

THE HISTORY OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

FROM THE EARLIEST ACCOUNTS
TO THE FALL OF ROME

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Chapter Nine

The First Civil War

*In Egypt, between 3100 and 2686 BC,
the First Dynasty pharaohs become gods,
the Second suffer civil war,
and the Third rule a reunited Egypt*

THE BATTLING CITIES OF MESOPOTAMIA had no national identity; each was its own little kingdom. At the beginning of the third millennium, the only nation in the world stretched from the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea at least as far upriver as the city of Hierakonpolis. Egypt was a kingdom like a knotted piece of string, over four hundred miles long, and so narrow in places that an Egyptian could stand on the desert that marked its eastern border and see right across the Nile to the wastes beyond the western frontier.

The nation's capital, the white city of Memphis, lay just south of the Delta, on the border between the ancient Lower and Upper Kingdoms. The site had little else to recommend it; the plain was so wet that, according to Herodotus, Narmer's first job was to build a dam to keep the water back. Even twenty-five hundred years later, Herodotus adds, "this bend in the Nile is closely watched . . . they strengthen the dam every year, because if the river decided to burst its banks and overflow at this point, Memphis would be in danger of being completely inundated."¹

Narmer's unification, and his establishment of Memphis as a single Egyptian capital, brings an end to predynastic Egypt. His son followed him to the throne, and was in turn succeeded by six more kings assigned by Manetho to the so-called First Dynasty of Egypt; an actual, formalized, royal succession.*

* Traditionally, the eight kings of "Dynasty 1" are Narmer, Hor-Aha, Djer, Djety (sometimes called Wadj), Den, Adjib, Semerkhet, and Qaa. Hor-Aha is probably Narmer's son, the pharaoh known to Manetho as Athothis. Given the lack of certainty over Narmer's actual identity, it is possible that

What these eight kings were up to, in the six hundred years that they governed over unified Egypt, is more than a little obscure. But we can glimpse the growth of a centralized state: the establishment of a royal court, the collection of taxes, and an economy that allowed Egypt the luxury of supporting citizens who produced no food: full-time priests to sacrifice for the king, skilled metalworkers who provided jewelry for the court's noblemen and women, scribes who kept track of the growing bureaucracy.²

The third king of the dynasty, Djer, sent Egyptian soldiers out on the first official expeditions past the borders of Narmer's kingdom. On a rock 250 miles south of Hierakonpolis, near the Second Cataract, an engraved scene shows Djer and his army triumphant over captives; these were most likely the indigenous people of Lower Nubia, who before long would be entirely gone from the area, driven out by bad weather and Egyptian invasions. Egyptian troops also marched northeast, along the coast of the Mediterranean, towards the area which would later be called southern Palestine.

Den, two kings later, extended another cautious finger outside Egypt's borders. He led his men over into the Sinai peninsula, the triangle of land between the northern arms of the Red Sea. Here Den, according to a carved scene in his tomb, clubbed the local chieftains into submission, in a victory labelled, "The first time that the east was smitten."

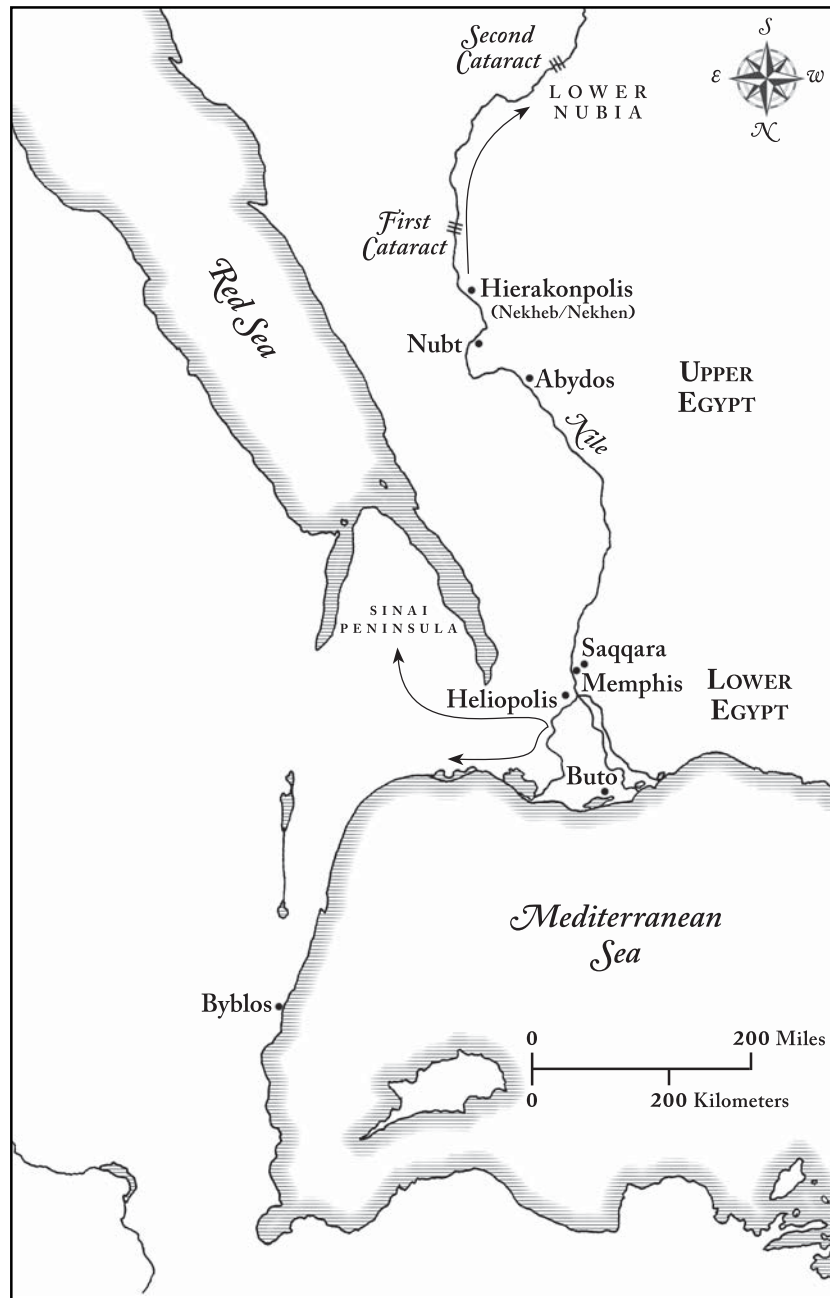
These victories were theoretically won on behalf of all Egypt, both north and south. But in death, the First Dynasty rulers reverted to their Upper Egyptian identity. They were buried in their homeland: at Abydos, far, far south of Memphis.

This was no simple graveyard. Common Egyptians might still be laid at the desert's edge in the sand, faces turned west. But Egyptian noblemen, society's second rank, lay in a grand graveyard on the high desert plain of Saqqara, just west of Memphis.* And the kings buried at Abydos were entombed in brick or stone rooms sunk into the ground, surrounded by a positive embarrass-

Menes should be identified with Hor-Aha rather than with Narmer (in which case Manetho's Athothis would have to be Djer). As a way of dealing with this, some sources will list Narmer as belonging to a sui generis "dynasty" nicknamed "Dynasty o" along with the Scorpion King. I have maintained the identification of Narmer/Menes, so I've eliminated any reference here to "Dynasty o." The Scorpion King didn't begin a royal line, so he should remain in predynastic Egypt, where he belongs. (Dating the ancient dynasties of Egypt is an uncertain business. I have here generally followed the dating used by Peter Clayton in his *Chronicle of the Pharaohs*, although I've rejected his "Dynasty o.")

* Some Egyptologists hold that the earliest pharaohs were buried at Saqqara and had honorary tombs also constructed at Abydos, so that they could rest in both north and south; opinion now seems to favor Abydos as the sole royal burying ground for the First Dynasty.

The First Civil War 63



9.1 Egyptian Expansion

ment of human sacrifice. Almost two hundred dead attendants cluster around Den, while Djer was buried in the company of three hundred courtiers and servants.

These kings may have been uneasy about the loyalty of the north, but in their deaths they wielded a startling autocracy. Any man able to compel the deaths of others as part of his own funerary rites has advanced well beyond the tentative force employed by the earliest Sumerian rulers.

It isn't easy to tease out exactly why this power was expressed by way of human sacrifice. By the time that the pharaohs of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasty were laid to rest, the Egyptians were carving along the walls of their tombs an entire postburial agenda for the dead: the ascent from the pitch-black chambers of the pyramids to the sky, the crossing of the waters that divide life from afterlife, a warm welcome from the waiting gods. But these "Pyramid Texts" date, at the earliest, from half a millennium after the sacrificial burials at Abydos. When the First Dynasty kings were interred, the Egyptians had not even begun to embalm their dead. The royal bodies were wrapped in rags, sometimes soaked in resin, but this did nothing to preserve them.

We can deduce, though, that the kings were going to join the sun in his passage across the sky. Buried beside the kings at Abydos lie fleets of wooden boats, some a hundred feet in length, in long pits roofed over with mud brick. On First Dynasty engravings, the sun-god is shown travelling across the sky in a boat.³ Presumably the pharaoh and the souls buried with him would use their boats to accompany him (although one of the grave complexes at Abydos has, not boats, but a herd of sacrificial donkeys for the king's use, suggesting that he at least might have been heading somewhere else).

Assuming that the kings reached the next life on the other side of the horizon, what were they going to do there?

Possibly, the pharaoh would continue his royal role; we have no Egyptian proof for this, but Gilgamesh, once dead, joined the gods of the underworld to help run the place. If the early pharaohs were believed to continue their kingly functions in the afterworld, the sacrificial burials make a kind of sense. After all, if a king's power only lasts until his death, he must be obeyed during his life, but there is no good reason to follow him into death. If, on the other hand, he's still going to be waiting for you on the other side, his power becomes all-encompassing. The passage to the undiscovered country is simply a journey from one stage of loyalty to the next.

Given the tensions between north and south, the First Dynasty kings needed this kind of authority to hold the country together. The theological underpinnings for the king's power are laid out by the "Memphite Theology," written on a monument called the Shabaka Stone (now in the British

The First Civil War 65

Museum). The stone itself dates from much later in Egypt's history, but the story it bears is thought by many Egyptologists to go all the way back to the earliest Egyptian dynasties.

There are many later elaborations of the tale, but its center is simple. The god Osiris is given the rule of the entire earth, but his brother Set, jealous of his power, plots his death. He drowns Osiris in the Nile. The wife (and sister) of Osiris, the goddess Isis, hunts for her missing husband-brother. When she finds his drowned body, she bends over him and half-resurrects him. Osiris is alive enough to impregnate her, but not quite alive enough to stay on earth. Instead he becomes king of the underworld. The son born to Isis after Osiris descends to his new realm, Horus, becomes king of the living realm.

As king of the living, the god Horus was associated with the sun, the stars, and the moon: in other words, he was (as Egyptologist Rudolf Anthes suggests) "that celestial body which appeared conspicuous either at day or night . . . the permanent ruler of the sky, who unlike the sun did not vanish at night time."⁴ The power of Horus did not wax and wane.

The early pharaohs of Egypt claimed to be the earthly embodiment of Horus, carrying with them that power which does not "vanish at night time," or with death. Nevertheless, all kings die. So Egyptian theology adapted to the inevitable. When the pharaoh died, he was no longer considered to be the incarnation of Horus. He became instead the embodiment of Osiris, who was both king of the underworld and the father of Horus, king of the living realm.* The earthly son of the dead pharaoh now took on the role of the incarnate Horus, which demonstrates the practical uses of such a system; it provides a neat way to legitimize succeeding rulers. The new king wasn't just the son of the old king. He was, in a sense, his father's reincarnation. Pharaohs might die, but the real power of kingship never bit the dust. The king of Egypt was not, first and foremost, an individual: not Narmer, or Den, or Djer. He was the bearer of a Power.

Sociologists call this arrangement "positional succession." It explains the growing tendency of Egyptian kings to claim the names of their predecessors; these names aren't just names, but descriptions of particular aspects of the undying kingship.⁵ It also makes a little more sense out of the tendency to marry sisters (and sometimes daughters). When a pharaoh succeeds his father, his mother (the previous pharaoh's wife) is, in a sense, his wife as well; he has, after all, become (in some sense) his father.⁶ It is still a number of centuries

* When considering Egyptian theology, it is useful to keep in mind Rudolf Anthes's observation that "Egyptian religion is . . . completely free of those logics which eliminate one of two contradictory concepts" ("Egyptian Theology in the Third Millennium B.C.").

before Oedipus runs into difficulties over this. For the Egyptians, family was the obvious place to find a wife.

Adjib, the fourth king of the First Dynasty, added a new descriptive title to his royal appellations: the *nesu-bit* name. Although these two Egyptian words have the sense of “above” and “below,” *nesu-bit* doesn’t express the pharaoh’s rule over Upper and Lower Egypt. Rather, the *nesu-bit* seems to refer to the realms above and below. The *nesu* is the divine power of government, the *above kingship* that passes from king to king; the *bit* is the mortal holder of this power, the *king below*.⁷

Adjib, the first king to claim this title, had trouble hanging onto the *bit*; perhaps the first historical example of protesting too much. His grave is surrounded by sixty-four sacrificed Egyptians, tribute to his position as holder of the kingship above. On the other hand, his tomb, the earthly monument to the king below, is the shabbiest at Abydos. Worse, his name has been chipped away from various monuments where it was originally carved.

