

A History of Western Education Volume I

The Ancient World:
Orient and Mediterranean
2000 B.C. - A.D. 1054

James Bowen



A HISTORY OF
WESTERN EDUCATION

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VOLUME I

The Ancient World: Orient and Mediterranean 2000 B.C. – A.D. 1054

VOLUME II

Civilization of Europe Sixth to Sixteenth Century

VOLUME III

The Modern West Europe and the New World

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James Bowen

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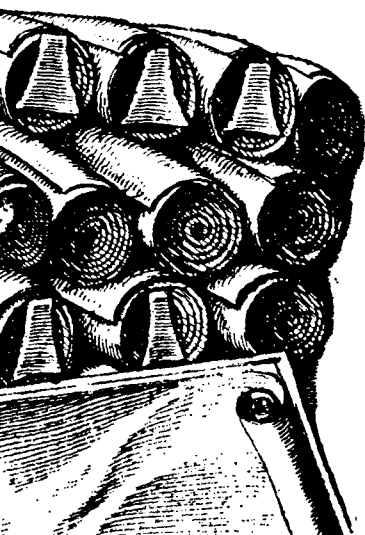


Western Education

Volume One

THE ANCIENT WORLD:
ORIENT AND MEDITERRANEAN

2000 B.C. — A.D. 1054



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Preface

The study of education has always been important in Western thought, attracting the interest of the greatest intellects in every age. Yet after several thousand years of close attention a precise definition, particularly of the more normative and ideational aspects of education, still eludes us. We do have the very strong implicit feeling that education is concerned with the maintenance of a social and cultural consciousness, with the transmission of an informed tradition that sustains civilization. Today, however, more than ever before, the study of education is of crucial significance since we expect not only the sustaining of our cultural traditions but also their critical revision and development. We demand of education that it provide a means to ever greater cultural vitality. And this, moreover, is often made without any clear realization that the demand itself is the result of historical processes.

One characteristic of education is outstanding: perhaps more than any other cultural process it carries almost all of its past with it into the present, even if this past rests in rather covert assumptions, practices, attitudes and beliefs. If we are to understand education in the fullest sense, as distinct from the more behaviouristic and prescriptive demands of particular learning and teaching situations, then we must study its history for the clarification and explanation which can be so secured. Not, of course,

that this is the relatively passive reading of a chronologically organized, already existent narrative of past educational thought and practice. On the contrary, genuine history, in the tradition derived from its Greek beginnings as *ιστορία*, is properly an activity of inquiry, investigation and scientific scrutiny. The historian is involved in making decisions on just what needs clarification and explanation, and in doing this his task, in part, is one of making the present intelligible. There are, of course, other tasks which historians perform; their inquiries and resulting narratives themselves help to build the collective social mind and so sustain the very traditions on which civilization rests and by which such studies are made possible.

At the present time there are many issues in education which confuse our thought and hinder our action and of these the most prominent remains the conflict between the two conceptions of education as a conservative and as a creative activity. There is no real theoretical conflict here at all since both aspects are part of the same process of the transmission and critical reconstruction of culture, yet in practice this conflict has engendered the fiercest debates and led to some of the most fundamental breaches within societies. For instance there is the rivalry between liberal and technical education with their respective antagonists considering the former a meaningless and decadent social ideal, the latter an illiberal and mindless kind of vocational training. The interesting fact remains, however, that the former conception, the *studia humanitatis*, for more than two millennia was dominant in the West and it was within such a conceptual framework that all educational issues arose and solutions or compromises were reached. In the course of that time the Christian church came to claim title over education and attempted to maintain this for more than a thousand years. In the process it had to come to terms with pagan education which already was possessed of a millennium of tradition. Paradoxically, the church not only came to terms with this tradition, it assimilated it even to the point in the thirteenth century of making the materialistic and non-theistic philosophy of Aristotle the basis of its own philosophy and educational thought and practice. This accommodation was forced upon the church by circumstances which also stimulated the growth of new forms of political and social theory, and the development of the modern political state. In recent times, particularly in the past two hundred years, the state has become increasingly concerned with the provision of education to the stage where it has not only surpassed the church – or churches as these have been considered since the Reformation

– but has made church influence subordinate or, in cases, even legislated it completely out of any educational role. The two influences of church and state remain as subjects for continued examination.

It is of the highest significance that since the entry of the state into education the controversies and conflicts on the nature, purpose and practices of education have become much greater. This is not to be taken to imply causation; rather the conditions which allowed the emergence of the organized political state have also promoted those changes which make it very difficult to make both theoretical and practical decisions in respect to education. The only really acceptable generalization we can make about the modern period is that there is a widely held implicit and nowadays explicit belief that education can and must be extended as widely as possible, even though there is no great clarity in the public mind as to why and how this extension should and can be made. There has been, however, a substantial effort on the part of numerous individuals and organizations to work at solutions to this general problem and we are now able to discern the main characteristics of educational thought in the modern period. Of these there are three which are pre-eminent: the search for an adequate rationale – or what is loosely termed a philosophy; the search for an adequate support system of institutions and processes; and the search for an adequate pedagogy, that is, for a workable method of teaching and learning.

These, then, have been the issues which have guided the selection of problems and their treatment in these volumes. In the presentation of the historical narrative it is not imagined in any way that our educational problems will be solved. On the contrary, the recognition of difficulties, their study and analysis, exhaust the historian's tasks and competencies. It remains true, however, that the identification and explication of problems – the process, that is, whereby they are raised from a position of tacit awareness to explicit formulation – is the first, necessary step towards any kind of intelligent action. History provides us with a context within which decisions can be made and further activities pursued.

