E. H.

GOMBRICH

A LITTLE HISTORY of THE WORLD

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TRANSLATED BY CAROLINE MUSTILL

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

Published in German as *Eine kurze Weltgeschichte für junge Leser* by Ernst H. Gombrich
Originally published under the title *Weltgeschichte von der Urzeit bis zur Gegenwart* by Steyrermühl-Verlag, Vienna in 1936

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U.S. Office: sales.press@yale.edu www.yalebooks.com
Europe Office: sales @yaleup.co.uk www.yaleup.co.uk

Set in Minion by Northern Phototypesetting Co. Ltd, Bolton
Printed in Great Britain by Cambridge University Press

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gombrich, E. H. (Ernst Hans), 1909–
[Kurze Weltgeschichte für Junge Leser. English]
A little history of the world/Ernst Gombrich.
p. cm.
ISBN 0–300–10883–4 (cl.: alk. paper)
1. World history—Juvenile literature. I. Title.
D23.G64 2005
909—dc22

2005011802

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The publishers would like to thank the Estate of E. H. Gombrich for permission to reproduce photographs from the family albums, taken by Ilse Gombrich.

Für Ilse

Wie Du stets Dir's angehört
Also stets Dir's angehört

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Preface

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

c. 1935.

My grandfather, Ernst Gombrich, is best known as an art historian. Besides many important academic publications, his popular introduction to art history, *The Story of Art*, has made him known to millions of readers around the world. But had it not been for *A Little History of the World*, *The Story of Art* would never have been written.

To understand how it happened – and why this, his very first book, has never appeared in English until now despite being available in eighteen other languages – we need to start in Vienna in 1935, when my grandfather was still a young man.

After Ernst Gombrich had finished his studies at the University of Vienna, he was unemployed and, in those difficult times, without prospect of a job. A young publisher with whom he was acquainted asked him to take a look at a particular English history book for children, with a view to translating it into German. It was intended for a new series called *Wissenschaft für Kinder* ('Knowledge for Children') and had been sent by a mutual friend who was studying medicine in London.

My grandfather was not impressed by what he read: so little so that he told the publisher – Walter Neurath who later founded the publishing house Thames & Hudson in England – that it was

probably not worth translating. 'I think I could write a better one myself,' he said. To which Neurath responded that he was welcome to submit a chapter.

It so happened that, in the final stages of writing his doctoral thesis, my grandfather had been corresponding with a little girl who was the daughter of some friends. She wanted to know what was keeping him so busy, and he enjoyed trying to explain his subject to her in ways she would understand. He was also, he said later, feeling a little impatient with academic writing, having waded through so much of it in the course of his studies, and was convinced that it should be perfectly possible to explain most things to an intelligent child without jargon or pompous language. So he wrote a lively chapter on the age of chivalry and submitted it to Neurath – who was more than happy with it. 'But,' he said, 'in order to meet the schedule that was intended for the translation, I will need a finished manuscript in six weeks' time.'

My grandfather wasn't sure that it could be done, but he liked the challenge and agreed to try. He plotted out the book at speed, selecting episodes for inclusion by asking himself simply which events of the past had touched most lives and were best remembered. He then set out to write a chapter a day. In the morning, he would read up on the day's topic from what books were available in his parents' house – including a big encyclopaedia. In the afternoon, he would go to the library to seek out, wherever possible, some texts belonging to the periods he was writing about, to give authenticity to his account. Evenings were for writing. The only exceptions were Sundays – but to explain about these, I must first introduce my grandmother.

Ilse Heller, as my grandmother was then called, had come to Vienna from Bohemia about five years earlier to pursue her piano studies. She was soon taken on as a pupil by Leonie Gombrich, after whom I am named. Leonie introduced Ilse to Ernst, and encouraged my grandfather to show her pupil some of the galleries and architectural splendours of Vienna. By 1935 their weekend outings together were well established – and in fact, they married the following year. And one Sunday, as my grandmother

remembers it, they were walking in the Wienerwald and had stopped for a break – 'Perhaps in a sunny clearing,' she says, 'sitting on the grass or on a fallen tree . . .' – when my grandfather pulled a sheaf of papers from inside his jacket and said, 'Do you mind if I read you something?'

'Well, it was better that he read it,' says my grandmother now. 'Even then, you know, Ernst's handwriting was very difficult.'

That something, of course, was the *Little History*. Evidently she liked it, and the readings continued for the next six weeks until the book was done – for he delivered it to Neurath on time. If you read it aloud, you will find how beautifully those readings shaped the telling of it; the dedication gives an idea of how he appreciated them. The original illustrations were produced by a former riding instructor, and my grandfather liked to point out that the numerous horses he included in his pictures were more skilfully drawn than the people.

When the book came out in 1936, titled *Eine kurze Weltgeschichte für junge Leser*, it was very well received, reviewers assuming that my grandfather must be an experienced teacher. Within quite a short time, it had been translated into five other languages – but by then, my grandparents were already in England, where they were to remain. In the end, the Nazis stopped publication, not for racial reasons but because they considered the outlook 'too pacifist'.

However, the seed had been planted and, despite his other concerns, my grandfather eventually responded to requests for a sequel, this time focusing on art history. This became *The Story of Art* – not for children because, my grandfather said, 'The history of art is not a topic for children', but for slightly older readers. It has remained in print since 1950 and continues to make new friends in more than thirty nations.

But the first edition of the *Little History*, which preceded its better-known cousin, lay in a drawer in North London. Some time after the war had ended, my grandfather managed to reclaim his copyright, but by then the world in which he had written the book seemed very far away. So nothing happened until, more than thirty

years later, he received an enquiry from a German publisher who, on reading the book, was captivated by its energy and vivid language. A second German edition was published with a new final chapter – and once again, my grandfather was surprised and delighted by the book's success and the many translations that have followed. He took a cheerful interest in tailoring editions for audiences of different nationalities, and was always ready to listen to the suggestions of the various translators. There was one caveat, though. Apart from the *Little History*, my grandfather wrote all his books in English: if there was ever to be an English edition, he was going to translate it himself.

Then, for ten years, and despite repeated approaches, he refused to do so. It wasn't just that he was busy, although that was also true. English history, he said, was all about English kings and queens – would a European perspective mean anything to English-speaking children? It took the events of the 1990s, and Britain's increasing involvement in the European Union – as well as my grandmother's tactful encouragement – to convince him that they might.

And so, at the very end of his long and distinguished life, he embarked on producing a new, English version of the book with which he had started. 'I've been looking at my *Little History*,' he told me with modest surprise, shortly after he began, 'and there's actually a lot in it. You know, I really think it's good!'

Of course, he made corrections. He added new information about prehistoric man. He asked his son – my father – who is an expert on Early Buddhism, to advise on changes to Chapter 10, while his assistant, Caroline Mustill, helped with the sections on Chinese history. It is our great good fortune that Caroline worked with him so closely, for he was still engaged in the task of translating and updating when he died, at the age of ninety-two. With his blessing, she has completed this difficult task meticulously and beautifully. Clifford Harper produced new illustrations, which I know my grandfather would have loved to see. But some changes, of course, could not be made without him: we know that he intended to add chapters about Shakespeare and about the Bill of Rights, and no doubt he would have expanded on, for example, his

very brief treatment of the English Civil War and the birth of parliamentary democracy, which carried less weight for the Viennese graduate who wrote the book than for the British citizen he became. But how he would have explained these things we could not guess, and so the areas he did not revise himself have been left as his thousands of readers in other countries already appreciate them.

