively gathered up this surplus

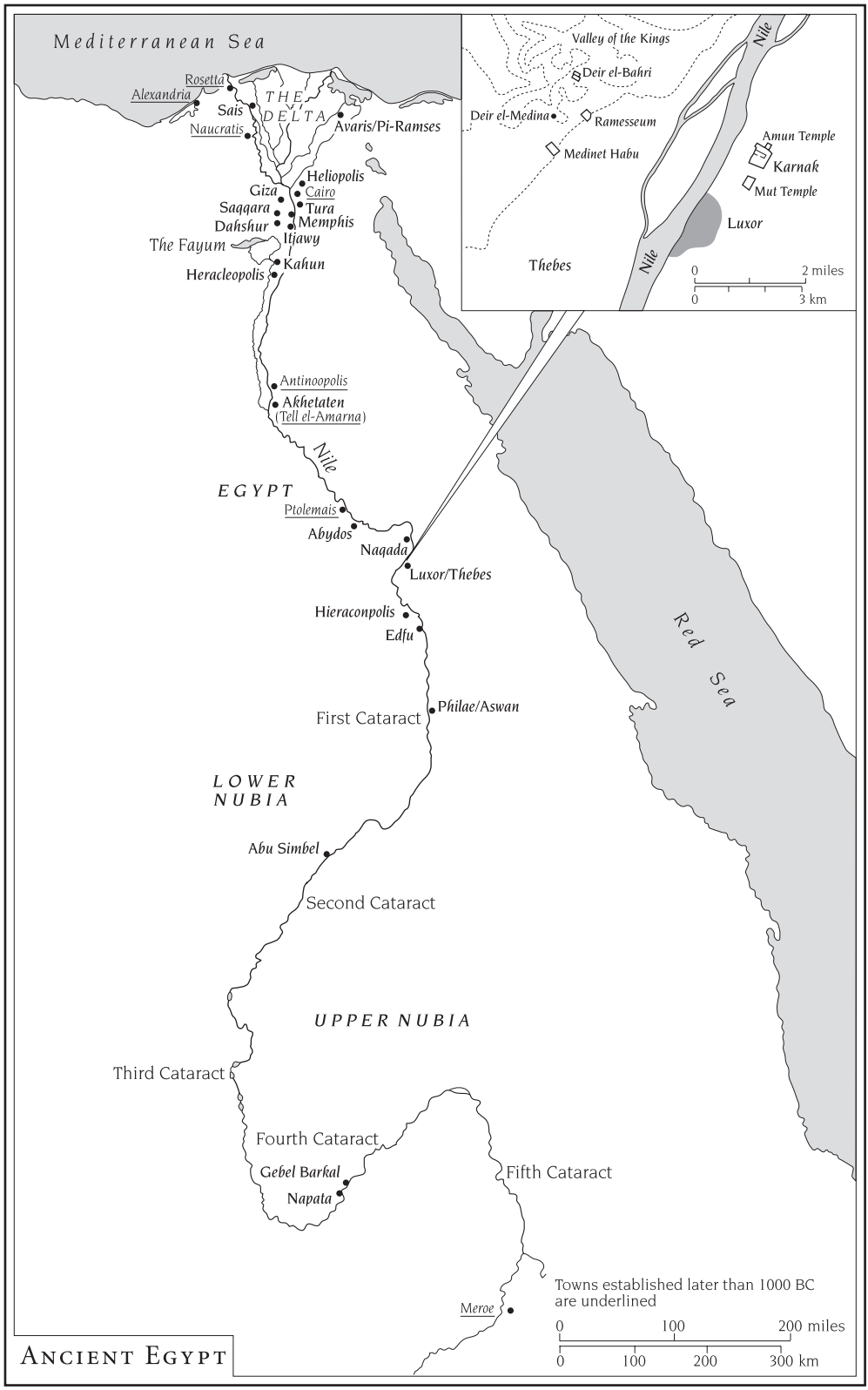
could be used to sustain rulers, palaces, craftsmanship, and great building projects and these are the achievements of the early kingdoms of Egypt, maintained, despite periods of breakdown, over twenty centuries.

To visit Egypt today remains an extraordinary experience. The pyramids are, of course, well known from illustrations and film but their size and even more so an entry to one of the inner chambers still provides as much resonance as it has done for visitors over forty centuries. Travelling up the Nile gives the feel that the land along the banks is still being worked as it has always been although now the dam at Aswan has brought the annual floods to an end. The great temples of the south, at Luxor, Edfu, and Abu Simbel, and the tombs of the Valley of the Kings or of queen Hatshepsut, have their own awe-inspiring quality. The impact is even greater if also experienced through the eyes of the nineteenth-century explorers. Amelia Edwards's *A Thousand Miles up the Nile* (published in London in 1877) is particularly evocative.

Beginnings

One of the most persistent Egyptian creation myths relates how at the beginning of all things was the sun, Ra. Ra scattered his semen and out of it sprang Shu, the god of dryness, and Tefnut, the goddess of humidity. Shu and Tefnut produced a new generation of gods, the sky goddess Nut and the earth god Geb. They in their turn gave birth to four children, Isis and Osiris, Seth and Nepthys. Isis and Osiris, husband and wife, became the first rulers of Egypt. However, Seth overthrew his brother, cutting him into pieces. Isis devotedly put him together again, adding a new penis (the original having been eaten by fish) with such success that she was able to conceive a son, Horus. She kept Horus hidden in the marshes until he was strong enough to overthrow Seth. Osiris meanwhile had become god of the underworld, where he acted as a symbol of rebirth. Seth continued in Egyptian mythology as a potential threat to order, while Horus remained as the protector of the earthly kings who were his successors. (See Richard Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, London and New York, 2003, for the details of the gods.)

This creation myth brought together several elements of early Egyptian history and beliefs. The 'family' was a composite one, made up of early gods from different cult centres along the Nile, while the conflict between Horus and Seth may well have echoed memories of a real struggle between two early states. It is a reminder that Egypt was not a natural unity. The country had two distinct ecologies. The valley was thin, often only a few kilometres wide in some areas, and stretching for 1,000 kilometres from the Nile Delta to the first cataract at Aswan. In the north, on the Delta, the river spread out over marshland and swamps that were rich in bird and animal life. There is no evidence that the Delta region actually ever formed an independent state, but there is increasing evidence of earlier cultures there to be found under depths of silt. The insistence that Egypt was made up of two distinct kingdoms, one in the north on the Delta, the other south along the valley, lasted in



ANCIENT EGYPT

MAP 2

Egyptian tradition long after the first unification in about 3000 BC. They are represented as the lands of reeds, the valley, and the lands of papyrus, the Delta, with different crowns and protecting gods.

Perhaps the most important development in recent Egyptian archaeology is the gradual piecing together of a sequence to Egyptian history that extends it far back beyond the first unification. Before 5000 BC there was still rainfall in what is now desert and it was possible for semi-nomadic cattle herders to roam the expanses, seeking refuge at oases during the summer months. Just as Eridu seems to have become sacred as a result of its water source so there are sites such as Nabta Playa, a hundred kilometres to the west of Abu Simbel on an ancient trade route west. (A *playa* is a depression that fills with water.) This became a ceremonial centre, possibly as early as the fifth millennium BC, with Egypt's first stone monuments, standing stones that may have been aligned with the stars, and a tradition of cattle sacrifice, the cattle being buried in 'tombs'. One theory suggests that cattle were sacrificed each year as their owners gathered in thanksgiving at the water. As the desert dried the nomads were driven into the Nile valley and it may have been this major transition that encouraged intense competition between rival groups and the emergence of hierarchical societies that were able to hold their own against each other.

