Part 1

Ancient Asia

Chapter 1

Ancient West Asia

Exhausted, Ninhursag yearned for a beer.
The great gods languished where she sat weeping.
Like sheep they could only bleat their distress.
Thirsty they were, their lips rimed with hunger.
For seven whole days and seven whole nights
The torrent, the storm, the flood still raged on.
Then Atrahasis put down his great boat
And sacrificed oxen and many goats.
Smelling the fragrance of the offering
Like big flies, the gods kept buzzing about.

From the Sumerian story of the Flood

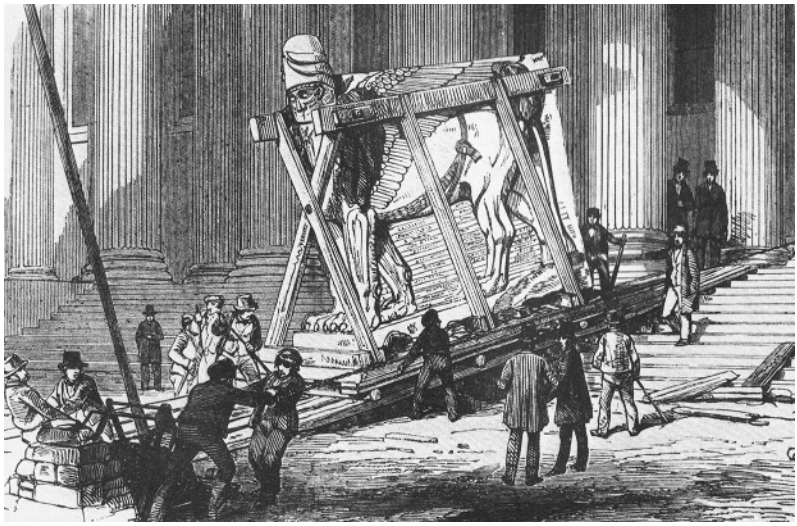
The First Civilisation: Sumer

Appreciation of Asia's antiquity is recent. Apart from China, whose uniquely continuous civilisation preserved a record of its own ancient origin, the rest of the Asian continent had to

wait for modern archaeology to reveal the cultural achievements of the earliest city dwellers. Excavations over the past century and a half have uncovered lost civilisations in West Asia as well as India. Near Mosul in northern Iraq, exploration of a mound at the site of ancient Nineveh resulted in the recovery of the library belonging to the Assyrian kings, a treasure trove for understanding the world's first civilisation. Surviving texts provide a means of approaching the Sumerians, who founded their cities more than two thousand years before Nineveh fell in 612 BC to a combined attack of the Babylonians and the Iranian Medes. The destruction of this last Assyrian city ushered in the final era of ancient West Asian history, that of Persian power.

Because the royal library comprised a collection of Mesopotamian compositions going right back to Sumerian times, it is hardly surprising that their translation became a focus of keen interest. No one could have expected, however, the sensation caused in 1872 by the Babylonian story of the Flood, an event that appears first in *Atrahasis*, the name of the Noah-like hero of this oldest Sumerian epic. There is no mention of sinfulness as in the biblical account: instead, the gods inundated the Earth to stop the racket that people were making below the stairs. The sky god Enlil found sleep quite impossible, so plague, famine and flood were in turn employed to reduce the numbers then overcrowding the world. Warning of the final disaster was given to Atrahasis by Enki, the Sumerian water god.

Although in the 1920s discoveries of mounds in the Indus valley led to the excavation of two ruined cities at Mohenjo-daro in Sind and Harappa in western Punjab, and in the process redrew the world map of ancient civilisations, the finds had a less dramatic impact than the earlier Mesopotamian ones because of our inability to decipher the Indus script. Sumer and Babylon had long emerged in a civilised way of living at the time the inhabitants of the Indus valley built their remarkable cities. Only China was a late starter in Asia, the Indus civilisation having collapsed more than a century before its first historical dynasty, the Shang, arose about 1650 BC on the north China plain. In spite of the decipherment problem, the material remains of the Indus valley cities bear witness to an influence on the subcontinent's chief concern, namely religion. Defeated though they were by the Aryan invaders, the Indus valley people were not without their revenge because their beliefs came to have a profound effect on the outlook of the Aryans. Besides absorbing the Indus preoccupation with ritual ablution, they became



The arrival at the British Museum of an Assyrian bull statue that was excavated at ancient Nimrud in 1847

fascinated by the possibilities of yoga, whose austerities were supposed to empower the rishis, divinely inspired seers. That an Indus valley seal shows a horned god in a yoga posture may explain the rise of Shiva, "the divine rishi", to a senior position in the Hindu pantheon, displacing warlike Indra. It had been Indra as Purandara, "the fort destroyer", who gave the invading Aryans victory over the Indus valley settlements.

Nothing is known about the arrival of the Sumerians in southern Iraq. As they believed that they had travelled in a westerly direction, the discovery of the Indus civilisation has encouraged the idea of the Sumerians being earlier occupiers of northwestern India. But it is just as likely that they moved into the Tigris–Euphrates river valleys from Iran, as did other migrants attracted to their agricultural potential, although there is also the possibility that the Sumerians always lived in Iraq. The name by which they are called is Babylonian, which means the people who live in Sumer, southern Babylonia. They named their own country Kengir, "the civilised land": it stretched from the sea to the city of Nippur, one hundred kilometres south of present-day Baghdad. A semi-arid climate ensured that irrigation was essential from the start, artificial canals eventually developing into an extensive network that required constant supervision, dredging and repair. As a result of this management of

The ruins of the ziggurat, or stepped temple, at Ur

water resources, groups of villages came under the direction of larger settlements, the first cities ruled by princes or kings, who considered themselves to be representatives of the gods. The Sumerians seem only to have distinguished between city prince, ensi, and king, lugal, after 2650 BC, the approximate date for the establishment of the earliest known royal dynasty.

Fundamental to a Sumerian king's power was a large retinue of unfree retainers, in part recruited from captives whose lives the king had spared. This military tradition lingered into the medieval period: the Janissaries of the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II, who captured Constantinople in 1453, were all ex-Christian slaves. These lifelong soldiers even formed the sultan's personal bodyguard. Like the Janissaries, the Sumerian king owned his retainers body and soul: they ate with him in the palace and did his bidding in war as well as peace. In addition to this power base, rulers sought to broaden their support by making their authority available to the underprivileged in Sumerian society: they presided over a legal system designed to protect the least well-off from the rich and powerful.

Because cities expanded around temples, the nuclei of all significant foundations, the Sumerians looked to the resident deities for prosperity. In the southernmost cities, situated close to the marshlands, the city gods were connected with fishing and fowling; upriver divine influence was spread over fields and orchards, the date growers paying special attention to the prodigious powers of Inanna, goddess of fertility; in the grasslands, worship was given over to Dumuzi, the holy shepherd. Because she combined in her person several originally distinct goddesses, Inanna was the most important goddess in the Sumerian pantheon, a variant of her name being Ninanna, "mistress of heaven". Identified with the planet Venus as the morning and the evening star, Inanna was the bitter enemy of her sister goddess Ereshkigal, "the mistress of death", and once she had the temerity to visit the "land of no return" so as to assert her own authority there. At each of its seven portals, she was obliged to take off a garment or ornament, until at last she stood naked before Ereshkigal. After hanging on a stake for three days, the water god Enki sent two sexless beings to revive Inanna's corpse with the "food and water of life".

But after her escape from death, the goddess could not shake off a ghastly escort of demons who followed her as she wandered from city to city. They refused to depart unless a substitute was found. So Inanna returned home to Uruk, took offence in finding her husband Dumuzi at a feast, and let the demons carry him off to Ereshkigal's underworld. Thereafter Dumuzi's fate was spending half the year in the land of the living, the other half with the dead. Thus he became West Asia's original dying-and-rising god.

At Uruk there is compelling evidence that the king acted as an intermediary between the city and the city goddess through the New Year rite of a sacred marriage. The ruler impersonated Dumuzi, a high priestess Inanna. One text has the king of Uruk boast how he

> lay on the splendid bed of Inanna, strewn with pure plants . . .
> The day did not dawn, the night did not pass. For fifteen hours
> I lay with Inanna.

