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Civilization Before Greece and Rome

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City-States and Kingdoms

Of all changes in the pattern of human life, the most radical came with the beginnings of agriculture and the domestication of animals. This, often called the Neolithic Revolution, had its origins in the Near East, in the foothills from Palestine to the Taurus and the Zagros: it began soon after the end of the last Ice Age, and was well under way by 8000 BC, with north Iraq as one of its first centres. Neolithic farmers gradually spread southwards into the plains, and first settled south Mesopotamia at about 5000 BC. If there were hunting-and-gathering groups there earlier, as there may have been, they left no detectable remains.

There were no permanent agricultural settlements anywhere in Egypt much before 5000 BC, although it had had a human population several thousand years before that. This lag behind the most advanced parts of the Near East was not a mark of backwardness. Humans, left a free choice, prefer to remain hunters and gatherers and do not settle permanently to the toil of farming until it is forced upon them. Herodotus tells us, on the authority of Egyptian tradition, that before the beginning of Egyptian civilization, most of Egypt, except a stretch in the neighbourhood of Thebes, was still untamed. This is credible: the natural vegetation alongside a flooding river in a hot climate is lush marsh and jungle, and the uncontrolled annual inundation of the Nile would have left pools and swamps, with vast reed thickets of papyrus, full of fish, wild fowl, wild pigs, hippopotamuses and crocodiles. The wadis would support trees as a kind of parkland. Archaeology shows that down to the fourth millennium Egypt was still the home of a rich fauna, including the elephant, rhinoceros, giraffe, baboon, antelope, gazelle, ostriches and lions. It was probably because the environment was so favourable for a hunting-and-gathering economy, that the Egyptians saw no advantage in changing their way of life until population increase compelled it. Even when agriculture was adopted, it did not immediately supplant older sources of food, and catching water birds and hunting wild animals, including

hippopotamus in the Nile, remained important well after 3000 BC: wall reliefs of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties (2450 BC onwards) still show people hunting in jungle marshes, and tomb painting of the second millennium depict high officials relaxing by boating in the swamps, where, as accompanying texts describe, they amused themselves spearing fish.

Early Egyptians were interested in their wild animals, and not only as hunters. They were keenly experimental. After taking over the animals already domesticated elsewhere, they tried to domesticate others, achieving permanent success with some, such as geese and ducks, but finding problems with such species as gazelle, ibex and hyena. They tamed the mongoose, a useful animal for catching snakes, but at about 2000 BC gave it up in favour of the cat, which did it even better. Yet unwittingly they brought about the disappearance from north Egypt of several large mammals during the first half of the third millennium. This came not from over-hunting, but from disturbing the ecological balance, particularly by setting under way increasing dessication away from the Nile. On much of the land annually inundated by the Nile there had been permanent plant cover; to meet the needs of agriculture, man destroyed this, thereby robbing wild beasts of areas which had earlier been their haunts. Man further upset the balance as he sought new pastures for his domesticated animals, driving out animals from regions where they could have survived. Amongst jungle and savannah mammals so lost were the elephant, rhinoceros and giraffe. In wetter places man drained swamps to make more land available—and thus brought further ecological changes by destruction of the papyrus beds and associated wild life.

Such ecological changes were not limited to Egypt. The past 10,000 years have seen occasional small variations in rainfall and temperatures in Egypt and the Near East, but the effects of these upon the environment have been slight compared with the changes man himself has wrought. Humans have felled and burned vast forests in Anatolia, north Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Cyprus and the Zagros. In Iraq, the network of natural water channels from the Tigris and Euphrates originally supported forests of date-palms and other trees, which in the natural state grew in dense impenetrable thickets. These have long gone. Destruction of trees allows a more violent fluctuation in temperatures, which changes the pattern of wind circulation and precipitation. Precipitation which does occur is more violent, and, falling on the denuded soil, results in flooding, with rapid run-off and consequent erosion, finally leaving bare rock or barren desert.

All the great civilizations began in alluvial plains, and, at least in Egypt and Mesopotamia (information is less complete for the Indus valley), the behaviour of the rivers was a major factor in the form they took.[1]

Egypt depended upon the Nile, south Mesopotamia upon the Euphrates and the Tigris. But there were significant differences between the different river systems. The Nile floods in a very regular, predictable and predominantly benign pattern, between late summer and autumn, when one harvest is in and all is ready for the next sowing. This did not preclude the need for hard work, but it did mean that the ancient Egyptians could be sure that their hard work would usually be well rewarded. Small differences of level divide the land along the Nile into a large number of flood basins, which constitute natural territorial units.

The hydrology of the Euphrates and Tigris fits less well than does the Nile with the agricultural year, and demands more control if it is to be used to advantage. Both the Euphrates and Tigris are normally at their lowest in early autumn, and then begin their rise. The Tigris is usually highest in March or April, and the Euphrates a month later: these are times when, if the rivers burst their banks, they are likely to wreak havoc upon the ripening crops.

Although the Euphrates and Tigris water the same plain, and their ancient courses in south Mesopotamia were nowhere as much as a hundred miles apart, one was much more important for early settlement than the other. The Tigris is lower in its bed than the Euphrates, faster flowing, carries almost twice the amount of water and at maximum flow has almost twice the rise, making it particularly difficult to use for irrigation. This discouraged early settlement, except along its tributary, the Diyala, a less formidable stream. Consequently, most early major settlements in south Mesopotamia were concentrated along channels of the Euphrates.

In Egypt, some of the settlements which grew up along the Nile from 5000 BC onwards had by the fourth millennium grown into towns, each controlling a strip of territory based on a flood basin. The excellent communications along the Nile, and the narrowness of the habitable area, with no viable hinterland into which dissidents could withdraw, made it easy for a determined ruler enjoying the support of his immediate territory to bring large stretches of the Nile under his control. In consequence, before 3000 BC Egypt had coalesced into two kingdoms, Upper Egypt, from about Aswan to Memphis south of Cairo, and Lower Egypt, comprising the Delta region from Memphis northwards. Scenes of warfare on the earliest Egyptian monuments (plate 8) reflect strife between the two kingdoms, as does the myth of Osiris, the god of the dead (p. 275). In the myth, Osiris, the god who ruled the Delta, was defeated by Seth of Upper Egypt, and behind the myth there may lay a real prehistoric king of Lower Egypt, killed after a struggle with his rival.

The unification of Egypt

Now the pace of advance accelerated. Some earlier scholars wished to credit this to the arrival of a hypothetical Dynastic Race, presumably innately more able, but evidence to support this view is flimsy if not entirely lacking. Most of the supposed differences between the hypothetical Dynastic Race and earlier Egyptians may be no more than differences between those who had incorporated agriculture into their way of life, and those who had not. The only physical evidence of a Dynastic Race, for what it is worth, is the claim that skeletons from this time differ so markedly from those of the earlier population that the later people could not have derived from the earlier groups. But knowledge of the physical anthropology of Neolithic Egyptians is limited to a very few sites, and Neolithic Egypt may well have nurtured a wider variety of human types than we know of.