In making this present investigation, certain practical considerations had to be taken into account, one of the most important being the scale within which the narrative should be constructed. Individual authorship has both its advantages and its limitations; the former include the development of a single synoptic viewpoint and the greater consistency with which problems can be investigated. Yet it is important for this to remain within the competency of a single mind. Accordingly the narrative must

reflect this unity and the multitude of data and variety of interpretations must be kept subordinate. After a great deal of deliberation the present three-volume format has emerged as the most practicable, particularly since it is possible to conceive of the history of Western education occupying three phases: the ancient period of Greco-Roman civilization, the medieval millennium from the fall of Rome to the Enlightenment, and the ensuing modern period which includes not only the West in Europe but its extension to most of the world outside. Periodization, of course, is a notoriously difficult activity for any historian and it is not claimed that the present ones have any completeness. They do, however, have the advantage of allowing a reasonable space for the development of the narrative and each of the three periods has certain internal organizing concepts. Throughout the task has been conceived to be one of critical revision of standard opinion in the history of education and to do this effectively I have been guided by the one cardinal ideal of working wherever possible from the sources. In general it has been necessary to use translations although these have been checked against the original texts in what have seemed crucial instances. Modifications of translations, and those by myself, have been recorded, usually in the footnotes. This movement *ad fontes*, which if it has a Renaissance flavour is still relevant and even more pressing today, has been supported by extensive field work. I have made it a particular feature of this writing to visit as many of the original locations as possible during several years spent in the Mediterranean, northern Europe, England and America. Field investigations have been supported by the study of remains and archives in many museums and libraries and in this way I have attempted to exercise some control on the printed sources which otherwise inevitably have a sense of remoteness. Most of the locations, remains and documents mentioned in the text have been verified in the original.

Inevitably an investigation as large as this one has taken a considerable time and depended on the support of colleagues and institutions. In this respect I owe a special debt to archivists, librarians, museum keepers and directors in so many locations and especially to the British Museum in London and the Ashmolean Museum and Bodleian Library at Oxford. To the Institute of Education at Oxford University I am particularly grateful for an appointment as Academic Visitor in 1969. So many colleagues too are deserving of my gratitude, and I would like to mention my mentor, the late Professor Archibald Anderson of the University of Illinois, and John Kent, formerly Professor of Classics at the University

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CHAPTER I

The First Scribal Cultures: Mesopotamia

Pre-literate man

Prologue: education and the world of symbols

Life began on earth probably more than fifteen hundred million years ago. During the past million man's immediate ancestors appeared and man, of the species *homo sapiens*, took his present form about 35,000 B.C. At that time he possessed his present cranial capacity and began to make tools, thus commencing the process of controlling his environment; all of man's achievements since then have depended upon the application of existing physical and mental powers. The use of tools prompted the development of techniques for their manufacture and employment, leading in turn to further developments – forms of social life in which tools became essential instruments. The organization of society around the making and use of tools marked the beginning of culture – that accumulation of instruments, ideas and institutions by which social life proceeds. In man's early culture improvements in the techniques of tool-making were accompanied by the appearance of abstract conceptions, evidenced by the incision of designs on tools and rocks and the execution of cave paintings, the famous Palaeolithic art of Lascaux in France currently being dated by radio-carbon

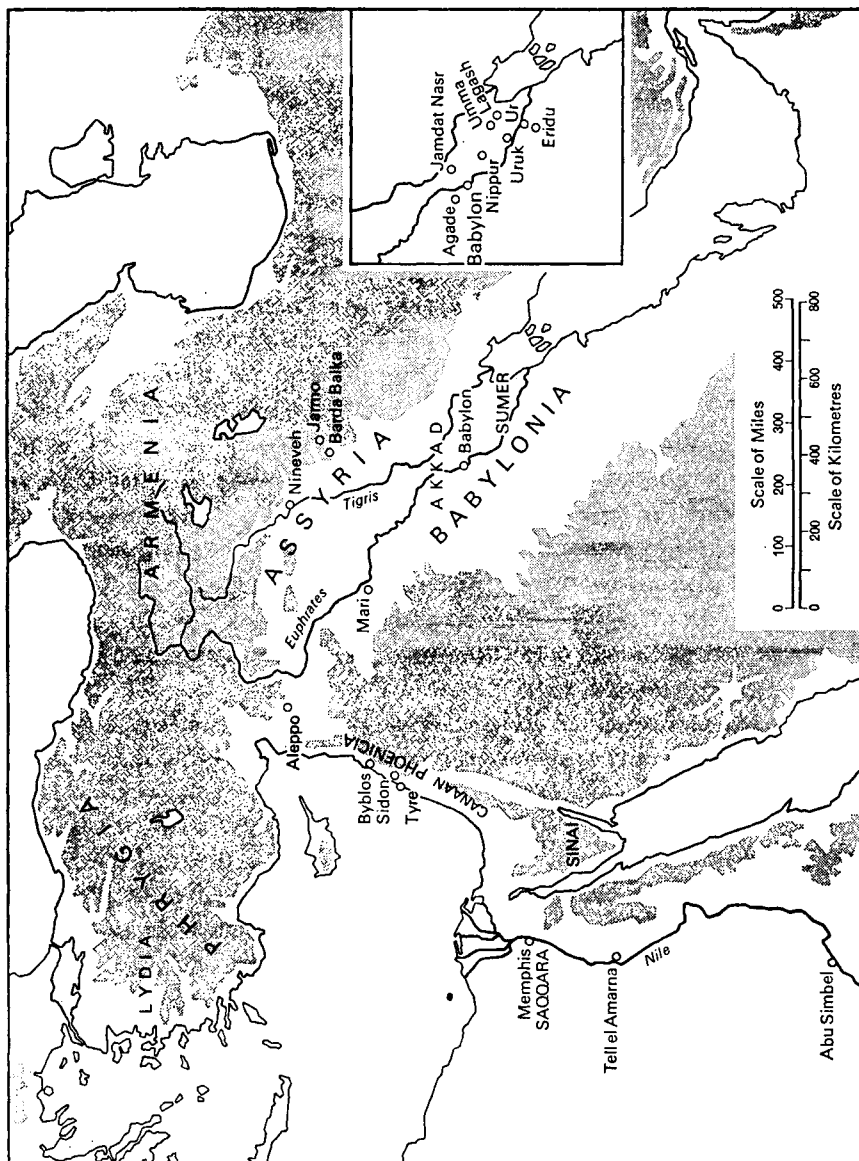
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methods to a period around 13,000 B.C.¹ Such paintings mark a major development in man's capacity for thought, since the ability to abstract visual design from the environment and give it graphic representation is a conceptual skill of the highest order. Some time in that first period a further effort of abstraction was achieved, with the development of speech. Of the origins of speech, nothing can be said with certainty. Theories are legion but all remain speculative; yet its significance cannot be overestimated: through its use ideas emerged, were communicated and transmitted through time. Speech and graphic representation provided the two elements from which the symbolisms of writing and reckoning were made, and these formed the basis of civilization. With them man was able to develop the many instruments and processes by which he pursued his activities; they enabled the transcendence of time and space, the liberation of man from the immediate and fortuitous. By these symbolisms the world of ideas was constructed and its exploration sustained.