The Unification of Egypt

Archaeological evidence shows that these early settlements had already developed distinctive features of later Egyptian civilization before 4000 BC. By that date burials in Upper Egypt were already being made with the body on its side facing west, the home of the setting sun, with provisions, food offerings, and hunting equipment being left for the afterlife. Emmer wheat, barley, and flax, the staples of Egyptian farmers, were being cultivated. During the second half of the fourth millennium, the four to five hundred years before the first recorded unification of Egypt, the scattered agricultural communities of the valley grew larger. The expansion of settlements such as Naqada and Hieraconpolis may reflect their position on the trading routes to the gold mines of the eastern desert but this was also a region of agricultural diversity. Hieraconpolis, a site that has now been excavated over a hundred years, grew dramatically between 3800 and 3400 and may have been home to five to ten thousand inhabitants. At Naqada north of Hieraconpolis there was a walled town as early as 3600 BC and a major cemetery with 3,000 tombs. Naqada has given its name to the culture that persisted between 3800 and 3000 BC, one that spread throughout Upper Egypt. The rise of these cities coincides with more sophisticated craftsmanship. Graves are becoming richer, with goods now made in gold, copper, and a variety of stones. Pottery from Hieraconpolis is beautifully made and its standard style suggests a select group of elite craftsmen working to common models. Among the luxury items are decorated maceheads, always a symbol of power in Egypt and often found buried in the more opulent tombs in the cemetery at Hieraconpolis.

The need for finer raw materials acted as the catalyst to open Egypt to a wider world. The Nile valley provided clay for pottery and mudbricks but little wood. Flint was the only immediately accessible stone (and was fashioned into fine ceremonial knives). Anything else, the fine white limestone from the rocks which lined the valley, the hard stones, granite and diorite, gold, copper, or semi-precious stones, had to be quarried or mined from the surrounding desert or traded from further afield. This required an ordered society able to organize expeditions across the inhospitable desert. By the end of the fourth millennium contact had been made as far as Mesopotamia. Cylinder seals have been found in Egypt that echo those of Sumer, and designs from them or from actual buildings may have inspired the form of the façades of Egyptian mudbrick tombs. Palaces adopt from Mesopotamia the same pattern of alternating recesses and buttresses for their façades that were used for temples there. The concept of writing, first found in Egypt on a set of inscribed labels in a royal tomb in Abydos dating from about 3100 BC, may have evolved parallel with but possibly earlier than in Sumer. Both Sumerian cuneiform (see above, p. 24) and Egyptian hieroglyphs (see below) used the same convention of combining signs to represent the sound of a word with others to represent its meaning.

Hieroglyphs, 'sacred carved letters', were derived from pictures found on much earlier Egyptian pottery. At first writing appears to have been confined to the court, used to record the state's economic activities, the name of the king (in a format known as the *serekh*), and in formal commemorative art such as the Narmer Palette (below). However, the emergence of writing marks a crucial moment as it offered a further means of royal control that could be sustained through fostering a formal class of scribes.

As the early Egyptian settlements on the Nile grew, so did tensions between them. They were probably exacerbated by a period of increasing aridity after 3300 BC which intensified settlement in the Nile valley and led to competition between rulers over luxury resources, copper, gold, and hard stone. It is reflected in the art of the period. A painted tomb at Hieraconpolis (Tomb 100) shows a man struggling with two lions and a ruler figure holding a mace over three captives while other palettes (the so-called Hunters' and Battlefield palettes) show contrasting scenes of conflict and harmony among animals. (The palettes were flat stones used originally as grinding surfaces for cosmetics but they later acquired ritual significance.) Rulers were often personified as animals, bulls, or lions in this period, as if they had to differentiate themselves for ordinary mortals through symbols of energy and power. The story of Horus and Seth may well represent an actual struggle between Hieraconpolis, a cult centre for Horus, and Naqada, whose cult god was Seth.

There was probably no one moment of unification but in later tradition it was from this disorder that a king named Narmer finally achieved some kind of dominance over Egypt just before 3000 BC. The archaeological evidence does not yet give unequivocal support for a conquest as some sites show undisturbed occupation. Some scholars see a lengthier process in which an earlier king, Scorpion, played a significant part in achieving an ordered state. At some point, perhaps soon after unification, Narmer's successors established their capital at Memphis, strategically

placed at the junction between the Delta and the valley. Their new conquest, the Delta, also had its important settlements although none is yet known to have reached the size of those of Upper Egypt. At Tell el-Farkha in the north-eastern Delta, a wonderful collection of bone figures shows that here too a sophisticated culture had developed. Frustratingly, one of the most important settlements of Lower Egypt, Maadi, has been almost totally obliterated by the spread of modern Cairo. Earlier excavations showed that its culture was completely distinct from that further south and had especially strong links with the Near East.

The Narmer palette is a remarkable survival and now enjoys pride of place at the entrance to the Cairo Museum. It was found carefully preserved in a temple deposit at Hieraconpolis by English archaeologists in the winter of 1897–8. The king was unknown but the reconstruction of two hieroglyphs, a catfish (*nar*) and a chisel (*mer*), gave us the name for which there was then no other record. The palette portrays Narmer, on one side of the palette wearing the crown of Upper Egypt and on the other that of Lower Egypt. The king is apparently shown as a southerner conquering the north, the Delta, though his enemies may well have included neighbouring peoples such as the Libyans. The king is shown on one side subduing his enemies, some of whom lie decapitated before him, their heads between their feet. It is disputed as to whether this depicts an actual battle or simply represents a symbol of royal power. Quite apart from its historical importance, the palette shows that many conventions of Egyptian art are now in place. Status is represented by the comparative size of the figures. Narmer is the largest figure throughout. In one scene an official is shown as smaller than Narmer but still much larger than the accompanying standard-bearers. The artist is not concerned so much with providing a proper representation as with passing on detail, even if this means distorting normal perspectives. The face of the king, for instance, is shown in profile but his eye is shown in full and the shoulders are viewed from the front. Both hands and feet are shown in full.

Horus continued throughout Egyptian history as the special protector of the kings. He was always portrayed as a falcon. On a magnificent statue of Khafra (often known by the Greek version of his name, Chephren), one of the pyramid-building kings of the Old Kingdom, now in the Cairo Museum, he is shown perching on the king's back, his wings around the king's shoulders. Each king took a 'Horus name' in addition to his birth-name and other titles. It was this name that was stamped as a cipher on all goods entering or leaving the royal treasury. It was often a reflection of how he saw his political ambitions—'He who breathes life into the heart of the Two Lands' or 'Bringer of Harmony', for instance.

Kingship is now established as the enduring form of Egyptian government. From this moment Egyptian history is divided into dynasties of the ruling families. In the past, historians have adopted a list of thirty of these dynasties compiled by an Egyptian priest, Manetho, on the orders of king Ptolemy II about 280 BC. They stretch from Narmer to the overthrow of Persian rule by Alexander in 332 BC. (A Thirty-First 'Persian' Dynasty was added later to Manetho's text.) Manetho's list still defines the broad chronology of ancient Egypt and the sequence of rulers but it leaves much

unresolved. It makes Narmer's unification appear much more sudden than archaeological evidence suggests and obscures gaps in order to portray Egyptian history as an unbroken series of kings. At times of breakdown, when dynasties may have ruled alongside each other, Manetho puts them one after another, providing a source of much confusion to historians. Some of Manetho's dynasties, such as the Seventh, have remained obscure; others such as the Ninth and Tenth may represent only one ruling family, not two.