Some scholars have attempted to link the striking Egyptian cultural advance at the beginning of the third millennium to contacts with south Mesopotamia. It is probable that there were contacts of some kind, particularly in connection with the invention of writing, where Mesopotamia seems to have had priority (p. 72). Parallels in art motifs also point to some kind of link. But such features could have resulted from contacts by a few alert long-distance traders of the Marco Polo type; they do not require us to imagine major migrations from south Mesopotamia to Egypt.

The crucial political change in early Egypt came at about 3100 or 3000 BC; different scholars use different chronologies. Then, according to tradition, Menes, the king of Upper Egypt, conquered Lower Egypt and made the two kingdoms into one. But history shows that a stable major state does not come about suddenly as the result of a single incident of conquest. The innovation which we call the unification of Egypt must have been the final stage of a long period of convergence. Yet even if not as sudden as tradition represents it, it did mark a major step in deliberate social organization; by it, Menes made all Egypt into a single political and economic unit—a good half millennium before any comparable development in Mesopotamia. Admittedly there were those in ancient Egypt who might have denied that Menes made the whole into one kingdom, since to the end the Pharaohs preserved the pretence of the duality of the system, not only in their title 'King of Upper and Lower Egypt', but also in wearing a composite crown which incorporated separate crowns for the original two kingdoms; but in practical terms the country was undoubtedly one. To emphasize the essential unity, Menes created a new capital, Memphis, at the point where the two former kingdoms met.

Tradition, recorded by Herodotus but not otherwise proved, recounts that Menes built a dyke to change the course of the Nile, and founded Memphis on the land so reclaimed.[2] Even if this tradition was not literally true, it at least implied a very early explicit recognition that life in Egypt depended upon regulation of the flood waters.

'There's a divinity doth hedge a king.' Rule by one man depends upon the existence of sanctions so powerful that the rest of the population are willing to accept his direction unquestioningly. In ancient Egypt the sanctions were religious and had prehistoric origins. In many primitive societies, the central figure is a magician who is believed to be so intimately linked with the supernatural world that he can control rain or fertility and other aspects of life. So long as his magic proves effective, his power is absolute, but when his powers fail he is sent back to the supernatural world by being put to death. The ancient collection of rituals and myths called the Pyramid Texts, from about 2400 BC in their extant form but incorporating beliefs from prehistoric times, shows behind the Egyptian king of historical times a magician of this category. That this person was originally put to death when his powers failed is hinted at by traces of cannibalism and human sacrifice in the Pyramid Texts, but the clearest indication is in a ceremony called the Sed festival. This was a ceremony to rejuvenate the king's failing powers after thirty years of rule. It began with the ritual burial of the king, which surely indicates that originally, when the powers of the king or his magician predecessor failed, he was put to death and there was a real burial.

From the beginning, these prehistoric antecedents invested the living king in Egypt with the aura of a divine being. Because the king was an incarnate god, with Egypt's welfare in his care, it was in everyone's interest to conform to his will. His religious sanction was everywhere evident, for he was nominally the chief priest in every temple. The very circumstances of the unification of Egypt may have served to reinforce belief in the divine nature of the pharaoh. If Menes did indeed divert the sacred life-giving Nile and drain a huge area to build a great capital where formerly there had been swamps, his divine powers could not be doubted. Also, since he controlled the whole Nile valley, he unquestionably had power over the water-supply to every part of the land, an aspect of royalty graphically illustrated in one of the earliest representations of a pharaoh, which shows him cutting the dyke of an irrigation canal with a hoe. From very early times the king of united Egypt had measurements taken of the height of the Nile as it was rising in the south, so that he could accurately predict the area which could be irrigated further north. All these factors meant that, from the point of view of an ancient Egyptian, the king was, quite literally, a fertility giver and controller of the Nile and all the life of

the land; from the Egyptians' point of view he was, without question, a god upon whom the life of the land depended. Moreover, because of the ease of navigation from one end of the country to the other by means of the gentle Nile, it was relatively easy to produce a unified system of government (even if administered in duplicate for north and south separately). We shall see that the situation was markedly different in south Mesopotamia.

The definiteness of the tradition makes it likely that Menes was a real king, but which? The name does not occur in native Egyptian records. Three kings, known to egyptologists as Scorpion, Narmer, and Hor-aha, have left monuments from about the time attributed to Menes. If one of these kings has to be picked as Menes, the most probable seems to be Narmer, but quite possibly more than one of them contributed to the tradition. This would accord with the probability that the unification was not an innovation abruptly introduced after conquest, but came about gradually over several reigns.

With Menes we enter the Dynastic Period. This terminology derives from an Egyptian priest, Manetho, who at about 300 BC compiled in Greek a list of all Egyptian kings from the beginning, divided into thirty dynasties (later extended to thirty-one), with, of course, Menes as the first king of the First Dynasty. Apart from the name and length of reigns of each ruler, Manetho gives us little snippets of information, such as that Menes 'was taken by a hippopotamus and died', or that his successor 'built the palace at Memphis; his writings on anatomy remain, for he was a doctor', or of the third in succession to him that in his time 'a severe famine gripped Egypt'. Particularly notable, from the records of the Third Dynasty ruler Zoser, is the mention of 'Imuthes, regarded by the Egyptians as Asclepios for his skill in medicine, the inventer of building in hewn stone'; this was the celebrated Imhotep, architect of the Step Pyramid (pp. 50f).

There are more theories than evidence about the running of the early Egyptian state. There are virtually no administrative records, and the text called the Palermo Stone provides less than it seems to promise, for whilst it gives us a record of one or more outstanding events for each year down to the Fifth Dynasty, these are mainly about festivals, divine statues, building works or expeditions abroad, with few details directly bearing on administration.

There is one type of evidence which is plentiful in this area: the titles of officials. Some scholars have used these in an attempt to build up a picture of the administrative network. Ancient Egyptians who could afford it delighted in arranging for their autobiographies to be written on their tombs, and Klaus Baer has analysed tomb inscriptions of over 600

notables, who between them recorded nearly 2000 titles in use during the Old Kingdom.[3] But in fact this mass of titles—legal, scribal, fiscal, religious, organizational, linked to the king or the royal court, or purely honorific—tells us less about the details of the administrative system than we might expect. Some titles which obviously began as marks of function quickly became at first markers of rank within a hierarchy and then merely honorific. The excessive number of titles borne by some officials points this up: when we find, as we do, that a particular notable had a string of well over 200 titles, we can be certain that, unless the man was an administrative genius, only a small portion of these can have related to functions he personally performed or carried responsibility for during his working life.

Baer was unable to make any significant links between the 2000 titles and the pattern of administration, but he did show that a large number of the titles could be placed in ranking order, in a way strangely similar to the British Order of Precedence. What this mass of titles gives us, therefore, is not an outline of the administrative system but a picture of a society obsessed with considerations of rank. Paradoxically, this non-functional use of titles performed a useful function. An evolving society creates new offices and ceases to need old ones. But without a mechanism for sweeping away obsolete offices, there grows up an enormous amount of unproductive dead wood. Conversion of old functional offices, no longer required, into honorific titles discharged this burden.