The constant search for control, liberation and expansion characterized man from his first appearance, and part of his success in devising effective mechanisms rested in his ability to secure the perpetuation and refinement of such skills through the procedures of education. For education includes that cultural process by which techniques for control of the environment are transmitted. Since man's environment from the end of the Neolithic period was as much social and intellectual as physical, the process of education took on a social and intellectual cast and increasingly through the course of history has been mediated symbolically. The operation of the process changed the character of man's environment: with the extension of symbolic control the physical environment diminished in significance and social aspects predominated, until, with increased dependence on conceptual achievements, the social environment in turn became less fortuitous, and the intellectual or noetic environment became paramount.

Settlement of the Ancient Orient 8000-3000 B.C.

The archaeological record shows Palaeolithic man to have been widely distributed throughout Africa, Asia and Europe. By the end of the last ice-age, perhaps around 8000 B.C., some groups living at the meeting place of those continents in the lands known as the Ancient Orient began to effect changes in tools and food production. In that region the climate was sufficiently hospitable to free man from excessive concern with sheer survival: simple forms of shelter were adequate, vegetable foods grew in



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relative abundance. There the Palaeolithic changed into a new culture, the Neolithic; new types of tools appeared – the adze, hoe and sickle – along with refinements in the production of stone tools. At Mt Carmel on the coast of present-day Israel what are presumed to be the earliest of Neolithic tools have been discovered, including a wood-and-flint sickle used for harvesting grain, from the Lower Natufian culture of Palestine. Neolithic sites proliferated in the region of the Ancient Orient after 8000 B.C., all displaying the features of settled agriculture, domestication of animals, the use of relatively advanced artefacts – pottery, polished axe-heads and implements for cultivation. Development of man's culture thereafter proceeded rapidly, and around 6500 B.C. organized village life appeared in the foothills of the mountains north of Mesopotamia where two of the world's earliest known villages, Jarmo and Barda Balka, have been excavated. In addition, more recently at Çatal Hüyük in modern Turkey a remarkable pre-Neolithic town has been discovered which contains a wealth of remains including shrines and wall-paintings in houses. Within the ensuing 2,000 years Neolithic man in this region controlled his environment to such a degree that he was able to descend from the hillside regions where he depended upon rudimentary and fortuitous agriculture, supplemented by food-gathering and hunting, to the fertile plains of the river valleys of the Tigris, Euphrates and Nile. To these areas, over the relatively short period of 1,000 years, he took his stone implements, animals and cultivated plants; by 4000 B.C. settled agriculture based upon irrigation supported a growing population and large villages became the unit of social organization.

Some time during the fourth millennium copper was discovered, and while it remained a precious and rare possession the increasing use of that metal between 4000 and 3000 B.C. marked the entry of many Neolithic groups into the Chalcolithic or Copper Age. Civilization began to take distinctive shape in the Ancient Orient: the activities of agriculture predominated over hunting, and settled village life became common, even for farmers. In that period of urbanization, surpluses from controlled agriculture became the underlying factor, enabling the release of part of the population from food production for the pursuit of other activities – crafts and services. There was a corresponding increase in commercial activity in the expanding urban settlements of the river valleys, and throughout the fourth millennium a complex pattern of caravan and river routes developed to supply the growing trade in gold, copper, precious stones, wood, implements, donkeys and camels. In the same period, and

as part of the same great process of invention, man devised some of his most important creations: seasonal agriculture with irrigation, the plough, copper tools, animal power, the wheel. Villages grew into cities, particularly in the land of Sumer towards the mouth of the Euphrates where the great centres of Uruk, Lagash, Ur, Eridu and Umma were regarded by their inhabitants, as they are by men to this day, as the cradle of civilization. From that early culture – from which, in time, the civilization of the West was to develop – there emerged a mythopoeic tradition which included an account of Creation and stories of the great flood, while the building of the great cities was celebrated in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the story of the legendary king of Uruk, the biblical Erech.

Proto-literate man: Mesopotamia 3000–2000 B.C.

Cities, with all of their complex activities, depended upon adequate developments in the social control of man himself, since only when human behaviour is predictable can urban life operate satisfactorily. A moral order was increasingly evident during the pre-literate Copper Age in Sumer, and in the Bronze Age it became firmly institutionalized. Evidence from the proto-literate period reveals man's attempts at community consolidation, and from such tremendous efforts were evolved the means for maintaining social continuity: a moral code explicated in literary form, although generally not written down, and the institution by which it was mediated – the temple.

The early Mesopotamian temple

The origins of the temple lie in the prehistoric period, how early cannot be estimated; certainly, however, in that period when the offices of king and high priest were still exercised actively by the one person.² It was not until later, in the period of the great empires, that these offices separated with the high priests becoming vicegerents of the king and the local gods minor deities of the greater cosmic god. Since sovereignty had not spread beyond the individual city-state in the early period of urbanization the temple was the sole regulator of social life, and through its offices all activities proceeded. Little is known of the temple's functioning in the early Chalcolithic Age, chiefly on account of a lack of evidence; history

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begins only with records, and these in fact are virtually non-existent before 3000 B.C. From the remains that have been excavated, however, and by inference from later records, it seems that the temple in that period was concerned with securing control of agricultural production. Despite the urbanization of society, life still rested upon the basis of agriculture, and it was to such activity that much of the administrative work of the temple was directed.