The man who did the chipping was Semerkhet, the next pharaoh. His removal of his predecessor’s name was his attempt to rewrite the past. If the names that the pharaohs gave themselves expressed their eternal hold on the kingship above, writing them down, in the magically powerful signs of the hieroglyphs, carved them into the fabric of the world below. To deface the written name of a pharaoh was to remove him from earthly memory.

The attempt to erase Adjib suggests that Semerkhet was a usurper at best, and an assassin at worst. His seizure of the kingship below seems to have succeeded; he built himself a lovely tomb, much bigger than Adjib’s, and poured so much sacred incense into it that the oil soaked three feet down into the ground and could still be smelled when the tomb was excavated in the early 1900s.⁸ But his efforts to claim the *nesu*, the kingship above, were less triumphant. “In his reign,” Manetho records, “there were many extraordinary events, and there was an immense disaster.”

This cryptic remark isn’t glossed by any later commentator. But the land around the Nile reveals that towards the end of the First Dynasty, the Nile floods lessened dramatically. By the Second Dynasty, the flooding was, on average, three feet lower than it had been a hundred years before.⁹ If lessening floods had slowly pinched Egypt’s farmers in a vise of lessening harvests, a tipping point of discontent might have arrived just as the usurping Semerkhet was busy defacing Adjib’s monuments all over Egypt.

Egypt relied for its very life on the regular return of the Nile flood, an event which varied from year to year in its details, but remained essentially the same. In his role as sun-god, Horus carried with him the same combination of change and stability: each sunrise and sunset is different, but each morning

The First Civil War 67

the sun reappears on the eastern horizon. The title of nesu-bit suggests that the king himself had begun to represent this doubleness of unchanging eternal power and its mutating, earthly manifestation. The king, buried, came back again as his own son, like but different. He was like a perennial plant that returns with a different color of flower but the same root.

For Semerkhet to be erasing a pharaoh's name—the first time, so far as we know, that this happens—must have been a shocking insult to this budding conception of kingship, a little like the sudden discovery that a pope who has been issuing ex cathedra declarations for years was elected by a miscount of the College of Cardinals.* If the Nile flood then began to drop, with no apparent end to the receding waters in sight, one of those unchanging verities which the king was supposed to embody was also suddenly in flux. What would happen next; would the sun fail to come up?

Semerkhet's reign ended with an upheaval in the royal house extreme enough to cause Manetho to start a "Second Dynasty." Most ominous of all—for the pharaohs, if not for the courtiers—the sacrificial burials stop.

It's unlikely that the Egyptian kings suddenly developed a new respect for human life, as some historians tend to imply ("The wasteful practice of human sacrifice ended with the First Dynasty"). More likely, the believability of the claim to the unquestioned power of Horus took a nosedive. The Second Dynasty king could no longer compel human sacrifice, perhaps because he could no longer guarantee that he and he alone held the position of nesu-bit. He could no longer promise that he had the undoubted right to escort those souls past the horizon in royal procession.

In this Second Dynasty, which is generally considered to have begun around 2890, an indeterminate number of kings reigned. Following on the drought (proof of the king's uncertain control over life and death), civil war broke out and raged for years. The war reached its height during the reign of the next-to-last king, Sekemib, when an inscription notes that the southern army fought "the northern enemy within the city of Nekheb."¹⁰ Nekheb, the ancient city of the vulture-goddess, was the eastern half of Hierakonpolis. It lay over a hundred miles south of Abydos, far into Upper Egypt. For a northern, Lower Egyptian rebellion to get this far suggests that during the Second Dynasty, the southern, Upper Egyptian hold on the empire was almost broken.

Although Sekemib himself was a southerner, the inscriptions that bear his name suggest that he may have been a ringer: a northern sympathizer, perhaps even of northern blood. Instead of writing his titles with the sign of the god Horus beside them, he wrote them next to the sign of the god Set.

* Yes, I am aware that this is not actually possible. But it would be shocking.

Set, the brother and murderer of Osiris (and the enemy of Osiris's son Horus), had always been more popular in the north. In later years he was pictured with red hair and a red cloak, reflecting the color of the Red Kingdom, Lower Egypt. He was the god of wind and storm; the bringer of clouds and sandstorms, the only powers strong enough to blot out the sun and bring it to the horizon before its time.

Set's hatred for his brother Osiris and for his brother's son Horus was more than simple jealousy. After all, Set was a blood relation of the king of the gods. He too felt that he had a claim to rule over Egypt. Old tales assured the Egyptians that, even after the murder, Set and Horus quarrelled over their competing claims to be the strongest, the most virile, the most deserving of rule over the earth. At one point, their arguments degenerate into a wrestling match. Set manages to tear out Horus's left eye, but Horus gets the better of his uncle; he rips off Set's testicles.

It's hard to imagine a less ambiguous resolution. The two, both kin and enemy, are struggling over the right to pass along the succession. Horus removes his uncle's ability to do so, and eventually inherits the throne. But Set's jealousy has already led him to commit the world's most ancient crime, the murder of a brother.

The hatred between Set and Horus is a reflection of the hostility between north and south, between two peoples with the same blood. Sekemib's allegiance to Set rather than Horus shows that the quarrel over who should control Egypt was alive and well. And when he died, a Horus-worshipper named Khasekhem came to the throne and took up the sword. He rallied the southern army and, after vicious fighting, overcame the northern enemy. Two seated statues of this triumphant king, both found at Nekhen (the western half of Hierakonpolis), show him wearing only the White Crown of Upper Egypt; around the base of his throne, the broken bodies of northerners lie in defeated heaps.

Egypt had survived its first civil war. Under Khasekhem, a king who deserves to be better known, it entered into the Third Dynasty, a time of peace and prosperity during which Egypt's pyramid-builders were able to develop their art.

The Third Dynasty owed its wealth to Khasekhem's efforts to rebuild Egypt's trade routes. Armed excursions out of the Delta had been abandoned, but during Khasekhem's reign inscriptions at the coastal city of Byblos, which did a huge trade in cedar logs cut from the mountain slopes nearby, began to record the arrival of Egyptian merchant ships. It owed its existence to Khasekhem's political marriage; he took as wife a princess from Lower Egypt, Nemathap, whose name and identity have survived because she was later given

The First Civil War 69

divine honor as the Third Dynasty's great founding matriarch. And it owed its peace not only to Khasekhem's generalship, but to his shrewdness in dealing with the Set problem.

After the war's end, Khasekhem changed his name. But rather than adopting a northern name that would honor Set, or claiming another title that would glorify the southern Horus, he chose a middle course. He became known as Khasekhemwy, "The Two Powerful Ones Appear"—a name which was written with both the Horus falcon and the Set animal above it. Temporarily, the two powers had been reconciled.

The reconciliation is reflected in the ancient myths as well. After the battle between Horus and Set, Horus recovers his missing eye from Set and gives it to his father, now ensconced as Lord of the Dead, as tribute. But Set also gets his own back; he rescues his testicles.

The conflict between the two powers, while balanced, has not gone away. Horus manages to keep hold of his power over Egypt, but Set, whose ability to father heirs is (theoretically, anyway) restored, continues to plot a hostile takeover. In a whole series of stories from a few centuries later, Horus and Set carry on an ongoing battle of wits that involves, among other things, Horus's sperm and a piece of lettuce. The jokes, which almost always involve someone's genitals, cover a real and present threat. Set's power doesn't diminish. He

T I M E L I N E 9

MESOPOTAMIA	EGYPT
Uruk period (4000–3200)	Naqada period (4000–3200)
Jemdat Nasr period (3200–2900)	
Atab	Archaic period (3100–2686)
Etanah	<i>Dynasty 1</i> (3100–2890)
Balih	Menes (Narmer)
Early Dynastic I (2900–2800)	
Early Dynastic II (2800–2600)	<i>Dynasty 2</i> (2890–2696)
	Old Kingdom (2696–2181)
Gilgamesh	<i>Dynasty 3</i> (2686–2613)
Early Dynastic III (2600–2350)	

70 Firsts

never leaves. He's always there, hovering, threatening to upset the orderly passing down of the nesu-bit name by pressing his own claims.

In later versions of the Osiris story, Set doesn't simply drown his brother; he dismembers him and scatters the pieces across Egypt in an attempt to obliterate his name. A thousand years later, Set has become the Egyptian Lucifer, a red-eyed prince of darkness, the Loki who threatens to bring the whole pantheon down in flames.

Khasekhemwy, the king who reunited north and south, has a huge tomb at Abydos, rich with gold, copper, and marble. But no human sacrifices. No courtiers followed him into death. The struggle over the throne had shown that the pharaoh was not a god; others could mount a claim to his power.

Chapter Seventeen

The First Monotheist

*Abram leaves Ur sometime after 2166 BC
and travels to the Western Semitic lands,
while the neo-Sumerian empire grows stronger*

SOMETIME DURING THE SUMERIAN STRUGGLE with the Gutians, a citizen of Ur named Terah collected his servants, his livestock, his wives, his sons and their families, and set off westwards. Among the household was Abram, Terah's son, and Abram's wife Sarai, who had the misfortune to be still childless.*

Terah was not a Sumerian, but perhaps an Akkadian or a member of a related tribe; he traced his ancestry back to Shem, the biblical progenitor of the Semites.¹ Born sometime during the rule of Naram-Sin, Terah had probably never lived in an Ur that was free of the Gutian threat. During his childhood, Ur had taken advantage of the weakening power of the Akkadian kings to free itself from Akkadian domination. By the time he became the father of three sons, the last Akkadian king was making a final stand for the throne; as his young family grew, the Gutians wrecked Agade and ranged freely across the northern plains.

Sometime around the time that Utuhegal was marching towards Ur, to take it over and then lose it again to his son-in-law, Terah and his family decided (understandably) that they would be better off out of the city. They set off,

* The traditional dating of Abraham's lifetime is 2166–1991 BC, based on a straightforward reading of the Masoretic text. There is, naturally, no agreement whatsoever on this. The text itself makes other readings possible; Genesis is a theological history, not a political chronicle, and does not provide an exact chronology. No archaeological evidence points irrevocably to Abraham; scholars comparing the world of Genesis 14 to ancient Mesopotamian conditions have come up with birth dates ranging from 2166 to 1500 BC, or have argued that he never existed at all. In keeping with my general practice up to this point, I have retained the traditional dating, but it ought to be held very loosely. However, Abraham's adventures fit well into the world of 2100 BC, as the rest of this chapter should make clear.

according to the book of Genesis, towards “Canaan”—to the west, towards the Mediterranean shore and away from barbarian Gutians, vengeful Elamites, and ambitious Sumerians.

The theological explanation for the journey, in Genesis 12, is that Abram had heard the voice of God. This was not a Sumerian god, or an Akkadian god, but *the* God: a God who gave himself the puzzling name יהוה, YHWH, possibly a form of the verb “to be.”*

This seems to have been a new idea for Abram. Terah and his sons were likely to have been worshippers of the moon-god Sin and his daughter Inanna, the patron deities of the city of Ur, simply because all Ur natives paid at least lip service to the moon cult. Also, the family names show a fairly standard homage to the Akkadian/Sumerian pantheon. Terah’s own name expresses kinship with the moon-god Sin. Sarai, Abram’s wife, was also his half-sister, Terah’s daughter by another wife; her name is the Akkadian version of Sin’s wife, the goddess Ningal. Terah’s granddaughter Milcah was apparently named after Sin’s daughter Malkatu.² Abram’s own name, which means “exalted father,” is ambiguous. Nevertheless, we can assume that both Abram and Sarai’s names were connected with moon worship, in part because later in the story, YHWH renames both of them as part of the making of a covenant. The new names, Abraham and Sarah, both contain the new syllable *ah*, the first syllable of the covenant name YHWH, a name which reclaims them from the possession of Ur and transfers ownership to the God of Genesis.

From this God, Abram gets both a promise and a command. The promise is that Abram will be made into a great nation and will be blessed; the command is that he leave his country and his people (the city of Ur and its mixed blend of Akkadians, Sumerians, and other Semites) and go “to the land I will show you”: to the land of Canaan, almost due west.[†]

* The familiar “Jehovah” is a non-name. The name God gives to himself when speaking to Abraham is YHWH (see, for example, Gen. 15:7); this name, later known as the “Tetragrammaton” in Greek, is thought by some linguists to be related to the Hebrew verb that expresses existence (see, for example, Jack M. Sasson, *Hebrew Origins: Historiography, History, Faith of Ancient Israel*, p. 81). The name simply consists of the four consonants; the Masoretic text of Genesis has no vowels anywhere, since the reader was meant to insert these as he went. Vowels were added to the Hebrew text much later to help fix its meaning; at this time, the name was rendered YAHWEH. However, to avoid impious use of the name, many readers substituted the name ELOHIM (the generic “my lord”) when they reached YAHWEH. From about 1100 on, scribes unfamiliar with Hebrew began with increasing frequency to insert the ELOHIM vowels into the YHWH consonants, yielding the nonsensical YEHOVIH, which eventually travels into English (by way of Latin) as JEHOVAH.

† The chronology in the Genesis account is ambiguous. Either Abram heard the call of God in Ur, convinced his father to head for Canaan, and then got sidetracked to Haran; or else Terah headed towards Canaan for other reasons and then got sidetracked to Haran, where Abram then received the

The First Monotheist 129

Plenty of races have claimed to trace their ancestry back to one particular god-favored individual, but this is the first time it happens within recorded history. By blood Abram was no different from the Semites around him, and not so different from the people who inhabited the land he was headed towards. But by divine fiat, he was separated from the rest and began something new: one Semite out of the rest, one God rising above the chaos of polytheism. He was the first monotheist.