Capable of making endless love, the goddess was the awakening force that stirs desire in people and causes ripeness in vegetation. A ruler's enjoyment of "the sweetness of her holy loins" was regarded by the Sumerians as vitally important because this sacred coupling guaranteed a city's survival. It is tempting to see their joy during the festival as recognition that a new seasonal cycle was about to begin, marked by

the return of Dumuzi from the underworld to Inanna's "ever youthful bed". In the *Song of Solomon* we find an unexpected parallel of such sensuousness, when "until the break of day, and the shadows fell away", the lover is exhorted to act "like a roe and a young hart on the mountains of Bether". This short love poem may well echo the rite of sacred marriage, even though an alternative view looks to Egypt for the source of inspiration. The authorship and the date of composition, not to say the inclusion of the *Song of Solomon* in the Bible, remain an unsolved mystery.

Uruk is also the setting of the Babylonian epic about Gilgamesh, a legendary Sumerian king whose original name was Bilgames. The city's earliest rulers fascinated later poets, much as the heroes of the Trojan War did the Greek epic poet Homer. They were the favourite subjects of court entertainment, their adventures being retold to ruler after ruler. Though it was the writing school of King Shulgi at Ur that set down for posterity the literary tradition of Sumer just before the close of the third millennium BC, the fullest surviving text of Gilgamesh's exploits comes from the Assyrian royal library at Nineveh. Translation of a small section of the epic was responsible for the furore in 1872, because it relates the visit made by Gilgamesh to his ancestor Utanapishtim, the one chosen to escape the Flood that "returned all mankind to clay". A later version of the Sumerian hero Atrahasis, this venerable sage was prepared to impart truth only to the man who dared to find him and was capable of doing so. The reason for Gilgamesh's visit to Utanapishtim was the grief that had overwhelmed him on the death of his companion Enkidu, something the distraught hero refused to accept as the inevitable end to life. Gilgamesh "wept over the corpse for seven days and seven nights, refusing to give it up for burial until a maggot fell from one of the nostrils".

Reaching Utanapishtim's subterranean house, Gilgamesh learns that his quest is hopeless, when Utanapishtim tells him he cannot resist sleep, let alone death. The only chance is a fantastic plant named "Never Grow Old" at the bottom of the sea. At great risk Gilgamesh fetches it from the deep and happily turns his steps to Uruk, but on his way home, while he dozes by a waterhole, a serpent smells the wonderful perfume of the leaves, and swallows the lot. Immediately the snake was able to slough its skin, and Gilgamesh realised that there was no way that he could avoid the underworld, "the house of dust".

Ereshkigal, "the mistress of death", and Inanna's implacable enemy

Our knowledge of the Sumerians derives from their invention of writing, quite possibly the most consequential advance in all human history. This stroke of genius not only gave support to an expanding economy, through easing communication within crowded cities, but it also permitted the formation of reliable archives. Obviously the use of script, as a substitute for verbal agreements, was of immediate value in commercial transactions, the importance of which can be gauged from the protection afforded to trade routes by successive kings. Even more valuable for a record of the very first civilisation on the planet was the ability to set down in a permanent medium the ideas that informed its workings. Without the Sumerian script we would neither possess poetical works such as the *Gilgamesh* epic, nor appreciate

Life-size alabaster mask that once fitted
on a wooden statue of Inanna at Uruk

how deep was the Sumerian preoccupation with death. About 3000 BC, the Sumerians in Uruk hit upon the notion of creating hundreds of pictograms, plus signs for numbers and measures: these were pressed into clay tablets with a reed stylus to compose what is called the cuneiform system of writing.

The idea that it was possible to capture a language by means of writing travelled along the ancient trade routes. In Babylon the adoption of cuneiform for Akkadian, a Semitic tongue, meant that long after Sumerian became a dead language the educated remained familiar with it—just as Latin was prized in Europe until the Renaissance. The first Semites must have entered northern Babylonia not much later than the Sumerians, whom they eventually submerged through further waves of migration. Elam was the first state in Iran to follow Babylon's example and, given established trade links between Mesopotamia and India via the island of Bahrain, stimulus for the Indus script could well have derived from merchant enterprise as well. Those who suggest that the idea of writing spread beyond India to China are wrong, however. Finds at Banpo, a fortified village close to modern Xi'an, in Shaanxi province, indicate how about the same time that the Sumerians began writing on clay tablets, its inhabitants incised their pottery with the antecedents of Chinese characters. Although fully developed words are not in

evidence until the Shang kings recorded queries to their exulted ancestors on oracle bones, the extreme antiquity of the Banpo signs argues against diffusion.

The unification of Sumer curtailed inter-city conflicts once disputes came to be settled by royal adjudication. This wider system of government formed the context of Uruinimgina's laws, which stand at the head of a long series including Hammurabi's famous code. King Uruinimgina of Lagash deplored his predecessors' confiscation of temple properties, which he returned. Driven from Lagash, he continued to rule as king at Girsu before being taken prisoner by the Semitic ruler of Akkad, where he died in 2340 BC. Even though the location of Akkad remains unknown, this ancient city was situated somewhere in northern Babylonia. For the Sumerians its rise as an imperial power spelt the beginning of the end of their independence. Yet Akkad's favourite instrument of power, wholesale massacre, could not ultimately ensure the survival of an empire that included Mesopotamia and Syria as well as eastern Asia Minor. Its nemesis

An early example of cuneiform, the writing system invented by the Sumerians about 3000 BC

were the semi-nomadic Gutians, who descended from the mountains of Iran and terrorised Semites and Sumerians alike.

After the collapse of Akkad, there occurred a last flourishing of Sumerian culture, which was recorded by King Shulgi's scribes. His capital at Ur escaped the violent attentions of new raiders from Iran through the construction shortly before 2050 BC of "a wall in front of the mountains". But his successors were less fortunate when the Elamites, supported by their Iranian allies, launched a devastating attack on Sumer. A lament tells us how "water no longer flows in weed-free canals, the hoe does not tend fertile fields, no seed is planted in the ground, on the plain the oxherd's song goes unheard, and in the cattle pen there is never the sound of churning". The gods have gone, their temples defiled, and ancient ways "are changed forever". Not even the dogs of Ur remained in the ruined city.

The Great Empires: Babylon, Assyria and Persia

Archaeological recovery of Babylon's past followed in the wake of the discoveries in ancient Assyria. Despite being less spectacular than those of Nineveh, the excavation of northern Babylonia led to a realisation that here was another early Asian civilisation of great sophistication. How else could Babylon have once been renowned for its Hanging Gardens? Together with the city's walls, they were regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Babylon was founded shortly after the Elamite devastation of Sumer. During these troubled times its inhabitants had the benefit of a political stability absent elsewhere in Mesopotamia because, instead of a series of short-lived dynasties, the first royal house ruled Babylon for almost three centuries. The city was strongly fortified and its influence gradually spread far and wide. Instrumental in this growth of power was King Hammurabi, whose reign witnessed the acceptance of Babylon's suzerainty over all Mesopotamia. His inscriptions show that he styled himself as the ruler of Babylonia and Sumer; he was "King of the Four Quarters of the World". Although Babylon went on the defensive after Hammurabi's death in 1750 BC, the hegemony he secured for the city bestowed on it a lasting fame.

One of the steles on which King Hammurabi's law code was recorded

The mystique surrounding the city's name survives today, as does Hammurabi's law code, which was carved on forty-nine stone columns, 2.25 metres high. In the settlement of disputes between citizens, it reveals how the Semitic custom of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" replaced the system of fines used by the Sumerians, who preferred to recompense physical injury with an appropriate payment, although murder and robbery were punished by death. Possibly Hammurabi considered this approach was inadequate for deterring crime in a newly acquired empire. The legacy of his harsh laws still informs attitudes in West Asia: turning the other cheek is not the usual response to a modern insult.

The eclipse of Babylon's first dynasty occurred in 1595 BC, when a raid by the Hittite king Mursilis I resulted in a sack of the city. Curiously, he withdrew to Asia Minor afterwards, and the Kassites took advantage of the power vacuum to seize control. They had begun to infiltrate northern Babylonia from Iran during the reigns of Hammurabi's successors, and Kassite kings were not seen as foreign intruders when their own long-lasting dynasty was in turn overthrown by the Elamites about 1152 BC. That the greatest king of the next Babylonian dynasty, Nebuchadrezzar I, was remembered for his chastisement of the Elamites only serves to underline the affection felt for the deposed Kassite kings. Nebuchadrezzar, the usual English spelling of Nabu-kudrri-usur, is based on a later Hebrew corruption of the name given to Nebuchadrezzar II in the Bible. Nebuchadrezzar was the fourth king of the new Isin dynasty, ruling in Babylon himself for twenty-two years.