So as a background for dating, historians have used other methods, radiocarbon, stratigraphy (which has produced sequences of pottery styles which have been dated, for instance), astronomical records, and, of course, other written sources. They have received extra help from the Egyptians themselves. An Egyptian calendar was developed based on the rise of the 'Dog Star', Sirius. Sirius remains below the horizon in Egypt for some seventy days, reappearing at sunrise around 19 July. By chance this coincided with the beginning of the Nile floods and so for the Egyptians marked the beginning of a new year. This 'solar' calendar had a full cycle of 365 days and 6 hours, in other words, every four years an extra day would have to be added to the year to keep it synchronized with the sun. Another calendar was based on the night sky. It was possible to plot how the stars seen on the horizon as the night passed into day moved in relation to the horizon in a regular pattern. The stars were divided into thirty-six groups, each of which rose above the horizon for ten days before being supplanted by another group. This led to a year of 360 days, and five extra days, birthdays of the gods, were added to make up 365, but this, of course, did not include the extra six hours. It has been calculated that both calendars, solar and lunar, set off together about 2773 BC. However, as the years passed it must have become clear that the lunar calendar was falling behind the solar calendar at the rate of one day every four years. By this time the system was so embedded that the two calendars were never reconciled and it took 1,460 years (i.e. four times 365) for them to coincide again.

This discrepancy has proved the Egyptologists' asset. A Roman historian happened to record that in AD 139 there was a coincidence between the rising of Sirius and the start of a civil year. By going back in jumps of 1,460 years other coincidences have been calculated for 1322, 2782, and 4242 BC. On a few occasions written sources have recorded the discrepancy between the rising of Sirius and the civil year. One document from the reign of king Sesostris III, for instance, mentions that Sirius will rise on the sixteenth day of the eighth month of the seventh year of the king's reign (dated here on the lunar calendar), and from this the year, 1866 BC, can be calculated. Other reigns can be dated from this, and a partial chronology of Egyptian history reconstructed.

This still leaves discrepancies, periods, and reigns of individual pharaohs where the chronology is debatable. There are so-called 'high', 'middle', and 'low' chronologies. In order to avoid confusion the chronology used here is that of the *Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, 2nd edition, Oxford, 2003, as described in chapter 1 of the *History* by Ian Shaw, 'Chronologies and Cultural Change in Egypt'.

The First Dynasties

The appearance of writing, the unification of the country, and the establishment of a capital at Memphis mark the beginning of what is known as the Early Dynastic period, the First to Third Dynasties (*c.*3000–2613 BC). (See Emily Teeter (ed.), *Before the Pyramids: The Origins of Egyptian Civilization,* Chicago, 2011, for an excellent illustrated survey of this early period.) This is the world's first stable monarchy—in contrast to the battling city-states of Mesopotamia. In these 400 years a model of kingship was developed. By 2500 BC the myth had developed that the king was the direct heir of the sun god Ra. Ra, it was said, impregnated the ruling queen (appearing to her usually in the guise of her husband). Thoth, the herald of the gods, then appeared to her to tell her that she was to give birth to the son of Ra. The royal couple thus acted as surrogate parents for their successor, and 'son' succeeded 'father' without a break. The king's wife was traditionally referred to as 'the one who unites the two Lords'. The earlier tradition of Horus as protector was absorbed into the myth by making Horus a member of Ra's family, and the god continued as the special protector of the king against the forces of disorder personified by Seth. In essence the king had a dual nature, the divine emanating through his human form.

On the succession of a new king there was a coronation ceremony, the *kha*, the word also used for the appearance of the sun at dawn, when the king was given his divine name that was afterwards written together with his existing personal name alongside the symbols of Upper Egypt (a sedge plant) and Lower Egypt (a bee). After thirty years of a reign there was the jubilee ceremonial of *sed*, when the king received the renewed allegiance of the provinces of Egypt wearing first the White Crown of Upper Egypt and then the Red Crown of Lower Egypt. Each province brought their local gods for him to honour. Part of the ceremony involved the king running a circuit of boundary stones that symbolized the full extent of his territory as if to confirm his fitness to rule.

Ceremonial was important but not enough. Although the ideology of the divine king was imposed in Egyptian life from the earliest times, his survival rested on being able to keep order (any loss of control was traditionally rationalized as a sign that the gods had withdrawn their support), and this involved bureaucratic expertise. From early times taxes were collected in kind by the court and then stored in granaries before being rationed out to support building projects and the feeding of labourers. Reserves were kept for emergency feeding. The sophistication of the system can be shown by the annual records of the height of the Nile floods from which the expected crop yield for the year could be calculated in advance. The Palermo stone (so-called because it is now housed in a museum in Palermo, Sicily) of about 2400 BC records these details in an important list of annals of earlier dynasties, which in itself shows how hieroglyphs were being used to systematically record the past. The king may also have controlled foreign trade, as it was the court that was the main consumer of raw materials and centre of craftsmanship.

The administrative complex around the royal court at Memphis was known as *Per Ao*, The Great House, a name used eventually, from about 1400 BC for the king himself, pharaoh. Heading the administration was the vizier, whose roles included overseeing the maintenance of law and order and all building operations. Then there were a host of other officials, with titles such as 'elder of the gates', 'chief of the secrets of the decrees', and 'controller of the Two Thrones', whose functions have been lost. It can be assumed that there were strong links with provinces, whose boundaries may have been based on much earlier states, as without these order could not have been maintained or resources channelled upwards to the court. The appearance of monumental 'palace façade' tombs along the Nile is the clearest sign that the royal administration was making itself felt throughout the kingdom. The Palermo stone also records royal progresses along the Nile every two years that allowed direct supervision of affairs by the king.

Resources were not only needed to sustain the king and his officials in life. From the earliest dynasties it was believed that at the death of a king his divinely created spirit, the *ka*, would leave his body and then ascend to heaven, where it would accompany his father, the sun god, Ra, on the boat on which Ra travelled through each night before reappearing in the east. However, certain formalities had to take place if the king was to reach his destination safely. The body of the king had to be preserved, its name recorded on the tomb, and the *ka* had to be provided with all it needed for the afterlife. It could not survive without nourishment.

These requirements were the same for all Egyptians, but only the kings could normally travel to the other world. Others, at this period, had to be content with an existence within the tomb or possibly in a shadowy underworld underneath it. However, those officials who had enjoyed his special favour might be able to rise with the king, and the custom grew of placing their tombs next to those of the kings in the hope that they would go to heaven with him as his attendants in the afterlife. It was a shrewd way of encouraging loyalty from leading nobles and officials.

Originally the bodies of the kings had been buried in mudbrick chambers. These gradually became more elaborate, the body being buried deeper and deeper in the ground, probably to protect the fine goods that were now buried with it. The deeper the body was buried, however, the more likely it was to decay (a body left in sand near the surface normally dried out from the warmth of the sun), and so there developed the process of embalming to fulfil the requirement that the body should be preserved. The viscera from queen Hetepheres of the Fourth Dynasty, mother of Khufu (Greek Cheops), the great pyramid-builder, have survived from *c*.2580 BC but no full mummy now survives earlier than one from the Fifth Dynasty (*c*.2400 BC). By the New Kingdom the art of embalming was to have developed into a complex ritual providing the world with one of its most enduring images of Egyptian civilization.