RATHER THAN HEADING DIRECTLY WEST, a route which would have taken them across desert, the clan travelled northwest along the easier route of the Euphrates. Eventually this would have brought them out on the northern corner of the Mediterranean coast. But they got as far north as the Bilikh river, which runs into the Euphrates at the point where they should have made a left-hand turn. Instead, they turned eastwards, followed the little river over to the small city of Haran, and settled there. Haran lay on a well-travelled trade route; it was, like Ur, a center of moon worship, and perhaps it felt familiar. Terah was growing old, and Haran was relatively peaceful.

Back down south, Ur-Nammu had taken his father-in-law's throne and extended his rule into a neo-Sumerian empire, but his reach never came as far north as Haran. Around 2094 he died, after an eighteen-year reign; his funeral poem praises him as a wise and trustworthy shepherd of his people, a king who had restored Sumer to itself, a man worthy of sharing a throne in the afterlife with Gilgamesh himself.³

Ur-Nammu's son Shulgi took his place. Not long afterwards—perhaps within four or five years—Abram left Haran and resumed his journey towards the land God had promised him. He travelled southwest and arrived, eventually, at Shechem, west of the Jordan river and halfway between the two bodies of water later known as the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea.

There, he required reassurance from God that the land would be his, because as far as he could see, it was full of Canaanites.

“CANAAN” is an anachronistic name for the land which would be known in the first millennium BC as Israel, to the Romans as Palestine, and to the Crusaders as “the Levant.” The earliest occurrence of the word “Canaanite” comes

divine command to strike back out in the original direction. Both readings of the text itself are possible. I merely note this so that I won't get (any more) letters accusing me of not having read my Bible.

from a tablet found at Mari, Zimri-Lim's walled city, and dates from around 1775; it appears to be an uncomplimentary reference to roving bandits from somewhere around the Jordan river.⁴ In 2090 BC there was no name for the land God promised to Abram, because it had neither a racial nor a political identity.

The people who lived along the expanse of the eastern Mediterranean shore were "Western Semites."^{*} We met their close relations all the way back in chapter 1, when Semites mingled with the Sumerians in the earliest days of the Sumerian cities. Instead of settling down on the Mesopotamian plain, the Western Semites kept on going. While their relations taught the Sumerians to farm, the Western Semites spread up and down the coast and built their own cities.

Abram is the first personality to bob up from the surface of the history of this particular area. Without any unified culture, the Western Semites produced no chronicles, and what we know of them comes only from the ruins of their cities. By 7000 BC, farmers with domesticated goats and sheep occupied towns all through the area. Sites such as Catal Huyuk in the far north and Jericho, farther south and close to the Dead Sea, claim the honor of being among the oldest cities in the world. Jericho, down in the land that Abram's descendants would eventually claim, stands out; most of the Western Semitic sites are villages with no particular defenses, this far back, but by 6800 BC, the people of Jericho had built themselves a startlingly huge stone wall. At the corner of the wall, a circular tower rose thirty-five feet high so that watchmen could keep a constant eye on the surrounding land.

What the people of Jericho were expecting to come at them is not entirely clear. It is true that Jericho is located at the site of a steady and constant stream of fresh water,⁵ but after all, the Jordan river was not so very far away. Nevertheless, the people of Jericho, alone among the Western Semites, built huge defenses against some frightening threat from the outside, and watched constantly lest it arrive unannounced.

By the time Abram arrived,[†] the Western Semitic cities had built up their own trade routes, particularly with Egypt. Byblos, halfway down the coast (and known as Gubla to the Akkadians, Gebal to the Semites), had built its entire economy on shipping cedars down to Egypt in exchange for Egyptian linen and precious metals. The northern city of Ebla was collecting taxes from cities that sent caravans its way.⁶ The city of Megiddo, built on the pass between the Jordan valley and the plain of Sharon, had been growing in size

^{*} This name originates with religion scholar Mark Smith, who suggests using it because it is not as horribly anachronistic as every other name used for the early inhabitants of the area. (See *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, p. 19.)

[†] In "Canaan," the eras after prehistoric times are divided (based on pottery styles) into Early Bronze I, 3300–2850; Early Bronze II/III, 2850–2400; and Early Bronze IV, 2400–2000.

The First Monotheist 131

since at least 3500 BC. Shechem, where Abram first asked God to confirm his promise, was at least as old, and was perhaps settled because of an ancient well that rarely ran dry. The original Western Semitic settlers had been joined by various immigrants who filtered in from the north and south; most notably the Amorites, nomadic peoples speaking a Semitic language of their own, who may have come from the Arabian peninsula.

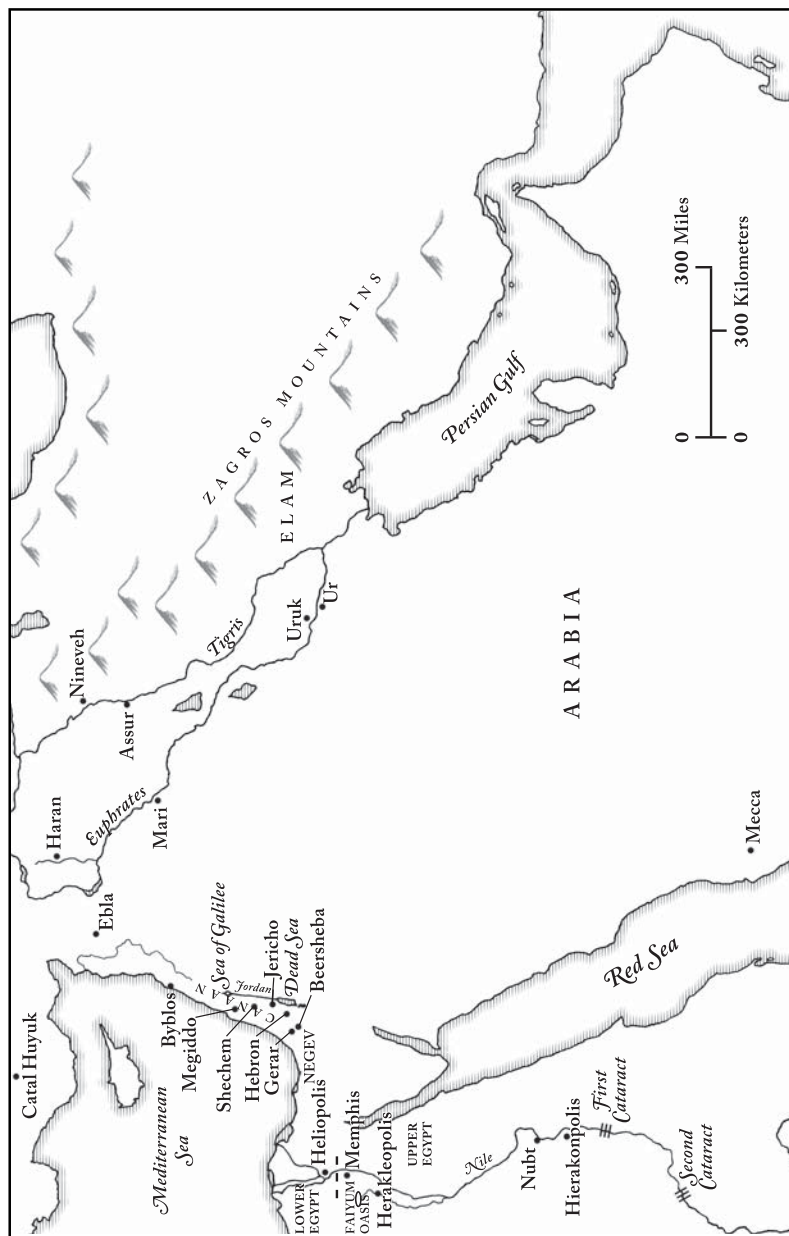
Abram can't be blamed for wondering how this patchwork country was ever going to be his. Nevertheless, he did not get the opportunity to wonder for long, because not five years after arriving in his promised land, he left again.

He wasn't alone. The archaeological record shows that, sometime between 2400 and 2000, the culture of the Western Semites—which had been moving increasingly towards urbanization—took a turn back towards a less organized, more nomadic lifestyle, with many cities temporarily abandoned.* A combination of overplanting and drought had shrunk streams and croplands; large settlements that consumed a lot of water had to disperse to survive.⁷ Add to this the collapse of the Old Kingdom to the south, and the Western Semites had lost not only cropland, but also their wealthiest and most consistent trading partner, the country which had once lavished riches on Byblos and a dozen other cities in exchange for goods. The Old Kingdom chaos had radiated north. In response, Abram went south.

"There was a famine in the land," reads Gen. 12:10, "and Abram went south into Egypt for a while, because the famine was severe." There was more water in Egypt; and, temporarily, a little more order. The "goofy" Seventh Dynasty had been followed by an Eighth Dynasty, slightly more stable but entirely unremarkable; it had 27 kings spanning 146 years, and not a single pharaoh's name has survived.

Around 2160, though, a powerful nobleman from Herakleopolis named Akhtoy had managed through force of personality, canny alliances, and sheer force to pull all of Egypt together under his reign. Manetho calls Akhtoy "more terrible than his predecessors," probably a comment reflecting the amount of bloodshed that the temporary reunification demanded.⁸ For the next hundred years, the descendants of Akhtoy—seventeen successive kings, comprising Manetho's Ninth and Tenth Dynasty—ruled over an Egypt that had lost almost all of its former greatness. It suffered not only from internal troubles, but from the inability to defend its edges from Western Semitic invaders, who constantly raided the Nile Delta in small nomadic bands.

* The theory was once that Amorites had mounted an armed invasion, which would account for such a drastic change in lifestyle; but since there does not seem to be any change in the culture of the area, this is unlikely.



17.1 Abram's World

The First Monotheist 133

According to the traditional dating, Abram arrived down in Egypt with his wife, his servants, and his livestock sometime around 2085. This was not very distant from the time of Akhtoy III of the Tenth Dynasty, a pharaoh who wrote of the Western Semitic invaders:

The vile Asiatic! It goes ill with the place where he is, lacking in water and covered in brushwood. . . . He never dwells in one place but has been forced to stray through want, traversing the lands on foot. . . . The Asiatic is a crocodile on the riverbank: he snatches on the lonely road.⁹

Perhaps this hostility explains why Abram, once down in Egypt, announced that Sarai was his sister rather than his wife. According to Genesis, Abram looked at Sarai, somewhere on the trip down to Egypt, and thought to himself: She is beautiful, so the pharaoh of Egypt is likely to order me killed so that he can have her (which certainly suggests that Semites had an equally low opinion of Egyptians).

Abram's fears came true. The pharaoh (one of the nameless, faceless, unremarkable kings of the Tenth Dynasty) co-opted Sarai and gave Abram thank-you gifts for bringing his beautiful sister to Egypt. Abram ended up with Egyptian sheep, cows, donkeys, camels, and servants. Meanwhile, the pharaoh and his household fared less well. Gen. 12 informs us that Sarai's presence in the pharaoh's harem brought a divine curse on it; the pharaoh and all of his household were inflicted with something called *neh-ga*. English translations tend to render this, politely, as "plague," perhaps because it involved nasty running sores. It rendered the pharaoh totally uninterested in any visits from any women of his household, let alone Sarai.

This odd story makes more sense if set beside the rest of the Genesis epic. Escaping from Egypt (and the pharaoh, who declined to kill Abram, clearly fearing further divine retribution), Abram returned to Canaan and settled near Hebron, significantly south of Shechem. The promise that he would be the father of a whole new nation did not seem to be coming true. The couple continued childless until Sarai was far too old for any hope of conception.

Twenty years or so after the original message from God, Abram decided to give the promise a helping hand. He borrowed Sarai's servant Hagar as a second and unofficial wife, promising Sarai that any child of Hagar's would be officially considered as her offspring.

This was not a practice unknown in the Sumerian cities—it is regulated in a set of Sumerian codes called the Nuzi Tablets—but it didn't work for Abram. God's promise of a new nation had been specific not just to Abram, but to Abram and Sarai together. Abram was to be the father of a new nation, but

Sarai, not just any fertile and available woman, was to be its mother. Like the one God himself, the new nation was going to resemble what came before it, and yet be entirely different. The God of Genesis shared some of the qualities of the nature-bound pantheon, but was beyond nature and uncontrolled by it. The new nation would be different from the peoples around it because it was created by the promise of the one God. That promise had been given to Abram and Sarai, not Abram alone. Any contribution from a Tenth Dynasty pharaoh or an Egyptian maidservant (“Hagar” is an Egyptian name that means something like “immigrant”; this woman was one of the maidservants given to Abram by the afflicted pharaoh) was not welcome; any more than the one God would have welcomed Enlil or Ishtar dropping by to give him a hand. It is after the episode with Hagar that God repeats his promise to Abram and renames him Abraham, showing his divine ownership of this man and his descendants.

Not long afterwards, Abraham again met a king with a roving eye. This time the king ruled Gerar, a city south of Hebron, in the area between Canaan and Egypt called the Negev. Once again afraid of being casually removed, Abraham again insisted that Sarah was his sister, and again Sarah was taken to the royal harem.

As a result, every woman in the entire household was rendered barren until Sarah was returned (and the king, Abimelech, was “kept from touching her,” which seems to suggest that the women weren’t the only ones temporarily deprived of their natural functions). Once again the story is preoccupied with the racial identity of this people God had promised to create.

Genesis was written, by any reckoning, well after the events it describes, with a deliberately anachronistic style of telling. The biblical accounts typically use names which would be familiar to contemporary readers, rather than the names in use during the historical past: “Ur of the Chaldees” is one such reference, since the land at the head of the Persian Gulf was not known as the land of the “Chaldeans” until the reign of Ashurnasirpal II of Assyria (884/883–859 BC) at the earliest.* Abram has dealings with “Amorites”; Abimelech, king of Gerar, is called a Philistine. These names refer to later political identities that evolved as Western Semitic tribes staked out territory and began to battle for it.