Revisions, in any case, are perhaps beside the point. What matters is his obvious sense that the pursuit of history – indeed, all learning – is an enquiry to be enjoyed.

'I want to stress,' he wrote, in his preface to the Turkish edition a few years ago, 'that this book is not, and never was, intended to replace any textbooks of history that may serve a very different purpose at school. I would like my readers to relax, and to follow the story without having to take notes or to memorise names and dates. In fact, I promise that I shall not examine them on what they have read.'

Leonie Gombrich
April 2005

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

With Carl and Leonie, 1972.

The Estate of E. H. Gombrich would like to thank, for information and advice: Patrick Boyde, Henry French, Rhodri Hayward, the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, J. B. Trapp and, in particular, Adrian Lyttelton.

1

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Once Upon a Time

All stories begin with 'Once upon a time'. And that's just what this story is all about: what happened, once upon a time. Once you were so small that, even standing on tiptoes, you could barely reach your mother's hand. Do you remember? Your own history might begin like this: 'Once upon a time there was a small boy' – or a small girl – 'and that small boy was me.' But before that you were a baby in a cradle. You won't remember that, but you know it's true. Your father and mother were also small once, and so was your grandfather, and your grandmother, a much longer time ago, but you know that too. After all, we say: 'They are old.' But they too had grandfathers and grandmothers, and they, too, could say: 'Once upon a time'. And so it goes on, further and further back. Behind every 'Once upon a time' there is always another. Have you ever tried standing between two mirrors? You should. You will see a great long line of shiny mirrors, each one smaller than the one before, stretching away into the distance, getting fainter and fainter, so that you never see the last. But even when you can't see them any more, the mirrors still go on. They are there, and you know it.

And that's how it is with 'Once upon a time'. We can't see where it ends. Grandfather's grandfather's grandfather's grandfather . . . it makes your head spin. But say it again, slowly, and in the end you'll be able to imagine it. Then add one more. That gets us quickly back into the past, and from there into the distant past. But you will never reach the beginning, because behind every beginning there's always another 'Once upon a time'.

It's like a bottomless well. Does all this looking down make you dizzy? It does me. So let's light a scrap of paper, and drop it down into that well. It will fall slowly, deeper and deeper. And as it burns it will light up the sides of the well. Can you see it? It's going down and down. Now it's so far down it's like a tiny star in the dark depths. It's getting smaller and smaller . . . and now it's gone.

Our memory is like that burning scrap of paper. We use it to light up the past. First of all our own, and then we ask old people to tell us what they remember. After that we look for letters written by people who are already dead. And in this way we light our way back. There are buildings that are just for storing old scraps of paper that people once wrote on – they are called archives. In them you can find letters written hundreds of years ago. In an archive, I once found a letter which just said: 'Dear Mummy, Yesterday we ate some lovely truffles, love from William.' William was a little Italian prince who lived four hundred years ago. Truffles are a special sort of mushroom.

But we only catch glimpses, because our light is now falling faster and faster: a thousand years . . . five thousand years . . . ten thousand years. Even in those days there were children who liked good things to eat. But they couldn't yet write letters. Twenty thousand . . . fifty thousand . . . and even then people said, as we do, 'Once upon a time'. Now our memory-light is getting very small . . . and now it's gone. And yet we know that it goes on much further, to a time long, long ago, before there were any people and when our mountains didn't look as they do today. Some of them were bigger, but as the rain poured down it slowly turned them into hills. Others weren't there at all. They grew up gradually, out of the sea, over millions and millions of years.

But even before the mountains there were animals, quite different from those of today. They were huge and looked rather like dragons. And how do we know that? We sometimes find their bones, deep in the ground. When I was a schoolboy in Vienna I used to visit the Natural History Museum, where I loved to gaze at the great skeleton of a creature called a Diplodocus. An odd name, Diplodocus. But an even odder creature. It wouldn't fit into a room at home – or even two, for that matter. It was as tall as a very tall tree, and its tail was half as long as a football pitch. What a tremendous noise it must have made, as it munched its way through the primeval forest!

But we still haven't reached the beginning. It all goes back much further – thousands of millions of years. That's easy enough to say, but stop and think for a moment. Do you know how long one second is? It's as long as counting: one, two, three. And how about a thousand million seconds? That's thirty-two years! Now, try to imagine a thousand million years! At that time there were no large animals, just creatures like snails and worms. And before then there weren't even any plants. The whole earth was a 'formless void'. There was nothing. Not a tree, not a bush, not a blade of grass, not a flower, nothing green. Just barren desert rocks and the sea. An empty sea: no fish, no seashells, not even any seaweed. But if you listen to the waves, what do they say? 'Once upon a time . . .' Once the earth was perhaps no more than a swirling cloud of gas and dust, like those other, far bigger ones we can see today through our telescopes. For billions and trillions of years, without rocks, without water and without life, that swirling cloud of gas and dust made rings around the sun. And before that? Before that, not even the sun, our good old sun, was there. Only weird and amazing giant stars and smaller heavenly bodies, whirling among the gas clouds in an infinite, infinite universe.

'Once upon a time' – but now all this peering down into the past is making me feel dizzy again. Quick! Let's get back to the sun, to earth, to the beautiful sea, to plants and snails and dinosaurs, to our mountains, and, last of all, to human beings. It's a bit like coming home, isn't it? And just so that 'Once upon a time' doesn't

keep dragging us back down into that bottomless well, from now on we'll always shout: 'Stop! *When* did that happen?'

And if we also ask, 'And *how* exactly did that happen?' we will be asking about history. Not just *a* story, but *our* story, the story that we call the history of the world. Shall we begin?

2

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The Greatest Inventors of All Time

Near Heidelberg, in Germany, somebody was once digging a pit when they came across a bone, deep down under the ground. It was a human bone. A lower jaw. But no human beings today have jaws like this one. It was so massive and strong, and had such powerful teeth! Whoever owned it must have been able to bite really hard. And must have lived a long time ago for the bone to be buried so deep.

On another occasion, but still in Germany – in the Neander valley – a human skull was found. And this was also immensely interesting because nobody alive today has a skull like this one either. Instead of a forehead like ours it just had two thick ridges above the eyebrows. Now, if all our thinking goes on behind our foreheads and these people didn't have any foreheads, then perhaps they didn't think as much as we do. Or at any rate, thinking may have been harder for them. So the people who examined the skull concluded that once upon a time there were people who weren't very good at thinking, but who were better at biting than we are today.

But now you're going to say: 'Stop! That's not what we agreed. *When* did these people live, *what* were they like, and *how* did they live?'

Your questions make me blush, as I have to admit that we don't know, precisely. But we will find out one day, and maybe you will want to help. We don't know because these people didn't yet know how to write things down, and memory only takes us a little way back. But we are making new discoveries all the time. Scientists have found that certain materials, such as wood and plants and volcanic rocks, change slowly but regularly over a very long period of time. This means that we can work out when they grew or were formed. And since the discoveries in Germany, people have carried on searching and digging, and have made some startling finds. In Asia and Africa, in particular, more bones have been found, some at least as old as the Heidelberg jaw. These were our ancestors who may have already been using stones as tools more than a hundred and fifty thousand years ago. They were different from the Neanderthal people who appeared about seventy thousand years earlier and inhabited the earth for about two hundred thousand years. And I owe the Neanderthal people an apology, for despite their low foreheads, their brains were no smaller than those of most people today.