The world of early oriental man was pantheistic: he had not achieved an intellectual separation of subject and object; the cyclic rhythm of agriculture and its occasional failures were part of the mystery of the gods. The gods could not be known, their workings were inscrutable, and man could only propitiate. The temple supplied that need, and the high priest became mediator between man and god. Man met these obligations through offerings and the payment of tribute to the temple, so that, in the course of time, the temples accumulated considerable wealth, controlled by what became a corporation of priests. Propitiation, however, had to issue in practical results, and a major duty of the temples was the regulation of the calendar, an activity of some importance in such societies where prediction of the flood cycles of rivers was basic to agricultural needs. The priests developed a lunar calendar and compensated for its lack of precision by adding intercalary months at irregular intervals. The calendar and astronomical observation were linked with prediction and propitiation; from those activities astrology developed, as a study of the influence of nature on man, and it remained a significant element of Mesopotamian thought.

Beginnings of reckoning and writing

Writing and reckoning had their beginnings in this context. Later Mesopotamian mythology attributed the origin of writing to the great god-scribe Nabu, and throughout several thousand years of high civilization in the region the peoples of Mesopotamia continued to cultivate a reverence towards writing: in their minds it was mystically charged. The first development of this activity cannot be traced through remains. In all likelihood the elements came from the graphic art of the Palaeolithic period which could have suggested the visual designs, but of their application to speech and the precise manner in which these designs became fused into the symbolisms of reckoning and writing only hypotheses exist, supported by occasional fragments of evidence. The earliest use of graphic symbols

for such purposes appears to be designs pressed into small lumps of clay, often no more than one inch in length, serving as official seals on jars, probably as an adjunct to temple accounting. The economic importance of the temple and its great wealth must have involved the priests in the activity of keeping records, both as a sacred duty to the god and as a mere fact of temporal power. In time, the jar seals evolved into a primitive notation system, with the numbers at first consisting simply in identical marks accompanying pictures of the enumerated objects, all scratched into tablets of moist clay, excavations having revealed tablets with such rudimentary notations at Erech, Jamdat Nasr and a number of other sites.³ The inscriptions in those primitive tablets show a conventional use of signs common to sites in different regions. Although undecipherable, and therefore strictly 'remains', they indicate the priority of reckoning over writing, and, since they are distributed so widely, they suggest also the possible exchange of scribes between regions. By the turn of the third millennium, systems of notation were in use in Mesopotamia. Quite early the ancient Mesopotamians must have developed a base of ten, and they recorded the first nine natural numbers by the appropriate number of crescent-shaped impressions, produced by pressing the round end of the writing implement into the clay obliquely. The tens were made by pushing directly into the surface, giving a circular impression. In the course of time pictures and numerals were no longer drawn or scratched; the nature of the clay tablets and the stylus (generally of wood, although bone and ivory were also used), the only readily available writing materials, led to a simplification and conventionalization of the symbols so that in virtually every case the original picture is lost. Many signs, indeed, can no longer be traced back to an original pictogram. Pictures were made by pressing the wedge-ended stylus directly into the clay a number of times to make an outline. These wedge-shaped impressions, known nowadays by the Latin name of cuneiform (*L. cuneus*, a wedge),⁴ were developed by the Sumerians who created the first major civilization of the region.

Some pictograms were also used to symbolize other associated ideas, thereby becoming ideograms, so that the same symbol came to represent different sounds (polyphones).⁵ Since Sumerian had numerous words with identical pronunciations (homophones),⁶ but different meanings, some existing ideograms were used for these homophonic words. By such a process, and with the addition of 'determinatives', signs added to words to remove the ambiguities that inevitably arose from such a system, a cuneiform script of thousands of complex symbols was developed to

serve the Sumerian language. That script remained in use for almost 3,000 years and throughout that time was adopted by numerous other peoples for writing their respective languages.

The Sumerians dominated the lower, south-eastern part of the Mesopotamian valley during the first half of the third millennium and their culture gave the pattern to early civilization in the Ancient Orient. As the Sumerians developed their particular world, other peoples moving around the periphery of the region remained in the pre-literate stage, and, since they left no records, their origins are largely unknown. Of those peoples, the Akkadians, who settled in the upper, north-western part of the valley, became the most prominent. Meanwhile the Elamites too had been developing a proto-cuneiform script. Later they adopted the Sumerian script, as did the Akkadians, and so during the third millennium several languages acquired written symbolisms.

The earliest tablets that can be deciphered, both in Akkadian and Sumerian, reveal a content almost entirely commercial: they consist of accounts, contracts, fragments of legal codes, lists of temple produce and treaties. Some are concerned with liturgical and historical matters, but these are a minority. A third sort of content has been discerned – lists of names and words – which are, in effect, primitive dictionaries, and these give the first indication of educational materials, seeming to be the prototypes of later, more complex lists used in the formal training of scribes. Both Sumerians and Akkadians developed the cuneiform script into more phonetic forms, decreased the number of symbols, and improved the calligraphic quality of the script. By 2500 B.C. the Akkadians were the dominant people, and Sumerian had become relegated to the status of an ancient and scholarly language, employed almost exclusively in the temples. In the ensuing centuries the growing religious literature was recorded in Sumerian. On the other hand, Akkadian became the language of everyday life; it was the public language. So developed a dualism in language which was to have parallels in later history – the coexistence of a scholarly and a common tongue.