In capturing the statue of Marduk, the patron deity of Babylon, the Elamites had utterly humiliated the Babylonians. A first attempt to

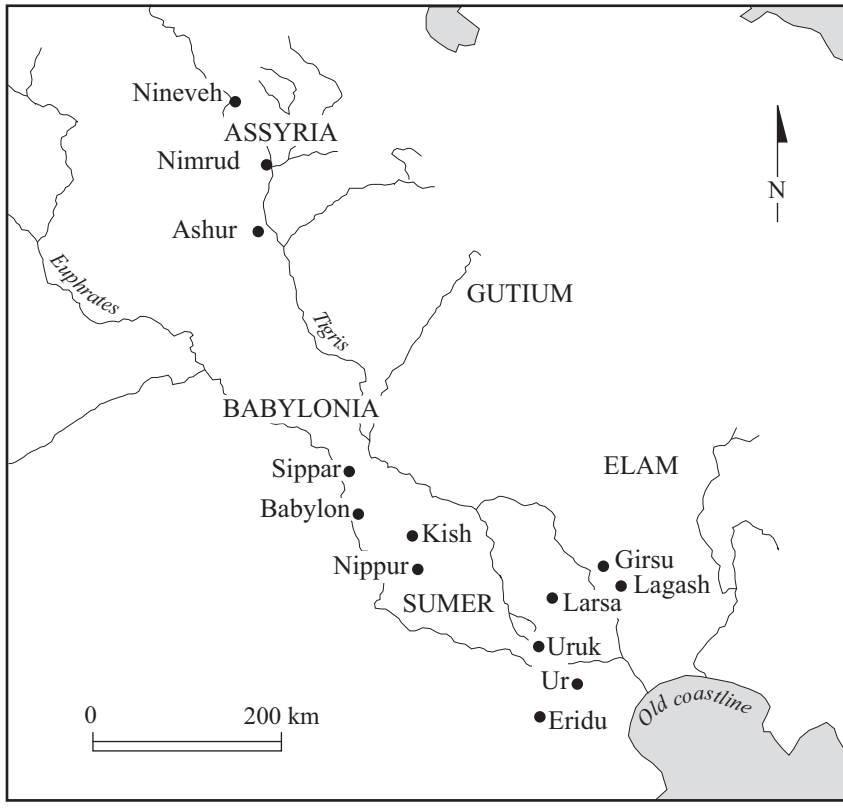
return the cult statue to its rightful place in the great temple of Esagila was thwarted by an outbreak of plague in Nebuchadrezzar's army. Having received favourable omens for a second attack on Elam, Nebuchadrezzar gathered his chariotry together and advanced in sweltering heat one summer. We are told how gruelling the campaign was

> in the month of Dumuzu, when soldiers' axes burnt like fire in their hands, and the surface of the road scorched like flame. In the wells, there was no water, nothing was available to slake a terrible thirst. The strength of the horses gave out, and even the legs of the strongest warriors shook with fatigue.

But the almost disastrous advance caught the Elamites by surprise, and next to a river the dust raised by a great battle "blotted out the light of day". The right wing of Nebuchadrezzar's chariotry decided the outcome and in triumph the Babylonians bore Marduk home.

Whatever the military significance of the encounter, the chronicler says that "the great god Marduk has clearly relented his anger against his land and has returned to take care of it again". It may be that Nebuchadrezzar capitalised on the rare defeat of Elam by declaring Marduk to be not only the city god of Babylon but the supreme god of the Babylonian pantheon. In Marduk's temple the monarch participated in an annual ritual of renewal, a reaffirmation of his right to rule. To this ceremony the gods of the other major cities were brought as witnesses, until unsettled conditions towards the end of Nebuchadrezzar's reign caused a temporary interruption of the practice, because it was too risky for their cult statues to be carried to Babylon.

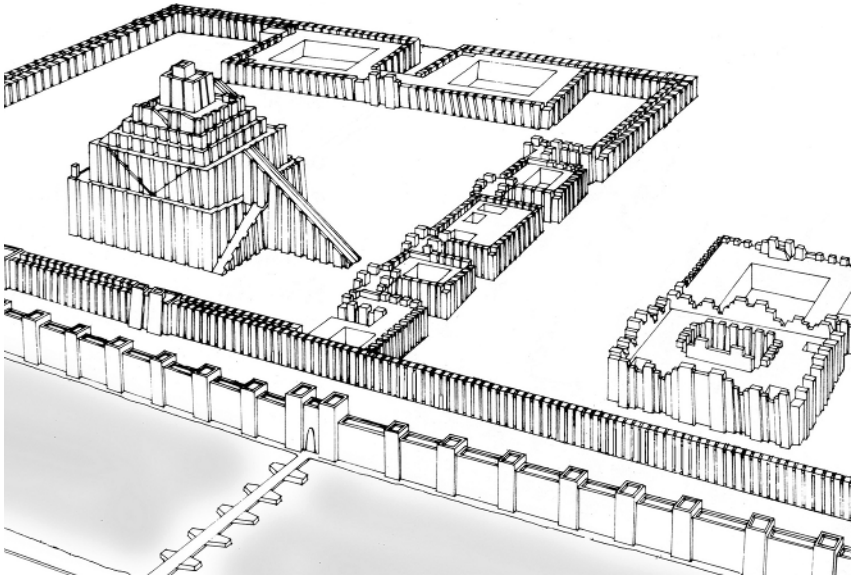
There were only minor skirmishes with Assyria, which occupied an area to the north of Babylon centred on the confluence of the Tigris river and one of its major tributaries. The rolling hills of Assyria sustained both herders and farmers thanks to a regular rainfall. Unlike Babylonia, dates could not be grown there but grapes were cultivated for fruit and wine-making purposes. At Nimrud, the biblical Calah, extensive wine cellars have been found along with lists of their contents. At some distance from the major Assyrian cities of Ashur and Nineveh, the city of Nimrud may have been the headquarters of the Assyrian army. One of its temples, dedicated to the war god Ninurta by Ashurnasirpal II, records this king's treatment of his enemies during the 870s BC. Not only did Ashurnasirpal "stand on their necks" and "with their blood dye the mountains red like wool", but more precisely he "cut off noses,



Ancient Mesopotamia

ears and extremities" of captives, "gouged out eyes", "burnt prisoners", "slashed the flesh of rebels" or "flayed" them alive. One disloyal ruler had his skin "draped over the wall of Nineveh". Massacre, pillage, wholesale resettlement—these were the favourite methods of Assyrian domination, whose sovereignty was "made supreme by the Ashur and Adad, the great gods". What allowed an Assyrian ruler to behave without apparent restraint was of course the power of his army.

At Nineveh, enjoyment of the grape is recorded in a wall relief from the palace of a later Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal. Though the monarch is shown reclining in Greek fashion on a couch, he does not drink in the company of men, as at a symposium. Only his wife, Queen Ashur-shurrat, shares the occasion with him. She sits on a throne in front of her husband, holding a wine cup to her lips while gazing upon her



The ziggurat of Marduk opposite the Esagila temple at Babylon

lord and master. Servants busily wave fly whisks so that no insect may mar the royal couple's relaxation. But even here, in this restful garden scene, the bloody nature of Assyrian rule intrudes, as the severed head of King Te-umman of Elam is suspended from the branch of a nearby tree. Birds are gathered around to pick off the flesh and pluck out the eyes. Well might Ashurbanipal have imagined in his cups that Assyria was destined to dominate ancient West Asia for ever, but within fifteen years of his death in 627 BC, its empire ceased to exist. Undermined by the civil war in which his two sons struggled for supremacy, Assyria fell easy prey to the Medes and the Babylonians.