'But all these "about"s, with no names and no dates . . . this isn't history!' you say, and you are right. It comes before history. That is why we call it 'prehistory', because we only have a rough idea of when it all happened. But we still know something about the people whom we call prehistoric. At the time when real history begins – and we will come to that in the next chapter – people already had all the things we have today: clothes, houses and tools, ploughs to plough with, grains to make bread with, cows for milking, sheep for shearing, dogs for hunting and for company, bows and arrows for shooting and helmets and shields for protection. Yet with all of these things there must have been a first time. Someone must have made the discovery. Isn't it an amazing thought that, one day, a prehistoric man – or a woman – must have realised that meat from wild animals was easier to chew if it

was first held over a fire and roasted? And that one day someone discovered how to make fire? Do you realise what that actually means? Can you do it? Not with matches, because they didn't exist. But by rubbing two sticks together until they become so hot that in the end they catch fire. Have a go and then you'll see how hard it is!

Tools must have been invented by someone too. The earliest ones were probably just sticks and stones. But soon stones were being shaped and sharpened. We have found lots of these shaped stones in the ground. And because of these stone tools we call this time the Stone Age. But people didn't yet know how to build houses. Not a pleasant thought, since at that time it was often intensely cold – at certain periods far colder than today. Winters were longer and summers shorter. Snow lay deep throughout the year, not only on mountain tops, but down in the valleys as well, and glaciers, which were immense in those days, spread far out into the plains. This is why we say that the Stone Age began before the last Ice Age had ended. Prehistoric people must have suffered dreadfully from the cold, and if they came across a cave where they could shelter from the freezing winds, how happy they must have been! For this reason they are also known as 'cavemen', although they may not have actually lived in caves.

Do you know what else these cavemen invented? Can't you guess? They invented *talking.* I mean having real conversations with each other, using words. Of course animals also make noises – they can cry out when they feel pain and make warning calls when danger threatens, but they don't have names for things as human beings do. And prehistoric people were the first creatures to do so.

They invented something else that was wonderful too: pictures. Many of these can still be seen today, scratched and painted on the walls of caves. No painter alive now could do better. The animals they depict don't exist any more, they were painted so long ago. Elephants with long, thick coats of hair and great, curving tusks – woolly mammoths – and other Ice Age animals. Why do you think these prehistoric people painted animals on the

walls of caves? Just for decoration? That doesn't seem likely, because the caves were so dark. Of course we can't be sure, but we think they may have been trying to make magic, that they believed that painting pictures of animals on the walls would make those animals appear. Rather like when we say 'Talk of the devil!' when someone we've been talking about turns up unexpectedly. After all, these animals were their prey, and without them they would starve. So they may have been trying to invent a magic spell. It would be nice to think that such things worked. But they never have yet.

The Ice Age lasted for an unimaginably long time. Many tens of thousands of years, which was just as well, for otherwise these people would not have had time to invent all these things. But gradually the earth grew warmer and the ice retreated to the high mountains, and people – who by now were much like us – learnt, with the warmth, to plant grasses and then grind the seeds to make a paste which they could bake in the fire, and this was bread.

In the course of time they learnt to build tents and tame animals which until then had roamed freely around. And they followed their herds, as people in Lapland still do. Because forests were dangerous places in those days, home to large numbers of wild animals such as wolves and bears, people in several places (and this is often the case with inventors) had the same excellent idea: they built 'pile dwellings' in the middle of lakes, huts on stilts rammed deep in the mud. By this time they were masters at shaping and polishing their tools and used a different, harder stone to bore holes in their axe-heads for handles. That must have been hard work! Work which could take the whole of the winter. Imagine how often the axe-head must have broken at the last minute, so that they had to start all over again.

The next thing these people discovered was how to make pots out of clay, which they soon learnt to decorate with patterns and fire in ovens, although by this time, in the late Stone Age, they had stopped painting pictures of animals. In the end, perhaps six thousand years ago (that is, 4000 BC), they found a new and more convenient way of making tools: they discovered metals. Not all of them at once, of course. It began with some green stones which

turn into copper when melted in a fire. Copper has a nice shine, and you can use it to make arrowheads and axes, but it is soft and gets blunt more quickly than stone.

But once again, people found an answer. They discovered that if you add just a little of another, very rare, metal, it makes the copper stronger. That metal is tin, and a mixture of tin and copper is called bronze. The age in which people made themselves helmets and swords, axes and cauldrons, and bracelets and necklaces out of bronze is, naturally, known as the Bronze Age.

Now let's take a last look at these people dressed in skins, as they paddle their boats made of hollowed-out tree trunks towards their villages of huts on stilts, bringing grain, or perhaps salt from mines in the mountains. They drink from splendid pottery vessels, and their wives and daughters wear jewellery made of coloured stones, and even gold. Do you think much has changed since then? They were people just like us. Often unkind to one another. Often cruel and deceitful. Sadly, so are we. But even then a mother might sacrifice her life for her child and friends might die for each other. No more but also no less often than people do today. And how could it be otherwise? After all, we're only talking about things that happened between three and ten thousand years ago. There hasn't been enough time for us to change!

So, just once in a while, when we are talking, or eating some bread, using tools or warming ourselves by the fire, we should remember those early people with gratitude, for they were the greatest inventors of all time.

3

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The Land by the Nile

Here – as I promised – History begins. With a *when* and a *where.* It is 3100 BC (that is, 5,100 years ago), when, as we believe, a king named Menes was ruling over Egypt. If you want to know exactly where Egypt is, I suggest you ask a swallow. Every autumn, when it gets cold, swallows fly south. Over the mountains to Italy, and on across a little stretch of sea, and then they're in Africa, in the part that lies nearest to Europe. Egypt is close by.

In Africa it is hot, and for months on end it doesn't rain. In many regions very little grows. These are deserts, as are the lands on either side of Egypt. Egypt also gets very little rain. But here they don't need it, because the Nile flows right through the middle of the country, from one end to the other. Twice a year, when heavy rain filled its sources, the river would swell and burst its banks, flooding the whole land. Then people were forced to take to boats to move among the houses and the palm trees. And when the waters withdrew, the earth was wonderfully drenched and rich with oozing mud. There, under the hot sun, the grain grew as it

did nowhere else. Which is why, from earliest times, the Egyptians worshipped the Nile as if it were God himself. Would you like to hear a hymn they sang to their river, four thousand years ago?

> Glory be to thee, Oh Nile! You rise out of the earth and come to nourish Egypt! You water the plains and have the power to feed all cattle. You quench the thirsty desert, far from any water. You bring forth the barley, You create the wheat. You fill the granaries and storehouses, not forgetting the poor. For You we pluck our harps, for You we sing.

So sang the ancient Egyptians. And they were right. For, thanks to the Nile, their land grew rich and powerful. Mightiest of all was their king. One king ruled over all the Egyptians, and the first to do so was King Menes. Do you remember when that was? It was in 3100 BC. And can you also remember – perhaps from Bible stories – what those kings of Egypt were called? They were called pharaohs. A pharaoh was immensely powerful. He lived in a great stone palace with massive pillars and many courtyards, and his word was law. All the people of Egypt had to toil for him if he so decreed. And sometimes he did.

