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## Archaic Religion: God and King

In my discussion of tribal religion I chose three examples for close examination: the Kalapalo, the Australian Aborigines (the Walbiri), and the Navajo. From the thousands of tribal peoples, this choice could not be defended as “representative,” even though each was chosen from a different continent. In considering chiefdoms as the form of organization intermediate between the tribal and the archaic, I chose to look mainly at Polynesia because of the clarity of the record there in which archaeology and ethnography combine to give a sense of development over many centuries, starting with Neolithic villages and ending with an early state in Hawai‘i. Still, given that we have data for hundreds of chiefdoms in many parts of the world, the choice of Polynesia can be defended as strategic but not as representative. With early states or early civilizations, what I have chosen to call archaic societies, we are in a very different situation. Though exactly how many there are can be argued, the number is surely quite small compared to tribes or chiefdoms, and those for which data is adequate are fewer still. Looking ahead to what follows the archaic, namely the axial age, there are only four cases: ancient Israel, ancient Greece, India in the second half of the first millennium BCE, and China in the same period. I have therefore decided to look closely only at those archaic societies that significantly contributed to axial ones: ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, which influenced both Israel and Greece; and Shang and Western Zhou China, from which there is a smooth transition to the Chinese axial age. Had the data been adequate I would have included the Indus Valley civilization in India as well.

I have, of course, in Chapter 4, already considered at length one other archaic society, Hawai‘i. This I have used as an example of the transition to an early state, with the advantage that we know more about it at an early stage

than any other case. For none of the archaic societies we will consider in this chapter was there anyone like David Malo around to report on their early stages, nor can we reconstruct the probable developmental sequence for over 2,000 years before their emergence as early states with the clarity we now have about Polynesia. For studying the beginning of an archaic religion, the Hawaiian case is invaluable because of the wealth of information we have about it, not available for any other case.

Before turning to the cases with which this chapter will be concerned, it will be useful to consider Bruce Trigger's instructive survey, *Understanding Early Civilizations*, a compendious comparative analysis of seven cases: Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt, Mesopotamia from Early Dynastic III to Old Babylonian times, China in late Shang and early Western Zhou times, the Aztecs from the late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries, the Classic Maya, the Inka kingdom during the early sixteenth century, and the Yoruba peoples of West Africa from the mid-eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Trigger has chosen his cases largely because they are the ones for which there is adequate data; the inability to understand the Indus Valley civilization on the basis of archaeological evidence alone (what little writing there is has not been deciphered) has forced him to exclude this important case, rightly in my view.<sup>2</sup> Trigger's sample is of mature states; because he does not include Hawai'i, he has no example of a really early state. Of course we should remember that the "early state" is more a process than an event—it is almost always impossible to "pinpoint the precise moment of the birth of the state."<sup>3</sup> Even in Hawai'i the state was clearly forming well before Western contact, though the process is more evident than in any of Trigger's cases, and for this reason the Hawaiian case remains invaluable.

One of the defects of my sample of archaic societies is that it excludes all the New World cases, so a summary of Trigger's findings—three of his seven are from the New World—can go a little way to make up for that deficiency. It will be useful to begin by considering what Trigger means by "early civilizations," because his definition is very close to what I mean by archaic societies:

Anthropologists apply the term 'early civilization' to the earliest and simplest forms of societies in which the basic principle governing social relations was not kinship but a hierarchy of social divisions that cut horizontally across societies and were unequal in power, wealth, and social prestige. In these societies a tiny ruling group that used coercive

powers to augment its authority was sustained by agricultural surpluses and labour systematically appropriated from a much larger number of agricultural producers. Fulltime specialists (artisans, bureaucrats, soldiers, retainers) also supported and served the ruling group and the government apparatus it controlled. Rulers cultivated a luxurious style of life that distinguished them from the ruled.<sup>4</sup>

If we think of Hawai‘i, the distinction between the *ali‘i* and the commoners is just such a clear class distinction. Another way of making the same point without focusing quite so centrally on class is to say that **the key distinction is between the state as a secondary formation and the rest of society.** That this is close to what Trigger means is clear when he writes, “wealth tended to be derived from political power far more frequently than political power was derived from wealth.”<sup>5</sup> So it is not class as defined in terms of relation to the means of production that is critical in these societies, but class as defined in relation to political power.

Also important for Trigger is the point **that kinship**, although remaining significant in different ways for both the rulers and the ruled, **no longer, as in tribal and chiefdom societies, is the “basic principle governing social relations.”** He adds one further point of great importance: “Just as class has replaced real and metaphorical kinship as a basis for organizing society, so religious concepts replaced kinship as a medium for social and political discourse.”<sup>6</sup> Of course, symbolic action and expression that can be called religious appear at every level of social organization, but something new in the religious realm appears in archaic societies: gods and the worship of gods. My reading of Trigger’s study reinforces my sense that what makes archaic society different from its predecessors is a complex religio-political transformation that gives rise to two ideas that are essentially new in the world: **kingship and divinity, in many ways two parts of a single whole.**

**Hawaiian society** as we described it focused on the king and his relation to, even identity with, the gods, particularly Kū and Lono. Kingship is central in every one of Trigger’s cases, and everywhere the king had a unique relation to the gods, was frequently considered a god himself. Some form of divine kingship can be found in Old Kingdom Egypt, the Aztecs, Mayas, Inkas and Yorubas, and in Zhou China the king was the “Son of Heaven,” though he was not himself considered divine. In Mesopotamia, the earliest period of what was probably priest-kingship is obscure, but there were sporadic claims to divine status by kings in the Akkadian and Ur III dynasties

in the third millennium BCE, and perhaps even in the Old Babylonian dynasty in the first half of the second millennium.<sup>7</sup>

Human sacrifice associated with royal ritual was present in some form in every case, and was, as in Hawai‘i, always an indication of the extraordinarily exalted status of kingship, although the extent of it was variable. The commonest form was what is called *retainer sacrifice*, in which wives and retainers, sometimes in large numbers, were buried with the dead king. In Egypt this practice was found in the First and probably the Second Dynasties; in Mesopotamia only in the Early Dynastic royal burials at Ur—in each case no later examples are known. Although the numbers decreased markedly in China after the Shang, some retainer burial was practiced for centuries. But in most cases human sacrifice in rituals other than funerals was not uncommon: Shang China, the Mayas, Inkas, and Yorubas, and most extensively of all, the Aztecs, where thousands of war captives were sacrificed at the great temple at Tenochtitlan right up until the Spanish conquest.<sup>8</sup>

The extraordinary exaltation of the ruler puts Hawai‘i firmly in the category of (early) archaic society, where such exaltation everywhere went to extremes unknown in earlier or later periods, but there are other features that we normally consider indicative of archaic society that were not present in Hawai‘i: urbanism and writing, for example. Trigger argues, however, that cities are not an indispensable marker of early civilizations; rather, such civilizations divide into two types, *city-states and territorial states*. Whereas Mesopotamia, the Yorubas, the Aztecs, and the Mayas were city-states, Egypt, China, and the Inkas were territorial states.<sup>9</sup> *City-states were large, multipurpose, urban conglomerates, usually located near highly productive agricultural areas, and from which larger states were sometimes formed, usually by subjecting other such cities to tribute status. In territorial states it was the court, not the city, that provided the center, and the court was often peripatetic. There were important ceremonial centers, but the court could visit them only intermittently or move from one to another.* Hawai‘i was clearly in the category of the territorial state, building its empire across the archipelago rather than reaching out from a single city. Of course, established territorial empires eventually gave rise to cities, though cities were not the basis of state structure. Conversely, city-states sometimes became territorial states, though extending city institutions to a large territory usually proved a daunting and often in the long run an impossible task, Rome being the great exception.

When we use the word “civilization,” as we inevitably must in speaking of archaic societies, we usually think of writing as an essential criterion. But in

Trigger's seven cases, writing was entirely absent among the Inkas and the Yorubas, and rudimentary among the Aztecs, Mayas, and perhaps the Shang Chinese (though there may have been more extensive writings than the oracle bones, on which our knowledge of Shang writing depends, they have not survived). Even in Mesopotamia, where writing was "invented" around 3200 BCE, it was first used mainly for accounting and for lists, and continuous texts cannot be deciphered until about 2500 BCE.

Another feature of most archaic societies is the presence of monumental architecture, mainly for ritual and/or royal use. The Hawaiian *heiau* (temple) was a modestly monumental structure, one of the largest of which, on the island of Maui, was over 4,000 square meters in area and required an estimated 26,000 labor-days for construction during ten separate occasions.<sup>10</sup> Such temples do not compare with the Mesopotamian *ziggurats*, the Aztec, Maya, or Inka temples, or, of course, with the Egyptian pyramids. But neither the Shang Chinese nor the Yorubas appear to have produced monumental architecture much more impressive than the Hawaiian *heiau*.

Trigger indicates that when he began his study he expected to find economic practices to be the most constant in his sample and religious beliefs and practices the most variable. In fact he found the opposite: subsistence patterns varied quite widely due to differences in ecological context, whereas religious beliefs and practices were remarkably comparable across his seven cases.<sup>11</sup> Comparable, but, as we shall see, still significantly different. In Chapter 4 we saw how the relation of religion and power, only incipient in tribal societies, came to a kind of climax in Hawai'i. Having used Trigger's book as an introduction to the field of mature archaic societies, we can now try to understand better the relation of religion and power, of god and king, in such societies by taking a closer look at three of them.

### Ancient Mesopotamia

On the face of it, Hawai'i and Mesopotamia could hardly have had more opposite starting points. Hawai'i was located in just about the remotest spot on the planet, out of contact with any other society for centuries before the arrival of Europeans. Mesopotamia (literally, "the land between the rivers"—the Tigris and Euphrates—present-day Iraq contains all of ancient Mesopotamia) was at the center of the vast Eurasian (and North African) land mass and was never out of touch with its many neighbors, near and far. This geographical difference alone helps account for the fact that the Mesopotamian

state began about 5,000 years before the Hawaiian state. Not only geographically, but in terms of other variables as well, Hawai'i and Mesopotamia are far apart among archaic societies, so that beginning the consideration of mature archaic societies with Mesopotamia allows maximal contrasts to appear.

Archaeology reveals that, in spite of their many differences, in both cases settlement began on largely virgin territory. After about 4000 BCE, in the alluvial plain of Southern Mesopotamia, only very sparsely settled before, a large number of fairly large settlements appeared rather suddenly, and by about 3200 BCE the first true cities in the world had emerged.<sup>12</sup> These cities focused on monumental temple compounds but also had palaces, markets, and extensive residential quarters. The new level of population density that these cities evidenced was made possible by extensive cultivation of the alluvial soil. But the economic basis of these cities was not just local irrigation agriculture, but area-wide economic innovations that Andrew Sherratt has called the secondary products revolution, a transformation that he believes was as significant as the beginnings of plant and animal domestication themselves, at least 4,000 years earlier.<sup>13</sup>

Early animal domestication was at first simply for the purpose of having a stable meat supply. With the secondary products revolution, for the first time animal power began to replace human power in agriculture. (It is worth remembering that, due to the absence of cattle and sheep, there was no secondary products revolution in the New World, or, of course, in Hawai'i). Yokes and harnesses were invented so that cattle could pull plows and carts. Sherratt estimates that the plow, because it can go deeper into the soil, is four times more efficient than the hoe in preparing the soil for sowing.<sup>14</sup> And carts make it much easier to bring grain in from outlying fields. These inventions appeared first in northern Mesopotamia by about 4000 BCE, in the old zone of agricultural settlement, but they helped to make possible the rapid urbanization in the south, which followed soon after. The changes involved in the secondary products revolution were not only agricultural; they involved a new kind of pastoralism as well. For the use of milk and milk products (yogurt, cheese) originated at about this time, as did the use of sheep to supply wool for textiles, earlier textiles being of vegetable fiber. Again, Sherratt estimates that the use of herds as a source of milk products is four to five times more efficient, in the amount of protein and energy produced relative to the same amount of feed, as using them only for meat.<sup>15</sup> Although southern Mesopotamia had rich alluvial soil that could be very productive when irrigated, and

lands beyond the possibility of irrigation that would support pastoralism, it had little else: no wood, no stone, no metal. In spite of great ingenuity in the use of resources indigenous to the area, it is clear that trade, including long-distance trade, was essential from the very beginning. Thus a region-wide economy, involving plow agriculture and intensive pastoralism, together with a considerable amount of trade, had appeared by the end of the fourth millennium BCE.

Susan Pollack catalogs some of the developments in southern Mesopotamia evident by the end of the Uruk period (4000–3100 BCE):

The Uruk period witnessed a massive increase in the number of settlements. Although many of them were small villages, others grew rapidly into towns and cities. By the end of the Uruk period, some larger settlements were walled. Temples and other public buildings became larger and more elaborate, and their construction must have employed large workforces for lengthy periods . . . Mass production was introduced for manufacturing some kinds of pottery using technological innovations such as mold manufacture and wheel-throwing. Systems of accounting . . . were elaborated and diversified, and writing—the premier accounting and recording technology—was invented toward the end of the period. Representations of men with weapons and bound individuals, presumably prisoners, attest to the use of armed force. The repeated depiction of a bearded individual with long hair, distinctive style of headdress, and skirt engaging in a variety of activities suggestive of authority is among the indications [of] the public exercise of power.<sup>16</sup>

By 2900 BCE the city of Uruk, perhaps the most important city of Sumer, had become enormous by the standards of ancient cities. Hans Nissen shows that it was larger than Athens in 500 BCE or Jerusalem in 50 CE, and almost as large as Rome in 100 CE.<sup>17</sup> It has been estimated that by 2500 BCE the population of Uruk was about 50,000. The main temple of the city was immense, with a stepped tower that had been rebuilt several times, each time with increased height.