Although official titles do not give us an adequate picture of how the early Egyptian state was run, the material does enable us to extract information about a few of the greatest offices in the state, sufficient to give us a rough sketch of the administrative framework, mainly in the time of the Fifth Dynasty. At that period all senior functions in the state were shared amongst six classes of official; these bore the titles, the Overseer of the Great Mansions, the Overseer of the Scribes of the Royal Records, the Overseer of Works, the Overseer of Granaries, the Overseer of the Treasuries, and what we usually translate as the Vizier.

The 'Great Mansions' of the first title were the courts of justice. There are indications that there were originally six such courts, but their location is unknown.

The 'Overseer of the Scribes of the Royal Records' was the head of the scribal administration, responsible for the preparation and filing of all state documents. There was at least one occasion during the Fifth Dynasty when two persons held this title simultaneously; since one of the two was the vizier, the greatest officer of state, he presumably had overall control, leaving the other holder of the title to supervise details.

The Overseer of Works was responsible for organizing work-forces for

such operations as building, agriculture, expeditions to distant places to obtain materials, and probably (although there is no specific Old Kingdom evidence) digging and maintaining canals. Several holders may have shared this title, each responsible for a particular sector of public works.

The general area of the duties of the 'Overseer of the Granaries' is obvious, but the details are not clear. Sometimes there were simultaneous holders of the title. Little is known of the location of state granaries, but these officials presumably used them to stockpile corn against future shortages as Joseph is said to have done in Genesis 41:48–9; since the state could not survive unless it kept its peasantry fed, this was a vital need. There were also granaries on private estates, where the Overseers of Granaries may have been responsible for assessment for taxation. This would explain their close connection with the Overseer of the Treasuries.

A major part of the duties of Overseer of Treasuries in the Old Kingdom was recording and collecting dues from private estates. Mention of a 'treasury of the residence' in the late Fifth and early Sixth Dynasties suggests there was a central treasury at the capital Memphis, for which this official would have been responsible. There were apparently also provincial treasuries. Later the collection of taxes came into the orbit of the vizier.

The most important officer in the state administrative system was undoubtedly the vizier. His office must already have existed by the beginning of the Third Dynasty, since the title occurs on stone vessels found beneath the Step Pyramid, built by the first king of that Dynasty. The earliest viziers were all royal princes, a relic from the original situation in which the king kept all authority within the circle of his kinsmen. The people nearest to the pharaoh in life were also those nearest in death, and the grouping of tombs associated with pyramids in Sakkara and Giza indicates that down to the Fourth Dynasty his immediate executives were mainly his close male relatives—sons, uncles, cousins, nephews. In the Fifth Dynasty this ceased to be the case, and high officials, including viziers, were no longer necessarily princes by birth. But even when no longer royal by birth, the men appointed as viziers, and sometimes other officials, were given the rank of prince by the honorific title King's Son.

The vizier needed to be a man of considerable ability, since his task was to oversee the whole administration, judiciary and economy of the country: second only to the king in status, in some circumstances he was of greater importance in practice. By the time of the Middle Kingdoms, this office had become divided into two, with separate viziers for Upper and Lower Egypt; there is the possibility that this division went back to the Old Kingdom.

The third millennium provides no detailed account of the duties of a vizier, but texts and reliefs from the tomb of Rekhmire^{c}, who held that office in the fifteenth century, tell us what they had become.[4]

Rekhmire^{c} ranked second only to the king, and all the royal courtiers did obeisance to him. The king, who was ultimately responsible for justice, appointed Rekhmire^{c} to act on his behalf, with no one able to override his decision. Rekhmire^{c} prided himself on his administration of justice. He claimed to be 'smiter of the smiter', to judge rich and poor impartially, to rescue the weak from the strong, to defend the widow and relieve the aged, to establish a son in his paternal inheritance, to give food and drink to the hungry and thirsty and clothing to the destitute. He gave judgement daily in his audience hall, seated upon a cushion on a chair, with a rug on the floor and a cushion beneath his feet. His scribes and other staff were ranged near him and petitioners queued to be heard in strict order. In the first instance they had to present their petitions in writing, but this must have been followed by oral examination, for Rehkmire^{c} specifically says that he took no offence if litigants gave way to their passions.

At some point every day Rekhmire^{c} conferred with the king. He also received reports from the chief treasurer, from the officers responsible for military security, and from all other senior officials, since all functions of the state—judiciary, treasury, army and navy, police, and agriculture—were under the supervision of the vizier. To communicate with various departments, the vizier had a staff of messengers, who had the right of immediate admission to any official. Wills had to be brought before the vizier to be sealed.

Reliefs in his tomb show Rekhmire^{c} accepting tribute from foreigners, and receiving the taxes from representatives of various cities. Much of the latter was in gold or silver, but it also included commodities in such forms as hides, bows, cedar wood, apes, cloth, oxen, corn, honey.

The various high offices of the Old Kingdom, little as we know in detail about their functions, show that already by the middle of the third millennium there was considerable departmentalization in the running of the Egyptian state. The directives of the great officers of state at the top were implemented by lower ranking officials, in a departmental system which probably went back in origin to the organization of servants in the royal household.

The administrators had the efficient running of Egypt in their hands, and good government was threatened if those administrators sank to the level of bureaucrats. It could happen. Instead of concentrating upon getting necessary work done, officials might act as though what mattered was to adhere at all costs to established procedures, whether or not it was

the most efficient way of performing the task in hand. A letter found at Saqqara shows a case of bureaucratic palsy as early as 2200 BC. The writer was an officer in charge of quarry workers, and obviously a man who took a pride in doing his job well. He expostulated at having been ordered to take his men across the river to government headquarters to receive their clothing, an unwarranted interruption in his duties. In the past, he pointed out, this procedure had wasted up to six days, as a result of delays at the issuing office. Why, he asked, should not the clothes be sent to him by barge, when the whole business could be settled within a single day?

The king himself was not a mere figurehead. Since the earliest viziers were royal princes, there is the possibility that some of those who succeeded as kings may earlier have served in that role. Certainly kings undertook specific functions in the administration of the kingdom. From very early in the Dynastic Period, the king made periodic tours by river to inspect the whole land, and from the reign of the Fourth Dynasty ruler Sneferu, this became a census of all the cattle, normally biennially, occasionally in successive years. This was in effect a periodic assessment of wealth, and must imply the beginning of a national system of taxation. It was this that brought the king the economic power which eventually made possible such huge public works as the building of the Giza pyramids.

From prehistoric times the hydrology of the Nile had sub-divided Egypt into a number of flood basins. These may have been the basis of the territorial divisions called nomes (totalling about forty, with variations from time to time), which formed the later units of provincial administration. They were already assuming that function by the Third Dynasty, and from soon after that time the administrators in charge of the nomes began to acquire a degree of independence of the capital. In addition, local officials received grants of land for their maintenance, which, in consequence of customarily being regranted to heirs, gradually became treated as private property; with their own estates, such officials became less subject to control from the capital. All this contributed to a weakening of centralized control. The culmination of these trends, combined with other factors which may have included a series of famines resulting from exceptionally low Nile floods, brought a gradual disintegration of the central power, and finally the collapse of the Old Kingdom at the end of the Sixth Dynasty (2155 BC).