One such pharaoh was King Cheops, who lived in about 2500 BC. He summoned all his subjects to help construct his tomb. He wanted a building like a mountain, and he got it. You can still see it today. It's the Great Pyramid of Cheops. You may have seen pictures of it, but you still won't be able to imagine how big it is. A cathedral would fit comfortably inside. Clambering up its huge stone blocks is like scaling a mountain peak. And yet it was human beings who piled those gigantic stones on top of each other. They had no machines in those days – rollers and pulleys at most. They had to pull and shove every single block by hand. Just think of it, in the heat of Africa! In this way, it seems, for thirty years, some hundred thousand people toiled for the pharaoh, whenever they weren't working in the fields. And when they grew tired, the king's overseer was sure to drive them on with his hippopotamus-skin whip, as they dragged and heaved those immense loads, all for their king's tomb.

Perhaps you're wondering why the pharaoh should want to build such a gigantic tomb? It was all part of his religion. The Egyptians believed in many gods. Some had ruled over them as kings long ago – or at least, that's what they thought – and among these were Osiris and his consort, Isis. The sun god, Amon, was a special god. The Kingdom of the Dead had its own god, Anubis, and he had a jackal's head. Each pharaoh, they believed, was a son of the sun god, which explains why they feared him so much and obeyed all his commands. In honour of their gods they chiselled majestic stone statues, as tall as a five-storey house, and built temples as big as towns. In front of the temples they set tall pointed stones, cut from a single block of granite. These are called 'obelisks' (a Greek word meaning something like 'little spear'). In some of our own cities you can still see obelisks that people brought back from Egypt. There's one in London by the Thames.

In the Egyptian religion, certain animals were sacred: cats, for example. Other gods were represented in animal form. The creature we know as the Sphinx, which has a human head on a lion's body, was a very powerful god. Its statue near the pyramids is so vast that a whole temple would fit inside. Buried from time to time by the desert sands, the Sphinx has now been guarding the tombs of the pharaohs for more than five thousand years. Who can say how long it will continue to keep watch?

And yet the most important part of the Egyptians' strange religion was their belief that, although a man's soul left his body when he died, for some reason the soul went on needing that body, and would suffer if it crumbled into dust.

So they invented a very ingenious way of preserving the bodies of the dead. They rubbed them with ointments and the juices of certain plants, and bandaged them with long strips of cloth, so that they wouldn't decay. A body preserved in this manner is called a mummy. And today, after thousands of years, these mummies are still intact. A mummy was placed in a coffin made of wood, the wooden coffin in one of stone, and the stone one buried, not in the earth, but in a tomb that was chiselled out of the rock. If you were rich and powerful like King Cheops, 'Son of the Sun',

a whole stone mountain would be made for your tomb. Deep inside, the mummy would be safe – or so they thought! But the mighty king's efforts were in vain: his pyramid is empty.

But the mummies of other kings and those of many ancient Egyptians have been found undisturbed in their tombs. A tomb was intended to be a dwelling for the soul when it returned to visit its body. For this reason they put in food and furniture and clothes, and there are lots of paintings on the walls showing scenes from the life of the departed. His portrait was there too, to make sure that when his soul came on a visit it wouldn't go to the wrong tomb.

Thanks to the great stone statues, and the wonderfully bright and vivid wall paintings, we have a very good idea of what life in ancient Egypt was like. True, these paintings do not show things as we see them. An object or a person that is behind another is generally shown on top, and the figures often look stiff. Bodies are shown from the front and hands and feet from the side, so they look as if they have been ironed flat. But the Egyptians knew what they were doing. Every detail is clear: how they used great nets to catch ducks on the Nile, how they paddled their boats and fished with long spears, how they pumped water into ditches to irrigate the fields, how they drove their cows and goats to pasture, how they threshed grain, made shoes and clothes, blew glass – for they could already do that! – and how they shaped bricks and built houses. And we can also see girls playing catch, or playing music on flutes, and soldiers going off to war, or returning with loot and foreign captives, such as black Africans.

In noblemen's tombs we can see embassies arriving from abroad, laden with tribute, and the king rewarding faithful ministers with decorations. Some pictures show the long-dead noblemen at prayer, their arms raised before the statues of their gods, or holding banquets in their houses, with singers plucking harps, and clowns performing somersaults.

Next to these brightly coloured paintings you often see lots of tiny pictures of all sorts of things, such as owls and little people, flags, flowers, tents, beetles and vases, together with zigzag lines

and spirals, all jumbled up together. Whatever can they be? They aren't pictures, they are hieroglyphs – or 'sacred signs' – the Egyptian form of writing. The Egyptians were immensely proud of their writing – indeed, they were almost in awe of it. And of all professions, that of scribe was the most highly esteemed.

Would you like to know how to write using hieroglyphs? In fact, learning this sort of writing must have been incredibly hard, as it's more like constructing a picture puzzle. If they wanted to write the name of their god, Osiris, they would draw a throne (), which was pronounced 'Oos', and an eye (), which was pronounced 'iri', so that the two together made 'Os-iri'. And to make sure that no one thought they meant 'Throne-eye', they often drew a little flag like this beside it (). Which meant that person was a god. In the same way that Christians used to draw a cross after a name, if they wanted to show that that person was dead.

So now you can write 'Osiris' in hieroglyphs! But think what a job it must have been to decipher all that Egyptian writing when people became interested in hieroglyphs again, two hundred years ago. In fact, they were only able to decipher them because a stone had been found on which the same words were written in three scripts: ancient Greek, hieroglyphs and another Egyptian script. It was still a tremendous puzzle, and great scholars devoted their lives to it. You can see that stone – it's called the Rosetta Stone – in the British Museum in London.

We are now able to read almost everything the Egyptians wrote. Not just on the walls of palaces and temples, but also in books, though the books are no longer very legible. For the ancient Egyptians *did* have books, even that long ago. Of course they weren't made of paper like ours, but from a certain type of reed that grows on the banks of the Nile. The Greek name for these reeds is papyrus, from which our name for paper comes.

They wrote on long strips of this papyrus, which were then rolled up into scrolls. A whole heap of these scrolls has survived. And when we read them we discover just how wise and clever those ancient Egyptians really were. Would you like to hear a saying written more than five thousand years ago? But you must

listen and think about it carefully: 'Wise words are rarer than emeralds, yet they come from the mouths of poor slave girls who turn the millstones.'

Because the Egyptians were so wise and so powerful their empire lasted for a very long time. Longer than any empire the world has ever known: nearly three thousand years. And they took just as much care as they did with their corpses, when they preserved them from rotting away, in preserving all their ancient traditions over the centuries. Their priests made quite sure that no son did anything his father had not done before him. To them, everything old was sacred.

Only rarely in the course of all that time did people turn against this strict conformity. Once was shortly after the reign of King Cheops, about 2100 BC, when the people tried to change everything. They rose up in rebellion against the pharaoh, killed his ministers, and dragged the mummies from their tombs: 'Those who formerly didn't even own sandals now hold treasures, and those who once wore precious robes go about in rags,' the ancient papyrus tells us. 'The land is turning like a potter's wheel.' But it did not last long, and soon everything was as strict as before. If not more so.

On another occasion it was the pharaoh himself who tried to change everything. Akhenaton was a remarkable man who lived around 1370 BC. He had no time for the Egyptian religion, with its many gods and its mysterious rituals. 'There is only one God,' he taught his people, 'and that is the Sun, through whose rays all is created and all sustained. To Him alone you must pray.'