With only archaeological evidence (the script was used almost solely for accounting and contains no decipherable narratives) to go on, we simply cannot say what the structure of authority in Uruk and other comparable cities emerging at the same time was like. Hans Nissen details some of the previous theories: that the early rulers, entitled *en*, or *ensi*, were in effect

priest-kings; that later, temporary military leaders called *lugal* (meaning “the great man”) were appointed, and these over time became permanent “kings,” rivaling the chief priests for dominance in the city. Nissen feels the whole terminology of *en*, *ensi*, and *lugal* is too inconsistent in the surviving records to support such a theory and that we simply do not know how power was wielded in the earliest period. By the early dynastic period (2900–2350 BCE) it is clear that there were royal dynasties in the major Sumerian cities, but that great temples were the focus of both wealth and power, and indeed their upkeep was a major royal responsibility. Both temple and palace have been referred to as “great households” or “great organizations” because they were major landowners, had large staffs, and in some cases engaged in textile manufacturing, the major Mesopotamian export.<sup>18</sup>

It is also generally agreed that besides the temple and the palace there was a vigorous “private sector,” perhaps led by lineage elders who also had a say in city government, though the idea of what Thorkild Jacobsen called “Primitive Democracy”<sup>19</sup> has not been widely accepted. In any case, relative to most other early states, early Mesopotamia does seem to be a case of “heterarchy,” that is, a nonegalitarian society with several competing centers of power, rather than one with a single dominance hierarchy.<sup>20</sup> The fact that Mesopotamia was the least isolated of any of the early civilizations, and the most dependent on long-distance trade due to its lack of local resources, is perhaps related to the existence of multiple power centers within its many cities. Although leadership in the Sumerian period is not as clear as it would later become, in quite early Sumerian mythology it is said that “kingship came down from heaven,” even though the king himself did not claim to be a god.<sup>21</sup>

The absence of divine kingship in the earliest history does not mean that this ubiquitous archaic idea was entirely absent. It appears, not surprisingly, in dynasties attempting to unite the city-states and create territorial empires. As Oppenheim puts it:

In Babylonia from the time of Sargon of Akkad [ca. 2350 BCE] until the time of Hammurapi<sup>22</sup> [1792–1750 BCE], the name of the king was often written with the determinative DINGIR (“god”), used normally for gods and objects intended for worship. We also know, from Ur III texts and, sporadically, from later documents, that statues of deceased kings received shares of the offerings in the temples. The sanctity of the royal person is often, especially in Assyrian texts, said to be

revealed by a supernatural and awe-inspiring radiance or aura which, according to the literature, is characteristic of deities and of all things divine.<sup>23</sup>

And the claim by a number of Assyrian kings to be “king of the universe” would seem to imply a power more than human.<sup>24</sup>

But even when, as was more often the case, the king was characterized as the “servant” or “slave” of the god (a usage that, in an entirely different context, will reappear in Christianity and even more extensively, in Islam) rather than as divine himself, it was his closeness to divinity, not his “secularity,” that was emphasized. In his inscriptions the king endlessly recounted all he had done for the gods—building or rebuilding temples, presenting lavish offerings, holding festivals, and so on—and attributed the prosperity of the land and even his military victories to the benevolence of the gods, particularly the patron deity of his city. Here, as in all early civilizations, the religious and the political are not different spheres, but aspects of a total understanding of cosmos and society, which does not mean that we cannot observe variations in how these aspects were phrased.

As in Hawai‘i, the Mesopotamian pantheon was enormous, but a few gods were particularly important: Anu, the father of the gods; Enlil, his son and actual ruler of the gods; Ninhursaga, the goddess of birth; Enki, the god of fresh water, but above all the god of intellect and cunning, and of all the productive arts.<sup>25</sup> Each city had its own patron god: Uruk was devoted to Anu; Eridu to Enki; Ur to Nanna; and so on. The patron god of Lagash was Ninurta, son of Enlil, warrior god, but also god of the plow. Although each god was related to particular aspects of nature (Anu to the sky, Enki to fresh water, and so on) and to aspects of human life, all of them had a great concern with economic prosperity, so that what Firth said of Tikopia, “the religious system was openly and strongly oriented towards economic ends,” is also true of Mesopotamia, as the following hymn to Ninurta from the end of third millennium Sumer, indicates:

Ninurta whom Enlil has named!  
 I wish to celebrate your name, O my king!  
 Ninurta, I, your man, your man,  
 I wish to celebrate your name!  
 O my king, the sheep has given birth to the lamb— . . . ,  
 And I, I wish to celebrate your name!

O my king, the goat has given birth to the kid— . . .  
 And I, I wish to celebrate your name! . . .  
 You fill the canal with perpetual water, . . .  
 You make the speckled barley grow in the fields,  
 You fill the pool with carp and perch[?], . . .  
 You garnish gardens and vineyards, with honey and wine!  
 And you will grant the palace a longer life!<sup>26</sup>

I don't want to imply that the gods were always benevolent—far from it. They were not infrequently the cause of what Jacobsen calls “paralyzing fear.”<sup>27</sup> As in Hawai‘i, they were not so far from the powerful beings of tribal peoples. They were the source of great abundance, but also the cause of storm, flood, and pestilence. They could bring victory or defeat in war. Above all, the gods were kings and queens, and the temples were their courts. The “service to the gods”—demanding, difficult, but joyous and rewarding—was at the center of life in Mesopotamia.<sup>28</sup> A large sector of the economy was organized to serve the gods and goddesses presiding in major temples, their relatives and retainers, all of whose images had to be lavishly “fed,” clothed, adorned with jewelry, and, occasionally, during festivals, paraded through the streets or taken on boat trips to neighboring temples.<sup>29</sup> Because the economic and political prosperity of the city depended on the benevolence of the gods, their generous service was the first obligation of both kings and people.

The nature of the relationship between gods and men is epitomized in the mythical “Story of Atrahasis.”<sup>30</sup> Although the text dates from Old Babylonian times (first half of the second millennium BCE), Jacobsen believes it represents ideas that go back at least to the third millennium. In the initial division of the world, Anu was allotted the heavens, Enlil the earth, and Enki the waters under the earth. As the gods had to be fed, Enlil put his many children, the lesser gods, to work carrying out the hard tasks of irrigation agriculture. The poem begins:

When Ilu (i.e., Enlil) was the boss  
 they were burdened with toil,  
     lugged the workbasket;  
 the gods' workbasket . . . was big,  
     so the toil was heavy,  
     great the straits.<sup>31</sup>

The gods had to dig out the Tigris and Euphrates rivers as well as the irrigation canals, and they found it all too much. They decided to revolt against Enlil, and having burned their work tools they surrounded his house. Enlil, frightened and barricaded at home, called on Anu and Enki for advice as to what to do. He felt like abandoning earth altogether and joining his father in the sky. But Enki, always the clever one, had a suggestion: why not create men to do the work the lesser gods found so tiresome? He killed one of the lesser gods, We-e, perhaps the ringleader of the rebellion (could we call it a strike?), and, mixing his blood with clay, fashioned the first human beings.<sup>32</sup>

Enki's plan worked almost too well: men took over the work of the gods, but greatly prospered in doing so. Their growing population became so noisy ("the land bellowed like a bull"), that Enlil could get no sleep. He sent a plague to wipe the people out, but the wise man Atrahasis consulted Enki who told him to keep the people quieter and give more offerings to the gods, and the plague ceased. Again the people increased and the noise level rose. This time Enlil sent a drought, but again Atrahasis persuaded Enki to intervene. The third time was really too much and Enlil sent a great flood to kill every human being. Enki, however, was one step ahead of him and had Atrahasis construct an unsinkable boat, load it with every kind of animal, and last out the flood. When Enlil discovered what Enki had done he was furious, but meantime the decimation of the people had left the gods with no offerings, and they were beginning to starve. Enlil finally realized that humans were indispensable to the gods, and, having arranged several methods of birth control, allowed Atrahasis and his people to resettle the earth.

One might think, says Jacobsen, that Enlil cut a rather poor figure with his fear, impulsiveness, and insensitivity, but to the ancients the story illustrates Enlil's ultimate power, his stunning capacity to create a flood that could potentially destroy every living thing. Jacobsen concludes: "All the same it is clear that the myth views absolute power as selfish, ruthless, and unsubtle. But what is is. Man's existence is precarious, his usefulness to the gods will not protect him unless he takes care not to be a nuisance to them, however innocently. There are, he should know, limits set for his self-expression."<sup>33</sup>

In ancient Mesopotamia the idea of the state organized the life of both gods and humans and the relation between them. After the creation of human beings, it was they, not the lesser gods, who "lugged the workbaskets." Or rather, it was the lot of most men to do so; some humans led a godlike

existence—they were “served” as the gods were served. Even so, kings were portrayed as working on the great building projects, though we may doubt how much time they actually spent doing so, and they, like everyone else, were servants of the gods, except for those relatively rare moments when they identified themselves as gods. Dominance was a major theme; mostly it was dominance cloaked in the mantle of legitimate hierarchy; but both gods and kings were capable of irrational anger against “undeserving” targets. Jacobsen identifies Anu with “authority” but Enlil with “force,” and it was Enlil who in fact ruled the world.<sup>34</sup> It is true that Enlil’s force was supposed to be “legitimate force,”

Yet, because Enlil is force, there lie hidden in the dark depths of his soul both violence and wildness. The normal Enlil upholds the cosmos, guarantees order against chaos; but suddenly and unpredictably the hidden wildness in him may break forth. This side of Enlil is truly and terribly the abnormal, a scattering of all life and life’s meaning. Therefore, man can never be fully at ease with Enlil but feels a lurking fear which finds expression frequently in the hymns which have come down to us.<sup>35</sup>

Yet nurturance, expressed as a concern for a certain kind of justice, was increasingly evident in the third millennium and the first half of the second, reaching a kind of climax in the so-called “code” of Hammurabi. Already in the middle of the third millennium we have a king of Lagash who proclaims himself “as the righter of social wrongs and defender of the weak”: “Uruinimgina [the king] solemnly promised Ningirsu [the god] that he would never subject the waif and the widow to the powerful.”<sup>36</sup> A poem written after the fall of the Akkadian dynasty of Sargon criticizes its kings for allowing “injustice and violence to set foot in the land.”<sup>37</sup> In the Ur III dynasty there was periodic remission of debt: “The tablets that enshrined the debtors’ obligations to their creditors were then collected and broken, thereby dissolving the debt.”<sup>38</sup>

The “code,” which Jean Bottéro argues is not a set of laws but a summary of Hammurabi’s verdicts, and thus not really a code, is justly famous. Bottéro points out that it is the prologue and epilogue that give us the clearest insight into the meaning of justice in ancient Mesopotamia. In the prologue Hammurabi writes:

When (my god) Marduk [who had for the Babylonians replaced Enlil as ruler of the gods] had given me the mission to keep my people in

order and to make my country take the right road, I installed in this country justice and fairness in order to bring well-being to my people.

And in the epilogue:

The great gods have called me, and I am indeed the good shepherd who brings peace, with the just scepter. My benevolent shade covered my city. I have carried in my bosom the people of Sumer and Akkad. Thanks to my good fortune (literally: the divine protection of which I am the object) they have prospered. I have not ceased to administer them in peace. By my wisdom I have harbored them. In order to prevent the powerful from oppressing the weak, in order to give justice to the orphans and the widows.<sup>39</sup>

The rhetoric of nurturance here is powerful: the image of the good shepherd will occur again in the history of religion. Needless to say, kings were seldom as benevolent as they claimed to be—the exorcism texts give examples of grave injustices coming from the palace. But neither was this “just rhetoric.” A standard was set that would have consequences.

We can speak of the idea of justice in ancient Mesopotamia, but we must be careful to understand that our word is not entirely cognate with their thought. For one thing, justice was personified, was a god. Justice was the sun god, Utu in Sumerian, Shamash in Akkadian, who, by lighting up, making visible, all actions, could discover which were just and which unjust. As Bottéro points out, there was no real idea of law in ancient Mesopotamia, but rather of decision, the decision of gods or kings: justice was not abstract, it was visible only in the particular case. The Akkadian term for justice, *mēšaru*, was closely associated with kingship: “The gods have commissioned him [the king] to make appear (to make shine) in the land *mēšaru*, i.e. order at the same time as justice.”<sup>40</sup> *Mēšaru* derives from the word *ēšēru*, which means “to go straight, in the right way; to be in order.”<sup>41</sup> Because justice was embedded in a whole way of life, an elaborate set of obligations and prohibitions including spheres we would consider having little to do with morality, we cannot equate it simply with our understanding of the term.

We know from the vast number of exorcism texts and penitential hymns that justice was often discerned retroactively: that is, if one suffered from some physical complaint or moral injustice, it must be because one had done something wrong. Divination was resorted to in an attempt to discover the

“sin” one had committed, the mistake one had made, the tabu one had violated, and specialists could prescribe the right rituals and petitions that might reverse the suffered wrong. But the way of thinking about life was indelibly hierarchical. As Bottéro put it:

Not only by virtue of the affirmed ontological superiority of their gods, whose inscrutability no one could overcome, but also by virtue of the gods’ role as masters and governors of the world, they recognized the gods’ sovereign privilege of complete freedom of decision and action. All the expressions and all the demonstrations of the gods’ will were thus accepted within the same “civic” spirit, as it were, like the orders of the kings by their subjects: without discussion, without protest, without criticism, in a perfect and fatalistic submission, with the clear consciousness that one does not resist that which is stronger. The gods were considered too clever, too equitable, and too irreproachable for them ever to be called arbitrary or for their decision ever to be questioned. In that land, even in words, no one ever really rebelled against the most pitiless of all decisions: our universal condemnation to death.<sup>42</sup>

Well, not quite “no one,” as we will see in a moment. There were a few prophets who foretold the fall of kings.<sup>43</sup> And there were intellectuals, such as the writer of the so-called “Babylonian Theodicy,” who did raise questions about the justice of the gods:

Those who do not seek the god go the way of prosperity,  
While those who pray to the goddess become destitute and  
impoverished.<sup>44</sup>

Although the Mesopotamian equivalents of Job’s friends do seem to get the upper hand in this dialogue, there are texts in which the mystery of reward and punishment is declared beyond human understanding:

What seems good to oneself,  
is a crime before the god.  
What to one’s heart seems bad,  
is good before one’s god.  
Who may comprehend the minds of gods  
In heaven’s depth?