How writing and reckoning were taught in that period is unknown; no schools have been excavated and the only data available are lists of words in both Akkadian and Sumerian, with explanations of the signs. These were probably instructional texts, but, since there is no evidence from the period concerning the procedures of teaching and learning, nothing beyond conjecture can be adduced. Yet the existence of the symbolisms and their relative sophistication indicate that towards the

end of the third millennium man certainly had well-developed methods of schooling for the scribes and had achieved a significant mastery of the processes of social control.

Although the Akkadians absorbed much Sumerian language, it was they who established political dominance. Some time around 2350 B.C. the two cultures of Akkad and Sumer were temporarily united by the Akkadian king, Sargon of Agade. With that union, the initial, formative phase in the development of literate man was drawing to an end. A century later Sargon's empire was invaded temporarily by the barbaric Gutians. After an occupation lasting perhaps a hundred years the Sumerians regained their independence about 2125 B.C. under the leadership of Ur-Nammu of Erech, beginning the Third Dynasty of Ur. This introduced what was to be a period of high culture, one significantly rich in materials relevant to the development of education. However, about 1760 B.C. Sumerian ascendancy in the region ended for ever when the Semitic peoples of Babylon under the leadership of Hammurabi established their hegemony over the Sumerians and built, in the ensuing 300 years, the great civilization of Babylon. Thereafter the centre of political power moved to the north, and leadership was exercised by the Assyrians whose dominance continued for yet another thousand years down to the seventh century B.C.

The high cultures of Mesopotamia 2000–500 B.C.

In the 1,500 years from 2125 to 625 B.C. there existed strong traditions in intellectual life that were relatively independent of changes in political power. Although that life varied and showed some definite developments, its record was one of continuity rather than discontinuity; it was marked more by conservation than by creativity. In examining that long period for data bearing on education, three aspects of political and social life are significant: the development of widespread sovereignty, the establishment of a highly organized governmental bureaucracy, and the stratification of society into definite social classes.

Sovereignty and the rule of law

Unlike Egypt, where a flourishing civilization had meanwhile become established along the River Nile, the region of Mesopotamia had no

strong features promoting political unity. On the contrary, the wide alluvial plain, surrounded by relatively hospitable hills and mountains, allowed the various peoples to move around and to form constantly shifting social and political coalitions that were characteristic of the first thousand years or so of urbanization in the region. Social harmony was secured by a multitude of different legal codes with varying degrees of effectiveness. In most communities these were carried by the oral tradition, although at times some decisions or regulations were recorded and quite a few prior to 2000 B.C. have survived, the most prominent being the *Code of Lipit-Ishtar*. Subsequently the Babylonian king, Hammurabi, was able to extend his sovereignty over most of the valley, in the process unifying the provisions of local codes into a single document, the widely known *Code of Hammurabi*, preserved on a stele, approximately eight feet high and now in the Louvre, Paris. That code was to remain the basis of law in the region for centuries: its promulgation signified the end to local rule and, in the words of the epilogue to the code itself, that

Hammurabi is a ruler, who is a father to his subjects, who holds the words of Marduk [the chief god of Babylon] in reverence, who has achieved conquest for Marduk over the north and south, who rejoices the heart of Marduk, his lord, who has bestowed benefits for ever and ever on his subjects, and has established order in the land.⁷

The mature temple

Social and political life continued to be organized around the temples, and by the time of Hammurabi these had become architecturally and functionally quite complex, reflecting the extension of sovereignty into religion: as Hammurabi became king, so Marduk became chief god. By virtue of his office the king remained high priest but much authority had to be exercised through delegated offices. Nepotism was a common, even required, practice, the king's sons or relatives holding the viceregal positions throughout the kingdom. Beneath the viceroys ranged a hierarchy of priests of four distinct grades; ancillary to them were the minor priests and temple staff. The chief priests, of the rank of *shangu*, were dignified and austere, and they had to be physically fit, observe rituals of purification, including the symbolically shaven head, and act as general superintendents of the temple's activities. They were assisted by three other ranks: *baru* (diviner), *kalu* (cantor) and *ashipu* (exorcist). The minor priests and temple staff, in addition to religious tasks, attended to the

numerous social and economic functions of the temple, and among their number were the scribes and teachers.

Division of the priests into such groups was part of a thoroughgoing stratification of Babylonian society. The *Code of Hammurabi* made explicit distinction between free men, freedmen and slaves. Article 17, for example, states that 'If a seignior [free citizen] caught a fugitive male or female slave in the open and has taken him to his owner, the owner of the slave shall pay him two shekels of silver.'⁸ Further, distinction was made in punishment among classes even for the same offence. Thus Article 196 states that 'If a seignior has destroyed the eye of a member of the aristocracy, they shall destroy his eye'; Article 198, 'If he has destroyed the eye of a commoner or broken the bone of a commoner, he shall pay one mina of silver'; and Article 199, 'If he has destroyed the eye of a seignior's slave . . . he shall pay one-half the slave's value.'⁹ The administration of such a complex society demanded a large group of literati – priests, scribes and other functionaries. Their training was highly organized during the Babylonian era, and considerable evidence is available; in the accounts of that training can be found the first recorded instances of man's efforts at organizing the process of education on a systematic, institutional basis.

Literacy and learning 2000–1500 B.C.

Learning in the third millennium seems to have been distinctly a priestly prerogative and closely related to either the temple or the palace. In the early second millennium this position appears to have changed considerably. Whether there was ever toleration of private teachers is not known, the data indicating that learning was in fact connected closely with the mysteries of religion. Writing itself was held in some reverence and awe, and in Babylon the priestly study of words, with their relationship to their objects, was of some importance. The enormous complexity of the language and the difficulty with which it was learned must have contributed to such pursuits. The priests considered themselves the guardians and conservators of knowledge; learning was in fact a process of initiation to be conferred seriously. Since the social system required a large group of literates, learning was carefully graded, the most important traditions being kept closely guarded secrets and transmitted only in oral form. A second class of secrets existed which could be written, but only cryptographically, by intermixing the two languages of Akkadian

and Sumerian, along with syllabic juxtaposition in the one document. In that way such valued formulae as the making of coloured pottery glazes were recorded. The third area of knowledge, that used in daily life, was the content of general scribal training and rested primarily on the broad basis of writing and reckoning. By the turn of the second millennium, however, it seems that, for the last of these activities at least, a high degree of secularization had occurred and that the common scribe was no longer a priest, a situation which developed, in all likelihood, because of the demand for large numbers of scribes.