The ancient temples were shut down, and King Akhenaton and his wife moved into a new palace. Since he was utterly opposed to tradition, and in favour of fine new ideas, he also had the walls of his palace painted in an entirely new style. One that was no longer severe, rigid and solemn, but freer and more natural. However, this didn't please the people at all. They wanted everything to look as it had always done for thousands of years. As soon as Akhenaton was dead, they brought back all the old customs and the old style of art. So everything stayed as it had been, for as long as the Egyptian

empire endured. Just as in the days of King Menes, and for nearly three and a half more centuries, people continued to put mummies into tombs, write in hieroglyphs, and pray to the same gods. They even went on worshipping cats as sacred animals. And if you ask me, I think that in this, at least, the ancient Egyptians were right.

4

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Sunday, Monday ...

There are seven days in a week. I don't need to tell you their names because you know them already. But have you any idea where and when it was that the days were each given a name? Or who first had the idea of arranging them into weeks, so that they no longer flew past, nameless and in no order, as they did for people in prehistoric times? It wasn't in Egypt, but in another country which was no less hot, but where, instead of just one river, there were two: the Tigris and the Euphrates. And because the important part of that country lay between two rivers, it was called Mesopotamia, which is Greek for the land 'between the rivers'. Mesopotamia is not in Africa, but in Asia, though still not so very far from our part of the world, in a region called the Middle East, in the country we know as Iraq. The Tigris and the Euphrates join together and then flow out into the Persian Gulf.

Picture a vast plain, crossed by these two rivers. A land of heat and swamp and sudden floods. Here and there tall hills rise out of the plain. But if you dig into them you find that they aren't hills at all. First you come across a lot of bricks and rubble, and when you

dig deeper you meet stout, high walls. For these hills are really ruined towns and great cities laid out with long, straight streets, tall houses, palaces and temples. But unlike Egypt's stone temples and pyramids, they were built with sun-baked bricks which cracked and crumbled over time, and eventually collapsed into great mounds of rubble.

One such mound, standing in the desert, is all that remains of Babylon, once the greatest city on earth, a city swarming with people who came there from every part of the world to trade their wares. Upstream, at the foot of the mountains, sits another. This was Nineveh, the second greatest city in the land. Babylon was the capital of the Babylonians – that's easy enough to remember – Nineveh was that of the Assyrians.

Unlike Egypt, Mesopotamia was rarely ruled by just one king. Nor did any single empire survive long within firm frontiers. Many tribes and many kings held power at different times. The most important of these were the Sumerians, the Babylonians and the Assyrians. For a long time it was thought that the Egyptians were the first people to have everything that goes to make up what we call a culture: towns and tradesmen, noblemen and kings, temples and priests, administrators and artists, writing and technical skills.

Yet we now know that, in some respects, the Sumerians were ahead of the Egyptians. Excavations of rubble mounds on plains near the Persian Gulf have revealed that the people living there had already learnt how to shape bricks from clay and build houses and temples by 3100 BC. Deep inside one of the largest of these mounds were found the ruins of the city of Ur where, so the Bible tells us, Abraham was born. A great number of tombs were also found that appeared to date from the same time as Cheops's Great Pyramid in Egypt. But while the pyramid was empty, these tombs were packed with the most astonishing treasures. Dazzling golden headdresses and gold vessels for sacrifices, gold helmets and gold daggers set with semi-precious stones. Magnificent harps decorated with bulls' heads, and – would you believe it – a game-board, beautifully crafted and patterned like a chessboard. The explorer who found these treasures took many of them to

England, where you can see them in the British Museum. Others are in the University of Pennsylvania and the Museum of Baghdad in Iraq.

They also found round seals and inscribed clay tablets in those tombs. However, the inscriptions were not in hieroglyphs, but in a totally different script that was, if anything, even harder to decipher. This was because pictures had been replaced by neatly incised single strokes ending in a small triangle, or wedge. The script is called *cuneiform*, meaning wedge-shaped. Books made of papyrus were unknown to the Mesopotamians. They inscribed these signs into tablets of soft clay, which they then baked hard in ovens. Huge numbers of these ancient tablets have been found, some recounting long and wonderful stories, such as that of the hero Gilgamesh and his battles with monsters and dragons. On other tablets kings boast of their deeds: the temples they have built for all eternity, and all the nations they have conquered.

There are also tablets on which merchants recorded their business dealings – contracts, receipts and inventories of goods – and thanks to these we know that, even before the Babylonians and Assyrians, the ancient Sumerians were already great traders. Their merchants could calculate with ease, and plainly knew the difference between what was lawful and what was not.

One of the first Babylonian kings to rule over the whole region left a long and important inscription, engraved in stone. It is the oldest law-book in the world, and is known as the Code of Hammurabi. His name may sound as if it comes out of a story-book, but there is nothing fanciful about his laws – they are strict and just. So it is worth remembering when King Hammurabi lived: around 1700 BC, that is some 3,700 years ago.

The Babylonians, and the Assyrians after them, were disciplined and hardworking, but they didn't paint cheerful pictures like the Egyptians. Most of their statues and reliefs show kings out hunting, or inspecting kneeling captives bound in chains, or foreign tribes-people fleeing before the wheels of their chariots, and warriors attacking fortresses. The kings look forbidding, and have long black ringlets and rippling beards. They are also sometimes

shown making sacrifices to Baal, the sun god, or to the moon goddess Ishtar or Astarte.

For both the Babylonians and the Assyrians worshipped the sun and the moon, and also the stars. On clear, warm nights, throughout the year and over centuries, they observed and recorded everything they saw in the skies. And because they were intelligent, they noticed that the stars revolved in a regular way. They soon learnt to recognise those that seemed fixed to the vault of heaven, reappearing each night in the same place. And they saw shapes in the constellations and gave them names, just as we do when we speak of the Great Bear. But the stars which seemed to move over the vault of heaven, now, say, towards the Great Bear, and now towards the Scales, were the ones that interested them most. In those days people thought that the earth was a flat disk, and that the sky was a sort of hollow sphere cupped over the earth, that turned over it once each day. So it must have seemed miraculous to them that, although most of the stars stayed fixed to the heavens, some seemed, as it were, only loosely fastened, and able to move about.

Today we know that these are the stars that are close to us, and that they turn with the earth around the sun. They are called planets. But the ancient Babylonians and Assyrians couldn't know that, and so they thought some strange magic must lie behind it. They gave a name to each wandering star and observed them constantly, convinced that they were powerful beings whose positions influenced the destinies of men, and that by studying them they would be able to predict the future. This belief in the stars has a Greek name: astrology.