Mesopotamia

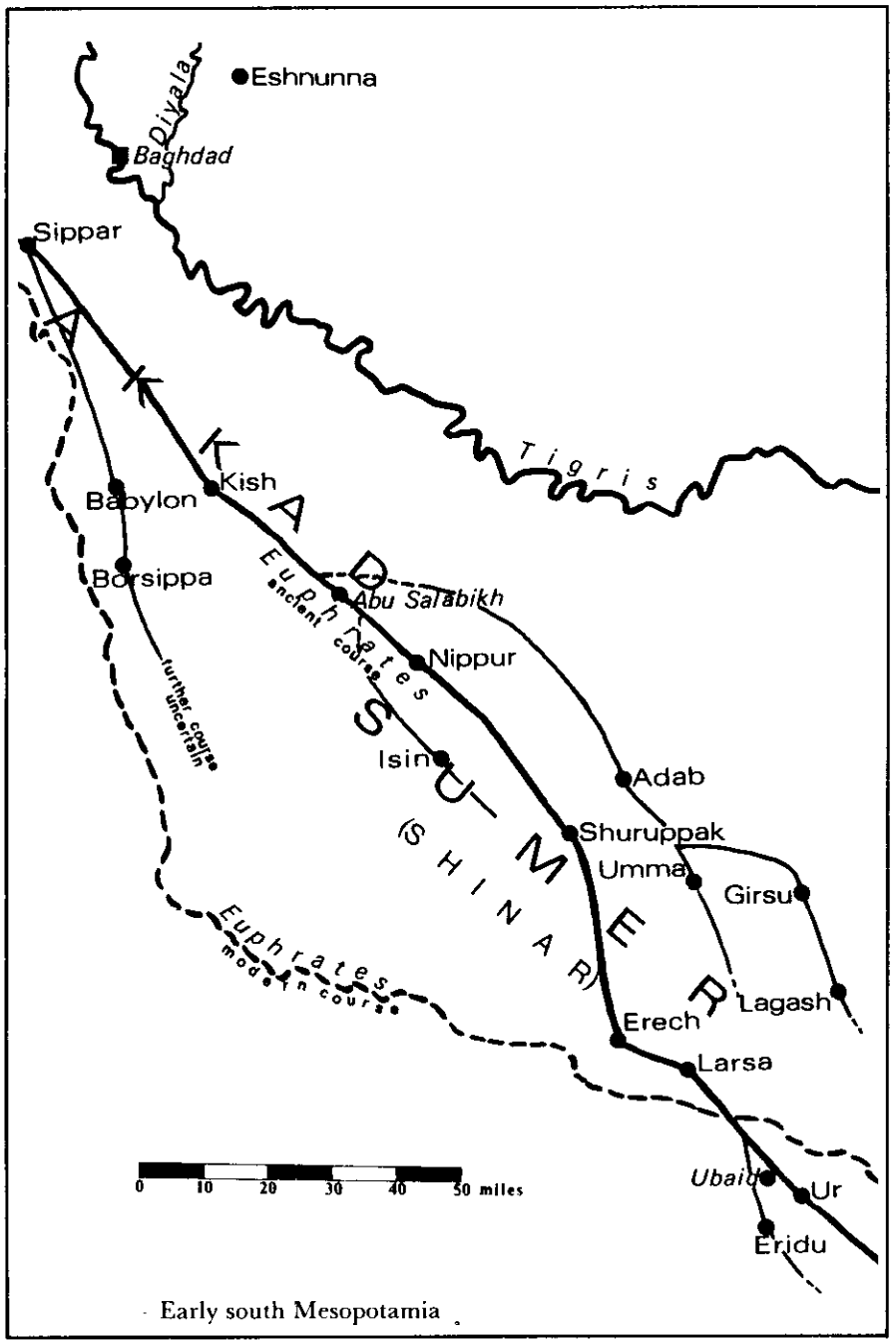
The rise of a centralized power came much later in Mesopotamia than in

Egypt, and by a very different course. But in some other respects, Mesopotamia had priority.

The earliest settlements known in south Mesopotamia date from 5000 BC or a little before. Archaeologists name this stage *Ubaid*, after the site in south Iraq, near Ur of the Chaldees, at which evidence for it was first found. So successful was the *Ubaid* economy that it spread throughout all Mesopotamia and into neighbouring lands, although it remained essentially a peasant economy based on villages.

Rainfall in south Iraq is well below the minimum necessary to bring crops to maturity, and some form of irrigation is essential. Unlimited water was, of course, available from two of the world's great rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris, but means had to be devised of using it. For thousands of years before human occupation of Mesopotamia, the Euphrates had periodically changed its course by bursting its banks and finding a new lower level after raising its old bed by silt deposits. In consequence, by the time of the *Ubaid* settlements there was an extensive network of seepages and old channels, which might carry water ranging from a trickle to a major flow. Early settlers could have utilized natural irrigation by seeding the banks of such water-courses as were perennial streams, but the chances of success would depend upon a critical balance between waterlogging and drying out. To be certain of a crop it was necessary to have land high enough above the water table to provide drainage, and a flow of water which could be fed on to the land as needed. The greatest significance of the *Ubaid* people was that they solved this technical problem and developed irrigation to increase the area of land available for grain and vegetable production. It is likely that they began by digging out old silted-up channels for use as canals, fed from the main river. This called for a substantial well-organized labour force, and this need constituted a factor which was eventually to have a fundamental effect upon the way society developed, since the larger the group and the better organized it was, the more land could be irrigated and the more prosperous the whole community would be. In the *Ubaid* context the limiting factor was the traditional size of the village, but it needed only one group to grow beyond village size to provide a model for widespread change.

From the middle of the fourth millennium, there were developments in south Mesopotamia of the highest consequence. The most striking features in this were the rise of the first cities, the beginning of monumental architecture, the more widespread use of metals, and above all the invention of writing. The last is discussed in chapter 4. Archaeologically this new stage is known as the *Uruk* culture, from the ancient name of the site (Erech in the biblical form) which is the most



Early south Mesopotamia

important source for it. These radical developments lead some scholars to postulate the entry of a new stratum of population which they identify as the Sumerians. This view is not to be rejected out of hand, but the changes can be explained otherwise.

Human conservatism often has the result that even where there are forces pointing the way towards change, it does not occur until pressure becomes irresistible. We may reasonably assume that pressure for change did develop during the *Ubaid* period: the value of communal effort in irrigation was evident to all, and as command of irrigation technology advanced, larger-scale works could be attempted, but these would require populations larger than a single village. If several villages combined into a larger social structure for such a purpose, other economic and political advantages would appear, such as increased opportunities for specialization, and greater bargaining power with other groups; and the advantages inherent in growth in community size would become evident, generating pressure towards development of cities.

Social changes would follow. Families descended from the earliest settlers would have taken possession of all the land best placed for irrigation, and as successful settlements sucked in the populations of less favoured villages, the newcomers would extend the irrigation systems to provide land for themselves. But there are limits to the area of land which can be watered from a particular network of canals, and a time would come when further extension was impracticable. Later immigrants, if they wished to settle, would have to work for the original landowners, either as labourers or as tenants paying their rent in the form of a share of their crops. A consequence of this would be the beginning of social stratification, in which it was only members of the old landowning families who enjoyed full citizen rights.