Yet even if the names in the text are deliberately anachronistic, the events in the story itself show a clear understanding of the difference not only between Abraham’s blood and Egyptian blood, but between Abraham’s race

* See chapter 48 for the entry of the “Chaldeans” into Assyrian and Babylonian history.

The First Monotheist 135

and the race of Abimelech. For the first time, it was possible to speak of Western Semites as belonging to different races.

In Sumer, from the earliest times, the primary identity of its people had not been as "Sumerians." They had been citizens of Ur, citizens of Lagash, citizens of Uruk, each paying primary loyalty to a different deity while acknowledging the existence of the others. The rise of Sargon's Akkadian empire, with its clear differentiation between Sumerians and Akkadians, had brought about a change: two peoples within one set of political boundaries, with a common identity ("subjects of Sargon") that nevertheless had not removed their basic difference. The raiding Gutians had further clarified this: two different peoples could nevertheless share an identity as *civilized* that set them off, together, against the contrast of a third.

Now Abraham, wandering west, speaking a language so like that of the Western Semites that he was able to communicate without too much difficulty, is set apart in a more sophisticated way yet. He is unlike Abimelech, another Western Semite, because of *choice*.

When the promise of God is finally fulfilled and Isaac is born, a new race is created and given a physical mark; God orders Abraham to circumcise his sons, himself, and his family as a sign of their separateness. (Presumably the sign would remind them, at the crucial moment, that they were not to mingle their blood with other races.) Later, when Abraham wants to find a wife for his son, he refuses to allow Isaac to marry any of the Western Semites around him. Instead he sends his servant all the way back to northwest Mesopotamia to bring back a blood relative, his great-niece Rebekah, from those relations who had remained behind in Haran.

Out of the old, a new race had come.

HAGAR'S SON too was different.

Sarai, with Abram's permission, chased the pregnant Hagar away. Hagar set out on the road that went from Hebron, past Beersheba, south towards Egypt. She was going home.

But Abram's son was not to be reabsorbed back into the chaos of Egypt during the First Intermediate Period. Hagar, according to Gen. 16, encountered a messenger of God on the road, and she too was given a promise. In a mirror image of the promise given to Sarai, Hagar's children would also become a nation too numerous to count.

So Hagar returned to Abram's household; and the baby, when born, was named Ishmael and grew up in his father's household. To him, the Arab peoples have traditionally chalked up their heritage. According to the Qur'an

(written at an even greater distance than Genesis from the events described), Abram—Ibrahim, in the Arabic spelling—was the first to worship Allah, the one God, rather than the stars, the moon, or the sun. When grown, Ishmael went with Ibrahim down into Arabia, to the city of Mecca on the southwestern corner of the peninsula, and together they built the Ka’ba, the first house for the worship of Allah. To this house, the Qur’an orders all of Allah’s followers—the “People of the Book”—to turn: “Wherever you are,” the Qur’an says, “turn your faces in that direction. . . . From wherever you start forth, turn your face in the direction of the Sacred Mosque; wherever you are, turn your face there.”¹⁰

BACK IN the neo-Sumerian empire that Terah’s family had fled, the unrest of earlier days had settled into an empire.

Shulgi, who had succeeded his father, the ambitious Ur-Nammu, on the throne of Ur, had spent the first part of his reign taking stock of his situation. After twenty years on the throne—less than halfway through his reign, as it turned out—Shulgi began to reorganize his domain.¹¹ This organization involved a certain amount of conquest; Shulgi campaigned his way up north as far as the little cities of Assur and Nineveh and then back over across the boundary of the Tigris, into the land of the Elamites, taking back Susa. He never pushed his way up north into the Elamite highlands, where Elamite kings from a long-lasting Elamite dynasty called the Simash kept their claim on sovereignty. But where his fighting ended, his negotiation began. Shulgi made treaties and covenants with a score of small princes and warleaders, marrying three of his daughters to the rulers of territories that lay over in the Elamite lands. He divided his growing territory into a series of provinces, with governors who reported back to him. This was an empire under the rule of law and treaty, bound by regulations that his people were to obey. They were to be obedient not simply because Shulgi had soldiers who could enforce his demands, but because he was the chosen one of the gods, selected by the divine for special favor:

Mother Nintu nurtured you,
Enlil raised your head,
Ninlil loved you . . .
Shulgi, king of Ur.

He is, in particular, beloved of the goddess Inanna, who has set her love on him thanks in part to his sexual prowess:

The First Monotheist 137

Since he ruffled the hair of my lap. . . .
Since on the bed he spoke pleasant words. . . .
A good fate I will decree for him.¹²

He is also beloved of the moon-god Nanna. In gratitude to his divine protectors, Shulgi built the largest ziggurat of Ur, the neo-Sumerian equivalent of the Great Pyramid; an enormous structure for worship, named in Sumerian "The House Whose Foundation Is Clothed in Terror."¹³ And in his attempt to rule righteously, as the gods required, Shulgi established a new set of laws. They are fragmentary, but these laws bear the distinction of being the first written code in history to prescribe set penalties for set offenses.¹⁴

WHILE SHULGI REIGNED IN UR, Abraham fought constantly to keep his family safe. It was a rough time to be in Canaan. During this time, the walls of Jericho alone were damaged and repaired seventeen different times.¹⁵

Abraham had fathered not one but two nations; both of his sons were marked with the sign of the covenant, the ceremonial removal of the foreskin that created a physical difference between them and the other Semites who were battling over the rough land between the Mediterranean coast and the Jordan river.* But this difference gave them no edge in the struggle for territory. When Sarah died, almost thirty years after giving birth to Isaac, the clan still had so little land that Abraham had to buy a cave from a nearby Western Semitic landlord in order to bury his wife.

* Muslims still practice male circumcision, or *khitan*, which tradition traces back to Abraham. Tradition says that the Prophet was born circumcised, but Muslim scholars disagree about the meaning of this miracle. Since the Qur'an does not specifically command circumcision, the practice is less strongly mandated in Islam than in Judaism; scholars disagree over whether circumcision is *wajib*, an obligation, or *sunna*, a custom. See M. J. Kister, " ' . . . and He Was Born Circumcised . . . ': Some Notes on Circumcision in Hadith," in *Oriens* 34 (1994), pp. 10–30.

138 Firsts

T I M E L I N E I 7

EGYPT	MESOPOTAMIA
<i>Dynasty 4</i> (2613–2498)	Early Dynastic III (2600–2350)
Snefru	
Khufu	Lugulannemundu (c. 2500)
Khafre	Mesilim
Menkaure	
<i>Dynasty 5</i> (2498–2345)	Lugalzagesi (Umma) Urukagina (Lagash)
<i>Dynasty 6</i> (2345–2184)	Akkadian Period (2334–2100)
	Sargon
	Rimush
	Gutian invasion
First Intermediate Period (2181–2040)	
<i>Dynasties 7 & 8</i> (2181–2160)	
<i>Dynasties 9 & 10</i> (2160–2040)	Fall of Agade (c. 2150)
	Third Dynasty of Ur (2112–2004)
	Ur-Nammu
	Shulgi Abram travels to Canaan

Chapter Forty-Six

From Western to Eastern Zhou

*In China, between 918 and 771 BC,
trouble both inside and out
forces the Zhou king to move east*

I N THE YEARS SINCE good King Wen's grandson had sent his brothers out to establish Zhou centers of power, the outposts had grown and spread into small kingdoms. The men who now ruled them, descendants of those original royal siblings, were the second and third and fourth cousins of the monarch; a blood tie so distant as to be merely formal.¹ The lands were now governed not by family relations, but by administrators (at best) and petty kings (at worst) who paid their dues of loyalty to the king not out of blood obligation, but out of duty.

Inevitably, the "Lords of the Nine Lands," centered around the old colonies, acted with more and more independence. In the remains of their capital cities, archaeologists have uncovered bronze vessels cast and inscribed by the lords of the lands themselves; the Zhou emperor had lost his control over the bronze casting which had once been a royal monopoly.² The inscriptions show that these same local governors were also beginning to celebrate their own feasts and rituals. They were not waiting for the king to act as the spokesman for heaven.

In response, the Zhou administration itself seems to have become slowly more and more structured, less dependent on personal loyalties, hedging its officials in with increasingly strict rules. Courtiers once simply called "lords," who had carried out the general function of enforcing the king's authority, now were awarded more specific titles: the Supervisor of the Land had one set of duties, the Supervisor of the Horse another set, the Supervisor of Works yet another. This growing bureaucracy, like the Mandate of Heaven itself, was

intended to protect the king's power; yet it simultaneously reduced it, spelling out the truth that he could not compel all-encompassing, heartfelt obedience simply through the force of his character.³

Soon, trouble between king and "lords" (called "dukes" in many translations) began to rear its head. Mu's son Kung, according to Sima Qian, took a royal trip to visit the lord of a small state called Mi. The Duke of Mi had collected, for his harem, three beautiful girls from one family. Even his mother found this excessive: "A threesome of girls from one clan is too splendid a thing!" she scolded him. "Even a king does not consider himself deserving of this, much less should you, a petty lout!"

She suggested that he give the girls to the king instead. The duke refused, and King Kung apparently went home in peace. But a year later, he marched in and exterminated Mi.⁴ He was not going to allow any of the lords of *his* lands the chance to wallow in greater luxury than that of the king.

During the reign of his successor, King Yih, the king's power was under threat from the outside as well. The Bamboo Annals tell us that barbarian tribes from outside the Zhou land mounted attacks on the capital itself. They had never accepted either Shang or Zhou rule, and did not intend to.⁵

The barbarians were beaten away, but the outside threat was compounded by treachery on the inside. Yih's brother, Hsiao, managed to seize his throne. The accounts of the overthrow are vague, but the Bamboo Annals say that King Yih departed from his capital abruptly, while his brother Hsiao succeeded him rather than his son and living heir, Yi.

Yih died in exile; eventually the usurper Hsiao died as well, and Yi managed to recapture his throne with the help of a coalition of lords who (in Sima Qian's words) "enthroned" him. But after this brief cooperation, he too had his difficulties with the lords of the lands. His particular *bête noire* turned out to be the Duke of Qi, up on the north Yellow river, which had grown into a stronger and stronger state in its own right. Bickering escalated to defiance; according to an inscription, Yi finally turned out the royal army and mounted a campaign against Qi. The Bamboo Annals add that he captured the Duke of Qi and boiled him in a bronze cauldron.⁶

Yi died the year after, and left the throne to his son Li. The quarrels between king and noblemen continued, and more than once erupted into actual fighting. Li, forced to battle constantly against challenges to his authority, grew more and more tyrannical. Sima Qian writes that his own people began to criticize him, and that in desperation the king ordered a Grand Inquisitor of sorts (a "shaman") to go out and listen for disloyal speech. Culprits were arrested and executed. "The criticism subsided," Sima Qian says, "but the feudal lords stopped coming to court. . . . The king became even

more stern. No one in the capital dared to say a word, but only glanced at each other on the roads.”⁷

Misfortune soon joined the king’s repressive policies to make the people of China more miserable than ever: periods of famine and drought, punctuated by flooding rains, destroyed the harvests. An ode from Li’s reign laments the state of the kingdom:

Death rains and chaos from heaven down
swamping the king and throne,
worms gnaw thru root and joint of the grain,
woe to the Middle Land, murrain and mould.⁸

Other songs passed down from these years talk of hunger, discontent, and rebellion.⁹

The lords who were still loyal to the king warned Li that an explosion was coming: “To block people’s mouths is worse than blocking a river,” the Duke of Shao told his king. “When an obstructed river bursts its banks, it will surely hurt a great number of people.”¹⁰

Li, unconvinced, refused to recall his Grand Inquisitor. Rebellion broke out; a mob gathered around the palace and shook the gates, but Li managed to get away, out of the capital and into the countryside. His young heir was less fortunate. Trapped in the city, the boy took refuge with his father’s faithful advisor, the Duke of Shao. To save the life of the heir to the throne, the Duke of Shao “replaced the Heir . . . with his own son.”¹¹

Presumably the replacement “king” was killed; and the faithful advisor, who had sacrificed his own family for his king, raised the prince in his household. The rule of the Zhou kingdom passed into the hands of regents, until Li died in exile and the heir, King Hsuan, took the throne.

As far as Sima Qian is concerned, the cycle is progressing through its usual round. From Mu onwards, the Zhou rulers are becoming slowly more decadent. In all likelihood, drought, famine, and the constant encroachments of the lords on royal power were more than enough to make the capital city an unhappy place; but Sima Qian finds it absolutely essential that Li be self-indulgent and cruel, and his son and heir Hsuan be headstrong and blind to the wise advice of his counselors.

Headstrong or not, Hsuan also faced a massive invasion of barbarians.

These invasions had become a constant annoyance. Across the northern and western mountain ranges, tribes of nomads ranged. They were probably Indo-European, and so unlike the descendants of those first Yellow river settlers; they lived a horse-oriented nomadic life, travelling across the high

From Western to Eastern Zhou 331

steppes on horseback, hunting game with bows. When they grew hungry, they came down to raid the fields and granaries of the Zhou farmers.