The early kings were buried in the sacred city of Abydos, far up in Upper Egypt, a recognition of their origin as southerners. Typically the tombs had a central burial chamber, walled with timber and surrounded by store-rooms for goods and subsidiary graves for officials. Near each tomb was a walled funerary enclosure where

rituals relating to the cult worship of each king were carried out. Despite plundering over the centuries, enough material survives to show that the tombs were filled with pots (containing food and drink for the afterlife), well-crafted stone vessels, sometimes finished in gold, and objects in copper and ivory. Another burial ground developed at Saqqara near Memphis. It used to be believed that the graves of the early kings were actually here, with those at Abydos being merely cenotaphs. Now it seems that the tombs at Saqqara, finely constructed though they might be, are in fact those of leading officials. The need to provide luxury goods for the kings' and his courtiers' survival in their afterlife appears to have been the catalyst for a major explosion in the arts during the Early Dynastic period.

Once the shafts of the tomb had been dug out and the surrounding chamber completed, the whole was finished off with a rectangular building over the tomb at ground level. These constructions have been nicknamed 'mastabas', after the benches that are found outside modern Egyptian houses. The mastabas of early tombs, royal and otherwise, were often constructed in the form of a model palace. It was the convention to build in a false door through which it was believed the *ka* would be able to cross. Within the door a stone gravestone known as the stele was placed. On the stele were inscribed the names and titles of the deceased, often with a representation of him seated at a table enjoying his offerings. Sometimes a list of the offerings was included, the idea being that the mere act of reading the list by the deceased could cause them to materialize and sustain the *ka* even if there was nothing real to eat.

The Building of the Pyramids

There are signs about 2700 BC that unrest in Upper Egypt led to the faltering of the evolving kingdom. It may have been associated with the adoption of a new royal burial ground at Saqqara, far north of Abydos and close to the 'capital' of Memphis, which gave the real or imagined impression that the kings had relaxed their authority in the south. Not for the last time in Egyptian history, a forceful new ruler, Khasekhemwy, restored order and brought fresh energy into the kingdom. Khasekhemwy (died *c.*2686) is recorded as the last king of the Second Dynasty but his successors in the Third carried on the new impetus. Around 2650 BC an architectural revolution took place, a rare occurrence in Egyptian history. It involved the tomb of king Djoser, the second of the new dynasty, at Saqqara, now firmly established as the royal burial ground. One of Djoser's advisers, Imhotep, had been entrusted with the supervision of the building of the royal tomb, a task that was always begun well before death. Above ground the tomb started as an ordinary mastaba (in other words was a continuation of earlier models), but this was extended and built upon so that eventually a stepped 'pyramid' of six layers emerged. On the southern side were two courtyards, and it has been assumed that these were copies of courtyards from the king's own palace at Memphis. The largest has been seen as a royal appearance court, a carefully designed forum for showing off the king, perhaps first

at his coronation and then at other great festivities. The smaller court seems to have been a copy of that used for the *sed* festival, with mock chapels for the provincial gods and two thrones, one to represent each kingdom of Egypt. It is as if the king is provided not only with goods, set out in elaborate chambers under the pyramid, but with the setting which would allow him to continue as ruler in the afterlife.

Nothing like Djoser's funerary complex had been seen elsewhere. It was faced in the fine limestone from the quarries at Tura, and is the earliest stone monument of this size built anywhere in the world. (The earlier great temples of Mesopotamia were built in mudbrick.) The builders remained under the influence of earlier wooden models. The stone columns in the entrance colonnade are fluted, the first known examples of a design that persists into Greek architecture. The flutes represent either bound reeds or carved tree trunks, copying wooden originals. The complex introduces another innovation in the *serdab*, a room attached to the main building in which offerings were placed. It had a slit in the inside wall opening on to an inner room where a statue of Djoser was placed in such a way as to be able to see the offerings. The king, seated and looking forward, provided a model for similar statues throughout Egyptian history, though these might also be standing or kneeling. Whatever the stance, they must be shown able to view or receive offerings. Their monumentality also reflects the enormous difficulty in working hard stone in that arms and legs are not shown distinct from the body. For the first time, too, the reliefs in Djoser's tomb portray the king not as a conqueror, as is the earlier convention, but as undertaking the rituals of kingship. One shows him running, perhaps as part of the *sed* ceremony. A mass of tunnels surround the underground tomb of the king and they are filled with thousands of stone vessels, some of which show inscriptions from earlier kings as if Djoser was being enshrined as an heir to the past.

There is continued speculation among scholars as to why this revolutionary design was adopted. One simple view is that Imhotep wanted to make the building more imposing. In its finished state the stepped pyramid was 60 metres high. Another view is that the king was associated with a star cult and the steps were the means by which he was to ascend to heaven. Inscriptions from later pyramids, the so-called Pyramid Texts, support this suggestion. One reads, 'A staircase to heaven is laid for him (the king) so that he may mount up to heaven thereby.' Whatever the reason, the Step Pyramid continued to inspire reverence for centuries. It was a popular place of pilgrimage and was being restored 2,000 years after it was built. Imhotep himself was later deified as the son of Ptah, the god of craftsmen.

Djoser's dynasty, the Third, brings to an end the Early Dynastic period. With the Fourth Dynasty (*c.*2613 BC) begins the Old Kingdom proper, which was to last to about 2130 BC. The Old Kingdom is dominated by the building of the Pyramids, one of the great administrative feats of history. For the Great Pyramid of Khufu (Cheops) alone, 2,500,000 limestone blocks with an average weight of 2.5 tonnes, were hauled up into position. One of the mathematicians accompanying Napoleon on his expedition to Egypt in 1798 calculated that the stones of the three pyramids of Giza could enclose France within a wall 3 metres high. It goes without saying that the

Old Kingdom was a period of prosperity and stability, with power focused overwhelmingly on the king. (There is a fine introduction to all aspects of the pyramids by Mark Lehner, *The Complete Pyramids: Solving the Ancient Mysteries*, London and New York, 2008.)

The transition from step pyramid to pyramid for the royal tomb can be seen at Meidum, some 50 kilometres south of Memphis, where there are the remains of what was built as a seven-stepped pyramid on the model of Djoser's. It was then enlarged to eight steps and finally the whole was encased in Tura limestone to form a true pyramid. For the first time a causeway was provided leading to a valley temple. (The king's body would have been brought up the causeway for final burial after rituals in the valley temple.) The pyramid is attributed to king Sneferu, first of the Fourth Dynasty, but it may not be his as he built two pyramids of his own at Dahshur nearby as well as another at Meidum. (In terms of volume Sneferu was the greatest pyramid builder of them all and he funded his programme by creating royal estates in Upper Egypt and cattle farms across the Delta that provided grain and meat for his workers. Analysis of remains in the workers' villages show that they were fed a diet rich in protein.) Sneferu's were the first pyramids planned as such from the start. However, there was still much to be learnt. The desert surface on which the first of Sneferu's pyramids was based was unsuitable, and, in order to prevent the collapse of the structure, its weight was reduced by decreasing the angle of the incline of the upper blocks, earning it the name 'the bent pyramid'.

The transition from a stepped to a true pyramid was a difficult one for the builders to make. They could no longer rely on each step providing a base for the next layer. It is unclear why the transition took place, but it may have been the result of changing religious beliefs. It has been argued, for instance, that Sneferu adhered to a sun cult. He was certainly a formidable man and titles that he adopted show that he identified his authority with that of the gods. One major change in the complex surrounding the true pyramids was that the mortuary chapel was now moved to the eastern side (from the traditional northern side) so that it received the first rays of the sun. The whole shape of the pyramid can be seen as the rays of the sun coming downwards. (There is an echo of this at Heliopolis, centre of a cult of the sun god, where a stone construction roughly in the shape of a pyramid, the so-called *benben*, was used as a symbol of the sun.) Sneferu's title is enclosed within a cartouche, an oblong circle that appears to signify his power over all that the sun encircled. The symbol became permanent: a cartouche remains the easiest way of spotting a king's title among other hieroglyphics.