Writing had improved by the second millennium. The cuneiform script of the time, known nowadays as Classical Babylonian, consisted of between 600 and 700 symbols: 6 vowels, 97 open syllables (a consonant followed by a vowel), 200 closed syllables (two consonants enclosing a vowel) and something more than 300 determinatives.¹⁰ Likewise reckoning advanced, the base of sixty was retained in preference to that of ten, and numerals were written in cuneiform script, with their own identity. Fractions were in use, difficult ones being approximated; geometry and square measure had been developed, necessary for such tasks as surveying of land, calculation of food storage and architecture, although in general approximation was as common as calculation – in circular measures, for example, π was given the value of 3.

Training of the scribe

To the study of those symbolisms came the young scribe, some time during childhood – the exact age is not known. It appears that there were no particular barriers to entering such a vocation, the motivation probably being prestige and increased social standing, indicated by several documents,¹¹ by the frequency with which scribes appended their names to their productions, and by the willingness of upper social classes to enter the vocation. Evidence from a number of documents of the Third Dynasty of Ur shows that scribes then were drawn generally from the more influential social classes; this represents, possibly, some hardening of class barriers with literacy becoming indicative of social superiority.¹² Whether girls could become scribes is not certain; there is, however, a little evidence to suggest that some did.¹³ All scribes had to specialize in one branch of the bureaucracy – the temple, law, medicine, commerce, the army, or teaching itself – and underwent, in consequence, two periods of training. The first, in basic literacy, was given by group instruction; this was

followed by appointment to the particular government department where higher and more specialized instruction was obtained through a system of apprenticeship and individual tuition.

So far as can be known, formal schooling was given only at the stage of basic literacy, that being carried out in the Tablet House or *edubba*. Early in this century, 1902-3, excavations of ancient Shuruppak revealed a large number of schoolroom exercise tablets dated to around 2500 B.C.¹⁴ Very few schoolrooms, however, have been identified with certainty. The earliest yet excavated is presumed to be that found at Mari in the upper part of the valley and estimated to date from about 2000 B.C. That particular school was located, not next to the temple, but between the administrative offices and the private rooms of the palace, and this suggests that by the time of the Third Dynasty (c. 2100 B.C.) schools were no longer connected as closely with the temple and were in the process of becoming purely secular institutions, an inference reinforced by the fact that most discoveries of school tablets have been in the secular quarters of the settlements. The supposed school at Mari consists of an entry passageway and two rooms, the larger measuring 44 feet by 25, the smaller about one-third the area: the main room has four rows of stone benches giving accommodation for forty-five; the smaller room probably accommodated twenty-three pupils in three rows of benches.¹⁵ All four walls were unbroken, so that illumination probably came from the ceiling in some way.¹⁶ Around the bases of the walls were clay basins set on the floor, probably for moistening the clay balls used for tablets; the floor was found strewn with shells which may have been used for counters during instruction in reckoning and computation, although, curiously, no tablets of any kind were discovered. Identification of this as a schoolroom, then, must have a slight element of reservation.

Of training in the scribal activities, and the development of the scribal character, very little is known. Present knowledge comes chiefly from a single composition in the Sumerian language, dated to around 2000 B.C., and therefore approximately contemporaneous with the two rooms at Mari. It has been reconstructed from twenty-one tablets and fragments, collected and assembled by a number of scholars over a period of exactly forty years: twenty of the fragments were excavated at Nippur in 1899, although at that time it was not realized that they were part of a single composition. In 1909 the first small tablet was translated, and in the ensuing period the remaining fragments were translated by various scholars; in 1949 the entire composition was published in a reasonably

definitive form.¹⁷ From that document, supported by fragmentary evidence that is appearing,¹⁸ some deductions can be made.

General supervision of the *edubba* was exercised by the *umma*, a term meaning authority or expert and referring to the function of the principal. He was assisted by a deputy, the *adda edubba*, literally, father of the Tablet House. Instruction was given by the teacher, the *dubsar* (or 'tablet writer'), assisted by the *sesbhal* (or 'big-brother'), the latter perhaps being an intending teacher gaining his specialized training in teaching by apprenticeship to the *dubsar*. Within the grade of *dubsar* there was specialization, the literature referring in particular to the *dubsar nishid* (scribe of counting), the *dubsar zaga* (scribe of mensuration) and the *dubsar ashaga* (scribe of measuring), although the last two prototypical arithmetic and geometry masterpieces may have been exercised by the one person.¹⁹ The basis of all instruction was writing, given by the *dubsar kengira*, the scribe of Sumerian, as evidenced in the major source which opens with the dialogue:

'Schoolboy, where did you go *from earliest days*?'

'I went to school.'

'What did you do in school?'

'I *read* my tablet, ate my lunch,
prepared my tablet, wrote it, finished it; then
my *prepared lines were prepared for me*

[and in] the afternoon, *my hand copies were prepared for me.*'²⁰

The same tablet refers to instruction in drawing (?), counting and accounting. Other evidence points to instruction in language, in reading, translation (between Akkadian and Sumerian) and reckoning.²¹ The existence of large numbers of bilingual syllabaries indicates the need for scribes to be familiar both with everyday Akkadian and scholarly Sumerian.