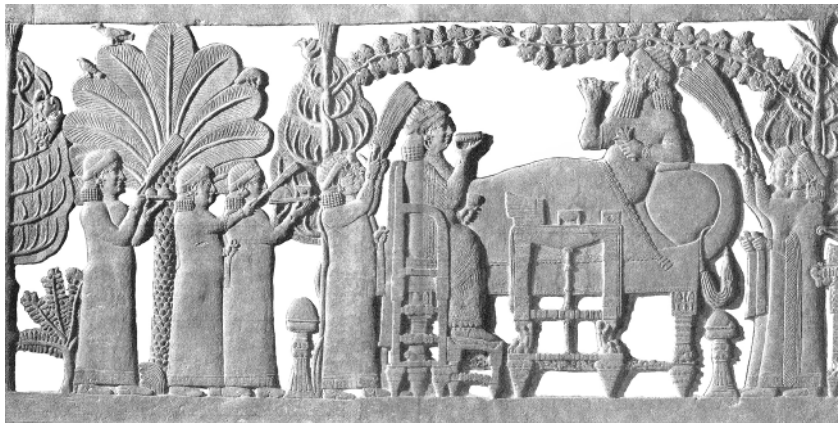
The slow growth of Assyrian power had much to do with its belligerent neighbour Mitanni, since for a long time it was a part of this northern kingdom. Mitannian strength derived from its chariotry, which was trained by Kukkuli, "the master horseman". That his famous training manual contains words closely related to Sanskrit, the language of the Aryan invaders of India, points to a connection between chariot warfare and successful takeovers of ancient lands. Similarities in chariot design in West Asia and India clearly suggests a western invasion of the subcontinent. Despite the chariot's invention on the steppe, ancient West Asia witnessed its first general use as a war

machine. Kukkuli's fame as a trainer for chariot horses was discovered through excavations at ancient Hattusha, present-day Boghazhöy in Turkey. There in the archive of the Hittite capital were not only clay tablets on which the original Mitannian version was written, but also translations of the manual into the Hittite and Akkadian languages, testifying to a very wide readership indeed.

Mitanni itself remains cloaked in obscurity, so that the number of Aryans living among the Hurrian-speaking Mitannians is still a matter of debate. Besides personal names and technical terms connected with horsemanship in Kukkuli's training manual, the main evidence for a sizable Aryan population are the gods who were invoked in treaties between Mitanni and other powers. One such deity is Varuna, the upholder of the moral order in India. Not until the Hittites crushed Mitanni in the fourteenth century BC, and two centuries later Hittite power itself disintegrated under the impact of the Sea Peoples, was there scope for the Assyrians to pursue imperial ambitions of their own.

The reasons behind the great migration of the so-called Sea Peoples are still not fully understood, but cities and palaces were razed to the ground in Greece, Asia Minor, Syria and Palestine. Assyria fought off those migrants who attempted to enter the Euphrates–Tigris valleys, while Ramesses III turned back most of the Sea Peoples in two hard-fought battles on the borders of Egypt. In 1182 BC the pharaoh overcame them on land as well as water. Successful resistance by the Assyrians seems to have inspired their own bid for universal dominion in ancient West Asia. The buildup of the Assyrian army was truly impressive: by the ninth century BC, some 60,000 were deployed against states in Syria and Palestine, a century later the regular forces had risen to 75,000, while under King Sennacherib, who ruled from 704 to 681 BC, the number jumped to an incredible 200,000.

It was Sennacherib who sacked Babylon after his son Ashur-nadin-shumi, the governor there, had been handed over to the Elamites by the rebellious Babylonians. A furious Sennacherib first defeated the Elamites and then captured the city of Babylon in 689 BC. Allowing his troops to sack it indiscriminately may have cost Sennacherib his own life a few years later, when he was assassinated by one or more of his surviving sons: for the destruction of Babylon was a sacrilegious act in the eyes of both Assyrians and Babylonians. The death of his favourite son at the hands of the Elamites had caused the Assyrian king to appoint Esarhaddon as the heir apparent. When the news of



King Ashurbanipal in his cups at Nineveh, with the severed head of the Elamite king hanging on the far left

Sennacherib's murder reached Esarhaddon, he knew he would have to fight for his accession. He said:

> My brothers went insane and did what is abhorrent to the gods. At Nineveh they hatched evil plots, resorted to arms, and striving for sovereignty they butted each other like billy goats.

Relying on the support of Assyrian nobles, who had already sworn an oath of loyalty to the chosen successor, Esarhaddon marched on Nineveh and put an end to the disturbances in the city, with the result that the people there acknowledged his authority by "kissing his feet".

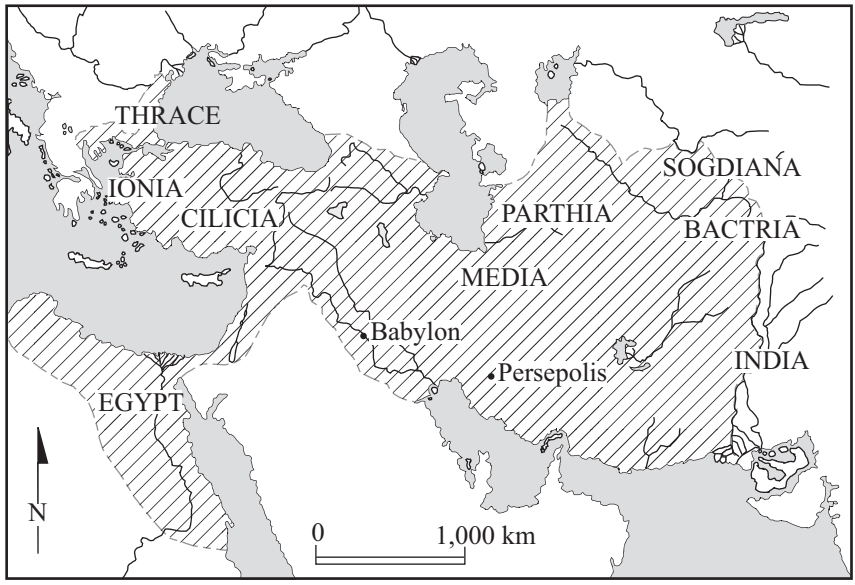
Esarhaddon's reign was a mixture of military triumph and civil reconstruction. In Babylon, a major building programme sought to heal the terrible wound inflicted by his father, especially through the restoration of Marduk's temple. Abroad, Esarhaddon extended Assyrian rule as far as Egypt, where he overran the Nile delta and advanced upriver to seize Memphis. Because the Assyrians were unable to rule Egypt themselves, they left this task to collaborators, who soon asserted their independence. Later these petty rulers were replaced by one pharaoh, Necho I, whose son Psamtik was to found the last effective Egyptian dynasty before the arrival in 525 BC of the Persians, the inheritors of Assyrian dominion. Continuous warfare was already putting a severe strain on Assyria, bolstered though it was through the wholesale resettlement of conquered peoples. It took surprisingly little to expose

Assyria's vulnerability to determined foes, the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC marking the end of its once mighty empire.

The Babylonians took advantage of the situation to gain control over the whole of Mesopotamia and Syria under King Nebuchadrezzar II, who was descended from the Chaldeans, a Semitic people living along the coast of the Persian Gulf. For some unknown reason, King Jehoiakim of Judah decided to throw off his allegiance to Babylon, with the result that in 597 BC Nebuchadrezzar besieged Jerusalem. The city was spared on its surrender through the payment of a heavy fine, but 10,000 Jews were taken as hostages to Babylon, where the prophet Daniel was already a resident.

In *The Book of Daniel* there are several stories about "the Babylonian Captivity". Along with three fellow exiles Daniel was trained to serve at court: the Babylonian names they answered to were Belteshazzar (Daniel), Shadrach (Hananiah), Meshach (Mishael) and Abednego (Azariah). Three episodes in particular stand out in the biblical narrative. The first was the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to bow down before "the golden image" that Nebuchadrezzar had set up.

Daniel in the lions' den, a Byzantine view of his miraculous escape



The Persian empire

When the king learnt of this insolence, he had them "cast into the midst of the fiery furnace" without ill effect. An angel, Nebuchadrezzar was convinced, had been sent by their god to save them. The second ordeal was suffered by Daniel under the new Persian administration for refusing to do homage to King Darius. When the new ruler discovered that Daniel's overnight stay in the lions' den had done him no harm, Darius admitted the power of the god that Daniel worshipped. A third episode, on this occasion not involving torture, is supposed to have predicted the Persian conquest of Babylon. During a feast hosted by Belshazzar, the grandson of Nebuchadrezzar, mysterious writing appeared on the wall, and only Daniel could read its message: "The days of the kingdom are numbered."