The thoughts of (those) divine deep waters,  
 Who could fathom them?  
 How could mankind, beclouded,  
 Comprehend the ways of gods?<sup>45</sup>

In one important respect, ancient Mesopotamia is like all the societies we have observed so far, in the last two chapters and in this one: there are notions about some kind of survival after death, but there is no idea of rewards and punishments in the afterlife, and, on the whole, such existence as there is, is uninviting. For the ancient Mesopotamians, the “netherworld,” where all spirits go, varies between bad—gloomy somnolence—and worse—a realm of fierce demons. Though Bottéro is indeed right that most people took death as unquestionable, the greatest of Mesopotamian poems, the Epic of Gilgamesh, is about a legendary king who literally goes to the ends of the earth to escape death, a reality brought home to him by the premature death of his dear friend Enkidu (both Gilgamesh and Enkidu are classic upstarts). Gilgamesh, the only ancient Mesopotamian writing to have made it into the canon of world literature, and that uncertainly, is far too complex a narrative to summarize here.<sup>46</sup> For all the vigor of his protest and the enormous risks he takes to overcome death, Gilgamesh is at last faced with the reality that his quest is impossible, and that he has no alternative but to submit: “mere man—his days are numbered; whatever he may do, he is but wind.”<sup>47</sup>

The term “civilization” is difficult to define, as it has been used in many ways. I am not using it as a contrast term to “uncivilized,” any more than I am using the term “culture” as a contrast to “uncultured.” As used descriptively, civilization is usually confined to societies that have states. The comparable term for nonstate societies is “culture area.” Polynesia is a culture area, though Hawai‘i might in time have given rise to Hawaiian civilization. Just as there are diverse societies speaking unrelated languages in a culture area, the American Southwest for example, so there may be many states speaking different languages within a single civilization, and, of course, none of these entities is static—all change over time.

Mesopotamian civilization was from the beginning a multi-city-state civilization. There was a common language, Sumerian, a common pantheon, and a common writing system. Early on, perhaps even from the beginning, there was a different language spoken in some of the northern cities, Akkadian, an early Semitic language (Sumerian is related to no known language group). Not only did the Akkadians share the same culture, they used the

same writing system, the cuneiform system that by 2500 BCE had developed out of the original pictographs. Sumerian and Akkadian, written in cuneiform, were the classic languages of Mesopotamian culture, and tablets written in both languages were copied and studied until the end.

Efforts to create a unified state in Mesopotamia emerged in Sumer first, and then among the Akkadians: Sargon founded a new city, Agade (or Akkad), to the north of Sumer, as his capital. Later, Babylon, not far from Akkad, unified Mesopotamia, and identified its patron deity Marduk with Sumerian Enlil. The Babylonian language was a dialect of Akkadian, and Babylon claimed to be the primary exponent of classic Mesopotamian culture. Assyria, beginning in the city of Assur, well to the north of the old Mesopotamian heartland, had a more ambivalent relation to the tradition, but by identifying its patron god, Assur, with Marduk, and by amassing a great royal library of classic cuneiform literature, it, too, claimed the cultural heritage of Sumerian/Akkadian culture.

Even when, by 2000 BCE at least, Sumerian had been replaced by Akkadian everywhere in Mesopotamia as the spoken language, Sumerian texts continued to be handed down, copied, and recopied, even in Assyrian times. In the first millennium, Aramaic gradually replaced Akkadian as the spoken language, but it was written in the new alphabetic script and the guardians of the traditional culture did not use it. After the Mesopotamians lost their political independence, first to the Persians (538) then to the Greeks (330) and then to the Parthians (247 BCE), scribes continued the cuneiform tradition. The last known text written in cuneiform script dates from 75 CE, and is taken to mark the end of Mesopotamian civilization.

In an important sense, all culture is one: human beings today owe something to every culture that has gone before us. Mesopotamian culture certainly had an influence on its neighbors, notably Persia, Israel, and Greece. Some, including some notable Assyriologists such as Jean Bottéro, have wanted to see it as the first act of “Western Civilization.” Others, notably Leo Oppenheim, who gave his book *Ancient Mesopotamia* the significant subtitle *Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, have wanted to emphasize the strangeness, the difference, of Mesopotamian civilization from ours.<sup>48</sup> An argument could be made for either position, but it would seem that Mesopotamian civilization as a comprehensive way of life did come to an end, and the last cuneiform text may be a convenient point to mark its demise, just as the last hieroglyphic text can be seen to mark the death of ancient Egyptian civilization.

Though writing is a convenient marker for a given civilization and has often been seen as an essential element in the definition of a civilization, we must be cautious in using it as such. We must be especially cautious in imagining that the invention of writing instantaneously created a “literacy revolution.” If that term has any validity—if it implies a change in *mentalité*—and we will consider that possibility in a later chapter, it hardly applies to ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, or Shang China. For one thing, early writing had quite limited usage. The archaeologist Hans Nissen goes so far as to say, “the invention of writing [in Sumer] did not mark any particularly historical turning-point.”<sup>49</sup> In Mesopotamia, writing, together with a developing number system, was originally used primarily in registering the contributions to temples and palaces and the rations paid out by them. Still, the use of writing and numbers in accounting practices was no mean achievement, whether or not it was a “historical turning-point,” and may be related to the fact that of all early civilizations, Mesopotamia had the most far-flung trade and the most developed market economy.<sup>50</sup> Early writing was also useful in the development of bureaucracy: orders could be transmitted to distant regions with some security that the exact instructions would reach the intended destination.<sup>51</sup> However, given that cuneiform (and hieroglyphic) writing was a very difficult practice, requiring years of special training, there had to be scribes in the palace or temple who could write the instructions, and scribes at the other end who could decode them. Even priests and kings might not be able to read.

Once more literary texts began to be written, often myths or hymns, segments of important rituals, they remained very close to spoken language. Their constant repetitions with minor variations show that they were frequently verbatim transcriptions of oral texts. In short, ancient civilizations, even when difficult writing systems had appeared, remained largely oral cultures throughout their history.<sup>52</sup> Writing did not mean the end of oral tradition; not even printing did more than make a dent in it. Although today oral tradition in most developed societies is pushed to the margins by the ubiquity of print and electronic media, it survives in many nooks and crannies in all existing societies. Because the gods—mostly benevolent, sometimes in their “wild” moods terrifying, always in the end inscrutable—were the center of concern for Mesopotamians throughout their history, perhaps the end of Mesopotamian Civilization was marked, not by the last cuneiform document to be produced, but by the last prayer to be uttered to Marduk or Assur, but of that we have no record.

## Ancient Egypt

Jean Bottéro claimed ancient Mesopotamia as the “first act” of Western Civilization, but how much more often has Egypt been cast in that role? Jan Assmann in *Moses the Egyptian*<sup>53</sup> has traced the image of Egypt held by the ancient Hebrews and Greeks, through many centuries when knowledge of Egyptian writing was lost but fascination with Egypt continued, up until recent times when such distinguished non-Egyptologists as Thomas Mann and Sigmund Freud found Egypt foundational for the understanding of Western culture. It has been my intention in this book to try to understand each religion in its own cultural context, so far as possible as its adherents understood it. This admittedly utopian enterprise itself, however, is culturally situated, made possible only by cultural developments, including massive scholarly advances, in recent times.

Nonetheless, when it comes to Egypt the baggage of preconceptions, even of prejudice, is heavy. A strongly negative picture pervades the opening books of the Hebrew Bible, particularly Exodus (the Joseph story in Genesis is a bit more nuanced), with Egypt as the very archetype of idolatry, the primary sin that the children of Israel must avoid at all cost, but also the archetype of oppression and slavery. Even a recent book that I admire, Michael Walzer’s *Exodus and Revolution*,<sup>54</sup> makes ancient Egypt the very symbol of everything we want to get away from, even to this day. On the opposite side—from Plato to the present—Egypt has been seen as the source of ancient wisdom, the origin of human culture. I will try to avoid the tendency either to demonize ancient Egypt or to idealize it, and to approach it as much as possible not from what followed but from what came before, from the point of view, say, of Tikopia, Hawai‘i, or ancient Mesopotamia.

Barry Kemp, the distinguished archaeologist of ancient Egypt, states well the situation in which anyone who undertakes what I have undertaken finds himself, however well intentioned: “I am aware as I write this book that I am creating in my own mind images that I hope correspond to the way things were in ancient Egypt. I also know that the more I try to make sense of the facts, the more what I write is speculative and begins to merge with the world of historical fiction, a modern form of myth. My ancient Egypt is very much an imagined world, though I hope that it cannot too readily be shown to be untrue to the original ancient sources.”<sup>55</sup> I would only add that history *is* our myth—as Jan Assmann puts it: “History turns into myth as soon as it is remembered, narrated, and used, that is, woven into the fabric of the

present. The mythical qualities of history have nothing to do with its truth values.”<sup>56</sup> To put it in one word, as William McNeill does, what we are doing is “mythistory.”<sup>57</sup> Looking at our project in these terms should bring us into closer sympathy with cultures such as ancient Egypt in which myth is a primary cultural form. To the extent that we are also creatures of myth in that “we are what we remember,”<sup>58</sup> we are in the same boat as the ancient Egyptians.

Another German Egyptologist reminds us that we are even one step closer to the ancient Egyptians. Not only do we still have our own myths, we cannot escape theirs:

Any sort of contact with the world of the Egyptians silences one question, *that of the reality and existence of these gods*. Egyptian religion lived on the fact that gods exist. If we remove the gods from the Egyptians’ world, all that remains is a dark, uninhabited shell that would not repay study . . . In order to understand the forces that circumscribe the very closed and homogeneous world of the Egyptians, we must inquire after their gods and employ all our conceptual armory in order to seek out the reality of these gods—a reality that was not invented by human beings but *experienced* by them.<sup>59</sup>

Given that “we” are the product of all previous human culture, we have, at some level “already” experienced those gods, as we have “already” experienced the powerful beings of tribal peoples. If we are truly to understand ancient Egyptian religion (or any religion), it will be part of our task to “remember” what we have forgotten, but which in some sense we already know.

If Mesopotamia in many ways looked like the antithesis of Hawai‘i, pre-dynastic Egypt provides more than a few parallels, improbable though that may seem. Egypt was certainly not as isolated as an island in the mid-Pacific, but compared to Mesopotamia it looks isolated. *Egypt is effectively the Nile Valley from the First Cataract to the Mediterranean*. Due to the yearly inundations of the Nile bringing new alluvial soil and avoiding both the need for irrigation and the problem of salinization, *the valley was one of the most fertile strips of land in the world*. It was bounded, however, on both sides by virtually impassable desert, and was thus much less vulnerable to incursions from without than was Mesopotamia. It was, however, vulnerable in several spots: from the upper Nile region known as Nubia, from Libya to the northwest, and from the northeast region, that is Palestine and beyond, inhabited

by what the Egyptians called “Asiatics.” It was also vulnerable to the sea along the coast of the Nile Delta. For the first 2,000 years of its dynastic history the vulnerable frontiers were breached only once, by Asiatics known as the Hyksos, who managed to rule the delta for a hundred years in the mid-second millennium BCE. Egypt’s partial isolation was only definitively breached in the first millennium BCE when the surrounding world had become more “developed.” Not only were there Nubian and Libyan rulers, but disorienting conquests by Asiatics—the Assyrians, and for a longer period the Persians—by the Greeks, that is, Alexander the Great and the Ptolemaic Empire that followed, and finally by the Romans. The first millennium BCE in Egypt was a period of considerable creativity and innovation even though the country was under unprecedented outside pressure and influence, but before that Egyptian civilization had developed for 2,000 years with little outside influence and with continuity of language and population. This among other reasons makes ancient Egypt remarkable. It was the longest lasting, most continuous, and best documented of the archaic civilizations and as such has to be Exhibit A when considering them. It also illustrates the considerable capacity for transformation within such civilizations as well as the limits beyond which those transformations apparently could not go.

Although dynastic Egyptian civilization seems to burst on the scene with stunning brilliance at the end of the fourth millennium BCE, it was not without centuries of preparation. An agricultural population of rather homogeneous culture grew gradually from about 5500 BCE to the end of the fourth millennium. During the last centuries of that millennium, and more clearly in Upper Egypt<sup>60</sup> than in the delta, there were growing signs of hierarchy and stratification, mainly indicated by the appearance of elite graves with luxury grave goods. Graves and tombs, as we will see, were matters of great importance to the Egyptians from the earliest times.

In the immediate predynastic period, that is, circa 3100 BCE, several paramount chiefdoms or early states appear to have emerged in Upper Egypt, the most important of which were Hierakonpolis and Naqada.<sup>61</sup> There is every indication that warfare between these polities was intense and that the unified state was the result of the military victory of one of the competing polities. Ideology was significant from the beginning: Naqada was associated with the god Seth and Hierakonpolis with the god Horus. When Hierakonpolis conquered Naqada to form what Kemp calls the Proto-Kingdom of Upper Egypt, the union was symbolized by the association of Horus and Seth as the expression of the unity of the “two lands” (later extended to mean

Upper and Lower Egypt), followed by the conquest of the whole country and the founding of the First Dynasty, with its new capital at Memphis, not far from present-day Cairo, where the delta begins to diverge from the main stream of the river.

The whole process of transition is obscure. There was some writing, in particular names of kings and deities, but continuous texts do not appear for several centuries, so no textual account of the founding exists until long after the historical fact. The first several dynasties saw a remarkable flowering of culture and the creation of cultural forms in several realms that would continue, not without some change, until the end of Egyptian civilization in the early centuries CE. The details, however, are far from clear: there is argument about the names and order of the early kings. Toby Wilkinson, among others, postulates a Dynasty 0, from about 3100 to 3000 BCE.<sup>62</sup> The first three dynasties, generally called protodynastic or early dynastic, lasted until 2600 BCE, when, with the Fourth Dynasty, the Old Kingdom begins.