It was Sneferu's son Khufu (Cheops) who emulated his father's building and began the first of the three great pyramids at Giza. The fact that he chose a new site suggests he was determined to make his own impact, and the tradition that he was a tyrannical megalomaniac lasted for centuries. (The Greek historian Herodotus passed on the story that he even sent his daughter into a brothel to raise more money for his projects. She hit on the idea of charging each of her customers a stone and was so successful in her trade, the story went, that she was able to use the total to build a small pyramid of her own!)

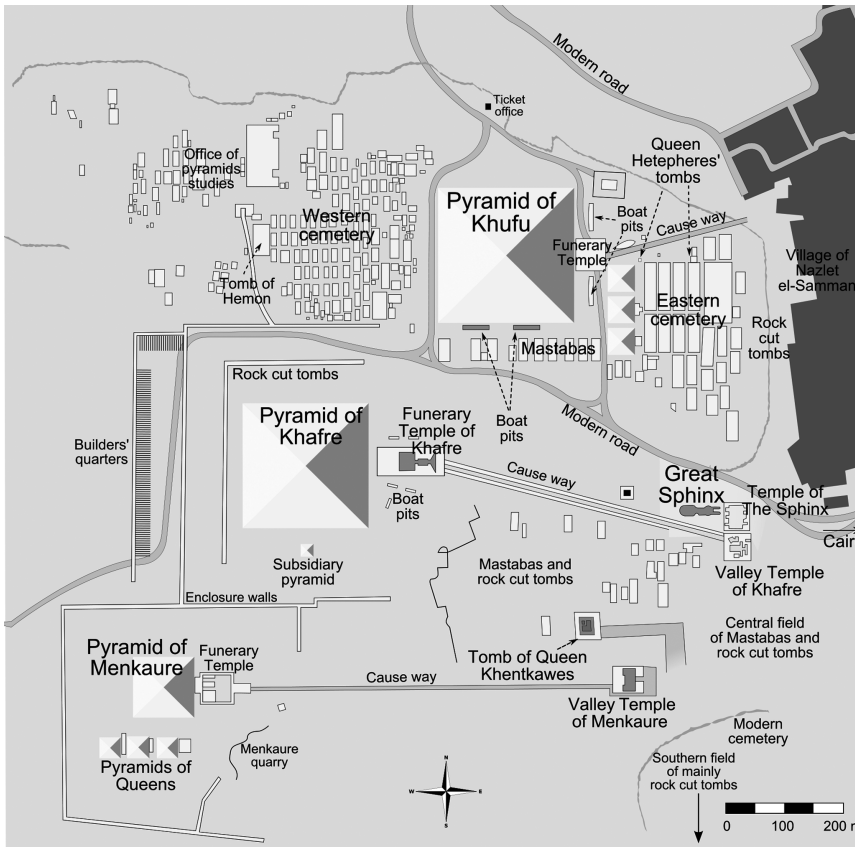


Fig. 1 Plan of Giza Plateau. The plateau provided an excellent solid base for the weight of the pyramids and the stone could be brought in during the floods. Note the Valley Temples where funerary rituals were carried out before the final burial in the Pyramid. The mastaba tombs of the royal family and favoured officials were clustered close to the pyramids.

The Giza plateau held three major pyramids, the Great Pyramid of Khufu, a slightly smaller one to his son, Khafra (Chephren in Greek), and the third, about half the size of the larger two, to Menkaura (Mycerinus in Greek), whose reign was short. The burial chambers of each pyramid have been located but they were robbed in antiquity. (Khufu's burial chamber was unusual in being in the middle of the pyramid rather than below ground.) The building of the pyramids needed great technical skills but relatively little technology. The site was important. The rock had to be firm enough to sustain the massive weight of the building yet close enough to water for the stone to be brought in during the time of inundation. (Fifty-tonne blocks of granite, used to line the burial chambers and the lower courses of some pyramids, would have had to be brought from Aswan, hundreds of kilometres distant. Limestone, the main casing stone, was much more readily accessible.)

The Great Pyramid of Khufu was built on ground that was carefully levelled round the planned edges of the pyramid with a mound of higher rock left in the middle. Each side measured almost exactly 230 metres and the whole was aligned perfectly to the north. This appears to have been done by taking the mid-point between the rising and setting position of a northern star. Within the pyramid shafts ran from the centre in the direction of important stars such as Sirius, the dog star. The accuracy and forward planning required is uncanny.

The most probable building method was by the use of ramps (pulleys were not known until Roman times). A mass of chips and mortar has been found that appear to have come from such ramps. A suggested gradient along which even a massive stone (and some pyramid stones weighed as much as 200 tonnes) could be shifted was about one in twelve. A ramp with this gradient could be built perpendicular to the pyramid base and as each level rose it would be heightened and lengthened to maintain the gradient. The stones themselves seem to have been loaded on to sledges that were then attached to ropes and pulled over timbers by gangs of men. Recent experiments at Giza with stone blocks suggest a workforce of some 25,000 would have been able to complete the Great Pyramid in twenty years.

The pyramids were only part of the funerary complex. At its fullest extent, best seen in the remains around Khafra's pyramid, it included a mortuary temple along the eastern side of the pyramid, where the body of the king was received for the final ceremonies before burial and where later offerings could be left. Leading up to the temple was a covered causeway nearly 600 metres long, its walls carved with reliefs. It led from the valley temple, where the king's remains were first received and probably given ritual purification before entering the final journey to the burial place.

Around Khufu's pyramid were a large number of traditional mastaba tombs arranged in ranks to the east and west. The eastern cemetery was the most favoured. It seems to have been reserved for the royal family, while officials had to take their place in order on the west. There is no more vivid example of a king, of vastly superior status to his subjects, arranging for his comforts in the afterlife. One other important find associated with Khufu is his magnificent ceremonial boat, found dismantled into over 1,200 pieces in a pit alongside the pyramid. It took some fourteen years to reassemble into a vessel 44 metres long complete with its oars and deckhouse. It may have been the actual boat used to convey the king's body to its burial place, or, alternatively, one for him to use in his afterlife when he would have to accompany Ra in his journey through the night.

Another famous monument of the Giza plateau is the Great Sphinx, the largest stone statue from the ancient world. (The word 'sphinx' is Greek, as many terms describing ancient Egypt are, probably derived from the Egyptian *shesep-ankh:* 'living image'.) It was fashioned from an outcrop of rock left unquarried during the building of the Great Pyramid, possibly because of the poor quality of the stone. It probably represents king Khafra as a man-headed lion. The lion was associated with the sun god and was believed to have guarded the gates of the underworlds of both the eastern and western horizons. The monument thus

suggests some kind of guardianship of the pyramids themselves, linked to Khafra in his role as son of Ra.