The Book of Daniel confuses Darius with Cyrus, the Persian king who occupied Babylon almost without a struggle in 539 BC. As the Babylonian empire was the most highly evolved state taken over by Cyrus, this founder of Persian power was anxious to conciliate its ruling class, to whom important posts were awarded on the basis of a willingness to serve the new regime. Their know-how was invaluable to the Persians and mediated between the conquerors and the most populous area of ancient West Asia. For the exiled Jews though, Cyrus was literally

a godsend: the prophet Isaiah maintained that the rise of Persia was part of a divine plan to rebuild Jerusalem. A parallel Babylonian account of Cyrus' success relates how it was the work of Marduk, who "scanned and looked through every country, searching for a king who would grace his annual procession. Then he pronounced Cyrus to be the ruler of the world".

Cyrus and his successors opened up new perspectives to conquered peoples. They respected the religious beliefs and practices of their subjects, making generous donations to local sanctuaries. Instead of the customary mass deportation, the Persians allowed captives to return to their homelands if they wished. Rebellions were not unknown in Babylon or the rest of the Persian empire; but despite periodic usurpation crises, the violent repression of the Assyrians became a thing of the past. Yet trouble lay ahead for the Persians in the form of Macedonians. Having secured the eastern frontier through the annexation of northwestern India, Darius was stopped from doing the same in the west by the revolt of the Ionian Greeks in Asia Minor. His retaliation engendered a deep enmity between the Greeks and the Persians. During the great invasion of Greece in 480 BC, the Macedonians were obliged to side with the Persians because the enormous expeditionary force passed through their territory. One hundred and forty-six years later, however, Alexander the Great returned the compliment by invading the Persian empire at the head of his Macedonian troops.

Understanding the World: Religion and Myth

Ancient West Asians invented gods to understand the world. Convinced that creation could not be explained by itself, and needing to give it meaning, they envisaged supernatural beings who were responsible for creating the world and for ensuring that its processes continued satisfactorily. Totally anthropomorphic though they were in their approach to the gods, neither the Sumerians nor the Semites forgot the original function that each deity performed in the natural order. The great Sumerian goddess Inanna was still the power behind the rain that each spring brought forth pasture in the desert. It did not matter that Inanna's abundant sensuality also turned her into a love goddess, the protectress and colleague of prostitutes. In the *Gilgamesh* epic, she offers herself to the poem's hero and is enraged when

he rejects her advances. The distracting effect of her charms is something Gilgamesh well knew: he had sent "the harlot Samhat" to tame the wild man Enkidu. "After he was sated with her delights," we are told, "Enkidu turned to face his herd, but the animals of the wild were already on the move." In the absence of a human family, he had grown up with them. Thus civilisation had claimed Enkidu, so fascinated was he with Samhat's account of the festivals held in Uruk, the attractiveness of the city's prostitutes and the fame of Gilgamesh, its ruler.

In Akkadian, the Semitic language in which the *Gilgamesh* epic has come down to us in its fullest form, Inanna is called Ishtar. Essentially the same goddess because of the Babylonian adoption of the Sumerian pantheon, Ishtar does later undergo a rather harsh transformation in Assyria. There she carried a bow and a quiver, her warlike aspect receiving emphasis with a curly beard. An Akkadian fragment, on badly damaged tablets, describes the wailing of Ishtar for Tammuz, whose annual death, resurrection and marriage suggests a fertility ritual connected with the agricultural cycle. Tammuz is the Akkadian equivalent of Dumuzi, the hapless husband of Inanna, whom she allowed demons to cart off to the Sumerian underworld. Worship of Tammuz as a dying-and-rising god spread to Palestine, where the prophet Ezekiel bitterly complained that even at "the door of the gate of the Lord's house . . . sat women weeping for Tammuz". Despite the *Song of Solomon*, it seems unlikely that Jewish kings ever consummated a sacred marriage in Mesopotamian fashion. Rather the celebration of the New Year in Jerusalem may have involved a nocturnal ritual during which the king was believed to have died and then returned to life in the morning. Psalms focus on such a theme, when the suppliant admits how

> the cords of death encompassed me,
> the torrents of perdition assailed me,
> the cords of Sheol entangled me,
> and the snares of death confronted me.

Whether some kind of humiliation was suffered by the ruler, followed by his joyful restoration, we have no idea. All that is clear is the anxiety of the prophets about the elaboration of cultic practices from the Exodus onwards. For them the worship of the golden calf in Sinai was a harbinger of the religious difficulties that faced the Jews once they

A Sumerian worshipper, dating from the third millennium BC

had settled in a land inhabited by peoples who subscribed to a multiplicity of West Asian gods.

Every Sumerian settlement gave worship to local deities, while the more important members of the pantheon held sway over the cities. The moon god Nanna resided at Ur, the sun god Utu at Larsa, the mother goddess Ninhursag at Kish, the water god Enki at Eridu, and the supreme deity Enlil commanded the sky at Uruk. References to the death of a god signal a view that blurred the line between immortals and mortals. And the Sumerians even deified their early kings. Such unregulated polytheism had not yet come under the influence of the Semites, who always maintained a strict separation of the human and the divine.

But where the Sumerians and the Semites were in complete agreement was on the question of fate. Both accepted that the destiny of everything in the world was determined by the gods, whose prime objective comprised a luxurious lifestyle for themselves. It might be said that the whole world had been programmed solely for their benefit. To continue with the computing analogy, the Sumerian account of creation contains an explanation of the glitches in the programme as well. After Enki fashioned from clay the first human servants, the gods gathered at a celebratory banquet, at which, overcome by strong beer, Enki and his wife Ninhursag became involved in a creation competition. Declaring that for each person she made it would be her decision whether "the fate is good or bad", Ninhursag's ineffectual creations set a challenge for Enki in finding them suitable employment. But his ingenuity "found them bread". The cripple became the servant of a king, the blind man his minstrel, the barren woman entered the royal harem and a sexless person joined the priesthood. What the myth explains are the destinies of individuals who do not take part in family life.

A fragment of the *Gilgamesh* epic

This means that the profession followed by the prostitute Samhat was divinely decreed, her acceptance of many "husbands" no more than an impersonation of Inanna herself. A tablet unearthed at Nippur underlines this link by recording a song that may have been performed during sacral prostitution. Though "sixty find relief on her nakedness, and the young men are wearied, the goddess is not wearied at all". Possibly a favourite in taverns as well as temples, the song's meaning cannot be missed. The Greek historian Herodotus, the chronicler of the Persian invasion of Europe, notes how every Babylonian woman had once in her life to sit in the temple and lay with a stranger, because it made her holy in Aphrodite's sight. Incorrect though this is, Herodotus was right in his association of the Greek love goddess with Sumerian Inanna and Babylonian Ishtar. A closer link would be the Canaanite goddess Astarte, whose cult was celebrated in Cyprus, the birthplace of Aphrodite. On that island, Herodotus relates, "a custom like that in

Babylon is followed". In Aphrodite, who was conceived at sea within sky god Ouranos' severed phallus, we have the export of Inanna–Ishtar–Astarte to Europe.

Only recently has it been realised how influential Sumerian ideas were not only in ancient West Asia but also ancient Greece. Oceanus and Tethys, the primeval couple of Greek mythology, could easily have come straight from the Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish*, which dates from the reign of Nebuchadrezzar I. This poem describes the war waged by Marduk against the primeval forces of chaos led by Tiamat, out of whose dismembered body he created the world after her defeat. Marduk is then crowned "king of the gods" by the divine assembly, and the epic ends with a recital of his fifty attributes. *Enuma Elish*, which takes its title from the poem's first words "When on high", continues,

> skies were not yet named nor earth below pronounced by name, sweet water Apsu, the first one, their begetter, and salt water Tiamat, who bore them all, had mixed together, but had not formed pastures, nor discovered reed-beds, when yet no gods were manifest, nor names pronounced, nor destines decreed, then the gods were born.

Like her namesake Tiamat, the Greek goddess Tethys dwelt on the edge of the world with her husband Oceanus, the encircling ocean. She had no established cult among the Greeks because no one knew anything else about her.