Michael Hoffman offers a number of reasons for the cultural florescence that accompanied the rise of a unified Egyptian state at the beginning of dynastic history. He cites the long period of population growth leading up to significant demographic concentrations in several parts of Upper Egypt; the extraordinary productivity of the land and the possibility of aggregating resources through taxation and storage; the rapid development of sophisticated craft production and architecture; and perhaps above all the centrality of the mortuary cult already in the first two dynasties, that will remain, through many vicissitudes, such an identifying characteristic of Egyptian culture:

As Egypt consolidated from local chieftainships into regional kingdoms, into the world's first national state, it developed the royal tomb as its flag: a symbol of political integration under god . . . From our brief exposure to the study of known mortuary practices and monuments, we can conclude that the development and function of the royal mortuary cult in late prehistoric and early historic Egypt (between about 3300 and 2700 BCE) was one of the most socially, economically, and politically sensitive indicators of the rise of the state and was one of the most important reasons why Egyptian civilization emerged when it did and in the fashion that it did.<sup>63</sup>

In the absence of continuous texts until well into the Old Kingdom, that is, toward the end of the Fifth Dynasty, around 2400 BCE, it is difficult to

reconstruct religious belief and practice. Many local gods are known, and the centrality of some of the gods, such as Horus and Seth, as mentioned above, is clear, but we know little of the context of myth in which these gods may have been embedded. For instance, the name of Osiris, known as the father of Horus in later times, is missing in the early dynastic period and even his existence then can only be inferred indirectly. On the other hand the relation between Horus and the king is clearly central. The naming of Egyptian kings is complex and became more so over time, but from the very beginning Horus figured prominently in the name of every king. Horus's emblem is the falcon, but it would be a mistake to call him a "falcon god." The name Horus means "the one on high." The falcon then, rather than an exclusive identity, associates him with the sky, perhaps even with the sun. In any case, as Kemp puts it, "Horus is the one deity whose figure appears unambiguously in association with Early Dynastic kings. The figure of the falcon . . . stands alone above a heraldic device containing the principal name of the king."<sup>64</sup>

A critical question for us in trying to understand archaic religion is the question whether the king is Horus in a strong sense—that is, is he divine, an instantiation of the god himself? This question has been answered variously. Henri Frankfort has argued for divine kingship,<sup>65</sup> whereas Georges Posener has held that the king is only metaphorically a god.<sup>66</sup> Jan Assmann in a number of works has argued for a changing understanding of the king's divinity, from god to son of god, to chosen by god, to servant of god. Perhaps the key is a changing understanding of divinity itself. In the Old Kingdom (third millennium BCE), ritual was not an interaction between gods and human beings, but an interaction between "gods" themselves. As Assmann puts it, ritual "was not conceived of as a communication between the human and the divine, but rather as an interaction between deities."<sup>67</sup> What this means in practice is that ritual language is "uttered as divine speeches by priests who play the roles of the deities in question as they carry out the respective cultic acts. The words uttered while performing the cultic acts are thus the words of the deities, sacred words whose radiant power makes it possible to illuminate the otherworldly meaning of what is happening in this-worldly events."<sup>68</sup>

This begins to make sense if we see that the "gods" of early dynastic Egypt are only incipiently differentiated from the "powerful beings" of tribal people, and that they are more identified with than worshipped, so that Assmann's "otherworldly" and "this-worldly" are only aspects of a largely undifferentiated cosmos. In this context it makes sense to say that the king *is* Horus, in

that he enacts Horus rather than worships him. Thus we could perhaps say that the early Egyptian king is Horus in the sense that the Hawaiian king is Kū. With the sun god Re of the Middle Kingdom things were undoubtedly different, as they perhaps were even in the later Old Kingdom when Re had become central and the king was said to be “the son of Re” rather than Re himself. But even though the relation between king and god evolved over time, Assmann also reminds us that the idea of the divinity of the king persisted. In the first four dynasties, “The ruler is not an image of god, he *is* god,” but in later times things are not entirely different: “Even in its classical, representative form, pharaonic kingship never entirely relinquished the idea that the pharaoh, son of god, was the incarnation of god. The god embodied by the pharaoh, however, was typically demoted to a filial rank: the pharaoh did not embody Amun, Re, or Ptah, but Horus, the son of Osiris, and as such the Son.”<sup>69</sup> But of course Horus was the god of kings before Amun, Re, or Ptah came on the scene and probably before Osiris was clearly established as his father.

The fusion of the divine and the human in the person of the king is perhaps the central expression of the “compact symbolism” which Erich Voegelin sees as characterizing tribal religion and only gradually differentiating in the history of archaic societies, not to be radically broken through until the axial age.<sup>70</sup> The king, whether as incarnation, son, or servant of the gods, is the key link between humans and the cosmos such that the weakness or absence of the king is a sign of profound cosmic and social disorder; the proper functioning of the king is the primary guarantee of life and peace.

Just as the powerful beings of tribal peoples were violent as well as benevolent, and in ancient Mesopotamia one never knew what Enlil might do, so chaos and disorder were never far from the consciousness of the ancient Egyptians. Erik Hornung describes an Egyptian understanding of reality going back as far as the Fifth Dynasty of the Old Kingdom in which chaos, defined as limitless waters and total darkness, preceded the coming into being of the first god, surrounds the finite universe, and will ultimately prevail when the cosmos grows old and is reabsorbed into it. Further, chaos not only surrounds the cosmos but penetrates it continuously, requiring equally continual human action to deal with it.<sup>71</sup>

This human action, focusing on the king, takes two main forms. One is the “hostile confrontation” with “the powers that belong to the nonexistent outside creation but invade creation and must be driven out of it. It is the duty of the king and the gods to do this.”<sup>72</sup> Such negative powers can be

represented by foreign enemies—Libyans or Asiatics—as well as by domestic rebels, or, indeed by anyone who transgresses the proper order of the world. From the earliest beginnings of Egyptian kingship there appears the image of “the smiting of the enemies,” often a painting or relief of the pharaoh holding a number of enemies or rebels by the hair while wielding a weapon with which he will destroy them. Military power was always associated with the Egyptian state and had a powerful symbolic justification in holding the line against chaos.

But there was another aspect of the confrontation with chaos or the non-existent, namely its essential role in “fertility, renewal, and rejuvenation.”<sup>73</sup> Unless the sun, which grows old at dusk, descends into the utter darkness of the underworld, it will not be reborn at dawn; unless the land is submerged by the inundation of the Nile, it will not bear new crops; unless all things, including humans, die, life will not continue. All these transactions with chaos are dangerous and must be acted out with meticulous ritual propriety, but it is only through them that life as we know it can go on. As the sun, from the Fifth Dynasty on, became ever more central in Egyptian religion, solar ritual became the primary focus of the cult. Unless the ritual was properly enacted, that is, carried out every hour of the day and night, in principle by the king but usually delegated to his priestly deputies, the very source of life would be endangered.

It is this second kind of confrontation with chaos, dangerous but not hostile, indeed essential, that helps us understand the importance of mortuary ritual and royal tombs in Egyptian history. The apparent Egyptian preoccupation with death was in reality a preoccupation with life. Because the death of the king was the greatest threat to human order, special precautions needed to be undertaken to be sure that it rendered life and not death. Tombs were not built, pyramids were not constructed *after* the death of the king, but such construction began early in his reign. The king’s son was obligated to complete the work and undertake the funeral ritual, but we know that the tombs of kings who died early were seldom impressive. Royal tombs, above all the great pyramids of the Fourth Dynasty, which remain among the wonders of the world, were monuments to the life of the king, before and after death. We could even refer to them as the reified rituals of divine kingship, the “flags” in Kemp’s analogy, of the ancient Egyptian state.

When we first find decorated tombs in the Fifth Dynasty and later, the scenes depicted are full of life, not only the daily life of humans, but the life of animals and plants as well. In later centuries the preoccupation with

the netherworld grew and representations of daily life were no longer so evident. But the “afterlife” to the ancient Egyptians was not viewed as a radically other world, but as a continuation of this one. From this point of view, as Hornung emphasizes, the relation between order and chaos was “anything but negative,” because the right relation between them was the very source of everything the Egyptians most valued.<sup>74</sup>

John Baines, among others, has taken pains to remind us that the lives of most of the ancient Egyptians were hard and, all too often, brief. In a population of 1 to 1.5 million, the real elite was a “close-knit group of a few hundred . . . The core elite together with their families numbered two or three thousand people.” Even when including secondary elites and local administrators who had some degree of literacy, together with their families, the “ruling class” only composed 3 to 5 percent of the population.<sup>75</sup> Although Baines argues that the daily life of the great majority was little different from that of Neolithic villagers, and local identification, particularly with the local deities or local versions of widely known deities, remained important throughout Egyptian history, the centralized Egyptian state reached into the village economically in the form of taxes, politically through military conscription or corvée labor, and almost certainly culturally. Especially during the early dynasties the royal court was peripatetic, regularly voyaging up and down the Nile, so that most villagers would have had some experience of the royal presence in their neighborhood. The contrast in style of life between that of the court and that of the villagers would indeed have given most people the impression that the king was a living god.

In Egypt as in other early archaic states, centralization of power under the leadership of the king was associated with remarkable cultural creativity in the development of writing, art, and architecture, but also with experiments in pushing the limits of human power. Evidence for human sacrifice in late predynastic and early dynastic Egypt is not plentiful, but is sufficient to make it clear that it was practiced. Retainer sacrifice of wives, officials, and servants occurred in the First and Second Dynasties, but then ceases.<sup>76</sup> Retainer burial is a marker of the extraordinary status of the king, who can take his closest associates with him into the afterlife, unlike ordinary mortals.

But the most extreme example of pushing the limits of power must be the building of the great pyramids of the Fourth Dynasty, after retainer sacrifice had been abandoned. Impressive tombs are a hallmark of Egyptian culture before and after the Old Kingdom, but nothing in Egyptian history or that

of any other archaic society comes near to equaling the colossal undertaking involved in the construction of the great pyramids of Cheops and Khephren at Giza in the middle of the third millennium BCE, engineering feats not equaled again in human history until the twentieth century CE. The wealth and manpower of the whole country must have been mobilized for decades to complete these enormous projects. The workmen who actually produced these monuments were not slaves, but ordinary villagers from all over the country who were required to spend given periods of time at the construction site. If there was no “national economy” earlier, this vast building project surely created one. But it also undoubtedly strained the early state to its limits. Just as retainer sacrifice had been abandoned earlier, so such gigantic construction projects were never repeated. Jan Assmann views the building of the great pyramids as a kind of culmination of the building of the early state:

In a sense the great pyramids of Giza represent the culmination of a process that began in Naqada [late predynastic period]. The tombs become increasingly monumental and the power of the chief (later the pharaoh) becomes greater and greater, taking on divine dimensions until the pharaoh becomes akin to the Supreme God. This increasing divinization of the ruler finds visual expression in the development of the royal tombs—a process that reaches its logical conclusion at Giza . . . The state provides the immense forces and organizational resources without which the architecture would be impossible. Thus the pyramids also symbolize and visualize the organizational prowess of the state, as embodied in the king, whose will is strong enough to move mountains.<sup>77</sup>

These great pyramids, visible to anyone traveling up or down the Nile for the last 4500 years, made, as Herodotus put it, even time afraid. They too will pass away, but unlike most Egyptian monuments, not any time soon.

It is ironic that, because we have no inscriptions associated with them, we know little about the exact meaning of the great pyramids. In Egypt as in Mesopotamia many centuries pass from the “invention of writing” until the appearance of continuous texts. Even when such texts do appear in the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties, their subject matter is very limited: administration and temple, above all mortuary, ritual. For one thing the literate class was still extremely small. For another, oral culture does not disappear with

the invention of writing—far from it—and much cultural knowledge was still entrusted to living memory rather than writing. Early writing gives us insight only into fragments of a whole way of life, a way of life primarily transmitted not only orally but mimetically, that is, by example.<sup>78</sup>

But the Old Kingdom, destined to remain forever enclosed in more than a little mystery, in spite of its claim through the great pyramids to overcome time, did in fact come to an end, and was followed by what is known as the First Intermediate Period at the end of the third millennium, that is, roughly 2150 to 2040 BCE. Because in archaic societies there is no such thing as “religion” or “politics” (we use those terms only analytically to describe dimensions of what was concretely a single whole), societal collapse and religious crisis are two ways of describing the same phenomenon. When the centralized state disintegrated and whoever claimed to be king exercised no effective power, then local upstarts appeared. Assmann speaks of an alternation in Egyptian history between the “monocentric surface” of the centralized state and the “polycentric deep structure” that reappeared whenever the surface structure crumbled. Not only did the geographic entities of the predynastic period reemerge, but something of the ethos of the earlier period appeared as well: namely the culture of the “violent hearted,” for upstarts rule by force and survive only by military victory.<sup>79</sup>

Nonetheless, centuries of dynastic history could not be obliterated and what at first glance looks to be a period of regression was in fact a period of marked cultural advance. Local power claimants could no longer act as appointees of the king: they had to seek other sources of justification. Naked power may have been the initial basis of local rule, but was not alone sufficient. Rather than claiming appointment by the king, local rulers claimed to have been appointed by the local god, and local cults flourished at the expense of the high gods. Rulers gave evidence of their divine chosenness by their capacity to bring order and even justice to the local scene.