During Hsuan's reign, the most threatening tribes were to the west.¹² The Zhou called them "Xianyun," which was probably not a tribal name; it was simply their designation for a coalition of different nomadic groups who had joined together to try to gain some of the Zhou prosperity for themselves.¹³

From the fifth to the twelfth year of his reign, the armies of King Hsuan marched out against the Xianyun, defending the center of his realm from those on the outside. They were a more troublesome tribe than the earlier invaders, in part because they used chariots in battle, and the wars against them dragged on and on. One of the poems from the Minor Odes ("Xianyun") section of the *Shi jing* laments the invasion; a soldier posted on the frontier complains,

We have no house, no home
Because of the Xianyun;
We cannot rest or bide
Because of the Xianyun . . .
The year is running out.
But the king's business never ends;
We cannot rise or bide,
Our hearts are very bitter.

Eventually the Xianyun dropped back, in the face of Zhou resistance, and for a time disappeared from the historical record. But Hsuan's victory over the barbarians did nothing to improve his authority with his own countrymen. Not long afterwards he was back to fighting his own feudal lords, and his fortunes grew bleaker and bleaker: "The many lords mostly rebelled against royal commands," remarks one chronicle.¹⁴

In the forty-sixth year of his reign, Hsuan died. His son Yu inherited, and the fall of the Zhou grew inexorably closer. An earthquake shook the capital almost as soon as Yu took power, and the resulting landslides apparently choked the river channels that supplied fresh water to the city: "When the source of the rivers is blocked," laments one of the court advisors, "the state will surely perish."

If there is no way to imbue the soil and the people want for daily needs, then the state will perish all the sooner! . . . Now Zhou's deeds are like those of [the Xia and the Shang] in their final years, and the rivers and their

332 Empires

sources are . . . blocked. . . . Landslides and dried up rivers are the signs a state will perish. And when the rivers dry up, landslides will surely follow.¹⁵

Sure enough, Sima Qian writes, “during that year, the three rivers dried up, and there were landslides.”

The parallel between the action of Yu’s grandfather Li, who had blocked the mouths of his people as a river is blocked, and the earth which slides down into the mouths of the rivers and cuts the capital city off from water, is unmistakable. The evils of the Zhou have overflowed into the earth itself; and in return Heaven will remove its Mandate from the Zhou, so that they no longer give life to their people.

Yu himself turned out to be a licentious, pleasure-seeking ruler. Having sired a son and heir on his senior wife, Yu then became infatuated with a harem woman and tried to depose the queen and crown prince on behalf of the concubine and her bastard son. His advisors resisted the suggestion, but Yu insisted; and finally the advisors stood aside. “The calamity has taken form,” the Grand Historian observed, in despair, “and there is nothing we can do about it.”¹⁶

This concubine, now queen, had ripped apart the royal family; not surprisingly, her chief pleasures were destructive. She liked best to hear silk tearing, and so she ordered enormous pieces of the expensive fabric brought to the palace to be torn up in order to amuse her.¹⁷ Despite the wasteful occupation, she seldom smiled and never laughed.

Yu cast around in his mind for some way to amuse her, and decided that he would light all the beacon fires, and beat the alarm drums. This was a signal reserved to warn of barbarian invasion; at the uproar, the nearby lords turned out their armies and charged to the walls of the city. On their arrival, they found no barbarians. Their startled faces were so comical that the concubine laughed out loud (perhaps for the first time).¹⁸

But barbarian invaders did arrive, not too long later. They were known as the Quan Rong; their homeland was north and west of the Zhou lands. They poured over the borders and laid siege to the city. And they were joined in this by non-barbarians: relatives of King Yu’s first wife, angry that she had been set aside. The outside and inside threats had coalesced into one dynasty-shaking attack.

King Yu ordered the beacon fires lit, but the feudal lords simply shrugged and went back to their own duties. They had no intention of being made fools of twice in order to entertain the emperor’s fancy piece. Yu himself, fighting against the invaders, was killed in battle. The barbarians looted the palace, kidnapped the concubine, and returned home.

334 Empires

the city of Loyang, which had been established centuries before by the Duke of Zhou.

So that he could march safely towards his new capital, the chief of the Ch'in—a minor state whose lord had not been officially recognized by the throne—sent soldiers to escort P'ing. In gratitude, according to the *Shu ching*, P'ing made the chief a lord, the Duke of Ch'in, and “also gave him sufficient land to sustain his new position, the chief city of which was the old capital which had just been abandoned.”¹⁹ The Zhou homeland was now in the hands of lesser lords; from his new eastern capital, leaning on the support of the dukes who would be loyal as long as it was in their best interest, King P'ing ruled over a newly shrunk kingdom.²⁰ The era of the Western Zhou had ended; the time of the Eastern Zhou had begun.

Chapter Sixty-One

Kingdoms and Reformers

*Between 560 and 500 BC,
India divides into kingdoms and alliances,
and the kingdom of Magadha begins its rise*

BETWEEN THE MYTHICAL BATTLE of the Mahabharata and the middle of the sixth century BC, the warlike clans of India had battled, negotiated, and treated their way into a semistable arrangement of kingdoms.

Sixteen of these kingdoms are mentioned in tales preserved by Buddhist oral tradition and later set down in writing.* Among them are the states of Kuru, Gandhara, and Pancala, kingdoms grown from the roots of the ancient clans that had fought in the Bharata War; the far southern state of Ashuaka, down below the Vindhya and Satpura mountain ranges, on the dry plateau now known as the Deccan; and the state of Magadha, below the curve of the Ganga.†

The sixteen kingdoms were called *mahajanapadas*, a word rooted in much

* Our best source for the very early history of the sixteen states is the Pali Canon (also called the *Tipitaka*), an enormous collection of Buddhist scriptures transmitted orally and set down in writing during the first century BC. The Pali Canon is divided into three sections: the *Vinaya Pitaka*, which prescribes the conduct of monks and nuns living in religious communities; the *Sutta Pitaka*, which consists of hundreds of teachings attributed to the Buddha (a “sutta” is a discourse or teaching) and is itself divided into five parts, called *nikayas*; and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, which is a systematic theology based on the teachings in the *Sutta Pitaka*. The Pali Canon is used by all four of the major schools of Buddhism (the Theravada, Mahasanghika, Sarvastivada, and Sammatiya) and is the sole sacred scripture for Theravada Buddhism. The texts in the Pali Canon are concerned with spiritual practice, not politics; the history we can gather from them has to be gleaned from passing remarks or from stories told to illustrate the source of a particular Buddhist practice.

† The most complete list is found in the sutta (teaching attributed to the Buddha) called the *Visakhuposatha Sutta*. The sixteen states and their alternate spellings are: Kamboja, Gandhar (Gandhara), Kuru (Kura, Kure), Pancala (Panchala), Malla (a kingdom that also included an alliance of eight clans called the Vajji or Vriji Confederacy), Vatsa (Vatsya, Vansa), Kosal (Kosala), Matsya (Maccha), Surasena (Shurasena), Chedi (Ceti), Avanti, Ashuaka (Assaka), Kashi (Kasi), Magadha, Anga, Vanga.

older times. The early nomadic Aryan warrior clans had called themselves *jana* (Sanskrit for “tribe”); the warrior clans that had settled in the Ganga river valley and claimed land for themselves extended this word and called themselves *janapada*, tribes with land. The sixteen mahajanapada, or “great janapada,” were tribes with land who had absorbed other tribes and become kingdoms. In these kingdoms, the king himself, his relatives, and his warriors remained the ruling clan. To be born into the ruling clan was to be *kshatriya* and to belong, by right, to the elite and powerful.

The *kshatriya* held political power, but the priests wielded a peculiar power of their own. Sacrifices and offerings had been part of the daily life of the Aryans since their journey south into India: “Indra helps, by his aid, the one occupied with sacrifice,” reads one of the earliest hymns in the Rig Veda, “the one who chants hymns, who cooks the sacrificial food, who is strengthened by holy utterance . . . and by the gifts to the officiating priests. He, O people, is Indra.”¹ Wound together with elements from the Harappan peoples and the other indigenous tribes, the old Aryan practices became the core of the most ancient form of practices later known as Hinduism. The priests who performed the sacrifices had been the first aristocracy of Indian society, and they continued to hold their influence in the sixteen mahajanapas. Like the ruling *kshatriya*, the priests had their own clans: to be born into a priestly family was to be *brahman* and to inherit the privilege of sacrifice.

This three-way division of society—priests, warrior-chiefs, and everyone else (the “everyone else” families were *vaishyas*, common people)—was far from unknown in ancient times. But in India, the priests dominated the rest. In most other ancient societies, the kings and warriors were at the top of the power heap; even those who paid lip service to the importance of the gods were likely to throw their prophets and priests in jail, or even execute them. And in almost every other ancient society, the king was able to carry out certain sacred functions, and sometimes held the highest religious office in the land.

But the *brahman* had an unshared power. During the days of the sixteen kingdoms, a man who had not been born *kshatriya* could still become king if the priests carried out a ritual to bestow sacred power upon him, but no one who was not born *brahman* could take up the job of a priest.² The *brahman* was, according to the later Hindu text *The Laws of Manu*, “the lord” of all other created orders, the most excellent of men: “born as the highest on earth, the lord of all created beings, for the protection of the treasury of the law;

(See *Anguttara Nikaya*, VIII.43, in Bhikkhu Khantipalo, trans., *Lay Buddhist Practice*; Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*, p. 138; and John Keay, *India: A History*, p. 45.)



61.1 Indian Kingdoms

whatever exists in the world is the property of the brahman . . . the brahman is, indeed, entitled to all.”³

By the time of the sixteen kingdoms, the animal sacrifices which had been so important to the wandering nomadic tribes had slowly fallen out of favor with the growing urban populations of India. But a power awarded by the universe itself to those “born as the highest on earth” could hardly be abridged. The importance of the priests was so built into the entire consciousness of the warrior clans that the brahmins—far from losing their job—kept their central role. Rather than sacrificing, they governed the proper performance of the bloodless rituals which now occupied the place of offerings: rituals carried out to honor the flame of the hearth, to acknowledge the coming of dusk, to honor deities by caring for their images, to mark marriages and funerals.⁴

Kingdoms and Reformers 485

AROUND THE EDGES of the sixteen states lay a ring of tribes who still resisted being enfolded into any one of the sixteen mahajanapada. Instead of coalescing into kingdoms, these tribes formed independent alliances, called *gana-sanghas*.

It seems likely that the tribes of the *gana-sanghas* were not primarily of Aryan descent, but rather had their roots in the inhabitants of the Ganga valley who had been there before the warrior clans arrived. Inter-marriage between the newcomers and the tribes (as illustrated by the alliance of the Pandava clan with the Pancala, back in the story of the Bharata War) had probably broken down any hard and fast racial divisions. But there is one strong proof that the *gana-sanghas* were, overwhelmingly, non-Aryan: they did not share the ritual practices so central to the lives of the Indians in the mahajanapada.

There were only two kinds of people in the *gana-sanghas*: the ruling families who claimed most of the land, and the hired servants and slaves who worked on it. The decisions (to go to war, to trade with another clan, to divert water from irrigation systems over particular fields) were made by the heads of the ruling families, and in these decisions, the laborers had no voice at all.⁵

The mahajanapada too had voiceless servants. They were a fourth kind of people: not ruling *kshatriyas*, or priestly *brahmins*, nor even common *vaishyas* who worked as farmers, potters, carpenters, and bricklayers. A late song of the Rig Veda, describing the mythical origin of each order, assigns pride of place to the *brahman*, who were born from the mouth of the huge, preexisting cosmic giant *Purusha*, whose death gave rise to the entire universe:

The *brahman* was his mouth,
his two arms became the *kshatriya*
his two thighs are the *vaishya*
and from his two feet the *shudra* was produced.⁶

The *shudra* were slaves and servants, the fourth and subordinate class of people. They were voiceless and powerless, unable to free themselves from servitude, allowed by law to be killed or exiled at any whim of their masters, barred from even hearing the sacred *vedas* read (the penalty was to have boiling lead poured into the offending ears).^{*} They were not part of the society of

^{*} By 600 BC, the Rig Veda—the oldest collection of hymns from ancient Aryan times—had been joined by three other collections of hymns: the Samaveda (a selection of Rig Veda hymns specially arranged for ceremonial use by singers), the Yajurveda (a combination of Rig Veda hymns plus newer texts, used by priestly specialists called *adhvaryu*, who carried out particular acts during religious

the mahajanapada; they were other, something else. Their origin is not clear, but perhaps the shudra were originally a conquered people.*⁷

In such highly stratified societies, someone was bound to be discontent.

The first objections to all of this hierarchy came from the gana-sanghas. Around 599 BC, the reformer Nataputta Vardhamana was born into a gana-sangha in the northeast of the Ganga valley: a confederacy of tribes known as the Vriji.⁸ His own particular tribe was the Jnatika, and he was a prince and rich man, the son of a ruler.

According to his followers, his reforms began in 569, when he was thirty years old. At first he rejected the wealth and privilege of his birth, divested himself of all possessions except for a single garment, and spent twelve years in silence and meditation. At the end of this period, he had reached a vision of a life free from any priests: there were no brahmans in his universe. The goal of human existence was not to communicate with the gods through the agency of the priests. Nor was it to please gods by carrying out the duties to which one was born, as the Hindu scriptures taught.[†] Rather, man should free himself from the chains of the material universe by rejecting the passions (greed, lust, appetite) that chain him to the material world.

Around 567, he began to walk barefoot through India, teaching five principles: *ahimsa*, nonviolence against all living things (the first systematic explanation of why animals have rights); *satya*, truthfulness; *asteya*, refraining from theft of any kind; *brahmacharya*, the rejection of sexual pleasure; and *aparigraha*, detachment from all material things (a commitment which the

rites), and the Atharveda (a collection not only of hymns, but of spells and rites for use in everyday life). (John Y. Fenton et al., *Religions of Asia*, pp. 27–28.)