In Mesopotamia, on the other hand, Tiamat was the ocean, and in the Babylonian version of the creation, she was turned into a dreadful monster, the prototype of serpentine Satan. Her baleful character is at odds with the East Asian attitude towards dragons, which were always seen as benevolent deities and held in high regard. Throughout Chinese history the dragon was the rainbringer, the lord of waters—clouds, rivers, marshes, lakes and seas. On the western edge of the Asian continent alone, the dragon acquired an evil reputation whether it lurked in caves or in the sea, so that Leviathan, the "Coiled One", was a direct descendant of Tiamat.

The rise of Marduk to a supreme position in Babylon had three distinct consequences. First of all, Marduk was now a national deity, the guardian of Nebuchadrezzar I's restoration of Babylonian power. The return of his cult statue, after the successful campaign against the Elamites, implied that once more Marduk would defend the city.

But a second aspect of his enhanced worship, no matter how much it suited the king to place emphasis on Marduk's cult for propaganda purposes, was shaped by the cosmic role he played in the *Enuma Elish* epic. The city god of Babylon was well on the way to becoming a transcendent deity, no longer tied to a specific place. A final consequence of Marduk's elevation was paradoxically a growing closeness between the worshipper and the god. A personal religion had come into existence when devotees could say "Marduk is my god", a constant source of advice that anticipates the attitude expressed in the Old Testament. "Show me thy ways, O Lord", beseeches Psalm 25, "teach me thy paths. Lead me in thy truth, and teach me." Of course a worshipper of Marduk would never have gone on to express a profound sense of personal guilt. "A broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart" was not then "a suitable sacrifice" because the general concept of sin had yet to develop in ancient West Asia. Wrongdoing was still primarily a matter for city regulation.

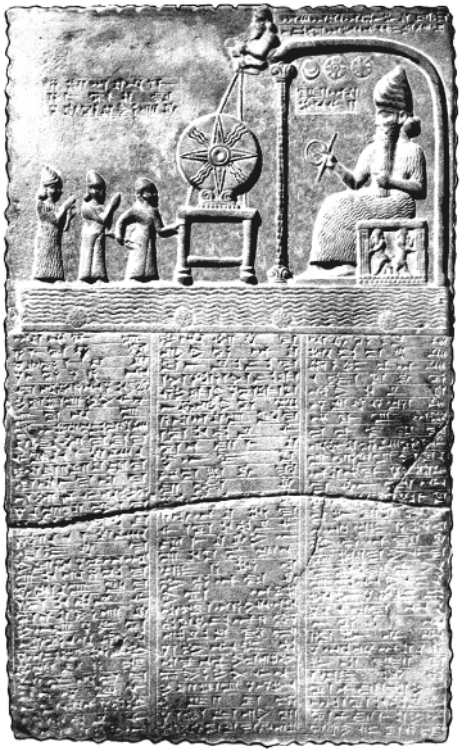
Pollution and purity were always central ideas for the Jews, who had forfeited the paradisal garden of Eden through sin. Enticed by the serpent, Adam and his wife Eve ate of the forbidden fruit growing on "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" and were driven from the garden for their disobedience. Though later associated with Satan, mention of the serpent in Eden may be intended to disparage Canaanite beliefs. Snake worship was part of the rain god Baal's cult, and the snake seems to have been a symbol of the mother goddess as well.

On Crete, an island that had once been ruled by West Asian kings, statuettes show goddesses or priestesses handling serpents. According to the Greeks, King Agenor of Tyre sent his five sons in search of their sister Europa, whom Zeus had abducted to Crete in the disguise of a bull. To this virile Greek deity she bore three sons, the most famous being King Minos of Knossos. He had the labyrinth built there for the Minotaur, a bull-headed man fed annually with seven girls and seven boys. Either a garbled account of the famous bull games or a misunderstanding of the nature of West Asian creatures with a bull's head on the body of a man, the killing of the Minotaur came to occupy an important place in Greek mythology. Rather than someone confused by its composite form, the bull-man was in Mesopotamia a reliable guardian against demons. That this was most likely his function on Crete goes some way to explaining Europa's abduction. It has indeed been plausibly argued that she was a Canaanite goddess of the night,

An impression made by a cylinder seal, showing the Sumerian sun god Utu rising behind mountains at the centre. Inanna stands on the left, Enki on the right, with the Euphrates and Tigris rivers pouring from him

as her name relates to the Semitic verb "to set": hence Europe, the continent where the sun sets.

In Eden the story of the Fall appears to be as much about divine omniscience as the discovery of sexuality. "Good and evil" means "everything", the knowledge reserved for a supreme deity. A variant in the *Book of Ezekiel* tells of a ruler who lived in a mountain paradise, but was cast down from this second Eden when he started to consider himself a divinity. Having "walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire", the king became so enchanted by his own "beauty" that his "wisdom" was corrupted by the "brightness". A Sumerian account of paradise features Enki and Ninhursag; she is besides herself with fury when Enki impregnates her daughter, granddaughter and great-granddaughter, not least because the water god had sired them all himself. As a result of the last sexual encounter, Enki almost died when his semen overflowed the goddess' loins. In his exhausted state he ate the eight plants that Ninhursag had grown from the spilled semen, falling so ill that the gods expected his end. These forbidden plants seem to have sealed Enki's fate until a fox persuaded the underworld deities to intercede on his behalf with Ninhursag, who relented the curse of death she had laid on him. This myth differs in all its details from the Jewish narrative of the Fall, except for the eating of tabooed food.



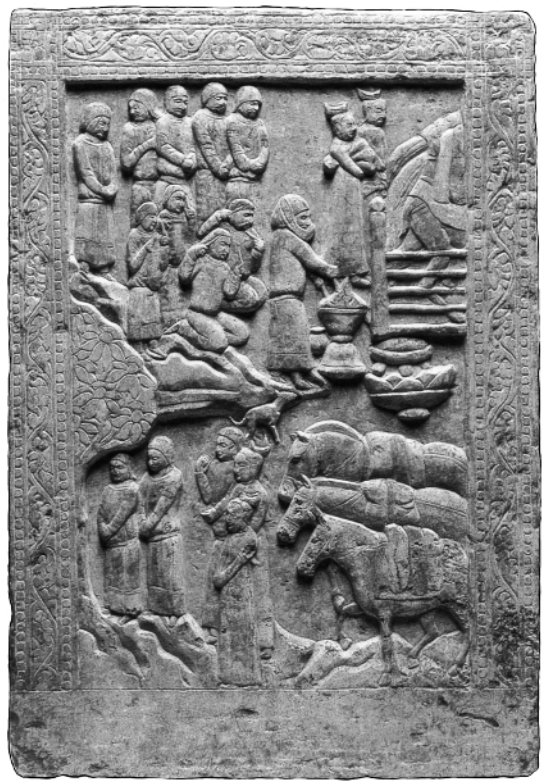
An account of the restoration in 870 BC of Shamash's cult statue at Sippar. Shamash was the Babylonian name for the sun god Utu

A reason for such a difference is the singular achievement of the Jews in perfecting a West Asian tendency towards monotheism: "The Lord our God, the Lord is One." While various arguments have been put forward to explain this development, the successive stages of Jewish consciousness are hard to discern. Was Abraham a monotheist? He lived in Ur, whose city god Nanna was credited with the foreknowledge of destiny. Was the experience of Moses crucial? In Egypt he would have been aware of the pharaoh Akhenaten's efforts to give supremacy to Aten, the sun god. Or were the prophets, faced by the brute force of Assyria, the inventors of a divine plan for Israel?

Whatever the answer, we encounter a distinct mode of thought when the Jews consider the supernatural. "The gods of the peoples are idols, but God made the heavens": the psalmist means other West Asian deities were no more than a human invention. This conclusion is transparent in

the apocryphal book *Daniel, Bel and the Snake*. To the Persian king Cyrus, Daniel demonstrates with the aid of ashes sprinkled on a temple floor that the footprints of those who came secretly to eat the food set out for the god Bel belonged to "the priests, with their wives and children". He also disposed of the sacred serpent by feeding it with cakes of boiled "pitch and fat and hair": these ingredients burst its belly asunder.