Endemic civil war interrupted the smooth transmission of oral and mimetic culture; a new flowering of written texts arose to fill the gap. Austere and relatively brief autobiographical texts from late Old Kingdom tombs have been found, often perfunctorily listing the magnanimous deeds of the deceased. But such autobiographical texts flourish in the first Intermediate Period. They give a dark picture of surrounding conditions in order to highlight the achievements of the local ruler. The autobiographical inscription of one such ruler, the Nomarch<sup>80</sup> Ankhtifi of Hierakonpolis and Edfu, states:

I am the vanguard of men and the rearguard of men. One who finds the solution where it is lacking. A leader of the land through active conduct. Strong in speech, collected in thought, on the day of joining the three nomes. For I am a champion without peer, who spoke out when the people were silent, on the day of fear when Upper Egypt was silent.<sup>81</sup>

Already in the Old Kingdom norms of moral obligation to the common people were reiterated in mortuary inscriptions. Ankhtifi resumes and expands this tradition when he claims:

I gave the hungry bread  
And clothing to the naked,  
I anointed the unanointed,  
I shod the barefoot,  
I gave him a wife who had no wife.<sup>82</sup>

But with Ankhtifi these acts were not merely the reiteration of established moral norms. In a time when people were dying of hunger and even eating their children, every norm of ordinary morality was being violated. Thus when Ankhtifi asserted:

I rescued the weak from the strong,  
I gave ear to the matter of the widow.

he was engaged in what Assmann calls “saving justice.”<sup>83</sup> He was not a bureaucrat operating under established moral norms, but a patron protecting, indeed saving, his clients from disaster and expecting loyalty in return. Assmann sees in this the emergence of a new rhetoric: “The rhetoric of crisis and salvation foregrounds the patron as a savior whose achievements have preserved the nome from the certain disaster seen everywhere else.”<sup>84</sup> If crisis conditions place a new emphasis on loyalty to the patron, they consign the disloyal to destruction. Assmann believes that the culture of loyalism created in the disastrous circumstances of the First Intermediate Period, became central to the culture of the Middle Kingdom, when fear of chaos was used to justify rule long after the country had been successfully reunited.

Assmann sees a shifting pattern of Egyptian values accompanying the oscillations between monocentric and polycentric polities. “Integration”

was the norm in periods of unity; “competition” in periods of disunity. It was the task of the Middle Kingdom (2040–1650 BCE) to move the new cultural rhetoric of the First Intermediate Period from the context of competition to the context of integration. But times had changed. The centralized state was not the isolated pinnacle that it had been in the Old Kingdom, when all faces were turned to the center. The center had to attract the loyalty of the newly independent and vigorous peripheries by cultural, not just military means. Assmann describes the problem:

On the one hand, it was necessary to reestablish the norms of integrative ethics and self-effacement so radically challenged by the collapse of the Old Kingdom. On the other, these norms had to be universalized: the ethic of a tiny privileged minority had to be transformed into the ethic of a broad cultural elite representing Egyptian ideals and sustaining the existence of the state. Something akin to “education” was needed. Indeed, the Middle Kingdom was the first to find that it required a systematic education policy as part of its project of political restoration.<sup>85</sup>

Education required schools and standard texts, as well as new genres of writing. It is from the Middle Kingdom that we begin to find “wisdom” texts, hymns and tales. “Literature” is a dangerous word as its origins are so recent in the West, but if we use the word cautiously, then we can begin to speak of Egyptian literature from early in the second millennium BCE. Of particular importance are the so-called “instruction texts” in which often a father imparts worldly wisdom to his son, but which also contain significant new religious ideas. To students of ancient China this focus on moral education for a bureaucratic ruling class, with a high regard for certain “classic” texts, will sound more than a little familiar, even though Confucianism in China developed many centuries later. As we will see, the differences are as important as the parallels.

The ancient Egyptian system of moral norms was summed up in a single term: *ma'at*. The term has been variously translated as order, justice or truth. None of these translations is wrong, but none is adequate, for, as Eric Voegelin puts it, “The symbol is too compact to be translated by a single word in a modern language. As the Maat of the cosmos it would have to be rendered as order; as the Maat of society, as good government and justice; as the Maat of true understanding of ordered reality, as truth.”<sup>86</sup> Assmann proposes the

translation “connective justice,” emphasizing the element of reciprocity that forms communities and establishes obligations. He cites a royal inscription from around 1700 BCE:

The reward of one who does something lies in something being done for him.

This is considered by god as *ma'at*.<sup>87</sup>

If *ma'at* points to the generalized reciprocity that is central for tribal societies and found in most moral systems subsequently, for the Egyptians it became substantial in the form of a goddess. Its “religious” status is indicated by the frequent depiction of the king offering *ma'at* as a small statue of the goddess to the god being addressed, who is said to “feed on” *ma'at*. Such a small statue of the goddess appears frequently in depictions of the judgment of the dead where the “heart” of the deceased is put on the scales opposite to the statue of the goddess. A heart lacking in *ma'at* will sink, thus condemning the deceased to nonexistence.

The appearance of the heart as a central symbol in ancient Egyptian religion is itself a symptom of the changed relation between god, king and humans after the First Intermediate Period. The “loyalism” that linked the local ruler to his god and his followers to him was generalized in the Middle Kingdom to the realm as a whole. The idea of kingship growing out of this way of thinking was closer to the Mesopotamian model of rule than to that of the Old Kingdom.<sup>88</sup> None of the old symbols were abandoned: the king was still Horus, and the son of Re. But the emphasis now was on the king as steward of the god, as chosen by the god; it was the god who was the real ruler.

But the king was also, on a grand scale, the patron and protector of the people. If Assmann uses the term “savior,” he does not mean a savior from this world, but a savior in this world. In summing up he says, “Egyptian civilization needs no Redeemer, only a ‘good shepherd’ protecting his sheep from the wolves.”<sup>89</sup> Concomitantly, the king requires a more consciously willed loyalty than would have seemed necessary in the Old Kingdom. Assmann describes a kind of history of the heart, remembering that in Egyptian heart means more than it does in English: it includes mind and will as well as feeling. In the Old Kingdom the elite ideal was the “king-guided individual.” There is no mention of the individual heart for “the heart of the king thinks and plans for all.” In the Middle Kingdom the ideal is the “heart-guided individual,” the person whose loyalty has been internalized, whose

eneration of the king has become part of his innermost self. The New Kingdom will see another development, the “god-guided individual,” but that must await consideration until a bit later.

Assmann argues that the Egyptian emphasis on the role of the ruler as protector of the weak against the strong, of the poor against the wealthy, as the upholder of any semblance of order against the chaos of civil discord, was a kind of Hobbesian justification of what was in some ways a police state in the Middle Kingdom.<sup>90</sup> Yet he is also aware that we are not talking about a Neolithic village where village elders could maintain order, much less a hunter-gatherer band ruled by a general will. When large-scale agricultural societies break down, violence and horrors of all sorts not infrequently erupt. One may doubt how many of the weak and poor the pharaoh really protected against the privileged of the land, but that his rule kept mayhem at bay may not have been just ruling class propaganda. It may have been appreciated, and not only by elite classes.

It is in the New Kingdom (1550–1070 BCE) that something that at least incipiently can be called theology flowers, but conscious reflection on religious meaning begins in the Middle Kingdom if not before. In order to understand the nature of Egyptian religious reflection, there are certain things we must consider. In *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, Assmann describes three dimensions of what he calls implicit theology, that is, aspects that appear primarily in practice: the local or cultic, the cosmic, and the mythic. He then describes what he calls the “fourth dimension,” explicit theology. He warns us early on that there was no “theoretical discourse” in ancient Egypt,<sup>91</sup> which makes his use of the term “theology” problematic. Eric Voegelin suggests a term for reflection that pushes mythical thinking to its limit—to the verge of theoretical reflection without ever quite crossing the boundary—mythospeculation.<sup>92</sup> This might be a better term for Assmann’s fourth dimension than explicit theology.

The three dimensions of implicit theology, which, Assmann says, were “confined entirely to the sphere of practice,”<sup>93</sup> comprise the basic continuity that makes it possible “to speak of ‘the’ religion of ancient Egypt, in the singular.”<sup>94</sup> Although Egyptian religion had its unique features, it is not entirely wrong to see it also as a species in the genus “polytheistic religions of the ancient Near East,” as long as we realize that such religions “represent highly developed cultural achievements that are inseparably linked to the political organization of the early state and are not to be found in tribal societies.”<sup>95</sup> As in other archaic societies, the king had a central role in each of the dimen-

sions of religious practice.<sup>96</sup> The king was responsible for the performance of cult and the construction and upkeep of the temples where cult was performed, not only in the capital, but throughout the country. Although tombs were important in every period of Egyptian history, after the Old Kingdom, temples replaced tombs as the site of major construction under royal patronage, a practice that continued well into Ptolemaic times. Temples were so important and so numerous that in a late text Egypt was called “the temple of the whole world.”<sup>97</sup> The king through ritual was also responsible for the maintenance of cosmic order, the daily passage of the sun and the annual inundation of the Nile. Finally, the king was at the center of the “central myth” that sustained the Egyptian state, namely, the myth of Horus as the son and successor of Osiris, but also as the beloved of all the gods.<sup>98</sup> The centrality of the king in every dimension of religious practice, however differently phrased in each society, was something common to all archaic societies.

Myth as a symbolic form was basic to Egyptian religion, but myth in the sense of extended narrative does not appear to have been as highly developed as in Mesopotamia, where it largely supplied what secondary reflection on religious meaning there was. Although allusions to aspects of the myth of Isis, Osiris, and Horus can be found in many Egyptian texts, it is indicative that the only “complete version” of the myth is Plutarch’s hellenized version, written in Greek in the second century CE.<sup>99</sup>

Mythospeculation (Assmann’s explicit theology), however, not unknown in other archaic societies, was particularly highly developed in Egypt, and underwent significantly more historical change than did religious practice (Assmann’s implicit theology). Its social location was the educated, literate elite, largely a product of the Middle Kingdom and later. In the New Kingdom the existence for the first time of a professional priesthood as a subgroup of the literate elite gave further impetus to mythospeculation. I will consider two texts of the Middle Kingdom to give some sense of what early Egyptian mythospeculation was like. It is important to notice that both texts either describe or are the words of “the god.” Much ink has been spilled as to whether they give evidence of a latent “monotheism,” a discussion that Erik Hornung has pretty well disposed of.<sup>100</sup> The existence of the gods is taken for granted in both texts, so in that sense they are polytheistic. But they are also clearly addressed to a god who cannot be subsumed among the other gods and whose status is the focus of the mythospeculation. The “Instruction to Merikare” is attributed to the First Intermediate Period, but is almost certainly a

product of the Middle Kingdom. After a good deal of worldly advice this Instruction has a “theological” coda of considerable interest:

Well tended is mankind—god’s cattle,  
 He made sky and earth for their sake,  
 He subdued the water monster,  
 He made breath for their noses to live,  
 They are his images, who came from his body,  
 He shines in the sky for their sake;  
 For them he made plants and cattle,  
 Fowl and fish to feed them.  
 He slew his foes, reduced his children,  
 When they thought of making rebellion.  
 He makes daylight for their sake;  
 He sails by to see them.  
 He has built his shrine around them,  
 When they weep he hears.  
 He made for them rulers in the egg,  
 Leaders to raise the back of the weak.  
 He made for them magic as weapons  
 To ward off the blows of events.  
 Guarding them by day and by night.  
 He has slain the traitors among them,  
 As a man beats his son for his brother’s sake,  
 For god knows every name.<sup>101</sup>

One cannot but observe in this passage themes that appear to be parallel to themes in the Hebrew Scriptures: mankind in God’s image, for example, and the combination of loving care and punishment of rebellion. But this is not Yahweh. What “god” means in such passages is problematic.

Apparently a notion of the divine as having a concern for the welfare of humans was widespread enough to arouse reproaches during the First Intermediate Period, or in the memory of it in the Middle Kingdom. The “Admonitions of Ipuwer” complains that not only the king, but also “the god” have been derelict in their duty of taking care of the people. Ipuwer reproaches the god who brought human beings into existence: “Where is he today? Is he asleep? His power is not seen.”<sup>102</sup>

But a remarkable defense of the “all-lord” is mounted in Coffin Text 1130 from the Middle Kingdom, a text that Assmann believes belongs in the de-

veloping tradition of wisdom literature. The text is an apology for the god against such accusations as Ipuwer's. In order to "still the anger" the god recounts his "four good deeds":

- (1) I performed four good deeds in the threshold of Light-land:  
I made the four winds,  
So that everyone could breathe in his time.  
That is one of my deeds.
- (2) I made the great flood,  
so that the poor man would have use of it like the rich man.  
That is one of the deeds.
- (3) I made each one like his fellow  
and forbade that they do evil.  
But their hearts resisted what I had said.  
That is one of the deeds.
- (4) I caused that their hearts cease forgetting the West,  
so that offerings would be made to the deities of the nomes.  
That is one of the deeds.<sup>103</sup>

What is striking about this text is the emphasis on equality. One can see in this text a remarkable forerunner of the assertion that "all men are created equal." The god has given the wind (the prevailing north wind brings blessed coolness to Egypt's otherwise desert heat), and the inundation of the Nile to all, rich and poor alike. And he made all humans alike, forbidding them to do evil. It is humans, not the god, who have created oppression and caused the difference between rich and poor, strong and weak.

Significant in these early texts is their intertextuality: they represent a continuing dialogue about the nature of god and the relation between god, morality, and existing social conditions. The king is not missing—the Instruction to Merikare indicates that the god has created rulers to protect the weak—but the focus is not on glorifying the king but on justifying the god. If the form is not theoretic, it is surely forensic, and forensic is probably one of the sources from which theoretical discourse developed. It is worth noting the importance of the forensic mode in the Hebrew scriptures.<sup>104</sup> All of this is to suggest that the axial age (mid-first millennium BCE), to be discussed in Chapter 6, did not come into the world unprepared. Much Egyptian mythospeculation is at least proto-axial, and we will have to return to it when we reach the axial age.