It is easy to be so overwhelmed by the sheer size of the pyramids themselves that one forgets the extraordinarily complex problems involved in managing the men and materials needed to build them. A steady supply of stone had to be quarried, shaped, moved, and put into position. The pyramid shape made its own demands. A small error in positioning in the lower layers would cause horrendous problems in the higher ones. Shaping the outside casing called for particular expertise. The whole operation, stretching, as it would have to, over many years, needed organizers of vision. It also required total confidence in the labour force. The mastermind behind the Great Pyramid was one Hemiunu, possibly the nephew of the king, and his life-size statue survives, showing him as a man of presence and confidence, just as one would expect. What incentives were needed to keep so many men toiling for so long can only be guessed at. Contrary to popular opinion, they were not slaves but ordinary peasants, presumably drafted in when their fields were under water from the annual inundation. They were also organized into smaller gangs who may have engaged in rivalry with each other to sustain morale. Each shift appears to have worked for three months and organizing the coming and going of replacements year on year was another administrative challenge. Death and injury, from being crushed to death by stones to debilitating back problems, must have been common.

The background to the building of the pyramids is well known. Their evolution can be traced from Saqqara and earlier. At Giza itself an extensive survey of 12,000 square metres to the south of the complex carried out by Mark Lehner as a Millennium Project has added enormously to the understanding of how the labour force was housed and the techniques it used. Even so the pyramids have provided a rich hunting ground for fantasists. They have been encouraged by a lack of any Egyptian references to the function of the pyramids. In the nineteenth century these fantasists earned themselves the nickname Pyramidiots for their extravagant stories in which the measurements of the pyramids were interpreted to prove everything from the origins of British weights and measures to an outline of history to come. The positioning of the pyramids has been related to star patterns, they have been given a history dating back to 12000 BC or even been said to have been built in two stages many thousands of years apart. Most of these fantasies centre on the Giza pyramids and ignore the many other smaller pyramids that fail to fit the proposed theory.

The simplest explanation for the Giza pyramids is that the pharaohs had become obsessed with the maintenance of their status for all time, an expression in fact of their divinity, and the monumentality of their burial places was the best way of achieving this. Yet the diversion of resources into such great buildings could not be sustained. By the Fifth Dynasty there is some slackening of this intense concentration on the king. Pyramids continue to be built, but these are much smaller and more human in scale. Some Fifth Dynasty kings now transferred their energies to building temples to Ra, taking as their model an original temple at an important cult centre to this god at Heliopolis at the entrance to the Delta. There is some

evidence that the temple priests were becoming more involved in government (or possibly that leading nobles themselves were becoming priests in the service of Ra).

The Collapse of the Old Kingdom

The most important development of all in the Fifth Dynasty was the growth of the power of successful bureaucrats. Possibly as a deliberate royal policy to elevate the king above his subjects, even those of his own family, many administrative posts were now awarded to non-nobles. Their burials, once aligned alongside those of the kings', were transferred to separate cemeteries. Many of these tombs were of great opulence and on a scale that would have been completely unacceptable in earlier times. Previously all achievement, whoever had effected it, had been credited to the king. Now the accomplishments of each official were proclaimed in an autobiography carved on the wall of the tomb, a justification of his right to enjoy offerings from others for eternity. The beautifully painted walls showed off the life of privilege that the owner hoped to enjoy, comfort and good food at home and a steady supply of crops and cattle from his estates. As the owners could no longer rely on their links with the kings for an afterlife, a new philosophy emerged that focused on the relationship of the deceased with the god Osiris. Osiris had originally been associated with agriculture and the reviving power of the annual flood and he now became linked to the continuing life of the deceased who, it was said on their tombs, were 'honoured' by Osiris as reward for their good behaviour on earth. The word for honour, *imakhu*, came to mean the sense of respect and protection that a man would feel for those inferior to him and thus an important ethical concept in Egyptian society. By the end of the Fifth Dynasty, many of the new bureaucratic families had consolidated their authority in the provinces and it was here that they now built their tombs. This, more than anything, marked the relaxing of supreme royal authority.

A number of factors may have coalesced to bring the end of the Old Kingdom in the next dynasty, the Sixth, about 2180 BC. The accounts on the Palermo stone suggest that the Nile floods were consistently lower and there are reports of famine from this time. Yet scholars are now more sensitive to the way disaster was often magnified in texts by those who claimed to have confronted and then overcome it and the archaeological evidence for agricultural contraction is ambiguous. The failure of royal power is better attested. The long reign of Pepy II of the Sixth Dynasty, traditionally put at over ninety years but probably between fifty and seventy years, seems to have led to a gradual fossilization of political affairs. Provincial nobles established their posts on an hereditary basis and placed personal aggrandizement above loyalty to the throne. Dominance over Nubia had been assumed for centuries with powerful rulers such as Sneferu exploiting its resources of gold, ivory, and ebony. This now faltered, with expeditions there in search of gold meeting strong opposition from the local population. There are reports of raids from nomadic tribes on other borders of the kingdom. Signs of impoverishment can also be seen with the tombs of Pepy's courtiers that are now built in mudbrick rather than in stone.

The First Intermediate Period

Pepy II died in about 2175. With the end of the Sixth Dynasty comes what has traditionally been called the First Intermediate Period (*c.*2160–2055 BC). The historical record is confused. Manetho's so-called Seventh Dynasty does not seem to have ever existed and the Eighth showed a rapid succession of weak kings, seventeen in twenty years. In effect royal authority collapsed and it was inevitable that Egypt would break up into smaller states as ambitious nobles exploited the vacuum of power. At Heracleopolis in Middle Egypt a brutal opportunist called Kheti held sway and claimed to be the successor of the Old Kingdom dynasties. His descendants retained power up to the end of the Intermediate Period (some eighteen or nineteen of the kings of Heracleopolis are known and are grouped together as the Ninth and Tenth Dynasties) but they never seem to have earned the full allegiance of their subjects. Meanwhile a rival dynasty established itself in the south of the kingdom at Thebes, then a remote provincial capital. Its kings extended their power further south into Nubia. In retrospect this was to prove the most important political development of the period but there was nothing inevitable about the eventual success of what was to be the Eleventh 'Theban' Dynasty (discussed below).

The most significant development was the continuing rise of the provincial administrators as important powers in their own right. By this time the system of administration was well established and the local officials highly experienced in running it. These officials would have wanted to keep order not only to maintain their own position but to give them the opportunity to provide tombs and offerings for their own afterlives. An excellent example of the confidence of these provincial rulers comes from the tomb of Ankhtifi (found at el-Mo'alla, south of Thebes). Typically for the period, Ankhtifi's position was one that combined the 'overlord' status of two nomarchs—the governors of provinces, (*nomos*, administrative district, another word that is Greek in origin)—as well as a religious role as 'overseer of priests'.

His 'autobiography' from the tomb is bombastic:

> I was the beginning and the end [i.e. the climax] of mankind, since nobody like me existed before, nor will he exist; nobody like myself was ever born nor will he be born. I surpassed the feats of the ancestors, and coming generations will not be able to equal me in any of my feats within this million of years.
>
> I gave bread to the hungry and clothing to the naked; I anointed those who had no cosmetic oil, I gave sandals to the barefooted; I gave a wife to him who had no wife. I took care of the towns of Hefat and Hormer in every [situation of crisis when] the sky was clouded and the earth [was parched (?) and when everybody died] of hunger.
>
> [When there was trouble in the neighbouring nome of Thebes] I sailed downstream with my strong and trustworthy troops and moored on the west bank of the Theban nome…and my trustworthy troops searched for battle throughout the Theban nome, but nobody dared to come out through fear of them. (Quoted by Stephan Seidlmayer in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*.)