One West Asian inheritance the Jews did not reject outright was the Zoroastrian notion of a final judgement. In spite of Cyrus' policy of religious tolerance in his empire, the Persians themselves never faltered in their respect for the teachings of Zoroaster, whose prophecy was delivered at some date before 1000 BC. Then the Persians were still living on the Central Asian steppe, their movement southwards only beginning after their cousins, the Aryans, had conquered northwestern



A Zoroastrian funeral. A dog patiently waits next to the priest at the centre

India. Calling themselves Iranians, rather than the Greek name Persians, they accepted Zoroaster's inspired utterances as the divine commands of Ahura Mazda, whose raiment was the sky.

All harm came from Ahriman, "the evil destructive spirit", in whose cosmic struggle with Ahura Mazda the world was caught up. Because no Persian god was ever thought to be omnipotent, Zoroaster believed that all creation had to assist Ahura Mazda's pursuit of ultimate victory. A series of saviours would be sent to guide the righteous, the last of whom has the power to raise the dead from the spot where life departed from them. Then the resurrected as well as the living were to be judged, after which the righteous would be saved and the sinners endure torments, before molten metal engulfed and purified the Earth.

For Jews, Christians and Moslems this final reckoning of accounts had immense appeal. Considering the undeveloped notion of an afterlife among the Jews, whose Sheol was simply the place to which all the dead went, this Zoroastrian idea came as an absolute revelation. Derived from the Akkadian word for "desolation", Sheol was the equivalent of the Sumerian underworld: a place, according to the *Book of Job*, where the worm is addressed as father, mother and sister, for in corruption all "rest together in the dust". Not so attractive though were the funeral practices of the Persians, who according to Herodotus "never buried until the body had been torn by a bird or a dog". Bones that had been separated from the flesh were then placed in an ossuary. Even though the Old Testament never once states in so many words why the Jews had a duty to bury the dead, many passages make it obvious that a burial should happen with proper mourning rites: to this day, they bury their dead in the ground and eschew cremation. After Cyrus allowed the Jews to rebuild Jerusalem, however, the possibility of physical resurrection seemed no longer in doubt. "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall wake", the prophet Daniel could proclaim, "some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt".

Endgame: Greco-Roman Europe Versus Persian Asia

Aggressive though the Persians were in founding their empire, Cyrus chose to represent himself as a restorer of damaged or destroyed cities and cults, beginning at Babylon with the improvement of Marduk's

temple. A tablet recovered from its ruins relates how "Cyrus, king of the lands, loves Esagila".

Under his energetic successors, Cambyses and Darius I, Persian rule rapidly spread across all of ancient West Asia, except Arabia, and over Egypt as well as northwestern India. Darius in particular did not relax his efforts in extending the imperial frontiers. Long before the aid sent by the Athenians and the Eretrians to his rebellious Greek subjects in Asia Minor provoked him enough to dispatch in 490 BC an expeditionary force to Greece, Darius' ambitions in Europe were public knowledge. Persian ships had reconnoitred the Mediterranean coastline as far as Italy before Darius' crossing from Asia in 513 BC, so as to mount an offensive against the Scythians. When later in 480 BC Xerxes, Darius' son, marched the same way to invade Greece, he reviewed his army at a palace built in Thrace by his father. The Athenian victory at Marathon a decade earlier was no more than a pinprick to the Persians, although the determination of Darius to bring the Greeks to heel passed on to his son a family obligation that began a seesawing conflict between Europe and Asia that lasted into the medieval period.

The unexpected defeat of both Xerxes' army and navy were the greatest events ever for the ancient Greeks, who let the Athenians take the lead afterwards in forming a defensive maritime league against more Persian attacks. Rivalry between Athens and Sparta gave Persia a respite from a sustained counter-attack, but war against the old enemy

Xerxes enthroned at Persepolis. His invasion of Greece in 480 BC inaugurated the conflict between Asia and Europe

Alexander the Great taken from a Roman mosaic. The Macedonian conqueror was much admired by Julius Caesar

provided a ready battle cry for anyone who like Alexander the Great wished to recruit the Greek city states in an overseas campaign. Once this Macedonian king assumed the leadership of the forces being assembled in Greece for such a war, the days of the first Persian empire—the so-called Achaemenid after Achaemenes the legendary forebear of the royal house—were numbered.

This was because Alexander led the most efficient army then deployed in the ancient world. At its core were superbly drilled Macedonian pikemen, whose five-metre-long weapon outreached other thrusting spears. When in 334 BC Alexander crossed to Asia Minor at the head of 32,000 infantrymen and 5,100 horsemen, he drove his own spear into the soil and announced that he accepted Asia as a gift from the gods. It was a prophetic claim, for his policy showed how he intended that his Asian subjects were to be free and neither part of a Macedonian empire nor slaves to the Greeks. On Alexander's part it was both belief and propaganda, and it touched many Asian hearts.

Having visited Troy, the original West Asian enemy of the ancient Greeks, the Macedonian king struck inland for the first of three battles

against the Persians. In this encounter he used only his Macedonian troops and some Greek horsemen. In the second and the third, his army consisted of Greeks, Balkan troops and Macedonians. Alexander was himself the spearpoint and the Macedonians the spearhead in battle, but the other soldiers were indispensable for the fulfilment of his grand plan. Once Persia was overthrown, he began to recruit West Asians as reinforcements. When he reached India in 326 BC his army had grown to 120,000 men, of whom Asian troops formed nearly half. But it was the Macedonians in Alexander's army who ultimately decided the limits of his conquests. They constituted the Macedonian assembly, the final arbiter of the king's wishes, and worn out by the effects of monsoon rain they felt they had been misled because the promised end of Asia was nowhere in sight. Alexander himself was baffled by India's size and, even though he wished to advance against Magadha in the Ganges valley, he recognised that this was now impossible and so he agreed to turn back.

Yet Alexander still achieved a conquest unmatched in ancient times, for he had overcome the Persians and added vast territories to their empire. His uniqueness was even more apparent in his ideal of a multi-ethnic kingdom, albeit organised on European lines, because Alexander made it plain that every person was to be judged in terms of worth, irrespective of parentage. He also insisted that he and eighty of his closest companions married the daughters of Persian noble families. Soldiers' Asian women and their children were made legitimate and educated at Alexander's expense, many of them settling in the seventy new cities he founded in Asia. Quite apart from the pressing need to augment his armed forces and find a way of bringing stability to his massive realm, Alexander firmly believed he had a divine mission to accomplish, which worried some of his Macedonian and Greek followers. As the Greek historian Plutarch put it:

> Alexander considered that he had come from the gods to be a governor and reconciler to the world. Using force of arms when he could not bring men together by reason, he employed everything to the same end, mixing lives, manners, marriages and customs, as it were, in a loving-cup.

Possibly the innovation that the Macedonians disliked most of all was the court ceremonial Alexander decided to adopt, because it included

the Persian custom of prostration. Though he could have practised one form of ceremonial for the Macedonians and another for the Asians, his insistence on the new one shows the extent to which his mind was set on treating all his subjects alike.

Only Alexander's sudden death from fever in Babylon, at the age of thirty-three, cut short his great multi-ethnic experiment. When the dying conqueror was asked in 323 BC to whom he bequeathed his authority, he replied "to the strongest", correctly anticipating the struggle between his senior commanders. Their wars ensured the division of Alexander's conquests into separate kingdoms. Just one of these new powers, founded in ancient West Asia by Seleucus in 305 BC, stayed close to the ideal of a multi-ethnic society. At his eastern capital, Seleucia on Tigris, in present-day Iraq, a suburb was named Apanea after Seleucus' Asian wife, whom he had married at Alexander's behest. This marriage lasted, unlike others between senior Macedonians and Asian brides, and Apanea was the mother of Seleucus' eldest son and most able successor, Antiochus I.

Well before his death in 281 BC, Seleucus recognised the talents of his eldest son by appointing him co-regent, an unusual move that almost certainly ensured the dynasty's survival. Although Antiochus was sent to take charge of the eastern territories, it would be wrong to see anything formal in this division of responsibility: father and son were both monarchs with complete authority wherever they happened to be operating. The man on the spot needed to have the power of decision belonging to a ruler. From the start, Seleucus appreciated the problems involved in running a far-flung and diverse empire. This is the reason he styled himself as a latter-day Persian king, rather than a second Alexander, whose portrait rarely appears on his coins, unlike those minted by the great conqueror's other successors.