The New Kingdom (1550–1070 BCE) was founded by Ahmose, who succeeded in driving the Hyksos out of Egypt and reuniting the country. But

the early rulers of the Eighteenth Dynasty not only drove the “Asiatics” out, they pursued them into their hinterland, establishing what is often called the New Empire, including Palestine, parts of Syria, and even, more briefly, northern Iraq. It was thus one of the first multiethnic empires (the Hittite Empire being another) already in the middle of the second millennium BCE, a phenomenon that would be increasingly important in the first millennium BCE. Even while recognizing that there were other realms, particularly in the northeast, the Egyptians laid claim to universal rule, a development that has often been linked to **the increasing sense of universality in the Egyptian understanding of divinity.** With the New Kingdom the promising beginnings of Middle Kingdom mythospeculation became far more explicit.<sup>105</sup> Without becoming God in the sense of the monotheistic religions, the god (who is often unnamed, but who could be identified as Re, Amun-Re, Ptah,<sup>106</sup> or others) **has a kind of reality that transcends not only humans but “the gods.”** Without ever losing connection to the social order and its earthly upholder, the king, the god becomes more clearly than ever, the god of individuals, and, although the evidence is uncertain, almost surely the god of ordinary people, not only the cultured elite.

A priest of Amun composed the following hymn to Amun (whose name means literally, the hidden one) in the 1330s:

Turn back to us, O lord of the plenitude of time!  
 You were here when nothing had come into being,  
 and you will be here when “they” are at an end.  
 You let me see darkness that you give—  
 shine for me that I might see you!  
 Oh, how good it is to follow you,  
 Amun, O lord,  
 great to find for the one who seeks him!  
 Drive off fear, place joy  
 in the heart of humankind!  
 How happy is the face that beholds you, Amun:  
 it is in festival day after day.<sup>107</sup>

Amun fulfils the old understanding of divine assistance to the poor and the weak, but the idea is now personalized, available to the individual. It is a passage like this that allows us to understand why Assmann says that in the **New Kingdom the ideal has changed from the king-guided individual and**

the heart-guided individual to the god-guided individual, so that in another text, something like the idea of “salvation” appears:

You are Amun, lord of the silent,  
 who comes at the call of the poor.  
 I called to you when I was in sorrow,  
 and you came to save me.  
 You gave breath to the one who was imprisoned,  
 and saved me when I was in bonds.  
 You are Amun-Re, lord of Thebes,  
 you save the one in the netherworld.  
 You are the one who is gracious to him who calls on him,  
 you are the one who comes from afar!<sup>108</sup>

Here the god, Amun or whoever, seems almost to be outside time and beyond the cosmos (you were here before the beginning and will be here after the end), but another side of late Egyptian mythospeculation, never seen as contradicting the side tending toward transcendence, symbolizes the god not as beyond the cosmos, but *as* the cosmos:

Your two eyes are the sun and the moon,  
 your head is the sky,  
 your feet are the netherworld.  
 You are the sky,  
 you are the earth,  
 you are the netherworld,  
 you are the water,  
 you are the air between them.<sup>109</sup>

Seeing the god as the cosmos, particularly as the sun, allows for a sense of human participation in the divine life, for the light of the sun, which surrounds us, is the presence of the god. As one hymn to the sun puts it: “All eyes see through you. They can do nothing when Your Majesty goes down.”<sup>110</sup> Assmann cites a passage from Goethe that picks up the theme of human participation in the light of the sun:

If the eye did not partake of the sun  
 How could it gaze on the light?

If we did not share in the power of God  
In the godly we could not delight.<sup>111</sup>

It is the very capacity to think of the creator god now as Amun, now as Ptah, as beyond the cosmos and identical with the cosmos, as distant from humans yet participating in them, without worrying about apparent contradictions, that keeps this remarkable tradition of reflection within the realm of mythospeculation rather than theoretical discourse.

Except for one brief moment: Akhenaten (1352–1338) and his so-called (from the name of his capital city) Amarna religion.<sup>112</sup> The pharaoh Amenophis IV changed his name to Akhenaten, obliterating Amun from his name, and, in intention, from the whole of Egypt, proclaiming Aten, the sun disk, as the sole god. The experiment lasted twenty years at most and by fifty years after Akhenaten's death had been obliterated from conscious memory, only to be rediscovered by archaeologists in the nineteenth century. Though clearly indebted to the mythospeculation that had arisen in the Middle Kingdom and flourished in the New Kingdom, Akhenaten's religion prefigures and is perhaps even subterraneously related to axial religions, in particular the religion of Israel, and had best be considered in Chapter 6. But however radical the Amarna religion was in some respects, it was regressive in one respect that links it indelibly to the archaic, not the axial, religious moment: there was no way the people could relate directly to Aten; knowledge of him came only through pharaoh; and even if there was one god, pharaoh, as his son, and even pharaoh's wife, were also divine.

However variously the relation between the divine and the human was figured in archaic religions, the role of the king was always central. Even when, as in Egypt, piety had become democratized and private devotion was widespread, the formation of religious community depended on kingship. The conquerors of Egypt knew this well: the Persians, Alexander, and the Ptolemies, even the Romans, took the role of pharaoh as essential for the maintenance of religio-social order in Egypt. Only when Christianity had decisively replaced the ancient religion could the vestigial role of pharaoh be abandoned altogether.

### Shang and Western Zhou China

The first thing to note with respect to ancient China in comparison with ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt is that the absolute chronology of the archaic

begins significantly later. The earliest writing we have from China dates to about 1200 BCE, nearly 2,000 years later than in the Middle East. Nonetheless there is every reason to believe that archaic civilization in China was largely indigenous and owed little to any other civilization. The Chinese Neolithic is exceptionally well known so that we have a picture of a long gradual development toward a stratified society and an early state by the middle of the second millennium BCE, with little indication of significant influence from the outside.<sup>113</sup> Chariots certainly and metallurgy possibly were introduced from the outside, but well into the second millennium BCE. And, although early Egypt shows a number of Mesopotamian influences, early China's writing, art, and architecture show no influences from abroad. It is of course possible that some influences from the Middle East or the Indus Valley could have reached China via Central Asia in the third and early second millennia, but we have no evidence that they were extensive, and the great distances and geographical barriers involved suggest that such influences were unlikely, even though in later times significant trade routes through Central Asia would be developed. But perhaps the most powerful argument for indigenous Chinese development is the unique style of Chinese society, culture, and religion, which sets it markedly apart from the cases discussed so far.

Linked to the fact that Chinese culture is indigenous and unique is its unparalleled continuity. Although in the archaic cases we have considered so far it is not difficult to trace continuities from the Neolithic to the early state, in every such case, and this is true of the New World archaic cultures as well, the axial "breakthrough," though not without precursors in the archaic cultures, occurs outside them and leads eventually to their demise, marked most clearly by the loss of their writing systems and thus their literature, not to be recovered until modern times. China is the one case, however, where there is a continuity not only from the Neolithic to the archaic, but from the archaic to the axial, a continuity marked by the persistence, not without development to be sure, of the same writing system from the archaic to the present.<sup>114</sup>

In our current postmodern mood, questions have been raised about such perhaps reified denominators as "Mesopotamia" and "Egypt," not to speak of "Israel" and "Greece," and there have been some who have questioned what "China" is as well. Yet major scholars in the field seem more than ready not only to preserve the term, but to push it ever farther back in history. The *Cambridge History of Ancient China*, published in 1999—though not definitive, it is as close to definitive as for a while we are likely to get—

contains a remarkable series of assertions from its various authors about when “China” begins. Kwang-Chih Chang, a distinguished archaeologist, writes that “By 3000 BCE, the Chinese interaction sphere can properly and appropriately be called China.”<sup>115</sup> David Keightley, a leading specialist on the Shang, writes a bit more hesitantly, “It is only with the late Shang and its written records, however, that one can, for the first time begin to speak with confidence of a civilization that was incipiently Chinese in its values and institutions.”<sup>116</sup> Edward Shaughnessy, a specialist on Western Zhou, however, writes that although many features of later Chinese culture may have had roots in the Neolithic and the Shang, “nevertheless, if those earlier periods can be said to be the foundation of Chinese history, necessary, to be sure, but underground and all but invisible throughout most of that history, then surely the Western Zhou would have to be called its cornerstone.”<sup>117</sup> And of course there are many who would date “Imperial China” only from the Qin (221–206 BCE) and Han (206 BCE–220 CE) dynasties. No one, however, has claimed a sharp break from the Neolithic to the present. Such continuity surely puts China in a class by itself.

Though the Chinese development is clearly unique, there is a problem in defining its uniqueness. Chinese civilization in the axial age is extraordinarily rich, providing a wealth of material and a diversity of views that make comparison with other axial civilizations most rewarding. Unfortunately, such is not the case with the Chinese archaic, particularly with its earliest phase in the Shang dynasty (ca. 1570–1045 BCE), but even for the Western Zhou (1045–771 BCE) the evidence is spotty and its interpretation contested. For Shang culture we are dependent, as far as written records are concerned, almost exclusively on the so-called oracle bones (there are a few inscribed bronze vessels), that is, the 100,000 or so inscribed cattle scapulas and turtle shell fragments that survive from the Anyang period (ca. 1200–1045 BCE). The texts, numerous but mostly quite brief, are evidence of an elaborate practice of ritual divination. Fortunately the subjects of divination are diverse so that a considerable amount of interesting information can be derived from careful analysis of the texts. Nonetheless many of the things we would most like to know are simply absent from this data. With regard to religion, the primary subject of this book, David Keightley has written, “the inscriptions provide a flat and abbreviated view telling us more of the notes of Shang cult than of the music of Shang belief.”<sup>118</sup> Given the great importance of the later Chinese development, we must use the limited information we have to try to understand its background.

One source of frustration is the lack of myths from surviving archaic texts. Large books have been written on Chinese mythology, but they derive their data largely from texts composed late in the pre-Han period, in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) itself, or even later.<sup>119</sup> Some of this material may date from Shang and Western Zhou times, but we cannot know exactly what. There is a little data from the Western Zhou, though even that is hard to date, but the oracle texts are entirely devoid of mythic narrative.

These texts, however, are not devoid of data significant for the understanding of Shang history, most importantly data about royal genealogy. From them we can construct a list of six predynastic kings and twenty-nine dynastic kings.<sup>120</sup> It is only from the time of the twenty-first dynastic king, Wu Ding, that we have archaeological and textual data because it was only under Wu Ding that the Shang ceremonial center at Anyang was established, a site extensively excavated in modern times. For kings earlier than Wu Ding we have only the order of succession, and the relationship between predecessor and successor, that is, whether the successor was a brother or a son of his predecessor. For Wu Ding and later kings, scholars have established approximate dates: Wu Ding's death date is given as 1189, and the last Shang king, Di Xin, is said to have ruled from 1086 to 1045. Several sites have been suggested as earlier Shang capitals, but without writing associated with them it is impossible to be sure when or if they were indeed capitals. Thus most of what we know of Shang society derives from its final approximately 150 years when the capital was at Anyang.<sup>121</sup>

Shang Society was, in Weber's terms, a patrimonial state, that is a state organized as an extension of the ruler's court, augmented by associated lineages and various kinds of servants. Incipiently, at least, it was a patrimonial bureaucracy in that a variety of appointed civil and military officers served under the king, though such officers were only incipient bureaucrats insofar as they were merely an extension of the personal rule of the king, lacking a strong sense of responsibility to the office itself. Paul Wheatley argues against those who see the Shang polity as feudal insofar as the king appointed local officials in outer regions of the realm and even recognized as subordinates some chieftains beyond the borders. Wheatley holds that these appointments should be seen as "benefices," dependent (in theory at least) on the pleasure of the king, and entailing no legal rights of the local ruler, as true feudalism would.<sup>122</sup>

One of the specific features of Shang society was the emphasis on lineage in general and the royal lineage in particular. Kinship is never unimportant in early states, but the absolutism of royal rule often took precedence over

lineage loyalty so that the importance of kinship relations was markedly reduced. It is quite possible that the preoccupation with lineage in Shang China was confined largely to the ruling class, and the royal lineage in particular, as in Hawai'i. But the Shang emphasis on lineage left a permanent legacy for all later Chinese culture, of which the Confucian emphasis on kin relationships was an expression. Ancestor worship, so central in Shang cult, has continued at the domestic level to this day.

The focus on the Chinese ruler was as strong as in any of the archaic cases, but the formulation of it differed significantly from Ancient Mesopotamia or Egypt. It has not been uncommon to refer to the Shang regime as a theocracy, but that does not mean that the king himself was considered divine, at least not in the sense that such was the case in Egypt or some other archaic societies. Ancestor worship was central in Shang religion, unlike the cases we have considered so far. The worship of ancestors and the understanding of them as indispensable intermediaries with high gods was, however, present in several other early states: the Yoruba of West Africa, and, in slightly varying ways, among the Aztecs, Mayas, and Inkas of the New World.<sup>123</sup> Nowhere, however, was worship of the royal ancestors so central as in Shang China.

References to gods are not missing in the oracle-bone texts, but they are not numerous and their significance is not entirely clear. Most important was Di ("the god" as we may call him, following our usage for ancient Egypt), also rarely Shang Di ("the god above"), whose power over weather, harvest, and war gave him the most extensive dominion of Shang deities. Significantly, however, Di was not worshipped directly, but rather through the royal ancestors as intermediaries. The actual nature of Di, and particularly the question of whether Di was a kind of primordial ancestor, is in dispute, but need not detain us. It is reasonably clear that the Shang did not view Di as a lineal ancestor—with their powerful concern for the royal lineage, if they had believed they were descendants of Di they would almost surely have said so. But with his lack of particular characteristics (at least as far as we know, not having myths from the Shang period), and the fact that his worship was indirect, he was perhaps similar to some of the otiose high gods known from other cultures. Because Di could intervene in battle for or against the Shang, he was surely not entirely otiose, and his Western Zhou successor, Tian (Heaven), was considerably more active. In addition to Di there were a number of nature deities, river and mountain gods, for example, a sun god who may have been conceived as multiple (ten suns being a calen-

dric unit), and various local deities as well. Though such deities did receive occasional sacrifice, their worship was not the main focus of the Shang cult as we know it from the oracle-bone inscriptions.