The best archaeological evidence for the development of cities comes from Erech. We have postulated the growth of the first cities from the combination of several earlier smaller settlements, and Erech did demonstrably develop on that basis. By 3000 BC it was a rapidly expanding city, with a population estimated at 50,000. As it expanded, old *Ubaid* settlements in the surrounding area became deserted, implying that their populations were being attracted into the developing city. Early in the third millennium a great enclosing defensive wall was built round Erech; this must surely indicate rivalry with other groups, most probably other developing cities, giving the threat of war. By this time the predominant language spoken in south Mesopotamia was certainly Sumerian, and it is proper to speak of the people as Sumerians, provided we do not import into that term any assumptions about racial origins.[5]

Although the city may have grown out of a group of villages, it was

something more than a mere overgrown village: it developed into a completely new social institution. Certainly a large proportion of its citizens continued to be concerned with work on the land, but the larger social structure made possible a degree of specialization which had no place in a village. It also served as a market, a centre for trade, and a regional shrine. The citizens, whether concerned with land, manufacturing, religion, or trade, all had their dwelling-places within the city walls, and all developed a sense of identity with the city, which created a powerful social force. The city was more than an urban complex: it was the centre of what it is now usual to call a city-state.

City-states

The term city-state was originally used in connection with Greece; Aristotle paid considerable attention to the concept. There the city-state was a region usually smaller than an English county, centred on an urban centre, with a population typically of between ten and twenty thousand, who governed themselves by an assembly of all citizens. It was to this form of political institution that the Greeks applied the term *demokratia*, democracy. Is it proper to apply the same terms to the institutions of early Sumer? The geographical structure was undoubtedly analogous. As to the form of early Sumerian society, we learn something of it from myths and epics, which originated in this period and presumably reflected human society at the time they arose. These indicate that originally government within Sumerian cities was by the assembly of all citizens, with particular influence resting with heads of families. This certainly conforms to Aristotle's definition of a city-state, and the form of government in the earliest stage of the Sumerian city-states leads some scholars to speak of it as primitive democracy.[6]

In view of these parallels, it is legitimate to ask, was there any historical connection between the early Sumerian and the Greek political institutions? A distinguished Greek historian has hinted at possible oriental influences upon the political form of the Greek city-states, by the tentative suggestion that they may have been modelled on, or at least coloured by, the system found in early first-millennium Phoenicia.[7]

But it is questionable whether there were any Phoenician city-states in the Greek sense. Certainly they met the geographical criteria, but their political systems were very different from those we associate with a city-state. We see this in the biblical account of Queen Jezebel of Israel. The story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21:1–16) puts it beyond doubt that Jezebel, a princess from one of the Phoenician royal houses in the ninth

century, had no concept of citizens' rights: she considered it intolerable that the ruler should not have absolute power over all the land of the state—a negation of one of the basic concepts of the city-state as known in both earliest Sumer and first-millennium Greece. Furthermore, we have inscriptions of Phoenician kings, which show them to have been hereditary and absolute, ruling as representatives of the gods; their political relations were with other kings, not with their own citizens. But even were it proper to speak of Phoenician city-states, they could not have originated under Sumerian influence, since down to late in the second millennium the main external political force in the region which afterwards became Phoenicia was always Egypt, not Mesopotamia. By the time Mesopotamia, in the form of Assyria, asserted its dominance there, the concept it brought was empire, not the city-state. There was, therefore, no possibility of dissemination of the political concept of the city-state from third-millennium Sumer to first-millennium Greece via Phoenicia. Similarities were the result only of parallel development under similar demographic and geographical conditions.

The rise of kingship

In earliest Sumer, although decision-making was a matter for the citizens as a whole, it was sometimes necessary to grant executive powers to one man. Typical instances were the need for someone to take the leading part at the city's rites for the New Year, to organize and direct communal canal-digging, or to lead the city's forces against an aggressor. Although appointments to such offices would in the first instance be on a temporary basis, they could soon take on a permanent nature. Military leaders have opportunities for establishing personal authority through the physical power they control, and leaders in the cult can do so by virtue of their ability to manipulate divine approval. Kingship in Sumer grew out of this, but kings did not immediately become absolute. One of the earliest kings was Gilgamesh, ruler of Erech at about 2700 BC, and the subject of several epics. One of these is particularly instructive about the balance of power in a city-state.[8] It tells how envoys came to Erech from the powerful city of Kish further north, demanding submission. Before making a decision, Gilgamesh, king though he was, had to consult the citizens. He first went to the city elders, and proposed resistance to the demands of Kish by force of arms. The elders, however, disagreed and timorously decided upon submission. Gilgamesh was unwilling to accept this, but it appears that he had no authority to overrule the elders on his own initiative, and he therefore put the case for resistance before the assembly of all the men of

the city of fighting age. This full assembly overruled the elders and backed Gilgamesh in his war plans. Here we see a situation in which, although there was a king as war leader, the normal forum for decisions was a council of elders, with the final decision reverting to the citizens as a whole in matters of the highest consequence.

The development of permanent kingship in Mesopotamian city-states eroded the earlier system of primitive democracy, but this did not bring conflict: there were both social and religious forces to ensure to the ruler the support of the citizens. Even after the citizens ceased to be the primary decision-makers, they continued to have rights in their city-state—land, access to water for irrigation, protection from violence against the person and economic exploitation, justice in disputes with other citizens, protection from external attack—and it was a primary function of the ruler to defend those rights. So long as he did so, he received the support of the citizenry, in courses of action which might involve war or trade missions outside the city-state territory. The ruler's role as a defence against aggression was particularly a source of support, for the people of the third millennium city-states felt a deep emotional attachment to their cities. When Ur was devastated at the end of the third millennium, a poet expressed the current feeling in a lamentation: in it he enumerated and mourned over the different parts of the city—its encircling wall, its great gate, its roads and avenues, its houses, the places where the citizenry were wont to take part in games and festivals, its temples—and showed that every feature was dear to him.[9]

But the strongest force making for acceptance of kingship was religion. Mesopotamian kingship, unlike Egyptian, was not essentially divine, but it had a religious dimension. In consequence, once it was fully developed, Mesopotamian theology incorporated it into the pattern of religious thought, so that it became established doctrine that kingship was one of the basic institutions of human life devised by the gods for mankind. This view was well represented by a work called the *Sumerian King List*.[10] This composition, originally compiled just before 2100 BC, purported to list all the kings of all dynasties ruling all Sumer from the beginning. Its opening words read

When the kingship was lowered from heaven, the kingship was in Eridu

and it then goes on to name two kings in Eridu who between them reigned 64,800 years. The kernel of truth behind this was that Eridu was indeed, as archaeology confirms, perhaps the most ancient of settlements inhabited continuously into Sumerian times, and in that sense it was the oldest centre of Sumerian civilization. But the supposed kings were as much a fantasy as the preposterously overlong reigns attributed to them:

they were an invention of priestly scribes, who believed that kingship was of divine origin and had existed since civilization began, and who could not imagine a prestigious city-state without a king. The actual names of the supposed kings could derive from ancient tribal leaders of the *Ubaid* period, vaguely remembered in oral tradition, but this is a guess. Apart from the absurd lengths of reign, historically there was no king who succeeded in extending his rule beyond his own city-state until the second quarter of the third millennium, and there were certainly no kings of Eridu who ruled all Sumer.