It was an approach enthusiastically endorsed by Antiochus who in 286 BC placed this Akkadian inscription in the temple of Ezida at Borsippa near Babylon. It begins:

> Antiochus, the great king, the mighty king, king of the world, king of Babylon, king of the lands, guardian of Esagila and Ezida, first son of Seleucus, the king, the Macedonian, am I. When I decided to rebuild Esagila and Ezida, the bricks I made with my own pure hands using the finest oil . . .

Antiochus I, whose Seleucid kingdom remained true to the multi-ethnic vision of Alexander

Already Antiochus had introduced a new dating system for documents written in Greek and Akkadian. Its purpose was to signal political continuity by the bold assertion that Seleucid kings were no foreign intruders but legitimate rulers attuned to local deities and actively participating in their cult. The dynasty was, after all, half-Iranian.

That the Seleucid empire lasted so long had much to do with such pragmatism. Another factor in its longevity was the absence of strong enemies, once Seleucus settled his border dispute in northwestern India through negotiation with the Mauryan empire. Outlying territories such as Bactria might fall away, but not until the Parthians and the Romans both pressed hard was the Seleucid dynasty reduced to little more than Syria. Conflict with Rome stemmed from Antiochus III's revival of Selucid claims to Thrace in the 190s BC. Despite the Romans inflicting a heavy reverse on him at Magnesia in Asia Minor, Antiochus remained sufficiently strong to keep the semi-nomadic Parthians in check. They were indeed obliged to furnish mail-clad cavalry as well as mounted archers for the Seleucid army.

Later kings, however, were hampered by a usurpation crisis as well as the growth of Parthian power. The takeover of Iran by the Parthians and their invasion of Mesopotamia coincided with a Seleucid civil

war, in which the Romans were only too pleased to meddle. Attempts to recover these important areas failed: by 126 BC the Seleucid kings had been driven west of the Euphrates, leaving them with a restricted economic base and no chance of mustering enough troops to fight back effectively. The extinction of the dynasty in 64 BC was therefore unavoidable.

Rome's annexation of Syria the same year brought the Romans and the Parthians face to face. Remarkable although the Iranian resurgence was under the Parthian kings, they were hardly the heirs of the Achaemenid Persians, because Parthia was never an all-powerful empire, but a loose union of virtually autonomous provinces. Nor were the Parthian kings as powerful as their Sasanian successors, despite the humiliating defeat inflicted on the Romans in 53 BC at Carrhae, where 10,000 legionaries were taken prisoner. Some were settled on Parthia's eastern frontier, beyond which they may have eventually faced Chinese soldiers near the Central Asian city of Turfan. A Chinese record tells of the surrender in 36 BC of a Hunnish chieftain, whose followers included a group of mercenaries suspiciously like ex-Roman legionaries from the description of their drill.

Parthian pressure on Rome's eastern provinces finally obliged its emperors to go on the offensive, with the result that on Trajan's death in AD 117 the Roman empire reached its widest extent. As holding on to the new conquests proved a less easy proposition, they were soon abandoned by an overstretched army. Mesopotamia was evacuated, the upper Euphrates valley forming the new frontier: it was still a dangerous one, especially after Parthia was taken over by the Sasanian monarchy in 226. Self-styled "Kings of Kings", Sasanian rulers held centre stage in the intercontinental struggle, first with the Romans and then with the Byzantines, the name by which their Greek-speaking successors in the eastern Mediterranean are known.

Although the Parthians and the Sasanians were Zoroastrian, the latter were more determined proselytisers of the faith, their conflict with Christian Europe taking on all the trappings of a crusade. The first Sasanian king, Ardashir, set the tone by seeking to recover all the territories that had been subject to Achaemenid Persia. But it was his son, Shapur I, who had cause to commission at Nash-i-Rustam, in southern Iran, gigantic rock carvings of his victories over the Romans. A submissive Philip is shown pleading for peace on his knees, while a second Roman emperor, Valerian, watches as a Sasanian prisoner

Persia triumphant. The famous celebration of Rome's defeat at Nash-i-Rustam

of war. After his capture in 260, Valerian acted as Shapur's footstool whenever the Sasanian king mounted his horse.

Yet this dramatic advance did not lead to annexation, in part because Shapur's real interests lay elsewhere. He may also have been influenced by the radical teachings of Mani, a prophet who was born into an ascetic Christian community near present-day Basra in southern Iraq. Mani's advocacy of worldly withdrawal infuriated the Zoroastrian priesthood, and ended with the prophet's own violent death, but he enjoyed the protection of a sympathetic Shapur until 272. One of the sources of Mani's inspiration was Buddhism, which he encountered on a visit to India. In a very real sense Manichaeism, the belief named after Mani, was an attempt to incorporate in a single set of ideas the religious experience of ancient West and South Asia. After Shapur's death, the Zoroastrians reasserted their authority over the Sasanian court, the ayatollah-like priest Kartir persuading Bahram I to execute Mani and afterwards persecute Jews, Christians, Manichees and Buddhists.

The Sasanian king Khusrau II,
the determined opponent
of the Byzantines

During the ancient era the Sasanians were unique in systematically attempting to impose religious orthodoxy. As a less rigorous approach was also at work in the Mediterranean world, after Constantinople became the capital of a Christian empire, the Europe–Asia struggle was inevitably seen in religious terms. It was Emperor Constantine the Great who had converted the Roman empire into a Christian state. In 325 he even obliged bishops to settle their differences about the nature of Christ at the Council of Nicaea, present-day Iznik in Asia Minor. There the Creed was adopted at his behest. Constantine himself presided over the crucial debates, guiding discussion towards unanimous agreement. "Internal strife within the Church of God," he said, "is far more evil and dangerous than any kind of war or conflict."

The climax of the Europe–Asia contest happened during the reign of the Sasanian king Khusrau II. By 619 he had overrun Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine and Egypt. Not even the True Cross was spared as booty. For a moment it looked as though the West Asians had won: Constantinople was threatened by a Sasanian army stationed on the eastern shore of the Bosporus, and by the Avars on the

western shore: Slavs and Bulgars poured into the Balkans, while the Lombards invaded Italy. But in the person of Heraclius the Byzantines found an emperor worthy of the worst military crisis that had ever arisen in the eastern Mediterranean. The loss of so much territory made meeting the army payroll almost impossible. Desperately short of money, Heraclius arranged for a massive loan from the Christian church and fought a series of gruelling campaigns against Khusrau. Almost a crusade, the conflict was accompanied by feverish religious enthusiasm and hatred on the Christian side, which spilled over into attacks on Zoroastrian fire temples in revenge for the desecration of Jerusalem.

It is one of the ironies of history that the bitter duel between Heraclius and Khusrau should have arisen from Byzantine political strife. In 590 the Sasanian ruler had been forced into exile by rebellious nobles, but he found in the Byzantine emperor Maurice someone who was prepared to restore him. In return for ceding most of Armenia to the Byzantines, Maurice sent an army that put Khasrau back on the throne. For hard-pressed Maurice peaceful relations with Sasanian Persia were priceless. He had inherited a badly depleted treasury as well as threatened frontiers. But his financial difficulties remained so burdensome that in 602 Maurice tried to save on rations by ordering soldiers in the Balkans to live off the land during winter. They not only mutinied but marched on Constantinople, where they slew the thrifty emperor and replaced him with one of their officers named Phocas.

Khusrau, vowing to avenge his benefactor Maurice, first supported a pretender alleged to by Maurice's son. After this young man died, Khusrau started to take possession of Byzantine lands in West Asia. An uprising against Phocas then brought a rebel fleet along with Heraclius to Constantinople in 610. We are told that:

> stark naked, Phocas was taken before Heraclius, who ordered that his right arm be removed from his shoulder, and his head impaled on a sword. Thus dismembered was Phocas paraded through the capital city, starting from the Forum of Constantine.

On the same day Flavius Heraclius was crowned, his claim to legitimacy being the overthrow of a usurper and the return of the empire to orderly government. Because Khusrau viewed this second coup as nothing

more than continued Byzantine intrigue, which in a sense it was, he felt there was no reason to stop his military operations.

By 629, however, the exhausted Susanians were ready to sue for peace. A shaken dynasty relinquished all claims to recently conquered territory, and then endured a series of coups that fatally weakened its resolve to resist Arab invaders in 651. Even though the Byzantines met the Islamic onslaught with more success, they had to accept the loss of nearly all their West Asian possessions, for Islam's sudden expansion marked the beginning of the medieval period in West, Central and South Asia.