Until recently the picture presented of the First Intermediate Period has been pessimistic. This is because it has been associated with a series of texts that detail

social breakdown and despair. One, *The Admonitions of Ipuwer*, talks of a world turned upside-down, with a resulting famine, and rich and poor in upheaval. 'Gold and lapis lazuli, silver and turquoise, carnelian and bronze are hung about the necks of slave girls while noble ladies walk in despair through the land… Little children say [to their fathers] he should never have caused me to live.' (Translation: Rosalie David.) The trouble with this approach is that archaeological evidence does not support it. Recent revaluations of the period stress that the weakening of central control was successfully countered by the rise of efficient local officials who, as has been seen in the example of Ankhtifi, had no inhibitions about proclaiming their achievements, even, in some cases known from Kheti's reign, not mentioning their king at all! Insofar as cultural vitality and craftsmanship spread outside the court to the provinces, it can even be viewed as a period of positive achievement, not least in that it showed that Egyptian society could respond creatively to change. A more careful examination of surviving texts shows that *The Admonitions of Ipuwer* may originate after the period and have exaggerated the disorder to justify the reassertion of power by the rulers of the Middle Kingdom or highlight the achievements of a boasting official.

The Emergence of the Middle Kingdom

In about 2055 BC one of the Theban princes, Mentuhotep II of the Eleventh Dynasty, launched a campaign north and eliminated the kingdom of Heracleopolis. There is no archaeological evidence of prolonged warfare and so it is likely that the nomes acquiesced in the takeover. The reunification marks the beginning of the Middle Kingdom. Mentuhotep's progress in reuniting Egypt can be seen in three successive Horus names he took for himself. 'He who breathes life into the heart of the Two Lands' was the first expression of his desire to unify the country. Then, as if to stress his southern origins, 'Divine is the White Crown [of southern Egypt]', and finally, in the thirty-ninth year of his reign when he felt totally secure, 'He who unifies the Two Lands'. His success was reinforced by the declaration of himself as a god and in reliefs he is shown wearing symbols of different deities.

Mentuhotep's concerns went further than unification. He secured the borders of Egypt against raiding nomads and then reasserted Egyptian influence over Nubia. Haunted by the recent loss of such a rich territory, Mentuhotep and his successors of the Twelfth Dynasty aimed at a total domination of the area and its peoples. Their power was expressed in a series of elaborately constructed forts on the Nile between the First and Second Cataracts. When Mentuhotep died he was buried in one of the finest monuments of the Middle Kingdom, a great funerary complex set against a natural amphitheatre of rock on the west bank at Thebes. It is a combination of old styles and new (not least in its recognition of the 'people's' cult of Osiris). As if establishing its links with an older Egypt, the complex has a valley temple, a causeway, 950 metres long, flanked by statues of the king in the form of Osiris, and a mortuary temple. Terraces and walkways give it further spaciousness and it was

surrounded by groves of sycamore and tamarisk trees. What it lacks is a pyramid (although some experts believe that one may have been built on the roof of the mortuary temple). The body was buried under the cliff face itself, while alongside the main complex are the tombs of six 'queens', wives or concubines of Mentuhotep. Close by archaeologists have found a tomb with the remains of sixty men who had been killed in battle. It is possible that these were heroes of the final battle for control of Egypt who were granted the status of lying beside their leader. The complex is a further sign of the ability of the great rulers of Egypt to express their links to the past without compromising their individuality. It is also a demonstration of the growing skills of the stone masons as well as engineers and architects. Sophistication of design rather than monumentality for its own sake is a major feature of the Middle Kingdom building projects.

For the time being no more royal burials took place at Thebes. The Eleventh Dynasty was replaced by the Twelfth about 1985 BC when one Amenemhat seized power. Amenemhat I was a commoner who had risen to the post of king's vizier, 'overseer of officials, lord of judgement, overseer of everything in this entire land', as one boastful inscription from his early career proclaims. He then appears as king himself although how he managed it is not known. Amenemhat was committed to making a new start. Seeking to strengthen his position strategically (there was increasing fear of raids from Asia which a headquarters as far south as Thebes was not well placed to deal with), he founded a new capital at Itj-tawy just south of Memphis in Middle Egypt (its full name reads 'It is Amenemhat who has conquered the Two Lands'). The new foundation also reflects Amenemhat's determination to establish an identity that is distinct from his predecessors. Its architecture shows experimentation with different designs for tombs and other complexes, some drawing on older models. Without rejecting earlier tradition, the capital, 'the Residence' as it was known, showed that artistic creativity could be fostered by an enlightened ruler. Amenemhat also set a new tradition of installing his son as co-regent so that power could pass more smoothly on a king's death and this practice kept his dynasty in power for some two hundred years.

4 Stability and Expansion

Egypt in the Middle and New Kingdoms, 1985–1000 BC

The Years of Stability

For the next 200 years (*c.*1985–1795 BC) Egypt enjoyed a period of equilibrium. The Middle Kingdom appears in its propaganda as one of the great periods of Egyptian history. At the beginning of the period the tombs of the provincial governors, the nomarchs (and their coffins, in particular), are among the finest in existence. The walls are covered with scenes of hunting, fishing, and the harvesting of abundant crops that they hope to enjoy in their afterlife while the tombs themselves are fronted by pillared façades and placed higher on the hillsides than those of more lowly officials.

Yet lurking behind the serene façade is the ruthless determination of the kings to keep order. As time progresses the ranking of tombs becomes less obvious and the number of smaller ones increases. In contrast the presence of royal monuments asserts itself. This reassertion of royal authority is shown by the extension of monumental building by kings such as Senusret (ruled *c.*1956–1911 BC) in all the major cult centres of the land—the king is, in fact, challenging the power of local temple elites by overshadowing their buildings with his. There was much closer control of the local nomarchs by state officials and nomarchs were given specific responsibilities, defending a border or leading an expedition overseas, which emphasized their position as servants of the king. While they were away on duty, their local power bases withered and so the authority of the kings increased.

The kings of the Middle Kingdom imposed their influence well beyond the traditional boundaries of Egypt. They controlled Nubia more effectively than ever before, notably during the reign of Senusret III (1870–1831 BC) when an interlocking series of forts and a surveillance system were put in place. They opened up new areas of cultivation in the Fayum, a large oasis area to the west of the river, through an impressive system of dikes and canals. They made the first significant contacts with Asia and the east through expeditions by boat and overland across the Sinai desert. The most important trading centre was Byblos, on the coast of Lebanon, from where cedarwood and resin (used in embalming) were shipped to Egypt. The contacts were so intensive that the local rulers at Byblos adopted Egyptian titles and used hieroglyphs. However, many texts show a distinct hostility towards Asians in general—Senusret describes himself as 'the throat-slitter of Asia' and the story of

Joseph's brothers selling him as a slave to an Egyptian master (Genesis 37: 28–36) rings true. There were also some trading contacts with Crete. It would be wrong, however, to overstate Egyptian influence in this period. There is virtually no evidence in the archaeological record of influences from further overseas, while among the records preserved in the great archive at Mari on the Upper Euphrates (destroyed about 1760 BC see p. 30 above) there is not even a mention of Egypt.

The administrative elite of the Middle Kingdom reached an impressive standard of efficiency. Slackness was not tolerated. Officials were expected to be versatile, at one moment leading an army, the next organizing an expedition to bring back stone from a desert quarry, and then administering justice in a courtroom. There was meticulous supervision by the state over every aspect of life. The carpenters in the royal boatyard recorded the movements of even planks and goatskins. The forts on the Nubian border, hundreds of kilometres from the capital, were garrisoned and fed. When workmen had to be assembled to build a pyramid for king Senusret II between the Nile and the Fayum at Kahun, an artificial town was built which could house 9,000 of them, complete with their stores.