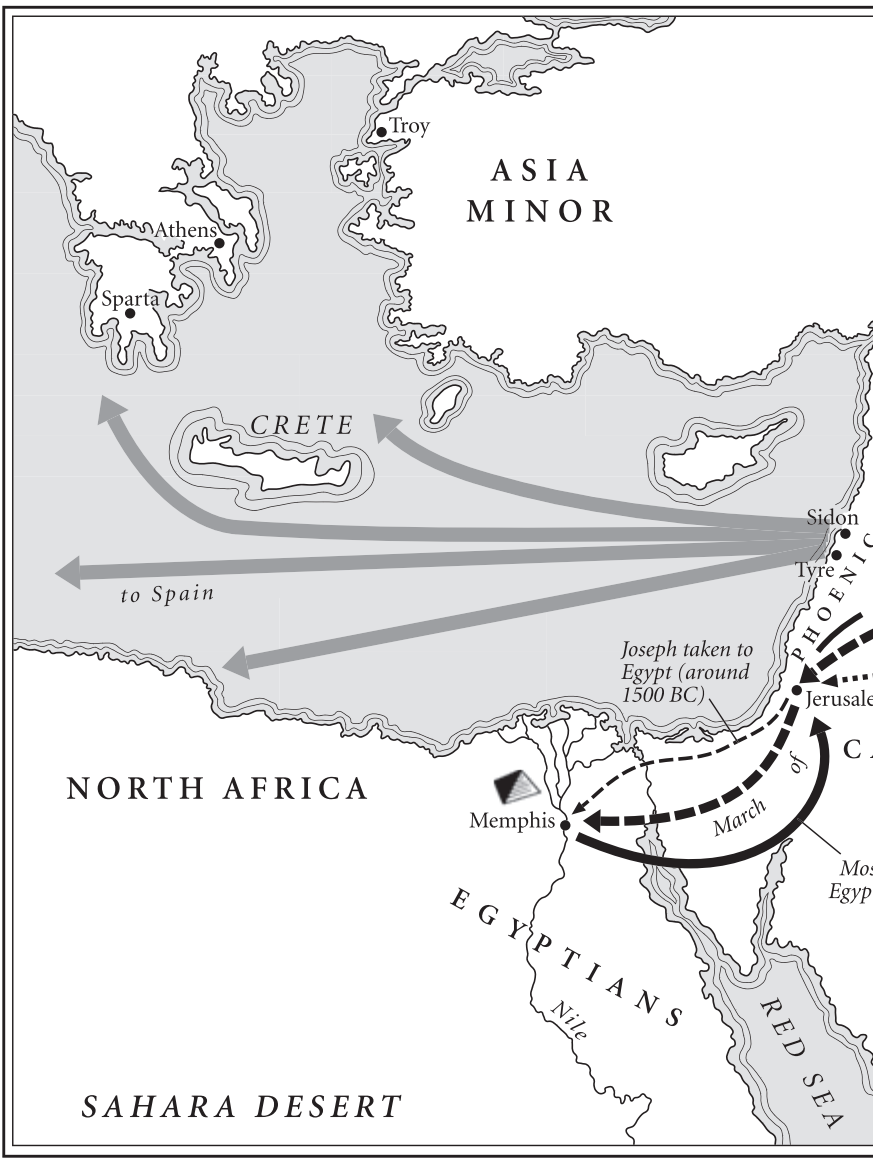
Some planets were believed to bring good luck, others misfortune: Mars meant war and Venus, love. To each of the five planets known to them they dedicated a day, and with the sun and the moon, that made seven. This was the origin of our seven-day week. In English we still say Satur (Saturn)-day, Sun-day and Mon (moon)-day, but the other days are named after different gods. In other languages – such as French or Italian – most of the days of the week still belong to the planets that the Babylonians first named. Would you ever have guessed that our weekdays had such

a strange and venerable history, reaching back all those thousands of years?

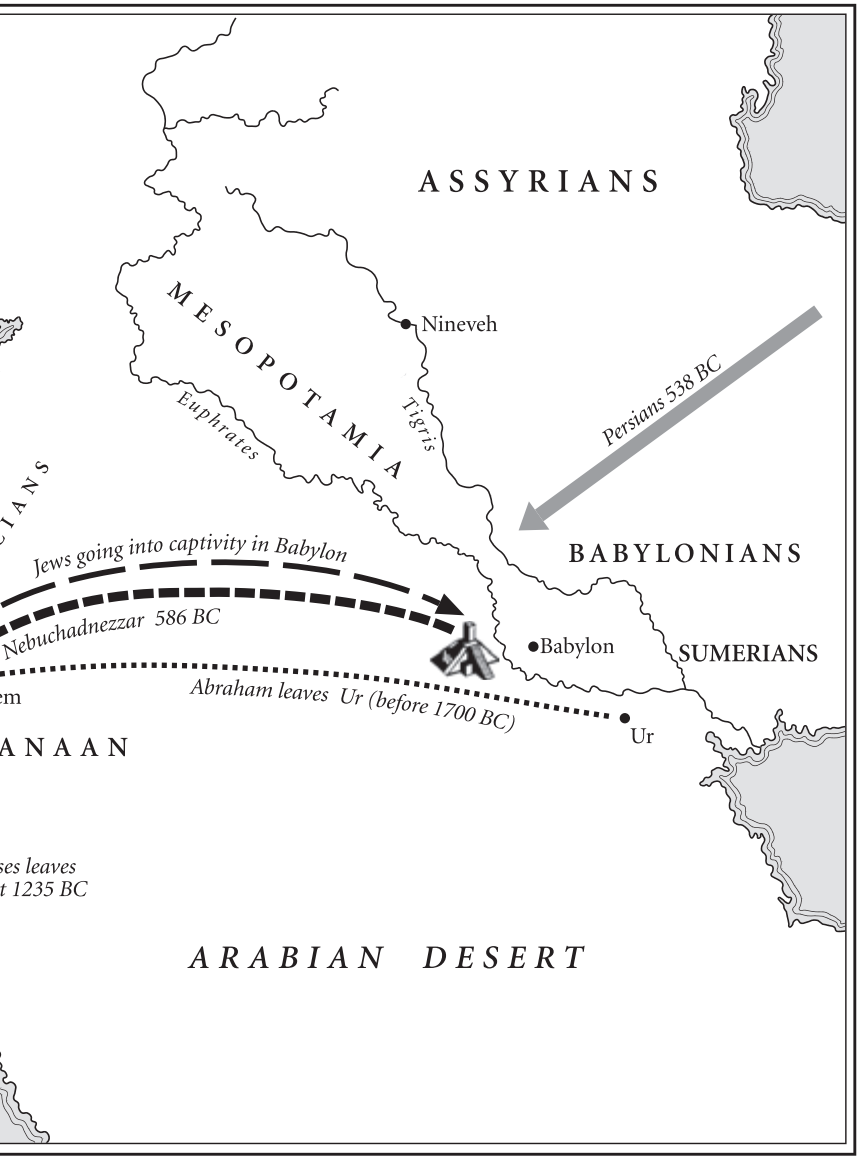
To be nearer to their stars, and also to see them better in a misty land, the Babylonians, and the Sumerians before them, erected strange buildings with a wonderful name: ziggurats. These are tall, broad towers made up of terraces piled one on top of another, with formidable ramps and steep, narrow staircases. Right at the very top was a temple dedicated to the moon, or one of the other planets. People came from far and wide to ask the priests to read their fortunes in the stars, and brought offerings of great value. These half-ruined ziggurats can still be seen today, poking out of the rubble mounds, with inscriptions telling how this or that king built or restored them. The earliest kings in this region lived as long ago as 3000 BC, and the last around 550 BC.

The last great Babylonian king was Nebuchadnezzar. He lived around 600 BC and is remembered for his feats of war. He fought against Egypt and brought a vast number of foreign captives home to Babylon as slaves. And yet his truly greatest deeds were not his wars: he had huge canals and water cisterns dug in order to retain the water and irrigate the land, so that it became rich and fertile. Only when those canals became blocked with silt and the cisterns filled with mud did the land become what it is today: a desert wasteland and marshy plain with, here and there, one of those hills I mentioned.

So, whenever we are glad that the week is nearly over, and Sunday is coming round again, we must spare a thought for those hills of rubble in that hot and marshy plain, and for those fierce kings with their long, black beards. For now we know how it all fits together.