With due respect to the *Sumerian King List*, which is a document of unrivalled value for some aspects of early Sumerian history and civilization, historically kingship did not develop until well after 3000 BC, in what is referred to as the Early Dynastic period. The first kings in the list whose traditions can be linked to identifiable human beings are those of the cities of Kish and Erech at about 2700 BC. But these were still not comparable in the extent of their territory and power to the rulers of Egypt, where kingship over the whole country had already existed for 300–400 years. These earliest major Mesopotamian rulers made attempts at expanding their power, but with limited success. An epic already touched upon narrates how Akka, king of Kish, the strongest city in the north of south Mesopotamia, sought to obtain the submission of Erech in the south, where Gilgamesh reigned—and failed. Kish did, however, at this time achieve a measure of expansion, so that a king of Kish not long afterwards made himself the head of a federation of other city-states and was able to guarantee and enforce treaties between them. The rulers of less important states in such a confederation did not use the term *Lugal*, king, as their title, but called themselves *Ensi*, usually translated city-governor; there was a difference in status, but theologically an *Ensi* was, equally with a king, a ruler who acted on behalf of the gods.

Compared with Egypt, kingship in Mesopotamia came late. This was a matter partly of geography and partly of social structure. All settlements in Egypt were adjacent to the Nile and linked by it, a situation which enabled a central authority to exercise control equally everywhere. In southern Mesopotamia, although most settlements were associated with the Euphrates, the situation was geographically more complex. The Euphrates had at least six major channels, some of them further sub-divided, and some flowing into lakes or disappearing into marshes, so that it was impossible to establish the royal power throughout the country by a single progress along the Euphrates, as it was (except in the Delta) along the Nile. There was also a considerable hinterland of thickets of poplar, willow and date palm, as well as great areas of marsh, into which disaffected peoples could withdraw. Not until the second half of the third

millennium was a king first able to conquer all the city-states of south Mesopotamia and make them into the nucleus of an empire, and even then the unification was precarious. This meant that no early king in south Mesopotamia could tax the whole land on a regular basis as the pharaoh did in Egypt, and in consequence the economic resources controlled by Early Dynastic rulers were in no way comparable to those of contemporary Egyptian kings. Even the most powerful Mesopotamian ruler down to well after the middle of the third millennium would have been quite unable to attempt any such vast public work as the building of a major pyramid. Another factor in the lesser power of a Mesopotamian king was that he lacked the supreme sanction of being a god; a deficiency which, however, in due course some rulers attempted to remedy.

The Early Dynastic period

As city-states developed during the Early Dynastic period (roughly 2900–2400 BC) specialization increased, with many categories of craftsmen represented—potters, metalworkers, jewellers, makers of cylinder seals, leatherworkers, masons, manufacturers of textiles—and trade links were forged with other cities and regions abroad. But irrigation-based agriculture remained central to the economy, and ownership of land played a vital part in the social, economic and administrative structure.

The old basic social unit, going back to before the rise of the city, was the extended family. The earliest communities were made up of groups of such families, all of which, in the early settlements, had a share in the community land. Every member of an extended family had rights in the use of the family land, but the land was not divided up into individually owned plots. Women as well as men could enjoy land rights.

There were factors which eventually eroded the original social and economic equalities of families in the community. The layout of irrigation canals could make land in some parts of a developing city-state considerably more productive than that elsewhere, and families so favoured in their land would become exceptionally prosperous and be in a position to wield particular influence through their economic strength. When community leaders were needed, they would be likely to be chosen from such families. This would be the social setting of the first kings, and of the persons whom they appointed as their lieutenants and courtiers.

Other families might be so disadvantageously placed that ultimately they would be driven to give up their land. Family land could be sold, but only with the consent of all persons with rights in it; such sales were usually negotiated by senior representatives of the family, with other

members acting as witnesses. To sell family land involved a major break with tradition and a loss of status, and would only happen under severe economic pressure. By buying out the land of families in distressed circumstances, members of the wealthier groups could build up large personal holdings. Later in the Early Dynastic period, we find that members of the ruling circle typically owned private estates running to several hundred acres. Thus there came to be a wealthy nobility and a class of landless citizens alongside the original landowning families.

There also developed temple estates. At the earliest stage of settlement, the priest responsible for the community's religious rituals would receive a plot from the community land, which, in view of his vital specialist duties, other members of the community worked for him. But the divine sanctions he wielded would ensure further donations of land and manpower to the shrine, so that its lands would gradually grow into a considerable estate. Since there may originally have been more than one primitive shrine within the territory which grew into the city, several temple estates could develop within one city-state. In one city-state for which approximate figures are available later in the Early Dynastic period, it is calculated that more than a quarter of all the land belonged to temple estates.[11]

Once kingship had developed, there also came to be royal estates. The nucleus of these would be the private landholdings of the early kings, but as the king's powers moved in the direction of despotism, he became in a position to extend the royal estates. We find cases of family land being sold to the king at so low a price (the equivalent of two years' crops or less) that it must have been a forced sale.

Thus we see the origin of a tripartite system, with landholding families, royal estates and temple estates. But there were also landless citizens. Their nucleus comprised later immigrants to the city-state, who did not share the rights in communal land enjoyed by older families, and their numbers were eventually swelled by members of former landowning families who had sold their land under economic pressure. There were various ways in which such people might maintain themselves: they might use a skill in some craft, or become hired workers or sharecroppers with landowning families, or take service in temple estates or in the royal administration. Members of landholding families as well as landless citizens could serve as administrators for the temples or the king.

The king would normally reward those who served him with a grant of land; legally the ownership of such land remained with the king, but it could become de facto an hereditary holding if the grantee had a son able to succeed to his duties. Royal administrators might include the collection of taxes amongst their duties, and in view of the opportunities that gave

for extortion, they could become wealthy men, able to buy up plots of land to form their own private estates.

The various groups in the city-state should not be thought of as rival blocks. Certainly clashes of interest could arise, in which family landholdings were the most vulnerable, but serious conflict was held in check by mutual inter-dependence. The temple authorities knew that their agriculture and trade depended upon a ruler able to give stable government and protect the state from aggression; citizens needed the king to enforce just laws and the gods to give fertility; and the king depended upon the approval of the gods and loyal support from the citizens.

Imperialism

A major change came with the beginning of imperialism. Even during the Early Dynastic period, some ambitious rulers had attempted to subdue other city-states by military conquest, but with only limited and transitory success. The first to succeed was a ruler known as Sargon, in the twenty-fourth century.