The rulers of the Middle Kingdom evolved an ideology that underpinned their rule. It centred on the concept of *ma'at*, harmony achieved through justice and right living. (*Ma'at* was personified as a goddess.) The kings claimed that their duty was to act with restraint so as to preserve the balanced relationship between ruler and gods on which *ma'at* depended. One text put it as follows: the king is on earth 'for ever and ever, judging humanity and propitiating the gods, and setting order [*ma'at*] in place of disorder. He gives offerings to the gods and mortuary offerings to the spirits of the blessed dead.' This involved generosity and forgiveness. A famous story is that of Sinuhe, a minor official in the retinue of Senusret I. Sinuhe has fled Egypt, fearful of the king's anger after some minor incident, and taken refuge in Syria. Years later he is nostalgic for home. He returns to Egypt to throw himself on the mercy of the king and is pardoned and allowed to live with the royal family again and even enjoy a tomb near the king. Such was the image the kings were pleased to portray. Their statues have moved away from the purely monumental to allow hints of their individuality to emerge through the conventional poses. Even here, however, one can sense the absolute power of the kings. Statues of Senusret III portray the conventional image of youth and virility but expressed in a gaze of stern implacability.

Officials collaborated in maintaining the image of a regime committed to moderation and justice. Texts survive in which fathers preach to their sons:

> Do not bring down the men of the magistrates' court or incite the just men to rebel. Do not pay too much attention to him clad in shining garments, and have regard for him who is shabbily dressed. Do not accept the reward of the powerful man or persecute the weak for him.

Some of this so-called 'Wisdom Literature' may date from before the Middle Kingdom, but it reflects the ethical spirit of this age.

Similar ideas are reflected in the 'Tale of the Eloquent Peasant', one of the most popular texts of the Middle Kingdom. A peasant is on his way with his loaded

donkeys from the Delta to the Nile valley. He is waylaid by a covetous landowner who tricks him into leading his donkeys over his barley. When one of the donkeys eats a mouthful of barley, the landowner triumphantly confiscates the animal. The rest of the story is taken up with the peasant's search for justice, which he achieves after long-winded displays of eloquence in front of the local magistrate. In a nice touch, the peasant is fed a daily ration while his case is being heard. At the same time his wife is also secretly sent provisions. Despite the enormous persistence required from the wronged peasant, the lesson is that the state will uphold justice and even support the oppressed during their ordeals.

Writing was fundamental to the status of the administrator. 'Be a scribe. Your limbs will be sleek, your hands will grow soft. You will go forth in white clothes honoured with courtiers saluting you,' was the advice given in a Middle Kingdom text, *The Satire of Trades*, which ridiculed all other occupations. The process of learning was a long one—twelve years according to a later Egyptian text. There were many hundreds of signs to learn and, like the calligraphy of Japan and China, the lettering of hieroglyphs became an art form in itself.

Hieroglyphs were a formal script used mainly for carving sacred texts on stone. At their simplest level individual hieroglyphs were pictures of what the scribe wanted to express, a figure of a man for a man, a pyramid for a pyramid (pictograms). The sound of the pictogram could be used also as a syllable in a longer word. The mace was *h(e)dj*, and so the pictogram for a mace was used whenever the sound 'hedj' appeared as a syllable in a word. Some hieroglyphs were used to represent single consonants but the script itself had no vowels. In fact, the symbol for mace was used to express not only the sound 'hedj', but the sound and words represented in 'hadj', 'hidj', 'hodj', and 'hudj'. Extra hieroglyphs often had to be added to make it clear what actual word was being expressed. A mace with a necklace after it, for instance, represented 'silver'. Pictograms could also represent abstract concepts. A papyrus roll stood for writing. The hieroglyph for 'to travel south', against the current of the Nile, was a boat with a sail, while that for 'to travel north', with the current, was a boat with an oar and its sail down. (See Mark Collier and Bill Manley, *How to Read Egyptian Hieroglyphs*, London, 1998.)

For the day-to-day administrative and legal texts that formed the bulk of Egyptian written material, scribes used the hieratic script. Hieratic was a form of shorthand in which the most common hieroglyphic symbols were abbreviated. As time went on it became more and more condensed, in effect a different script from hieroglyphs altogether. Many of the texts were inscribed on papyrus, made from the stem of a marsh plant that was cut into strips that were then pasted together to form a smooth surface. Each sheet measured about 48 × 43 centimetres and could be joined with others in rolls of up to 40 metres. Writing was with a reed, using black carbon with important words highlighted in red ochre.

Texts from the Middle Kingdom suggest a love of learning for its own sake. One father, Kheti, from a humble background himself, talks to his son. 'I shall make you love writing more than your mother—I shall present its beauties to you. Now, it is greater than any trade—there is not its like in the land.' The Middle Kingdom was

seen as the classical age of literature, and its most celebrated stories, such as the two outlined above, were copied and recopied by later generations. Literary texts were, however, only a small part of the total output of administrative documents, medical treatises, funerary inscriptions, and accounts of religious ritual, that have also survived.

Another major cultural achievement of the Middle Kingdom was its jewellery. Jewellery had many functions. It served as a sign of status and wealth as well as of royal approval. The king would make presentations to favoured courtiers in a tradition that has lasted to present times. The Order of the Royal Collar, given for bravery in battle, is found as early as the Old Kingdom. Jewellery was also assumed to have magical properties, helping to ward off evil spirits and disease. Certain stones, turquoise and lapis lazuli, for instance, had particular significance. The master craftsmen of the Middle Kingdom have left marvellous examples of crowns and pectorals from the tombs of royal women. Their speciality was *cloisonné* work, the inlay of precious stones within a gold frame.

From earliest times the framework of order and a shared sense of community was maintained by religion. The Egyptians were sensitive to the complexity of spiritual forces and the need to propitiate those gods who could protect them against disorder, destruction, or everyday misfortune. The coherence of religious belief was maintained by absorbing gods into a family and conflict could be rationalized through myths of inter-god conflict such as that between Osiris, Horus, and Seth. The threat of political disunity could be neutralized by merging gods, Ra from Heliopolis in the north with Amun from Thebes further south, for instance. Spiritual forces were represented in human or animal form. Ra is hawk-headed (a hawk soars upwards to the sun) with a sun-disc on his head; Thoth, the god of wisdom, with an ibis head and a scribe's tools in his hand. Seth was always presented as a mischievous creature with a long snout and a forked tail.

At the level of popular religious belief the Middle Kingdom is the period of Osiris. His story, his death and suffering, and rebirth as a saviour who welcomes those who have lived by his rules to another world, is grounded in the ancient ritual of annual renewal found in many other cultures. By the Middle Kingdom the main shrine to Osiris was at Abydos, where tradition had it that his body was reassembled after its mutilation by Seth (see earlier, p. 38). In tomb paintings the body of the deceased is often portrayed visiting Abydos before its final burial. It became the custom for visitors to the cemetery to build a small chapel or cenotaph to act as a permanent memorial for the giver and each year Egyptians flocked to the shrine for a re-enactment of the myths of his rebirth. The celebrations re-enacted a 'funeral', during which his coffin was assailed by his 'enemies', followed by a rebirth and a triumphal return of his cult statue to his temple.

Osiris judges each soul as it comes to him after death. In the texts that explain what is required of a good man, there is the same emphasis on moderation and harmony with the natural world. The deceased promises that he has not killed, fornicated, offended the gods, that he has not taken milk from children, dammed up flowing water, or taken herds from their pastures. It is an attractive code of life,