The content of instruction when not directly vocational was moral and didactic, at times severely so, at others suffused with levity. The dignity of the scribal office and the need to develop a consciousness of it in the apprentice provided the subject-matter of many exercises in dictation and calligraphy; two themes in fact were used, in a kind of counterpoint, emphasizing on the one hand the rewards of success and, on the other, the consequences of failure. Thus compare:

A scribe whose hand moves in accordance with the mouth [i.e. is skilled in dictation], he is indeed a scribe!²²

or

You *have carried out well the school duties*, have become a man of *learning*.
 Nidaba, the queen of the place of *learning*, you have exalted.
 Oh Nidaba, praise!²³

with

A scribe who does not know Sumerian, what [kind] of a scribe is he?

and

A disgraced scribe becomes a man of spells [?].²⁴

Yet the instructors were not content to rely upon exhortation and didacticism alone; apparently physical punishment was used freely, as the following instances demonstrate.

I must not be late or my teacher will cane me.

My 'school-father' *read* my tablet to me, [said] 'The . . . is cut off', caned me.

Who was in charge of . . . [said]

'Why when I was not here did you talk?', caned me.

'Why when I was not here did you not keep your head high?', caned me.

'Why when I was not here did you stand up?', caned me.

'Why when I was not here did you *go* out?', caned me.

'Why when I was not here did you take the . . .?', caned me.

'Your hand is not good', caned me.²⁵

Indeed, the frequent references to chastisement suggest that coercion was the general method of reproof, employed continually as a major means of securing effort by the pupils.

The texts for study, 'prepared lines', were assembled by the *dubsars* of the *edubbas* (masters of the Tablet Houses), and organized into some kind of instructional sequence. The beginner had a simple maxim to copy and memorize, using a ball of clay flattened into a lenticular tablet, usually between two and three inches in diameter. These tablets gave some difficulty to archaeologists when first discovered, until their true identity was established.²⁶ Usually the *dubsar* or his assistant the *sesgal* wrote a line which was then copied immediately below; alternately, the model

and the copy were made in parallel columns, the tablet after correction being rolled back into a ball and pressed out again for further exercises. From the small lenticular tablet the novice progressed to larger rectangular tablets which varied in size from two inches by three, through to five inches by six. The exercises for these were more complex, but the technique of the instructor setting a copy, either across the top, or in a side column, was continued, this being attested by tablets which have been found with dual inscriptions, one in correct grammar and skilled calligraphy, the other poorer on both counts. Dictation was apparently taught, the first exercises requiring transcription of simple maxims to lenticular tablets, the length of the passages increasing as the novice improved.²⁷ This was supplemented by linguistic training. In the course of time the *dubsars* composed lists of words and phrases arranged in common-interest groups, such as animals, countries, cities, stones and minerals, which were required to be learned. Some tablets that have been unearthed – prototype textbooks – contain extremely long lists of these words indicating a more extensive amount of knowledge than has been credited to these peoples hitherto.²⁸ Inscription was made by a reed stylus held in the right hand, and once the early exercises were mastered writing proceeded from left to right in parallel rows, starting at the top of the tablet and working down. After mastering the instruction given in the Tablet House the novice became a junior scribe and his new status carried with it the title of either *dumu edubba* or *dubsar tur* and he was ready to proceed to higher specialized studies.

Higher learning: the House of Wisdom

Whether the *dumu edubba* proceeded directly to a particular bureaucratic department or to the House of Wisdom first is not known. Perhaps both ways existed. The House of Wisdom, which operated as a place of advanced instruction during the second millennium, was attended by some graduate scribes, and studies proceeded there at a higher level. It seems unlikely that the House of Wisdom was concerned with higher thought in the sense of speculation. In the Babylonian period considerable advances were made in notation and reckoning. Fractions were more highly developed in a sexagesimal system, this apparently being an achievement of the temple schools, although it seems that such mathematical activities were confined entirely to the schools and were used, in consequence, solely for classroom activities. There is a little evidence from very early

texts that the sexagesimal fractions might have been used for the solution of problems in architecture, in military engineering and in money transactions involving calculation of interest and principal, but none of these ever developed extensively.²⁹ Some textual evidence points to experimentation in mathematics for its own sake, that is, to the deliberate construction of problems to be solved, although it is more likely that these were used for mathematical instruction than as efforts at intellectual inquiry.

Theoretical speculation did not become highly developed; the bulk of Babylonian mathematical treatises deal with concrete problems that can be solved by the application of standardized procedures. The scribal occupations were connected closely to craft traditions, especially in the sciences, and the overwhelming preoccupation was with solving specific problems. Babylonian thought in fact displayed a tension between speculation and tradition throughout their cultural evolution, the dualism between mathematical inquiry and empirical procedures being paralleled in their literature. The period 2000–1500 B.C. was one of intense literary activity; the bulk of the myths of earlier days – *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Irra-Myth* and *Enuma-Elish*, for example, products of a vigorous oral tradition, and so zealously transmitted – were all recorded on tablets, apparently for the first time, both in the ancient priestly language of Sumerian and in the everyday Akkadian. Yet in this very period there was rapid decline in Sumerian studies and an equally strong increase in the study of Akkadian. The growth in the numbers of Akkadian scribes is well documented, although they did not fare well at the hands of the Sumerian scholars of the *edubba* who made frequent and rancorous jest at those scribes who were ignorant of the scholarly Sumerian,³⁰ and the teacher of Akkadian never enjoyed the prestige of the Sumerian master. The needs of the Akkadian scribes are further attested by the increasing use of bilingual syllabaries and word lists.

*Decline of Mesopotamian thought: Kassite, Assyrian, late Babylonian times
1500–500 B.C.*

What caused this decline? The answer seems to be that the scribal culture of the Sumerians and their imitators produced the situation almost inevitably. The whole tradition of scribal literacy demanded obedience and compliance by the student; there was virtually no scope at all for creative thought or speculation. Akkadian, and in turn Babylonian, became the

established vernaculars of Mesopotamia and so had some vigour, while Sumerian remained essentially conservative, and it was not until the middle of the second millennium that the scribes, realizing the danger that a vigorous and largely oral vernacular held for the ancient Sumerian tradition, set to the task of preserving their classics in written form. It seems no accident that the bulk of Sumerian literature was first written down when that venerable language was on the verge of extinction.³¹ The literature that was recorded, moreover, shows little speculative trend. Certainly it reveals man's awareness of himself in the surrounding cosmos, although following long traditions of heavenly propitiation much of the literature demonstrates a quality of resignation and even a voluntary acceptance of man's limitations.³² One hymn, *I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom*, written down first in Akkadian times (c. 2300–2000), contains a theme that becomes repeated increasingly often:

I have arrived, I have passed beyond life's span.
I look about me; evil upon evil!
My affliction increases, right I cannot find.
I implored the god, but he did not turn his countenance;
I prayed to my goddess, but she did not raise her head.