Although we speak of the civilization of the Early Dynastic period as Sumerian civilization, there were people of language groups other than Sumerian who contributed to it: in the northern half of south Mesopotamia there were many people whose mother tongue was the Semitic language Akkadian. Throughout history, Semitic-speakers have entered from the Syrian desert to settle in Mesopotamia; Semitic loanwords in the earliest Sumerian texts show that some Semitic-speakers had already settled there in the fourth millennium. Some historians have seen Semites and Sumerians as two distinct ethnic or racial groups in competition for south Mesopotamia, but this would have left evidence of inter-racial conflict, and there is none. Quite a number of Early Dynastic 'Sumerian' kings bore Semitic names, and so did many scribes who wrote in Sumerian. The fact is that what for convenience we call Sumerian civilization was a joint creation of peoples who had met and mixed in south Mesopotamia, and who, after centuries or millennia in the same geographical background, differed in little other than their mother tongue.

Sargon (2371–2316 BC) was one of the Semitic-speaking group. He had been a high official of a king of Kish, under whom he founded his own city, Agade, not far from where Babylon later rose to supremacy. After the formerly powerful Kish had been eclipsed by an expansionist king of Erech, Sargon overthrew the latter. He now made a clever use of religion

to obtain formal recognition of himself as the overlord of the whole country. He did this by displaying the conquered king in a neck-stock before the great Sumerian god Enlil in the central city of Nippur and claiming that it was Enlil who had given him the victory, a claim in which the Nippur priesthood concurred. He then proceeded to use a combination of religious propaganda and military conquest to gain control of all city-states in south Mesopotamia.

Sargon was the first ruler to have a permanent professional army, and spoke of 5400 soldiers who daily took their meals in his presence. As he conquered other city-states he destroyed their walls to deprive potential rebels of strongholds. Where the *Ensi* (city-governor) was willing to transfer his allegiance, he left the old administration in office; in other cities, he filled governorships with his own townsmen. By these means he began the breakdown of the autonomy of the old city-state system, and started a move towards centralized government. These measures left Sargon with a much stronger economic and military base than any of his predecessors, and gave him the resources to make possible expansion outside south Mesopotamia. He and his successors conquered the principal cities in a region stretching from 'the cedar forest and the Silver mountains', that is, the Amanus in north Syria and the Taurus in Asia Minor beyond, to well down the Persian Gulf, and into southwest Iran. This was a commercial rather than a political empire. It was primarily directed towards trade, but, to serve that end, the Sargonic rulers were ready and able to attack and destroy cities whose competition as major trading centres injured the interests of Agade. They also set up garrisoned fortresses at strategic points to protect trade routes. Sargon's interest in trade is reflected in the fact that he made his capital Agade the principal port on the Euphrates, and boasted of ships berthed there from Tilmun, Magan and Meluhha, probably respectively Bahrein with some of the Arabian coast, Oman or the Iranian coast opposite, and the Indus valley (on these contacts see pp. 139–42). Such activities made Agade a city of great wealth, and Sargon's grandson, Naram-Sin, felt sufficiently exalted in status to write his name in a way which implied that he was a god.

The empire founded by Sargon lasted just over a century. Its final collapse was triggered by invasion by a people from the Zagros, who dislocated trade and ruined the irrigation system, but essentially was due to its inherent instability: both Sargon and his successors had to put down revolts. When, near the end of the third millennium, a new power structure developed, known as the Third Dynasty of Ur, its territory was more limited, but it benefited by a more efficient infrastructure, in the form of a highly bureaucratic royal administration, of which we have the records in cuneiform tablets running to hundreds of thousands.

Class and race in ancient society

Economic stratification in the early states put members of one class into a position to exploit and oppress those of another. But in both Egypt and Mesopotamia a social conscience developed to condemn such oppression. Very early it was accepted that it was a major responsibility of the king to protect the economically weak against the powerful. Perhaps the springs of this concern were not without an element of self-interest. To leave a major population element subject to intolerable hardship brought the risk of disorder and instability; to allow one social stratum to ride roughshod over another could end in a challenge to the royal power itself. But however it came about, kings and great princes accepted the defence of the weak as a primary duty. In Mesopotamia this principle was incorporated into written law, and may have been a major factor in its origin (p. 162). It was no less important in Egypt, where it became incorporated into religious thought, and as a principle in the administration of justice. Some rulers boasted of their concern for their people. A prince under the Eighteenth Dynasty says: 'No one was hungry in my time. In famine years I ploughed the fields in my nome, . . . to keep its people alive. . . . I gave to the widow and the married woman alike.'

The most depressed class was the slaves. Slavery was an internal development within ancient societies and not an essential element in their origin. None of the pre-classical societies were economically dependent upon slave labour, although most increasingly came to use slaves, as military conquests brought in more and more prisoners-of-war. The earliest slaves in Mesopotamia were men or women captured in raids on the mountains, so that the ideograms for 'slave' and 'slave-girl' were compounds from the signs for 'man' or 'woman' plus the sign for 'mountain'. As states developed their potential for aggression against their neighbours, the numbers enslaved increased. The Agade king Rimush, just before 2300 BC, attacked his eastern neighbours, slaughtering (so he proudly claimed) 17,000 men and taking 4000 prisoner. Of the captives, he dedicated six slaves to the god Enlil, retaining the rest as forced labour for the state. Two centuries later, Shu-Sin of Ur organized his war-captives in labour camps.

The story was similar in Egypt. From early in the third millennium there are references in texts, or reflections in art, of royal raids into Palestine for cattle and human booty, and under the Sixth Dynasty we find a royal officer boasting of the multitude of captives he brought back from a major expedition there. In the middle of the second millennium Tuthmosis III listed war prisoners from Palestine, taken to Memphis as state labour, totalling, with their families, 89,600.[12]

But despite the increasing number of prisoners-of-war as slaves, most state work in the third millennium, in both Mesopotamia and Egypt, including the building of the pyramids, was undertaken by free men, who had an obligation for corvée service. Corvée service doubtless at times produced hardship, but free men could, and did, strike if conditions became too harsh. A Babylonian myth tells of junior gods going on strike and burning their tools because their irrigation work was too hard, and in Egypt during the reign of Ramesses III (1193–1162 BC) workmen went on strike when their rations fell into arrears.

In Mesopotamia later in the third millennium, the practice developed of reducing citizens to slavery for debt, and such slavery was well institutionalized by the eighteenth century, since five of Hammurabi's laws controlled aspects of it. Later, children were often made over to temples to save their lives in times of famine, and an economically important class of temple slaves grew up from this source in first-millennium Babylonia. Such slaves might come to hold important positions within the temple administration.

Slavery as an institution, apart from state slaves captured abroad, began in Egypt only in the Middle Kingdom. By about 1750 BC, we hear of wealthy people owning slave establishments of the order of forty or fifty men, women and children, whom they used to run their households and estates. But in both Mesopotamia and Egypt, state and temple slave labour always remained more prominent than domestic slaves.

Other regions give a similar picture of the relative unimportance of domestic slaves as a social and economic factor. Although the Hittite laws reveal a social stratification, the less privileged group were hardly slaves as we understand the term, since they could own property and received compensation for injury. For this reason, where I have had occasion to mention such people I have used the term 'unfree' rather than 'slave'. They seemed to correspond quite closely to the *mushkenum* class in Hammurabi's laws (p. 44). In Crete of the late second millennium, Linear B tablets show the presence of domestic slaves, but give no suggestion that the economy was dependent upon slave labour. The Israelites had slaves and legislated about them, but the institution was socially so insignificant that it rarely surfaces in the biblical narratives. Enslavement of an Israelite sold for debt was limited to six years and when such a slave was released he had to be set up with livestock and food (Deuteronomy 15:12–14). This provision had a parallel in Mesopotamia, where kings in the Old Bablylonian period sometimes issued an edict of *mesharum*, literally 'righteousness' or 'justice', which was an economic measure which included the release of citizens who had had to sell themselves into slavery for debt.