At the center of the Shang cult was the worship of the Shang royal ancestors, who were considered to be powerful deities in their own right and also to have the capacity to intercede with Di in matters of great importance. Ancestors of other lineages were probably also conceived as continuing to intervene in earthly life, but their jurisdictions would have been limited to their descendants. Only the royal ancestors were seen as intervening in matters of concern to the realm as a whole and to the king in particular (for example, in matters of his health or whether his wife or consort would give birth to a son or daughter). But if the gods, including Di, were viewed largely impersonally, having little in the way of individual personality, such was also the case with the ancestors. They were classified by distance from the present (the more distant, the more powerful), and by whether they were direct ancestors (more important) or collaterals, that is, kings succeeded by nephews rather than by sons (less important), and, of course by whether they were male (more important) or female (less important—and lineal mothers of kings were the only females mentioned). On the whole the cult was directed not to the parental generation, but began with the grandparental generation.

Wu Ding is the rare case of a ruler whose conquests made him stand out from the ranks of the largely anonymous ancestors, and receive worship immediately after his death. Wu Ding's own divination texts show a wide variety of recipients being asked many kinds of questions, but under his son, Zu Jia (ca. 1177–1158 BCE), a process of increasing routinization set in, in which the cult was organized in terms of a calendrical cycle, with each ancestor assigned to a particular day, and asked a limited number of questions.<sup>124</sup> Questions concerned the weather, the success of the harvest, the outcome of military expeditions, or simply will there be any calamity during the next period of time. The answers were determined by reading the cracks that appeared after the scapulas or turtle shells had been subjected to heat, and then the charges and replies were inscribed.

If the existing king was not divine, he was proleptically so, for he would, after his death, become an ancestor whose power would only increase with each successive generation. As Wheatley puts it, “the ruling monarch was a member of a lineage which coexisted ontologically on earth and in the heavens above, and he was a pivotal figure in all ritual procedures.”<sup>125</sup> Divination

and sacrifice, even if carried out by others, were always performed in the name of the king, who alone was the intermediary between the earthly and the divine realms. It is in this connection that the Shang king referred to himself as “I, the one man” (*yu yi ren*). But if the ancestors were impersonal, so, in a sense, was the king. Keightley quotes David Schaberg as saying of Shang and Zhou kings, “There was no provision in Chinese ritual language for naming a living king; until he received a posthumous title, the word for him [*wang*] was the word for all kings, and he was indistinguishable, at least on the level of language and ideals, from that generalized role.”<sup>126</sup> It was, then, the ritual role of the king that was decisive, not his personality. And however mysterious the high god Di may be to us, there was a unique relation between the god and the king. As Keightley tells us, “What distinguished both Di and the king was that, at least in the limited world of the divination inscriptions, Di focused his attention on no other living individual and his activities. Welcome or unwelcome though this attention may have been, it cannot have failed to enhance the king’s status in the religious and political hierarchy.”<sup>127</sup>

But if the king’s authority was enhanced by his special role with respect to Di and the ancestors, Keightley also points out that the king’s power was limited by “a network of spiritual obligations and attentions,” such that “the king was no despot, free to act as he pleased.” Indeed, the pressures on the king and the king alone that led to his use of the phrase “I, the one man,” might well, Keightley suggests, have meant, “I, the lone man.”<sup>128</sup> Keightley characterizes the consequences of the king’s embeddedness in a ritual-social order as follows: “The wishes of these various Powers—particularly those of the ancestors, whose jurisdictions appear to have been arranged more systematically and comprehensibly than those of Di or the Nature Powers—may have served as a kind of unwritten constitutionalism, just as later Confucian traditions may have limited the options available to an Emperor.”<sup>129</sup>

If the Shang king was no despot, neither was he in any sense a democrat. As with other archaic societies, the distinction between ruler and ruled was stark. Keightley points out that although in the Chinese Neolithic there is little evidence of human sacrifice, in the Shang dynasty, “the burial of mutilated and beheaded human victims, and the ritual slaughter of dozens of captives, became a regular part of man’s spiritual, and political, repertoire.”<sup>130</sup> Some Shang elite tombs were of enormous size and had complex structures as well as splendid furnishings,<sup>131</sup> all of which had to be created by dependent

labor of some sort. On the basis of our scanty evidence we do not know if there was a sense of obligation on the part of the king for the welfare of the common people, such as we will encounter in the Zhou dynasty, but the divination concerns as expressed in the oracle bones have more to do with the welfare of the ruling elite than that of society as a whole.

The Shang dynasty presided over a realm of significant if shifting size in the Yellow River Valley of North Central China in the last centuries of the Second Millennium BCE. New regions for agriculture were opened up and population grew; cities were built and the arts cultivated, particularly the art of bronze casting, a most sophisticated technology. Our chief visual knowledge of Shang culture comes from bronze vessels of exquisite beauty that have survived in significant number. Whether this rich but imperfectly known civilization saw the beginning of the moral concerns that would be central to all subsequent Chinese culture, we cannot presently say.

At least in later memory, the Zhou conquest of the Shang began with what we can only call a moral explosion whose echoes can still be heard. According to records of uncertain date, the early Zhou kings, Wen (r. 1099–1050 BCE) and Wu (r. 1049/45–1043 BCE), justified their effort to replace the Shang with a new doctrine, expounded with particular clarity by King Wu's brother, the Duke of Zhou (Zhou Gong), the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven (*Tian ming*). As we have seen, the high god Di did, on occasion, predict success for the enemies of the Shang king, but there is no indication that such action was considered punishment for the king's faults. The Zhou continued on occasion to use the term Di or Shang Di (Shang here means "above," and is not the same graph as the one for the Shang dynasty) for the high god, but much more frequently referred to him as *Tian* (Heaven), a term not used in that sense in the Shang inscriptions.<sup>132</sup> The Zhou viewed Heaven as intensely concerned with the moral quality of human beings, kings in particular.

King Wen, who was the first Zhou ruler to take the title king (*wang*) even though he was from the Shang point of view a rebel, was viewed in the Zhou tradition as a model of ethical behavior (*wen* means, roughly, "culture"), whereas the last Shang king was viewed as morally depraved. King Wu (*wu* means, roughly, "military") completed the conquest of the Shang, a conquest consolidated by his son, King Cheng, for whom, due to his youth, King Wu's brother, the Duke of Zhou, acted as regent in the first seven years of his reign. King Wu and the Duke of Zhou were also viewed by later generations as paragons of morality. A Heaven deeply concerned with human morality

could and did transfer the Mandate (*ming*) from one dynasty to another if the ruler of the previous dynasty became too degenerate. The Zhou doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven was extended back before the Shang dynasty, which, the Zhou ideologists claimed, had itself been given the Mandate of Heaven due to the moral faults of the last rulers of the Xia dynasty, about which we know nothing from Shang inscriptions themselves. Although effective in legitimating the newly installed Zhou dynasty, the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven proved a two-edged sword, as it could be turned against the Zhou themselves, and against every succeeding ruling house throughout Chinese history. One of the Major Odes of the *Shi* or *Book of Songs* begins with the following stanza:

Mighty is God on High,  
 Ruler of His people below;  
 Swift and terrible is God on high,  
 His charge has many statutes.  
 Heaven gives birth to the multitudes of the people,  
 But its charge cannot be counted upon.  
 To begin well is common;  
 To end well is rare indeed.<sup>133</sup>

The ode continues with a series of invectives attributed to King Wen describing the crimes of the Shang, and ending by invoking the deserved end of the preceding Xia dynasty as well, yet the Ode affirms the conditional nature of royal rule, which could not help but apply to the Zhou themselves.

In most respects, the transition from Shang to Zhou shows a great deal of continuity. The early Zhou kings conquered a larger area than that over which the Shang had ruled, but lacked the capacity to rule most of it directly. Members of the royal lineage, brothers and nephews of kings, for example, were given subject domains. In some instances existing local rulers were recognized as subject to the Zhou court; in particular the descendants of the Shang ruling house were established in what became the state of Song. This arrangement has frequently been referred to as feudalism, though Wheatley has the same reservations about this term as in the case of the Shang, and prefers to consider the Zhou regime as patrimonial, with benefices established for royal relatives. Feudalism, argues Wheatley, drawing from European history, requires some kind of contract between lord and vassal, missing in Zhou as in Shang.<sup>134</sup>

Herrlee Creel, however, argues for the usefulness of the term “feudalism,” properly understood, for the Zhou period. He offers his own, somewhat minimalist, definition: “Feudalism is a system of government in which a ruler personally delegates limited sovereignty over portions of his territory to vassals.”<sup>135</sup> But, in fact, his analysis is very close to that of Wheatley. According to Creel, the Zhou claimed they were creating a centralized administration, that their “vassals” were not autonomous, but subject to the royal will, and that the Zhou court taxed, administered justice, and in theory, though not often in practice, removed vassals from their domains, especially in the early years when there were strong monarchs.<sup>136</sup> This is not far from what Wheatley means by a patrimonial regime that gives benefices to subordinates. What Creel wants to stress is that the later idealization of the early Zhou kings was not entirely misplaced. As he says, “it was no part of the intention of the early kings to establish a realm of which they were not in full control. They had not conquered ‘all under heaven’ merely for the sake of giving it away.”<sup>137</sup> Their failure to establish, except relatively briefly, a centralized regime was due to the lack of techniques of control to do so, not, at least in the eyes of later thinkers, to lack of intention. It was their putative intention that lived on, though it would not be again realized until 221 BCE.

Though the beginnings of patrimonial bureaucracy were present in the Zhou royal court, as they had been in the Shang court, as well as in the newly established subject states, neither Shang nor Zhou were effectively centralized: the process of decentralization of the Zhou kingdom that became complete in the Warring States period (481–221 BCE) had set in early on. For convenience, the Western Zhou period is said to end with the fall of the Western Zhou capital in 771 BCE and the reduction of the Zhou court to political impotence thereafter. The transition from archaic to axial, which is the primary concern of this book, was taking place between the end of Western Zhou and the establishment of the centralized empire by the Qin in 221 BCE. We need not draw any sharp line in this period of 550 years, but, as we shall see in a later chapter, it may be convenient to take the life of Confucius (551–479 BCE) as a turning point.<sup>138</sup>

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to date the texts that purport to come from the period between the Zhou conquest and the lifetime of Confucius, so we can only conjecturally trace the development of thought in that period. Two of the most important bodies of texts that Confucius himself referred to with respect, and so at least parts of which must precede him, are the *Book of Documents* (sometimes referred to as the *Shujing*—I will refer to

this as the *Shu*) and the *Book of Songs* (sometimes referred to as the *Shijing*—I will refer to this as the *Shi*). The *Shu* purports to contain speeches and dialogues from the early years of the Zhou conquest, some of which, if they may not be the actual words of the alleged speakers, are nonetheless almost certainly of Western Zhou date and even early in that period.<sup>139</sup> It is in the “Da gao” (“Great proclamation”) chapter, attributed to King Cheng, that we find the first mention of the Mandate of Heaven, and in the “Shao gao” (“Proclamation of Shao Gong”) that we first find reference to the emperor as Son of Heaven (*Tianzi*). The latter passage is worth quoting:

August Heaven, the Lord on High, has changed his eldest son and this great state Yin’s [Yin was the term the Zhou sometimes used to refer to the Shang] mandate. It is the king who has received the mandate.<sup>140</sup>

In this passage we can see how the Zhou absorbed the Shang high god Di into their primary reference to Heaven, and how the emperor is not only the son, but the “eldest son,” of Heaven.

Shaughnessy holds that two of these early chapters of the *Shu* contain an argument on the nature of government between Zhou Gong (The Duke of Zhou) and his half-brother Shao Gong, also referred to as the Grand Protector Shi. Zhou Gong, perhaps protecting himself from the accusation of usurping power during his regency for young King Cheng, argues in the “Jun Shi” (“Lord Shi,” that is, Shao Gong, in this case the addressee of Zhou Gong’s speech) that the Mandate of Heaven is given to the Zhou people in general and that virtuous kings (he cites Shang kings as well as Kings Wen and Wu as precedents) have always relied on meritorious ministers for successful rule. Shao Gong, replying in the “Shao gao,” argues, as noted above, that the mandate was given to the king and that he alone can rule. As Shaughnessy notes, this argument would continue throughout Chinese history, with Confucius and his followers taking the part of Zhou Gong, and royal absolutists the part of Shao Gong.<sup>141</sup>

What is of interest here is how far these early chapters of the *Shu* anticipate later, perhaps axial, developments. There is no doubt, though the argument must await a later chapter, that for Confucius the idea of Heaven and its Mandate did have axial implications. I think it can be argued, however, that in the early days of the Western Zhou the axial implications were incipient at best. What was at stake was an intra-elite argument about the legitimacy of one royal lineage, that of the Zhou, replacing another royal lineage, that of the Shang, at the highest level of authority, in the face of centuries of

predominance of the Shang house. All the actors in this drama were members of royal families and the archaic idea that it is only the ruler who can mediate between the high god and the people was not in question. Even the dispute between Zhou Gong and Shao Gong in its original form was only about the relative power of members of the ruling family. It would be hundreds of years later, with Confucius and his successors, that early Zhou terminology would be used to formulate a much more generalized conception of the relation between the divine and the human. Cho-yun Hsu and Katheryn M. Linduff have put it well when they write, “The Zhou contribution provided the cornerstone for their own political legitimacy, but it opened the course for the long Chinese tradition of humanism and rationalism and may be thought of as the first step toward a Jaspersian breakthrough.”<sup>142</sup>

Even if the early Zhou proclamation of the idea of the Mandate of Heaven was only a first step, it had implications for the understanding of the relation of ruler and people as well as ruler and Heaven significantly different from anything we know about the Shang. In the “Jun Shi” Zhou Gong is supposed to have said: “If our sons and grandsons cannot be respectful above and below [toward Heaven and the people], and destroy the glory that our ancestors have brought to our house—if they do not remember that Heaven’s Mandate is not easy to keep, and that Heaven is not to be relied upon, they will overturn the Mandate.”<sup>143</sup> What respecting the people entails can be discerned from a number of chapters in the *Shu*. For example, in the “Zi Cai” King Wu admonishes one of his sons to “attend even to the helpless and solitary, attend even to pregnant women . . . from of old the kings have done so.”<sup>144</sup> If I may paraphrase Bernhard Karlgren’s rather awkward translation of this chapter, the son is told to set an example for the people, to care about and encourage them, to avoid capital punishment, and, indeed, as far as possible to avoid punishments altogether.<sup>145</sup> We may doubt how far such injunctions were carried out, or how the kings actually attended to pregnant women, but it is the ideal that is of interest here.