Who can understand the counsel of the gods in the midst of heaven?
The plan of a god is deep waters, who can comprehend it?
Where has befuddled mankind ever learned what a god's conduct is?³³

The recording of such literature points to some supplanting of the highly valued and presumably vigorous oral tradition. At the same time a conflict is apparent between the conservative use of the written language and its increasingly instrumental function in Semitic life.

Conservatism in literature, as in mathematics, continued. The oral tradition remained valued, as two documents of Kassite times (c. 1500 B.C.) illustrate. In *The Irra-Myth*, for example, occur the lines:

The scribe who learns this text by heart
escapes the enemy, is honoured [in his own land].
In the congregation of the learned where my
name is constantly spoken
I will open his ears.³⁴

and in the *Enuma-Elish* (*Epic of Creation*) are the lines:

The sage and the learned shall together
ponder [them], father shall tell [of them]

to son and teach [them to] him, the ears of
 the shepherd and the herdsman shall be opened. . . .
 . . . This tradition that an old man had related in the
 days long ago [he wrote down and] left it
 as an instruction to coming generations.³⁵

These two statements appeared during the period of Kassite dominance (1500–1200 B.C.) which succeeded the Babylonian period and which was, generally, a time of cultural and social stagnation. The emphasis on conservatism in these two passages illustrates the growing rigidity of the scribes who had become organized into guilds, while the wider society had to a certain extent become feudalized with the granting of autonomous lands to the nobility. The scribal phrase 'son of' appears increasingly and has been traced through scribal 'families' for centuries in this period.³⁶ The terms refer, not to kinship, but to the growth of guilds and apprenticeship systems. By far the most significant aspect of the appearance of these scribal guilds and the excessive concern for tradition is the absolute disappearance of any further reference to the *edubba*. In a study of the scribal families of Uruk it has been revealed that all were officers of the temple, leading to the inference that from Kassite times the scribal occupation returned to the temple and that scribes again assumed the priestly vocation, devoting themselves to the conservation of their past traditions, chiefly through the literary tasks of transcribing and editing.³⁷

Emphasis on the performative aspects of the scribal role is revealed in the literature which retains and even accentuates the traditional religiosity while stressing man's impotence to secure knowledge:

Mankind is deaf and knows nothing
 What knowledge has anyone at all?

runs a contemporary verse.³⁸ One of the major writings of the Kassite period is *Ludul bēl nēmeqi* (*The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer*), the story of a man meeting with numerous calamities until he is restored eventually by the god Marduk. In his travail, the speaker observes at one point, despairingly,

Who knows the will of the gods in heaven?
 Who understands the plans of the underworld gods?
 Where have mortals learnt the way of a god?³⁹

The final intervention of Marduk carries overtones of spiritual redemp-

tion. Also from the Kassite period, or even later, is the so-called Babylonian *Theodicy* – the earliest extant text is c. 1000 B.C. – which is a complaint against the human condition, in this case the excessive precedence accorded the first-born. The narrator declares:

In my youth I sought the will of my god;
With prostration and prayer I followed my goddess.
But I was bearing a profitless *corvée* as a yoke.
My god decreed instead of wealth, destitution.

Justice is not to be secured; the complainant has no success in life. One counsellor suggests:

Unless you seek the will of the god, what luck have you?
He that bears his god's yoke never lacks food, though it be sparse.

The contrast being developed is that between knowledge and piety, and clearly the latter is ascendent. Indeed the sufferer is warned:

O wise one, O savant, who masters knowledge,
In your anguish you blaspheme the god.
The divine mind; like the centre of the heavens, is remote;
Knowledge of it is difficult; the masses do not know it.

Even speech itself is seen as a source of possible error, an equivocal gift of the gods:

And mistress Mami, the queen who fashioned them,
Gave perverse speech to the human race.
With lies, and not truth, they endowed them for ever.

The tablets are partly fragmentary and the final text is difficult to establish; none the less, the argument is certain: man's way is one of obedience and submission to divine ordinance. Centuries after the Kassite period, c. 1000 B.C., the same theme is repeated:

The mind of the god, like the centre of the heavens, is remote;
His knowledge is difficult, men cannot understand it.
The product of the hand of the goddess Aruru is life in general.⁴⁰

By the end of the second millennium the creative vigour of the Mesopotamian peoples was exhausted. The oral tradition remained honoured, but in literature rather than practice; scribes became increasingly occupied with the mechanical skills of their office, and literary studies became centred on activities which included concern with the mystical meanings

of words. Yet the achievement of these peoples was very great. In their proto-literate period they had achieved significant feats of abstraction in developing the concept of the pantheon, thereby beginning the intellectual activity of separating man from the totality of the environment, and so making a tentative step towards an objectivity of view. The inventions of speech and writing were potentially great instruments for developing the object-subject relationship, yet, on the eve of such a development, the Babylonians turned in another direction. The vigour of the oral tradition was diverted into written literature, which in turn became formalized and conservative, and its study heavily tradition-bound. The potentiality of writing as an instrumental skill that could be applied to the solution of problems arising from speculative thought was not seized upon. Instead, writing too served the purpose of restriction rather than liberation and was taught not as an instrumentality but as an end in itself. The civilization of Babylon, and Assyria after it, developed into scribal cultures in which the possibilities of a wider public literacy were not realized. Throughout those millennia similar developments were occurring in Egypt where a comparable scribal culture had emerged.