* The word *caste* was a sixteenth-century invention of the Portuguese. Ancient Indians are more likely to have used the Sanskrit word *jati* (“birth”) for the divisions.

† In the sixth century BC, Hinduism underwent massive new developments (not unrelated to the political shifts) and put out branches in three different directions. The Way of Action was a Hinduism particularly dominated by the priests, who emphasized that the role of every man and woman was to carry out the duties of the caste into which he or she was born. The Way of Knowledge focused, not on action, but on the achievement of high spiritual enlightenment through the study of *upanishads*, new teachings written down beginning around the time of the sixteen kingdoms. The Way of Devotion emphasized instead the worship of the highest deity in the Indian pantheon (either Shiva or Vishnu) as the center of the good life. All three traditions offer rebirth into a better human existence or (eventually) into a heavenly existence as a reward for those who excel in action, or in enlightenment, or in devotion.

This is a very simple summary of an immensely huge and complicated religious tradition. *Religions of Asia* by John Fenton et al. is a standard introduction that gives a slightly more detailed explanation of Hinduism’s development. *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction* by Kim Knott is another good overview. A more detailed (and academic, although still readable) resource is *Hinduism: Origins, Beliefs, Practices, Holy Texts, Sacred Places* by Vasudha Narayanan.

Kingdoms and Reformers 487

Mahavira illustrated by doing away with his single garment and going naked instead). Followers gathered behind him, and as a great teacher, Nataputta Vardhamana became known as the “Mahavira” (the Great Hero).⁹

None of these were brand new ideas. Mainstream Hinduism also taught the freeing of the self from the material world in various ways. The Mahavira was less an innovator than a reformer of already existing practices. But his explanations of the need for extreme self-denial, and the obligation to respect all life, were compelling enough to gather a following. His doctrines became known as Jainism, his followers as Jains.*

A few years later, another innovator appeared from outside the mahajana-padas, also born into a gana-sangha. Like Nataputta Vardhamana, he was born to power and money. He too rejected the privileges of his life around the age of thirty and walked away into a self-imposed exile. He too came to the conclusion that freedom could only be found by those who were able to reject their passions and desires.

This innovator was Siddhartha Gautama, a prince of the Shakya clan, which lay north of the Mahavira’s native Vrijji alliance. According to the traditional tales of his enlightenment, he lived his earlier years surrounded by family and by comfort: he had a wife and a young daughter, and his father the king kept him in luxury within the walls of a huge palace, cut off from the lives of ordinary men.

But one day Siddhartha ordered his charioteer to take him for a drive in the park. There he saw an ancient man, “broken-toothed, gray-haired, crooked and bent of body, leaning on a staff, and trembling.” Shocked by this extreme old age, he returned to his palace: “Shame on birth,” he thought to himself, “since to everyone that is born, old age must come.” He pushed the thought away, but on his next journey to the park, he saw a man riddled with disease, and after that a corpse. This cast him into even greater trouble of mind.

But the crowning revelation happened at a party some time later. He was entertained by the dancing and singing of beautiful women, but as the evening wore on, they grew weary, sat down, and fell asleep. The prince, looking around the room,

perceived these women lying asleep, with their musical instruments scattered about them on the floor—some with their bodies wet with trickling

* Another simplified summary; for more, try the basic *An Introduction to Jainism* by Bharat S. Shah, or the more scholarly *The Jains* by Paul Dundas. The best-known modern follower of Jain principles is Gandhi, who made ahimsa the center of his campaigns for nonviolent change. Gandhi was not himself a Jain, but grew up in a city where there was a large Jain population.

phlegm and spittle; some grinding their teeth, and muttering and talking in their sleep; some with their mouths open; and some with their dress fallen apart so as plainly to disclose their loathsome nakedness. This great alteration in their appearance still further increased his aversion for sensual pleasures. To him that magnificent apartment . . . began to seem like a cemetery filled with dead bodies impaled and left to rot.¹⁰

It was in response to this that he set out on his own self-imposed exile. The year, according to tradition, was 534 BC.*

Siddhartha spent years wandering, trying to come to peace with the inevitability of decay and corruption. He tried meditation, but when his period of meditation was done, he was still faced with the reality of approaching suffering and death. He tried the Jain method of asceticism, starving himself to weaken his ties with the earth until, as a later text tells us, his “spine stood out like a corded rope,” his ribs like “the jutting rafters of an old roofless cowshed,” and his eyes were so sunken into their sockets that they seemed “like the gleam of water sunk in a deep well.”¹¹ Yet this self-denial did not move him an inch beyond the common human condition.

Finally, he came to the answer that he had been searching for. It is not just desires that trap men and women, but existence itself, which is “bound up with impassioned appetite,” and which always desires: “thirst for sensual pleasures, thirst for existence, thirst for non-existence.”¹² The only freedom from desire was a freedom from existence itself.

The realization of this truth was Siddhartha’s enlightenment, and from this point on he was known not as Siddhartha Gautama, but as a Buddha: an enlightened one who has achieved *nirvana*, the knowledge of a truth which is caused by nothing, dependent on nothing, and leads to nothing, a way of existence impossible to define in words.[†]

This was not merely a spiritual discovery, but (despite claims of detachment) a political position. It was both anti-brahman and anti-caste. The emphasis in brahmanical Hinduism on rebirth meant that most Indians faced a future of weary life after weary life after weary life, with no hope of leaving

* The traditional birth and death dates for both the Mahavira (599–527) and the Buddha (563–483) have been criticized in recent scholarship as about a hundred years too early, which would shift both men into the next century. Support for the later dates is widespread but not universal among scholars of India; as uncertainty remains, I have decided to use the traditional dates for the sake of consistency.

† For more, try the basic *Buddha* by Karen Armstrong, and Michael Carrithers’s *Buddha: A Very Short Introduction*. A more comprehensive study of Buddhism is found in *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices* by Peter Harvey.

their strictly circumscribed lives except through rebirth, which might face them with yet another long lifetime of similar or worse suffering. It was an existence which, in Karen Armstrong's phrase, did not so much promise the hope of rebirth as threaten with "the horror of redeath . . . [B]ad enough to have to endure the process of becoming senile or chronically sick and undergoing a frightening, painful death *once*, but to be forced to go through all this again and again seemed intolerable and utterly pointless."¹³ In a world where death was no release, another kind of escape must be found.

Equally anti-brahman (and anti-kshatriya) was the Buddha's teaching that each man must rely on himself, not on the power of a single strong leader who will solve all of his problems. Much later, a ninth-century Buddhist master coined the command "If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha!" in order to emphasize to his students just how important it was not to submit to a single authority figure—even one who claims a divine mandate, whether king or priest.¹⁴

Soon the Buddha too had his followers, disciples drawn from all castes.

While Mahavira and the Buddha preached the relinquishment of material possessions, the kings of the mahajanapadas were fighting to gain as much territory as possible. Kashi and Kosal, just north of the Ganga, and Magadha to the south were prime enemies in the wars for land. They fought over the Ganga valley, and were joined in this competition by the gana-sangha Vrijji, home confederacy of the Mahavira.

Kashi and Kosal traded off power with each other, neither keeping dominance for long. But Magadha, below the Ganges, grew steadily stronger. The king Bimbisara came to the throne of Magadha in 544 BC, and became the first Indian empire-builder, albeit in a minor way. As the Buddha was reaching enlightenment, Bimbisara was rallying his armies against the delta kingdom of Anga, which controlled the river's access to the ocean (by way of the Bay of Bengal), and which contained the important city of Campa, the primary port from which ships sailed out for trade and down the coast to the south.¹⁵ He marched against it, conquered it, and kept it.

This was not a huge conquest. But Anga was the first of the sixteen kingdoms to be permanently absorbed into another, which was a portent of things to come. And military campaigns were not Bimbisara's only victory. He treated his way, by marriage, into control over part of Kosol, and by another marriage into friendship with the gana-sangha on his western border.¹⁶ He built roads all across his kingdom, so that he could easily travel around it and call its village leaders together into conference. These roads also made it possible for him to collect (and police) the payment of taxes. He welcomed the Buddha, who had wandered down from the north; any doctrine which

490 Empires

reduced the power of the brahmins was bound to increase the power of the king. He was well on his way to making Maghada not a set of warrior clans that held uncomfortably together, but a little empire. India, so long on an entirely different path of development than the empires to the west, was drawing closer to them.

T I M E L I N E 6 I	
ROME	INDIA
	Sixteen kingdoms in the Ganga river valley
Tarquin the Elder	
	Birth of the Mahavira (trad. 599)
Servius Tullius (578)	Birth of the Buddha (trad. 563)
Etruscan League	Bimbisara of Magadha
Tarquin the Proud (535)	Death of the Mahavira (trad. 527)
Roman Republic begins (509)	
Celtic invasion	
First Roman dictator	Death of the Buddha (trad. 483)

Chapter Seventy-Nine

Empire

*Between 44 BC and AD 14,
Octavian becomes the First Citizen,
the Parthians reject Roman ways,
and the entire empire pretends that Rome is still a republic*

WITH CAESAR'S BODY STILL LYING on the floor of the Senate, Mark Antony finally managed to shove his way into the Senate chamber. He was too late to help Caesar, but he did prevent the conspirators from throwing Caesar's body into the Tiber, as they had planned. Instead they deserted the Senate and marched in phalanx to the Capitol, swords still drawn, shouting to the people to come join them, and "resume their liberty." They were at a crucial juncture: the people in the street might spontaneously band together against them. A few of the better-known citizens of Rome fell into the march with them, and soon the city was past the immediate danger point. Meanwhile three of Caesar's household slaves came and got his body from the empty chamber and carried him home.¹

Mark Antony, not sure how the public mood would break, fled to a friend's house, disguised himself as a slave, and got out of the city as quickly as possible. Brutus and Cassius, on the other hand, continued to make speeches about Caesar's death as a tragic necessity. The next day, they reassembled the Senate and suggested that Caesar be given a big honorable funeral and also be honored as divine, now that he was safely dead. The Senate agreed. This kept Rome calm, and also encouraged Mark Antony, who had not gone far, to come back; clearly no purges of Caesar's allies were about to begin.

But in the next days, the calm was wrecked when Caesar's will was made public, and it was found that he had divided his huge private fortune among the citizens of Rome. His body was then carried through the streets; Brutus and Cassius had agreed to this, as a necessary part of an honorable burial, but

when the citizens to whom he had been generous saw the mutilated body, a riot began to form.

Mark Antony, who was in the Forum to give Caesar's funeral speech, encouraged the uprising. He had brought with him an armed guard, led by one of his allies: Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, who had been appointed by Caesar to be the governor of provinces in Gaul and Nearer Spain. Lepidus had not yet left for his new command, but he had been collecting troops in Rome to take with him. Now he surrounded Mark Antony with them. Safely guarded, Antony capped off his funeral speech with a show-and-tell: he took Caesar's ripped and bloodstained toga out from under his arm and shook it out so everyone could see how many times he had been stabbed.

The sight of Caesar's toga was the last push needed to send the people in the street over the edge. Citizens ran through the streets, waving torches and yelling for Brutus and Cassius to be found and torn to pieces.

No one could find them. They had managed to get out of the city in the early hours of the riot, and were now holed up in Antium. Mark Antony took control of the government and, by way of thanking Lepidus for his support, gave Lepidus the position of Pontifex Maximus, High Priest of Rome.

But Mark Antony's hold on power was very shaky. He was, as far as the Senate was concerned, Caesar Junior, as likely to become a tyrant as Caesar had been, and without Caesar's charisma to persuade any of them onto his side.

At the same time, Brutus was wooing the public from his exile at Antium, sending money back to Rome for public festivals, hoping to buy his way back into the good graces of the people. One of his allies in the Senate, the orator Cicero, helped him out by making continual speeches about his generosity and his willingness to fight tyranny. "By this time," says Plutarch, "the people had begun to be dissatisfied with Antony, who they perceived was setting up a kind of monarchy for himself; they longed for the return of Brutus."²

Brutus might have been able to return as a hero in a matter of weeks except for one factor: Caesar's adopted son Octavian, now eighteen, had been posted away from Italy on military duty, but as soon as he heard of his uncle's murder, he headed home.

When Octavian arrived, Cicero (who thought Mark Antony a fool and a tyrant in the making) saw the young man as his best possible ally against Antony's power. This naturally headed off any support for Brutus, the assassin. Plutarch writes that Brutus took this badly, and "treated with him very sharply in his letters."³

This did nothing to get Cicero back on his side, and Brutus gave up for the time being, left Italy altogether, and went to Athens to stay with a friend.

Antony, who had positioned himself as a friend of Caesar's, could not

exactly oppose the man's nephew. But he quite rightly saw Octavian's arrival as a threat to his own power. He treated the young man with indulgence, asked him whether he really thought he was up to the task of dealing with Caesar's estate, laughed at his serious manner, and tried to block him from standing for tribune.

Opposed by Antony, Octavian began to make friends with all of Antony's detractors and opponents. Eventually a rumor got back to Antony that Octavian was planning to have him assassinated. The younger man denied the charge, but the suspicion was enough to transform the two men from political rivals into actual enemies. "Each of them hurried about all through Italy to engage, by great offers, the old soldiers that lay scattered in their settlements," says Plutarch, "and to be the first to secure the troops that still remained undischarged."⁴ Cicero's silver tongue helped to tip the balance; he convinced the Senate to declare Antony a public enemy of the Roman people, which meant that Roman troops could drive him out of Italy.