The poems in the *Shi* are no easier to date than the so-called authentic chapters of the *Shu*, but many of them give a vivid picture of how rulers ought to act as well as how they in fact do act. For example:

Happiness to our lord  
That is the father and mother of his people.  
Happiness to our lord!  
May his fair fame be forever.<sup>146</sup>

But not all rulers were judged so worthy. Another song warns:

Oh, our people are exhausted,  
 Would they have but a little respite!  
 Treat the middle kingdom with kindness,  
 Then peace will reign in all the lands.<sup>147</sup>

Or the judgment may go beyond warning:

Big rat, big rat,  
 Do not gobble our millet!  
 Three years we have slaved for you,  
 Yet you take no notice of us.  
 At last we are going to leave you  
 And go to that happy land;  
 Happy land, happy land,  
 Here we shall have our place.<sup>148</sup>

In early China, people were more valuable than land, so that oppressed peasants could, as it were, “vote with their feet.” Though they may have sought a “happy land,” the most they were likely to find was a somewhat more benevolent lord.

If the *Shi* gives us a remarkably frank picture of Zhou political life (at moments, as in the “Big Rat” poem, rivaling David Malo’s picture of early Hawai‘i), it also is our best source for pre-Confucian piety. One of the “Zhou Hymns,” generally believed to be the oldest texts in the collection, gives an idea of the centrality of Heaven in Zhou belief:

Reverence, reverence!  
 By Heaven all is seen;  
 Its charge is not easy to hold.  
 Do not say it is high, high above,  
 Going up and down about its own business.  
 Day in, day out it watches us here.  
 I, a little child,  
 Am not wise or reverent.  
 But as days pass, months go by,  
 I learn from those that have bright splendor.  
 O Radiance, O Light,

Help these my strivings;  
Show me how to manifest the ways of power.<sup>149</sup>

The phrase “I, a little child” indicates that it is the king speaking; the king sometimes even refers to himself as an orphan. Such usages are probably related to the phrase “I, the one man,” which the Zhou as well as the Shang continued to use.

What is significant in this hymn is the idea that the king is the humble servant of Heaven. No Shang inscription implies any such relation of the Shang king to Di. Indeed Di almost completely drops out of late Shang inscriptions, which are addressed almost exclusively to ancestors (though under Wu Ding ancestors were sometimes viewed as intercessors with Di). References to ancestors are not missing in the *Shi*, but they are rare, particularly in comparison to the many references to Heaven. That ancestors were still viewed as potentially influencing their descendants is indicated by the opening verse of a Minor Ode:

The fourth month was summer weather;  
The sixth month, blistering heat.  
Have our ancestors no compassion  
That they can bear to see us suffer?<sup>150</sup>

Another Ode describes an ancestral sacrifice in great detail, and observes:

Every custom and rite is observed,  
Every smile, every word is in place.  
The spirits and Protectors will surely come  
And requite us with great blessings  
Countless years of life as our reward.<sup>151</sup>

Oracle bones are very different sorts of texts from the hymns, odes and airs of the *Shi*, so we are, in a sense, comparing apples and oranges. For all we know there were Shang hymns to Di that have not survived. But from the existing evidence, it does appear that Zhou piety from fairly early on, though it continued to observe ancestor worship, developed significantly new preoccupations with Heaven and the human-divine interaction. We have, for example, in an Ode in the *Book of Songs*, an accusation of Heaven that reminds us of the Egyptian accusation of the god:

Broad and vast is mighty Heaven,  
 Yet it keeps its grace from us,  
 But rather brings death and famine,  
 War and destruction to all the states.  
 Foreboding Heaven is a cruel affliction,  
 It does not ponder, does not plan.  
 It pays no attention to the guilty,  
 Who have committed their crimes.  
 But the ones who are innocent,  
 These, without exception, suffer.<sup>152</sup>

But here, too, Heaven has its defenders:

The hardships of the folk here below  
 Are not brought on by Heaven;  
 No, nice to meet, then a stab in the back.  
 Violence comes from the acts of man.<sup>153</sup>

What we have here is at least incipient theological argument. When Confucius said he was “a transmitter, not a creator” (*Analects* 7/1), he surely had a point, because he was indeed trying to conserve and interpret the traditions of the “three dynasties” (Xia, Shang and Zhou), but particularly that of Zhou:

The Master said, Zhou could survey the two preceding dynasties. How great a wealth of culture! And we follow upon Zhou.<sup>154</sup>

As I have noted, in no other case does the axial follow the archaic with such continuity.<sup>155</sup>

I have referred to the despotic founders of early states, who came to power through blood and terror as they almost always did, as upstarts of the kind that tribal society usually managed to repress. As opposed to Girard’s theory, it would seem that the first killing among culturally organized humans was not the killing of a scapegoat, but the killing of an upstart who genuinely threatened to revive the despotism of the old primate alpha male. We have argued that hunter-gatherer egalitarianism is not the abandonment of domi-

nance, but a new form of it, the dominance of all against each. Effective dominance, however, brings on not only submission but resentment, and a desire to resist dominance. That is why upstarts wishing to re-create despotism can be found in every society. We do not need to go to sociobiology for an understanding of the ubiquity of upstarts: modern philosophy has had more than a little to say about this human proclivity. Hobbes spoke of the “desire to be foremost,” Hegel of the fundamental human dialectic of “master and slave,” Nietzsche of the “will to power.”

But though upstarts are found in all societies, successful upstarts appear only in complex societies. Two aspects of complex society help to make this possible. An increasing agricultural surplus allows larger groups to form—groups beyond the face-to-face bands of hunter-gatherers—and the age-old techniques of dealing with upstarts are harder to apply in such large societies. But the opening wedge for the successful upstart is most often militarization. Large, prosperous societies are almost always in danger from the have-nots at their fringe, or from other prosperous groups who would like to become even more prosperous. In a situation of endemic warfare, the successful warrior emanates a sense of mana or charisma, and can use it to establish a following. Thus in Polynesia, the *toa* (warrior) could challenge the *ariki* (priest/chief). “Heroic ages” in many parts of the world have seen the rise of such warrior chiefs. The brave warrior alone could not challenge the old egalitarian consensus. As Hobbes pointed out, the strongest man can be overcome by a coalition of others, even by someone weak when the strong man is asleep. It is when the outstanding warrior can mobilize a band of followers that he can challenge the old egalitarianism and, as a successful upstart, free the disposition to dominate from the controls previously placed on it. The warrior band, however, can turn out to be a self-defeating project if all it does is stimulate the creation of other warrior bands leading to an ever escalating increase in violence (a real possibility—the “nightmare of history” of which James Joyce spoke).<sup>156</sup>

Chiefdoms are notoriously ephemeral, but early states are also quite fragile. It is only when a successful warrior can fashion a new form of authority, of legitimate hierarchy, that he can break the cycle of violence and hope for lasting rule, perhaps one to be inherited by his offspring. But this involves a new relation between gods and humans, a new way of organizing society, one that finds a significant place for the disposition to nurture as well as the disposition to dominate. This is the task that archaic religions and societies have to complete if they are to be even briefly successful. In doing so they

elaborate a vast hierarchical conception of the cosmos in which the divine, the natural, and the human are integrated.

Even societies in which the old hunter-gatherer egalitarianism was maintained by an informal system of increasingly severe sanctions against incipient upstarts, required a pattern of myth and ritual that would provide meaning and solidarity “above the fray,” so to speak, of everyday life. That was the role of the Dreaming in Australia and the other tribal groups we considered had similar practices and conceptions. We then found that in societies where agriculture was increasingly important and population was growing, ranked lineages could provide, as we said, “a superordinate reference point capable of moderating and mediating the tensions of daily life.” The Kalapalo and the Tikopia had such ranked lineages, even though they were basically egalitarian.

There are clear continuities between tribal and archaic religions: in the moments of collective effervescence in the great festivals of archaic society, the solidarity of the social whole was reaffirmed. But most of the time in archaic societies hierarchy, not collective solidarity, provided the organizing principle. As Lewis Mumford writes:

At this point, human effort moves from the limited horizontal plane of the village and the family to the vertical plane of a whole society. The new community formed a hierarchic structure, a social pyramid, which from base to pinnacle included many families, many villages, many occupations, often many regional habitats, and not least, many gods. This political structure was the basic invention of the new age: without it, neither its monuments nor its cities could have been built, nor, one must add, would their premature destruction have so persistently taken place.<sup>157</sup>

Archaic societies were much larger than preceding societies had ever been. If they were to maintain any stability at all they had to find forms of solidarity that were based on more than tribal festivity on the one hand or warrior force on the other. The solution that every archaic society of which we have adequate knowledge found was a new conception of kingship and divinity that moved beyond old ideas of ranked lineages and powerful beings. In Hawai‘i as in the societies we have examined in this chapter, kings acted like gods and gods acted like kings. The cosmos, as Jacobsen said, was seen as a state, and the state as an essential element in the cosmos.<sup>158</sup>

But perhaps we need to move back a step. Once upon a time there was no state and no cosmos seen as a state. How did we get from a society, even a ranked society, in which chiefs and people were still linked by strong kinship ties, to a society in which a genuine secondary formation, a state, no longer linked to the common people by kinship, could appear? It would seem that that shift from tribal to archaic society only became possible when one man focused so much attention on himself that he could claim that he and he alone was not only capable of rule, but capable of maintaining society's relationship to the gods—or, before long—to “the god.” When the Shang king spoke of himself as “I, the one man,” he expressed a profound truth about archaic kingship. The new secondary formation, the state, was to express his will alone, and it was he alone who stood before the god(s), maintaining the right ritual relationship to the divine. It is as though the king, himself divine or semidivine, was the necessary fulcrum to move society to a new level of social organization. Or, to change the metaphor, it is as though the archaic king unleashed an explosion of atomic energy, capable of moving what had for millennia not been willing to move. But, once achieved, the archaic state had quickly to weave a web of institutions and structures of power, but also of rituals and conceptions of the cosmos, which would make it seem both natural and inevitable.

In archaic society traditional social structures and social practices were grounded in the divinely instituted cosmic order, and there was little tension between religious demand and social conformity. Indeed, social conformity was at every point reinforced with religious sanction (taboo). Nevertheless the very notion of powerful kings and well-characterized gods acting toward men with a certain freedom introduced an element of openness that was less apparent at the tribal level.<sup>159</sup> Once kings claim to be protectors of the common people questions can be raised when the common people suffer, and the basis of political legitimacy is open to argument. Once gods have replaced powerful beings as the focus of ritual and myth, dramatic symbolic reformulations are at least conceivable. “In all polytheism there is a latent monotheism, which can be activated at any time,” Eric Voegelin goes so far as to say, “if the pressure of a historical situation meets with a sensitive and active mind.”<sup>160</sup>

In the section on ancient Mesopotamia, we argued that archaic societies, even when they had writing, probably did not undergo a “literacy revolution.” Rather, orality remained the dominant mode of communication during archaic times and long after. Still, we need to consider whether the existence of writing did not allow at least the beginnings of more reflective and

systematic thought than could have been carried on by oral tradition alone. Although riddles, aphorisms, and maxims are standard features of oral tradition, the more developed arguments that we find in the so-called wisdom literature of the ancient Near East, or in some of the writings that survive from Western Zhou, did perhaps depend, at least in part, on writing. Narrative is central to oral tradition, but written narratives could be ordered and revised to give them a weight they might not have had in oral recitation. Hymns could become the vehicles of mythospeculation. Whatever aids to reflective thought that the technology of writing supplied were limited to the scribal class. Early literacy has been called craft literacy, because it was a specialized craft that only a few could master. Those few, however, may have been essential for the self-understanding of archaic society and for what was to come.

Voegelin was reminding us that even in massively conformist archaic society, where, as Jacobsen puts it for Mesopotamia, the “prime virtue” was obedience,<sup>161</sup> there were “sensitive and active” minds—prophets, priests, scribes—who, even within the confines of the cosmos as a state, could think new thoughts. The reality of archaic civilization was centralization of political power, class stratification, the magnification of military power, the economic exploitation of the weak, and the universal introduction of some form of forced labor for both productive and military purposes.<sup>162</sup> As against these undeniable realities we must also cite the major achievements of archaic society: the maintenance of peace within the realm, more productive agriculture, the opening up of markets for long-range trade, and significant achievements in architecture, art, and literature. But equally important was, with the help of a literate elite, a new effort to give political power a moral meaning. The archaic king was almost always depicted as a warrior, as a defender of the realm against barbarians on the frontiers and rebels within; as such he embodied a powerful element of dominance. But he was also seen, and probably increasingly as archaic societies matured, as the defender of justice, in Mesopotamia and Egypt as the good shepherd, in Western Zhou as father and mother of his people. Gods as well as kings were increasingly thought of not only as dominant but also as nurturant. The very appeal to ethical standards of legitimacy for both gods and kings, however, opened new possibilities for political and theological reflection. In the axial age a new kind of upstart, the moral upstart who relies on speech, not force, would appear, foreshadowed as we have seen, by voices already raised in archaic societies.