It was in this part of the world, between Mesopotamia and Egypt, that the history of mankind began, with bloody battles and daring voyages by Phoenician trading ships. You can look at this map again as you read the next chapters.


ASSYRIANS
MESOPOTAMIA
Nineveh
Euphrates
Tigris
Persians 538 BC
BABYLONIANS
Jews going into captivity in Babylon
Nebuchadnezzar 586 BC
Babylon
SUMERIANS
Abraham leaves Ur (before 1700 BC)
Ur
ARABIAN DESERT

5

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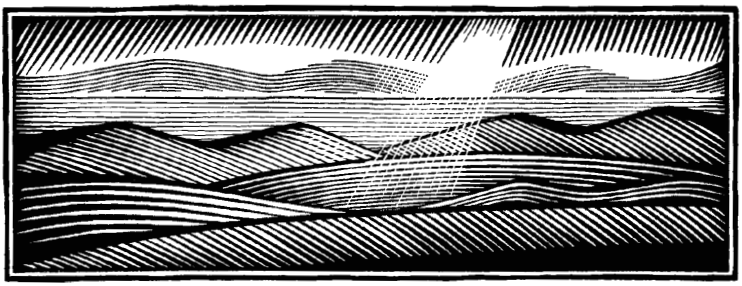
The One and Only God



Between Egypt and Mesopotamia there is a land of deep valleys and rich pastures. There, for thousands of years, herdsmen tended their flocks. They planted vines and cereals, and in the evenings they sang songs, as country people do. But because it lay between those two countries, first it would be conquered and ruled by the Egyptians, and then the Babylonians would invade, so that the people who lived there were constantly being driven from one place to another. They built themselves towns and fortresses, to no avail. They were still not strong enough to resist the mighty armies of their neighbours.

'That's all very sad, but I can't see what it has to do with history,' you say, 'for the same thing must have happened to thousands of small tribes.' And you're right. But there was something special about this one, because, small and defenceless though they were, they didn't just become *part* of history, they *made* history – and by that I mean they shaped the course of all history to come. And this special something was their religion.

All other peoples prayed to many gods – you remember Isis and Osiris, Baal and Astarte. But these herdsmen only prayed to one god, their own special protector and leader. And when they sat beside their camp fires in the evening, and sang songs about their deeds and their battles, they sang of *his* deeds and *his* battles. *Their* god, they sang, was better and stronger and more exalted than all the gods of the heathen put together. Indeed, they insisted as the years went by, he was the only god there was. The One and Only God, Creator of heaven and earth, sun and moon, land and river, plant and beast, and of all mankind as well. It was he who raged furiously against them in the storm, but he never abandoned his people. Not when they were persecuted by the Egyptians, nor when they were carried off by the Babylonians. For that was their faith and their pride: they were *his* people, and he was *their* God.

You may have already guessed who these strange and powerless herdsmen were. They were the Jews. And the songs of their deeds, which were the deeds of their god, are the Old Testament of the Bible.

One day – but there's no hurry – you may come to read the Bible. Nowhere else will you find so many stories about ancient times so vividly told. And if you read them carefully, you may find that you now understand many of them better. There's the story of Abraham, for example. Do you remember where he came from? The answer is in the Book of Genesis, in chapter 11. He came from Ur in the Chaldees. Ur – that mound of rubble near the Persian Gulf, where they dug up all those ancient things like harps and game-boards and weapons and jewellery. But Abraham didn't live there in the earliest times. He was probably alive at the time of Hammurabi, the great lawgiver, which was – as you remember! – around 1700 BC. And many of Hammurabi's strict and just laws turn up again in the Bible.

But that isn't all the Bible has to say about ancient Babylon. Do you know the story of the Tower of Babel, when the people of a great city tried to build a tower that would reach up to heaven, and God was angry at their pride and stopped them building any

higher by making them all speak different languages so that they could no longer understand one another? Well, Babel is Babylon. So now you will be able to understand the story better. For, as you know, the Babylonians really did build gigantic towers 'the top of which reached even to the heavens', and they built them so as to be nearer to the sun, the moon and the stars.

The story of Noah and the Flood is also set in Mesopotamia. A number of clay tablets have been dug up, inscribed with cuneiform script telling a story very similar to the one in the Bible.

One of Abraham of Ur's descendants (the Bible tells us) was Joseph, son of Jacob, whose brothers took him to Egypt and sold him, despite which he became a counsellor and minister to the pharaoh. You may know how the story goes on: how there was a famine throughout the land, and how Joseph's brothers travelled to Egypt to buy corn. At that time, the pyramids were already over a thousand years old, and Joseph and his brothers must have marvelled at them, just as we do today.

Rather than return to their own country, Joseph's brothers and their children settled in Egypt, and before long had to toil for the pharaoh as the Egyptians did at the time of the pyramids. In the first chapter of Exodus we read: 'And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour: and they made their lives bitter with hard bondage, in mortar and in brick . . .' In the end, Moses led them out of Egypt into the desert – probably in around 1250 BC. From there they tried to win back the promised land – that is, the land in which their ancestors had lived since the time of Abraham. And finally, after long, cruel and bloody battles, they succeeded. So now they had their own small kingdom, with its capital: Jerusalem. Their first king was Saul, who fought against a neighbouring tribe, the Philistines, and died on the battlefield.

The Bible has lots of good stories about the next kings, King David and King Solomon. Solomon was a wise and just king who ruled soon after 1000 BC, which was about seven hundred years after King Hammurabi and 2,100 years after King Menes. He built the first Temple of Jerusalem, although his architects weren't Jews, but foreign artisans from neighbouring lands. It was as large and as

splendid as any built by the Egyptians or the Babylonians. But in one respect it was different: deep inside the heathen temples there were images of Anubis with his jackal's head, or of Baal, to whom even human sacrifices were made. Whereas in the innermost part of the Jewish temple – the Holy of Holies – there was no image at all. For of the God, whose first appearance in the history of the world was to the people of the Jews – God, the Almighty, the One and Only God – no image could or might be made. All that was there were the tablets of the Laws with their Ten Commandments. In these God had represented himself.

After Solomon's reign things went less well for the Jews. Their kingdom split in two: the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judah. Many battles followed, at the end of which one half, the kingdom of Israel, was invaded by the Assyrians in 722 BC, and was conquered and destroyed.

Yet what is so remarkable is that the effect of so many disasters on the few Jews who survived them was to make them even more devout. Men arose among them – not priests, but simple people – who felt compelled to speak to their people, because God spoke through them. Their sermon was always the same: 'You yourselves are the cause of your misfortunes. God is punishing you for your sins.' Through the words of these prophets the Jewish people heard again and again that suffering was God's way of punishing them and testing their faith, and that one day salvation would come in the form of the Messiah, their Saviour, who would restore their people to its former glory and bring unending joy.

But their suffering was still far from over. You will remember the mighty Babylonian warrior and ruler, King Nebuchadnezzar. On his way to war with the Egyptians he marched through the Promised Land, where he destroyed the city of Jerusalem in 586 BC, put out the eyes of King Zedekiah and led the Jews in captivity to Babylon.