Antony retreated to the north with the army he had managed to gather, and Octavian marched after him with another army and both consuls. The two met in battle at Modena, in 43 BC. But although Antony's men finally broke their line and fled, both consuls were killed along with many of Octavian's own men. It was not a joyful victory for the Romans.

Antony went through the Alps to the soldiers stationed in Gaul, and recruited them to his side. They had served with him before, they respected his abilities as a commander, and apparently the crisis was bringing out the best in him: "It was his character in calamities to be better than at any other time," Plutarch says. "Antony, in misfortune, was most nearly a virtuous man."⁵

Octavian at this point seems to have rethought his position. As long as Cicero and the Senate had hopes for the return of the Republic, they would never be fully behind him; their apparent support for him had merely been in order to get Antony out of Rome. But Octavian didn't want the return of the Republic. He wanted his great-uncle's power, and Cicero was not going to help him there: "Perceiving that Cicero's wishes were for liberty," Plutarch observes, "he had ceased to pay any further regard to him."⁶

So, following Caesar's example, he decided to make an alliance with his rival in order to strengthen his own position. Rather than attacking Antony, he dispatched friends to take a message: he had a proposal to make, if Antony would agree to meet with him.

In November, the two men met in a private location at Bologna, and for three days discussed a possible partnership. They decided to form a triumvirate, as their elders had done before them. As the third member of the triumvirate, they included Mark Antony's ally Lepidus; he was, after all, Pontifex

Maximus, and he commanded a good number of legions in his position as governor of provinces in Gaul and Nearer Spain.

This triumvirate was no informal arrangement, though: the pact of allegiance was written out. "The empire was soon determined of," Plutarch says, "it being divided amongst them as if it had been their paternal inheritance."

Each man then made up a list of the Romans he wanted to see killed in the takeover. This was far, far beyond even the pretense of legality. All together, there were three hundred persons on the death list, including Cicero (on Antony's list), Antony's own uncle (on Octavian's list), and Lepidus's brother (who had publicly opposed him) on Lepidus's own list.

The three returned to Rome at the head of an armed force and ruthlessly carried out the hits. After this, they divided the empire up. Octavian got the west, Antony the east. Lepidus, who was doomed to be the tail end of the triumvirate, lost his provinces in Gaul and Nearer Spain and instead was given Africa, which was hardly a plum job.

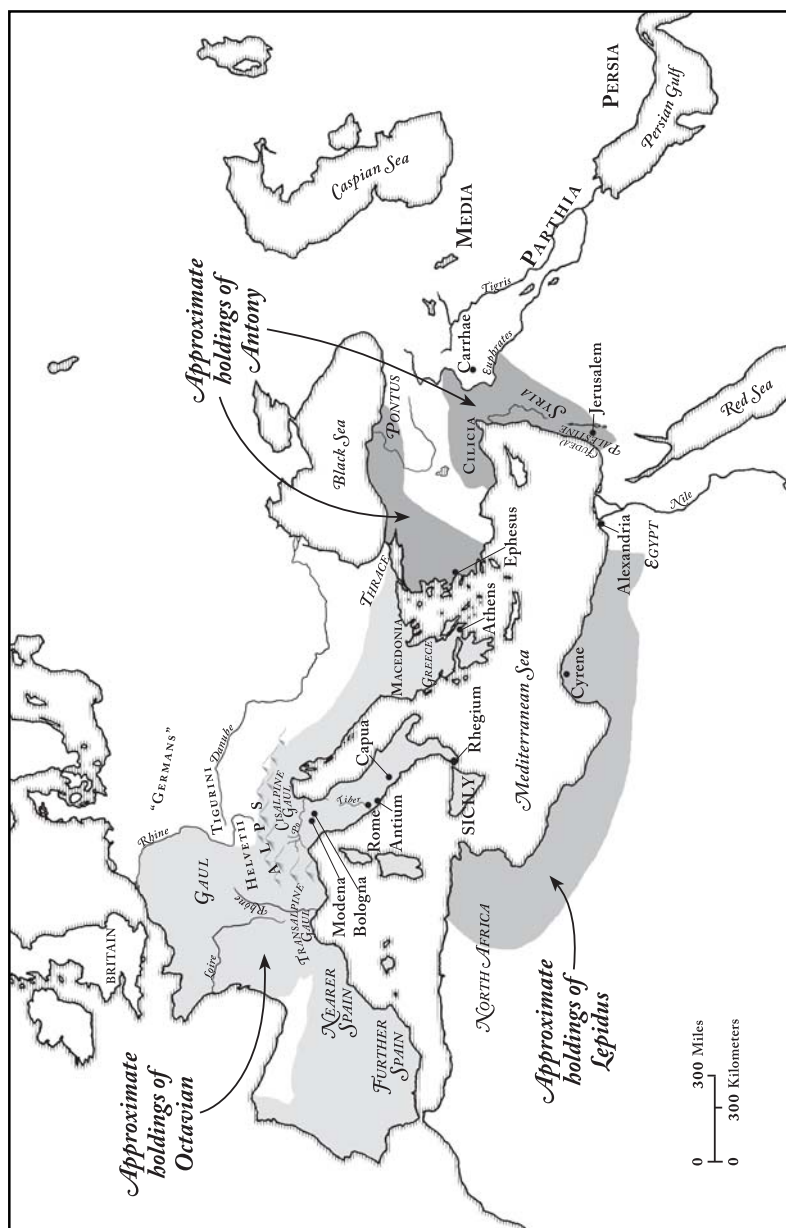
But he was pacified with temporary control of the city of Rome. While Lepidus looked out for the capital city, Antony and Octavian set out for Greece with part of the army to kill Cassius and Brutus.

Cassius and Brutus made a stand in Macedonia, dividing their army in two and stationing the troops in two different places. This forced Antony and Octavian to divided their forces as well. Octavian took the task of attacking Brutus; but on the day of the battle he was suffering from illness: "weak and unwell," Suetonius says, and soon driven back in a rout.⁷ Antony, on the other hand, defeated Cassius, who killed himself without realizing that Brutus was still in good shape; he then turned and finished off Brutus for Octavian.

Octavian headed home, having grown sicker, and more than half-expecting to die before he could get back to Rome. Antony stayed east, to help protect the border. The Roman province of Syria was facing a possible invasion; the Parthians, by command of their king Orodes II, were massing on their western border, ready to invade the Roman-governed lands. And Antipater, the Roman governor of Syria, had just been poisoned; his son Herod was now governing in his place, but he was new to the job.

Antony arrived in Syria, but his attention was soon distracted from the coming attack. In 41, the year after the defeat of Brutus and Cassius, he met Cleopatra, who sailed up to Cilicia to see him and presented herself in a way bound to attract:

in a barge with gilded stern and outspread sails of purple, while oars of silver beat time to the music of flutes and fifes and harps. She herself lay all alone, under a canopy of cloth of gold, dressed as Venus in a picture, and



79.1 Rome Under the Triumvirate

beautiful young boys, like painted Cupids, stood on each side to fan her. Her maids were dressed like Sea Nymphs and Graces, some steering at the rudder, some working at the ropes. The perfumes diffused themselves from the vessel to the shore, which was covered with multitudes, part following the galley up the river on either bank, part running out of the city to see the sight.⁸

Instead of remaining in Syria to protect the province, Antony, starstruck, followed Cleopatra back down to Alexandria.

The Parthian attack came in 40 BC, just months later. The Parthians swept down through Syria into Palestine, intending to kill the Roman governor Herod. He fled to Rome, so the Parthians instead dragged out Hyrcanus (who was the High Priest and Ethnarch of Judea, reporting to Herod) and cut both of his ears off. This kept him from serving as high priest any longer, as Jewish law dictated that the high priest be un mutilated.

Right after this success, Orodes was murdered by his son Phraates IV, who also killed off his brothers and his own oldest son, in an elimination of rivals that was excessive even by Parthian standards. Antony pulled himself away from Cleopatra and went back to Rome to consult with Octavian, who had, surprisingly, recovered from his illness. With a fresh army and the fugitive Herod in tow, Antony marched back east.

The Parthians, under Phraates IV, tried to defend the Syrian holdings, but Antony managed to drive them back out of Palestine. In 37 BC, he installed Herod as a vassal king of Rome: a secular King of the Jews, doing away with a combined priesthood and kingship.

Meanwhile, back a little farther to the west, Octavian had eliminated Lepidus. Lepidus had gotten terminally tired of being the weak sister in this setup. He sailed with troops to Sicily, which he claimed as his own. This was a clear message that he wanted more power in the triumvirate.

Octavian, however, landed on the shores of Sicily and begged Lepidus's soldiers not to resist him: they could save Rome from civil war, if they would simply desert Lepidus's cause. They did, legion after legion; Lepidus seems to have lacked the personal charisma to overcome Octavian's appeals. Finally Lepidus himself was forced to follow his troops to Octavian's camp, surrender, and beg for mercy. Octavian spared his life, but took his provinces, his soldiers, and his title of Triumvir away from him.⁹ He also put him under house arrest, where Lepidus remained, for the rest of his life.

Octavian and Antony now shared the power between them, but Antony was in an increasingly weak position. After its initial success, his campaign against Parthia had turned inexorably towards disaster. He had tried to make a push

into Media and was forced back on a retreat during which twenty thousand infantry and four thousand cavalry died.¹⁰

By 34 BC, Antony had given up. He went back to Egypt and to Cleopatra. The desertion gave Octavian the excuse he needed to declare war on Antony as an enemy of Rome, which would make him ruler of Antony's part of the empire as well as his own.

But he needed to convert any pro-Antony senators to his side. In 32 BC, Octavian had Antony's will read aloud to the Senate. This was illegal, but when the Senate heard that Antony had left most of his money to the half-Egyptian children that Cleopatra had borne him (these were twins, one boy and one girl) and also had asked to be buried in Egypt, they agreed to a formal pronouncement of war against Antony, as though he were a foreign enemy.¹¹ Octavian remarked that, given Antony's complete bewitchment by Cleopatra, he didn't expect any trouble removing him from the scene; he suspected that Antony's generals would be Cleopatra's beauty stylist and an Egyptian eunuch or two.

Antony, hearing news of this declaration, began to assemble himself an army and navy at Ephesus. His force was considerable: five hundred warships, Plutarch says, with a hundred thousand infantrymen and a handful of royal allies, one of whom was Herod, king of Judea.

Octavian journeyed towards him with a fleet and land forces of his own. After a series of pitched battles, the two navies met near the promontory of Actium, jutting from the northern coast of Greece. After Octavian's ships had destroyed three hundred of Antony's, Antony and Cleopatra left the scene of the fighting and sailed back towards Egypt. Most of his men deserted and joined Octavian, who was clearly on the winning side.

Octavian decided that it would be wiser not to leave Antony down in Egypt to plan more trouble for Rome. He waited through the winter, and then set out for Egypt.



79.1. *Octavian. Bronze head of Octavian, Caesar Augustus, 63 BC–AD 14.* Museo Civico Archaeologico, Verona, Italy. Photo credit Cameraphoto Arte, Venice/Art Resource, NY

When Antony heard of Octavian's approach, he stabbed himself in the stomach with a sword and bled to death slowly. Cleopatra managed to kill herself, although her body was unmarked and no dagger was found nearby; later, her servants suggested that perhaps she had allowed a poisonous snake to bite her, rather than remain a lifelong prisoner of Octavian's.

Octavian ordered Cleopatra's son by Caesar put to death as well. The year was 30 BC, and he alone was in control of the Roman territories.

IN 29, HE ARRIVED BACK in Rome, to a people sick of war.

Octavian threw himself a victory parade, and gave away money to the citizens. He also ordered the doors to the Temple of Janus closed to show that Rome had entered into a new time of peace. Octavian's victory at Actium was, in his own version of events, a new beginning. Not: *The Roman Republic has ended and the Roman Empire has begun* (as later historians would see it), but rather: *The Republic has been given a fresh new start*.

To keep this illusion alive, he could not dissolve the Senate: that would do away with half of Rome's official name. The Senate too was in a delicate position. Octavian had just finished fighting a war against a Roman citizen, and he had just put to death Caesar's only son. These were both autocratic actions, and if he acted too much like a king, protest was bound to swell up until it could no longer be ignored. If, on the other hand, the Senate compelled him to lay down all of his power, civil war might break out again. If one thing had become clear in the past years, it was that the original form of the Republic would not hold peace in the city for long.

The compromise between the Senate and Octavian was, like Octavian's own version of the victory at Actium, one of terminology. In 27 BC, Octavian walked into the January meeting of the Senate and formally announced the laying down of all the powers that had been granted to him in the years of crisis: this showed that they were extraordinary powers, not usual ones, and that the Republic was still in full force.