Despite their stratification, ancient societies were not rigid caste systems, and always retained a degree of social mobility. The possibility of rising within society is specifically mentioned in Egyptian texts from the Old Kingdom period; the *Instruction of the Vizier Ptahhotep* counsels a man who has become rich after being poor not to pride himself upon his wealth, and a man who serves an official who rose from humble circumstances not to be presumptuous towards him on that account.

Social mobility could extend even to the top, for in both Mesopotamia and Egypt it from time to time happened that a man not of royal birth became king. Any problems to which this gave rise were not social but religious; the main difficulty was that the king was a god in Egypt, and in Mesopotamia the chief earthly representative of the god, but the priests had means of soothing these problems away. It happened with Sargon of Agade. In tradition his father was unknown, indicating not bastardy but rather that he was of humble birth. But there were ways of giving a man of humble origin the necessary link with the divine: in Sargon's case, the establishment created the legend that he was the son of a High Priestess, who, because she should not have yielded herself to a man, bore him secretly. Such a mother's son was worthy to be a king, for a High Priestess was often of royal blood and always the wife of a god. Near the end of ancient Egypt's history, Alexander the Great received priestly promotion when he conquered the country in 332 BC. Foreigner though he was, with no claim of divinity and no shadow of former link with Egypt, he became recognized as the legitimate god-king of the country by a visit to the oracle of the god Amun in the oasis of Siwa, where the god decreed that Alexander was his own son and thus himself a god.

Nor were other social distinctions fixed and final: the man who began landless could become a landowner, the slave could be granted his freedom, and the free man could be reduced to slavery for debt. There were several paths to land ownership. Kings needed administrators, and rewarded them with grants of land. A merchant who became wealthy by trade was able to buy plots of land and consolidate them into an estate; even in regions where customary law forbade the sale of ancestral land, wealthy merchants could get round the prohibition by the legal fiction of being adopted by the seller and receiving the land by inheritance.

At one stage in the early second millennium, there was briefly a more formal class division in Mesopotamia. Hammurabi's laws recognized three social classes and graded penalties for offences according to whether the victim was a gentleman (*awilum*, a member of one of the old landowning families), a landless free citizen (*mushkenum*), or a slave (*wardum*). But the distinction at law between *awilum* and *mushkenum* disappeared after the Old Babylonian period.

Ethnic divisions played little part in major ancient Near Eastern societies. This is very clear for Mesopotamia. The third millennium knew no split on racial lines between the speakers of different languages, and no such split developed later. The cultural pressure of Mesopotamian society ensured that although many diverse ethnic groups entered Mesopotamia, all were eventually assimilated, and none permanently stood apart.

We see a good example of this in the Amorites, nomads from the Syrian desert. When they started to enter Mesopotamia in the late third millennium, the established population mocked them as savages, barbarians unacquainted with corn and with no proper burial rites. But once the Amorites had settled and adopted Mesopotamian institutions, this attitude disappeared. Hammurabi, of Amorite origin, did not think of himself as a foreigner imposing a new system on Mesopotamia; he saw himself as part of the old society, and in the prologue to his laws (p. 158) he attributed his success to his call by the old Sumerian gods. And although in his laws Hammurabi recognizes the social division between gentleman, free man, and slave, he nowhere makes any distinctions between his subjects on the grounds of their ethnic origin.

The Cassite Dynasty which followed the First Dynasty of Babylon was another case. Undoubtedly of foreign origin and of a different ethnic group, after a century they were just Babylonians in almost every respect. The only relics of their foreign origin was that they had introduced a new type of boundary-stone to mark land grants, and some of their kings (but not all) still bore names of Cassite origin. Within a hundred years their religion, their language, their buildings, their economy, and their social institutions had all become Babylonian.

In Assyria, the Hurrian annexation of the country in the fifteenth century left a strong Hurrian ethnic element, reflected in Hurrian names and ancestries of Assyrian officials of later times. But yet there is nowhere the slightest evidence of discrimination against anyone on the grounds that he was of Hurrian descent.

It was the same too with the Aramaeans, nomads who entered Mesopotamia from about 1200 BC. Some of them did remain outside the main stream of the life of Assyria and Babylonia for several centuries. But this was not because of rejection by the older populations on ethnic grounds; it was a matter of their own tribal social structure. Those Aramaeans who chose to settle were so rapidly assimilated that before 1050 BC an Aramaean had made himself king of Babylonia, and was so readily accepted that, usurper though he was, the king of Assyria married his daughter. More than that, the union was consciously recognized as making for harmony amongst peoples: by it, the marriage agreement said, 'the people of Assyria and Karduniash [Babylonia] were mingled together'.

The case for ethnic tolerance in Egypt is less easy to establish. Indeed, the Bible could be taken to show that it did not exist, since Genesis 43:32 makes the statement that 'The Egyptians might not eat bread with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination unto the Egyptians'. But this is an editor's comment from the first millennium, and may reflect Israelite rather than Egyptian attitudes.

Egypt's borders provided strong natural defences against major invasions, so that the large-scale immigration of foreign ethnic groups was far less common than in Mesopotamia. Nonetheless from earliest times small-scale infiltration took place from Sinai, Libya and Nubia. Provided this was not too massive, it was frequently tolerated, so that we have, for example, records of nomadic tribesmen being allowed to enter Egypt from Sinai to pasture their cattle, just as Genesis 47:1–6 tells us of the Israelites.

There was only one successful major invasion of Egypt before the first millennium. This was the entry from Palestine of the people known as the Hyksos. Beginning as infiltration in the late eighteenth century, by the early seventeenth it had become an invasion, by which Hyksos rulers imposed themselves on the Delta area. Eventually their control of Egypt extended southwards to somewhere short of Thebes, where a native Egyptian king continued to rule. They were finally expelled by the middle of the sixteenth century BC. The Hyksos were never fully assimilated and in later Egypt they were always thought of as barbarous foreigners.

But the basis of the Egyptian attitude to the Hyksos was not racialist. The earliest immigrant phase of the Hyksos entry was not opposed; the subsequent Egyptian objection to them was because they were no longer immigrants sharing the Egyptian way of life, but conquerors seeking to impose alien institutions and subjugate native Egyptians.

Later attempted invasions brought a similar reaction—vigorous opposition founded not on racial hostility but on determination to defend the Egyptian way of life. In the thirteenth century groups known as the Sea peoples attempted to settle along the coasts of Palestine and Egypt. Some, such as the Pelestu (Philistines), succeeded. But they were finally beaten off from Egypt, in a major sea battle in about 1186 BC. But the Egyptians, much as they disliked the Sea Peoples as invaders, had no objection to them as an ethnic group, since some of the earliest wave, called Sherden, who later gave their name to Sardinia, were taken into Ramesses II's bodyguard and later received grants of land.