Octavian himself set down an account of this in his *Res Gestae*, a statement engraved on brass that later stood in front of his mausoleum: "After I had put an end to the civil wars," it said, "having attained supreme power by universal consent, I transferred the state from my own power to the control of the Roman Senate and people."¹²

In return, once Octavian had demonstrated that he respected the Republic, the Republic returned the favor. Octavian remained consul (a republican office), and the Senate gave him control over the outlying provinces—which, since most of the soldiers were stationed there and not in Rome, gave him

control over the army. He was also allowed to establish something new, a large standing bodyguard in Italy itself: the "Praetorian Guard." This gave him, in effect, a private army, and broke the tradition that Rome did not keep an army close to home.¹³

He also retained the title *Imperator*, which he had held since 29; this title had always been a yearly honor, given to a successful general, but now it became part of his permanent name. So did another name, *Augustus*. Technically, the term meant consecrated, set apart and different; but it was a brand-new name, with no political baggage, so it could take on any shade of meaning that Octavian gave it.¹⁴ Octavian himself saw the title *Augustus* (which became his primary name) as a reward for virtue, given to him by the Senate in recognition of his refusal to grasp power. He lays this out in the *Res Gestae*, where he lists all his conquests ("I extended the frontiers of all the provinces of the Roman people, which had as neighbours races not obedient to our empire. . . . I restored peace to all the provinces of Gaul and Spain and to Germany. . . . Egypt I added to the empire of the Roman people" and so on),¹⁵ but these are not the basis for his authority. Rather, he deserves to be *Augustus* because "after I had extinguished the civil wars, having been put in supreme possession of the whole empire by the universal consent of all, I transferred the republic from my own power into the free control of the Senate and Roman people. For the which service I received the appellation of *Augustus* by decree of the Senate. . . . After that time I stood before all others in dignity, but of actual power I possessed no more than my colleagues."¹⁶

This was, of course, almost an exact reverse of the truth; *Augustus* had the actual power of an emperor, but not the title. Even to some of his contemporaries (such as the geographer Strabo), this so-called First Settlement seemed silly.

Over the next decades, *Augustus* combined acting like an emperor without a title and constant negotiations with the Senate over what formal privileges he should actually have. In the year 23, *Augustus* declined to be elected consul again, as he had successively for the past nine years. His exact motivation for doing this is not entirely clear. He may have realized that, if he were elected consul every year, a lot of senators were *not* getting the chance to run for an office which for many was the culmination of a lifelong dream. This was bound to produce discontented murmuring.¹⁷ And he was also struck by a serious illness in 23; Suetonius remarks that he had ringworm, bladder stones, and spots all over him.¹⁸ Possibly he did not like the idea of having to publicly display himself at an election while suffering from unsightly blemishes.

In any case, relinquishing the consulship was no sacrifice, because he still

remained above the consuls in the power structure. The Senate had agreed to make him proconsul for life, which meant he could not only dabble legally in senatorial and consular affairs whenever he pleased, but could also exercise military power—the *imperium*—inside the city. This was an important privilege, particularly since he now had a standing army within march of Rome.

He had, in fact, every single power of royalty, including the legal means to strong-arm the city into doing what he wanted. But he still kept himself away from the word *emperor*. Augustus, Tacitus says, subjected the world to empire under the title of *princeps*: *fessa nomine principis sub imperium accepit*. Later translations would render this word “prince,” but Augustus would have simply called himself the First Citizen.¹⁹

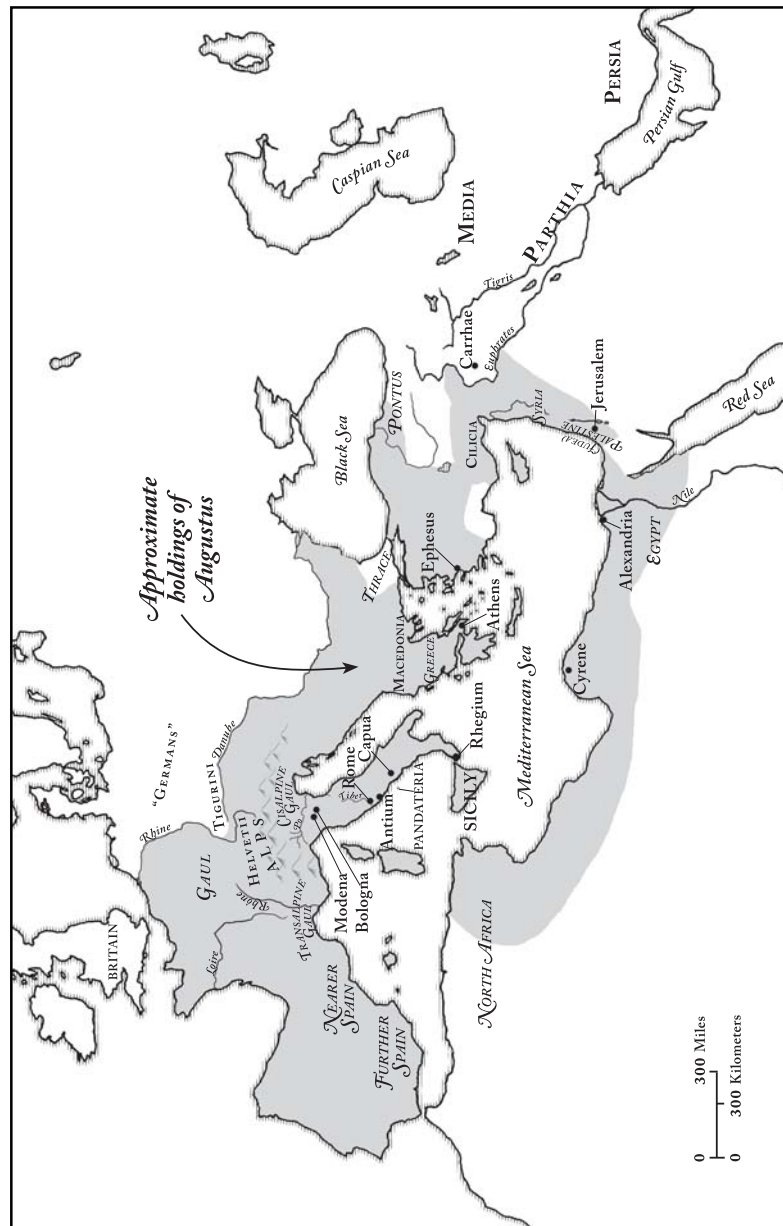
IN 20 BC, Augustus managed to work out a peace with the Parthian king Phraates IV. Antony’s defeat had been a very good thing for Augustus, but it had been an embarrassment for Rome. The Parthians had taken Roman prisoners of war and had captured the Roman standards; Augustus needed to get them back.

Phraates IV agreed to return the prisoners of war and the standards. What he got from Rome is less clear. Augustus gave Phraates a slave girl, who soon became his lover, but there must have been some other inducement.

Phraates IV did send all four of his sons to Rome as hostages, an act which usually indicated weakness.²⁰ But given the state of intrigue in Parthian royal families, perhaps this was a Roman favor to Parthia; it gave Phraates IV a few more years in which he did not have to watch his back and sniff his cups. It also gave the Romans a chance to teach Roman ways to the Parthians (a technique that the Assyrians had used on Egyptian princes long before). Continued peace with the Parthians was important for Roman prosperity. It meant that the trade route to India and perhaps even farther to the east was now passable, rather than blocked by a solid wall of hostility.

Rome may have been prospering, but Augustus, who so needed the forms of the Republic to hold his empire together, was having trouble keeping up appearances. Senators had started trailing into the Senate later and later; this was understandable, since they were basically wasting their time passing any laws at all, but Augustus wanted Rome to see business-as-usual carried on. In 17 BC, he announced that senators who came in late would have to pay a fine.

Meanwhile he was accumulating even more powers. In 13, Lepidus died, still under guard. Octavian then “assumed the office of high priest,” Suetonius writes, “which he had never presumed to do while Lepidus was alive.”²¹ This meant that the ruler of Rome’s political affairs was now also the religious head



79.2 Rome Under Augustus

of state, a combination which considerably boosted his power and would remain the norm thereafter.

This made the Senate even more irrelevant. By 11 BC, Augustus had to change the regulations of the Senate so that business could be carried on even if the required minimum of four hundred senators (out of six hundred) didn't show up. He also announced that the members would no longer speak in order of seniority, since they had fallen into a habit of getting up one at a time and saying, "I agree with the last speaker." Instead, in an effort to keep everyone awake, he started calling on them to speak at random, like a college teacher with an inattentive freshman class.²²

At the same time, Augustus was trying to find himself an heir and create a dynasty, a most unroman idea.

The Senate had some sympathy for the idea of an heir, since no one wanted a war to erupt as soon as Augustus died, but there was no legal way for him to appoint someone to be the next emperor of Rome. The more personal problem was that Augustus had no son of his own. He had considered making a son-in-law his successor, and so back in 24 BC he had married his fourteen-year-old daughter Julia off to her seventeen-year-old cousin Marcellus, his first choice for an heir. But Marcellus died just a year later. After that, Augustus married Julia to one of his officers, a man named Agrippa; but Agrippa too died, in 12 BC.

Instead of giving the poor woman some peace, Augustus then married her to his last candidate: his wife's son by a previous marriage, Tiberius. Tiberius was no one's first choice. He was cold and distant, generally silent, and he had odd tics: he walked stiffly, and made constant gestures with his fingers when he talked.²³ As Augustus's heir, Tiberius was a placeholder. The emperor hoped that one of Julia's sons would grow old enough to be appointed successor instead. But meanwhile he had created a wretched family life for his daughter. Julia hated Tiberius, and their life was so miserable that he went off to Rhodes, while she grew more promiscuous and drunken. Her behavior became so scandalous, in fact, that Augustus finally had her confined on Pandateria, a prison island.

His domestic troubles did not take him away from the business of running his empire for long. In 4 BC, Herod the Great—the vassal king put back on the throne by Mark Antony—died, leaving three sons and an enormously rebuilt temple. He had used his authority to turn the shabby, rebuilt Second Temple into a showpiece of his greatness as a king (albeit one under Roman supervision). The flat space on which it sat, the Temple Mount, was too small to allow for much expansion, so Herod dug all around it and built huge underground chambers to serve as foundations for more floor space.

Now Herod the Great was dead. But rather than choosing one of Herod's three sons to succeed him, Augustus divided Palestine into three parts; perhaps the size of the Temple had revealed family ambitions that needed to be squelched. In any case, Herod Antipas got Galilee, next to the Sea of Galilee; Archelaus got Samaria and Judea; and the third brother, Philip, got the north. Herod Antipas and Philip ruled without too much incident; but Archelaus turned out to be so cruel that in AD 6 Augustus yanked him from his throne and put a Roman official, a procurator, in his place to keep an eye on the area. This procurator had the final say over the whole area, particularly in serious legal matters such as executions, but as long as Herod Antipas and Philip behaved themselves, the Romans tended to leave them alone.

A little farther to the east, the Parthians were suffering from an anti-Roman reaction.

In 2 BC, Phraates IV's family life took a downturn again. His slave girl had borne him a son, and when this son reached his late teens, he turned and murdered his father. Coins from the reign of this boy, Phraates V, show his mother beside him; possibly she was a co-ruler, but she looks more like his consort, and it was not unheard of (although icky) to marry your mother in Parthia, particularly since she seems to have been barely fifteen years his senior.²⁴ Their joint reign made them terribly unpopular, and after barely four years, the Parthians drove them out into exile.

After this one of those Roman-educated sons of Phraates IV took the throne, under the royal name Vonones I. This was the sort of influence over Parthia that the Romans had hoped for, the next best thing to actual rule as they had in Palestine. Unfortunately, it didn't last. Vonones's portraits on his coins show him with western-style hair, undoubtedly learned in his days in Rome, and Vonones's Roman ways annoyed the Parthians in his court. Roman words in the mouths of Parthian men, Roman dress, Roman habits: these had become increasingly unpopular with the conservative part of Parthian society. During peace, it seemed even more important to stay vigilant about their native culture; a vigilance that wasn't necessary during wartime, when the hostilities acted as a natural check over cultural exchange.

Vonones I also lasted for only four years or so, before the Parthian patriot Artabanus drove him away (or killed him) and became king in his place. Parthia remained at peace with Rome, but it was a tentative peace, with Parthia consistently resisting all Roman influence and holding itself aloof on the other side of the Euphrates.*

* Internal Parthian politics are very obscure, and all reconstructions are uncertain; this is a probable course of events.

710 Identity

By AD 4, Augustus had given up on finding himself a blood heir. Two of Julia's grandsons had died young. The third, Agrippa Postumus, had grown to be so vicious that he was widely thought to be insane; Augustus had sent him to the prison island of Pandateria as well. He was stuck with Tiberius, so he formally adopted his son-in-law as his ward and part of his immediate family.

This did not make Tiberius his heir, since hereditary rule was still an unspoken possibility. But he did give Tiberius more and more control over the Roman army; and since the support of the Roman legions was the greatest prop of imperial power, this was almost as good as handing Tiberius a crown. In AD 13, the Senate confirmed Tiberius as proconsul and princeps alongside Augustus, which eliminated the immediate problem of a hereditary transfer of power.

T I M E L I N E 79	
PARTHIA	ROME
	Social War (91)
	Lucius Sulla, consul
	Lucius Cinna, consul
	Gladiator War (73)
	Crassus, consul
	Pompey, consul
	Cicero, consul
Orodes II	Julius Caesar, consul
	Battle of Pharsalus (48)
Phraates IV	Assassination of Caesar (44)
	Octavian, consul
	Battle of Actium (31)
	First Settlement (27)
	Second Settlement (23)
	Octavian, pontifex maximus
Phraates V	
Vonones I	
Artabanus II	
	Death of Octavian (AD 14)

Empire 711

The action came just in time. In August of AD 14, the two men were travelling together when the seventy-five-year-old Augustus was struck with diarrhea. He grew progressively weaker, until he was unable to get out of his bed.

On his last day, he asked for a mirror so that he could arrange his hair, as though for an audience. "When the friends he had summoned were present," Suetonius writes, "he inquired of them whether they thought he had played his role well in the comedy of life." When they agreed, he quoted (almost as his last words) two lines from a popular drama:

Since the play has been so good, clap your hands
And all of you dismiss us with applause.²⁵

In the last moments of his life, he could finally admit the truth that no one in Rome had dared to speak: his role as protector of the Republic had been playacting, and his refusal to accept the title of emperor had been nothing but pretense, all done for the sake of the audience.