There they remained for nearly fifty years, until, in its turn, the Babylonian empire was destroyed by its Persian neighbour in 538 BC. When the Jews returned to their homeland they had changed. They were different from the surrounding tribes and saw them all

as idol worshippers, who had failed to recognise the one true God. So they kept themselves apart and had nothing to do with their neighbours. It was at this time that the Old Testament was first written down as we know it today, 2,500 years later. To those around them, however, it was the Jews who seemed odd, if not ridiculous, with their ceaseless talk of a unique and invisible god, and their strict observance of the most tiresome and inflexible rules and practices ordained by a god whom no one could see. And if the Jews had been the first to distance themselves from other tribes, it was not long before those others were taking even greater care to avoid the Jews, that tiny remnant of a people that called itself 'chosen', who pored night and day over their sacred songs and scriptures as they tried to understand why the one and only God allowed his people to suffer so.

6

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I C-A-N R-E-A-D

How do you do it? Why, every schoolchild knows the answer: 'You spell out the words.' Yes, all right, but what *exactly* do you mean? 'Well, there's an I, which makes "I", and then a "C" and an "A" and an "N", which spells "can" – and so on, and with twenty-six letters you can write anything down.' Anything? Yes, anything. In any language? Just about.

Isn't that amazing? With twenty-six simple signs, each no more than a couple of squiggles, you can write down anything you like, be it wise or silly, angelic or wicked. It wasn't anything like as easy for the ancient Egyptians with their hieroglyphs. Nor was it for the people who used the cuneiform script, for they kept on inventing new signs that didn't stand just for single letter sounds, but for whole syllables or more. The idea that each sign might represent one sound, and that just twenty-six of those signs were all you needed to write every conceivable word, was a wholly new invention, one that can only have been made by people who did a lot of writing. Not just sacred texts and songs, but all sorts of letters, contracts and receipts.

These inventors were merchants. Men who travelled far and wide across the seas, bartering and trading in every land. They lived quite near the Jews, in the ports of Tyre and Sidon, cities much larger and more powerful than Jerusalem, and quite as noisy and bustling as Babylon. And in fact, their language and their religion were not unlike those of the peoples of Mesopotamia, though they didn't share their love of war. The Phoenicians (for this was the name of the people of Tyre and Sidon) made their conquests by other means. They sailed across the seas to unknown shores, where they landed and set up trading posts. The wild tribes living there brought them furs and precious stones in exchange for tools, cooking pots and coloured cloth. For Phoenician craftsmanship was known throughout the world – indeed, their artisans had even helped in the construction of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. Most popular of all their goods was their dyed cloth, especially the purple, which they sold throughout the world. Many Phoenicians stayed in their trading posts on foreign shores and built towns. Everywhere they went they were welcomed, in Africa, Spain and in southern Italy, on account of the beautiful things they brought.

Nor did they ever feel cut off from home, because they could write letters to their friends in Tyre and Sidon, using the wonderfully simple script they had invented, which we still use today. It's true! Take this 'B', for example: it is almost identical to the one used by the ancient Phoenicians, three thousand years ago, when they wrote home from distant shores, sending news to their families in those noisy, bustling harbour towns. Now you know this, you'll be sure not to forget the Phoenicians.

7

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Heroes and their Weapons

Here are some lines to be chanted aloud while tapping their
rhythm,
Lines that were used by the poets of Greece in their stories
of warfare,
Telling the contests of gods and of heroes in earlier ages.

(Verses like this, with six beats to each line, were called 'hexameters' by the Greeks. The rhythm suits the Greek language, but it sounds a little unnatural in English.)

You will have heard of the war that arose when Paris, the
Trojan,
Sided with Venus and gave her the apple of gold in the
contest,
How, as reward, she helped him to seize the beautiful Helen,
Wife of the King of the Greeks, Menelaus the Caller in
Battle,
How an army of Greeks laid siege to the city of Troy to
regain her,

With Agamemnon and Nestor the sage, Achilles and Ajax,
And countless heroes who fought in that war with the sons of King Priam,
Paris and Hector, for ten long summers and winters before the
City at last was conquered and razed to the ground by the victors.
Do you also remember the tale of the wily Odysseus?
How, returning from Troy, he experienced the strangest adventures,
Till, at last, on miraculous ships, he returned to his homeland,
To the wife who awaited her lord all the years of his absence.

Verses like these were chanted at feasts by Greek minstrels as they played their lyres. Later, they were written down and people came to believe that one poet, called Homer, had composed them all. They are read to this day and you, too, can enjoy them, for they are as fresh and vivid as ever – full of beauty and wisdom.

'Now wait a minute,' you're going to say. 'These are stories, not history. What I want to know is, *when* and *how* did these events take place?' A German businessman called Schliemann asked himself that same question, more than a hundred years ago. He read Homer over and over again, and longed to see all the beautiful places described by the poet. If only he could hold in his hands, just once, the wonderful weapons with which these heroes fought. And one day he did. For it turned out that all of it was true. Not in every detail, of course: the heroes named in the songs were no more real than the giants and witches in fairy tales. But the world that Homer describes – the drinking cups, the weapons, the buildings and the ships, the princes who were at the same time shepherds, and the heroes who were also sea raiders – were not inventions. When Schliemann told people this they laughed at him. But he didn't give up. He just kept putting money aside, so that one day he could go to Greece and see for himself. And when he had finally raised enough money, he hired labourers and set about digging in search

of all the cities mentioned in Homer. At Mycenae he discovered palaces and the tombs of kings, armour and shields, just as the Homeric songs had described them. And he found Troy, too, and dug there. And it turned out that it really *had* been destroyed by fire. But in all those tombs and palaces there wasn't one inscription, so that for a long time no one could put a date to them until, one day, quite by chance, a ring was found in Mycenae that didn't come from there. On it, in hieroglyphs, was the name of an Egyptian king who had lived around 1400 BC, and had been the predecessor of Akhenaton, the great reformer.

Now at that time there was living in Greece, and on the many neighbouring islands and shores, a warlike people who had amassed great treasures. Greece was not so much a kingdom as a collection of small fortified cities, each with its own palace and king. The people were mostly seafarers, like the Phoenicians, only they traded less and fought more.They were often at war with one another, but on occasion would gang together to plunder other shores. And as their fortunes grew bigger, they grew bolder – and not just bolder, but braver, because to be a sea raider takes courage as well as cunning. So sea raiding was a task which fell to the nobility. The rest of the population were simple peasants and shepherds.

Now, unlike the Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Assyrians, these noblemen weren't interested in preserving the ways of their ancestors. Their many raids and battles with foreign peoples had opened their eyes to new ideas and taught them to relish variety and change. And it was at this point, and in this part of the world, that history began to progress at a much greater speed, because people no longer believed that the old ways were best. From now on, things were constantly changing. And this is why, nowadays, when we find even a fragment of pottery – in Greece, or anywhere else in Europe – we can say: 'this dates from roughly this or that period.' Because a hundred years later a pot like that would have gone out of fashion, and nobody would have wanted it.

It is now thought that all the beautiful things that Schliemann found in his excavations of Greek cities – the fine vessels and daggers decorated with hunting scenes, the golden shields and

helmets, the jewellery and even the colourful paintings on the walls of the halls – were not invented there. They were first made not in Greece or in Troy, but on an island nearby. This island is called Crete. There, at the time of King Hammurabi – do you remember when that was? – the Cretans had already built splendid royal palaces, with innumerable rooms, staircases running up and down in all directions, great pillars, courtyards, corridors and cellars – a veritable labyrinth!

Speaking of labyrinths, have you ever heard the story of the evil Minotaur, half man, half bull, who lived in a labyrinth and made the Greeks send him seven youths and seven maidens each year as human sacrifices? Do you know where that was? It was in Crete, so there may be some truth in the story. Cretan kings may once have ruled over Greek cities, and those Greeks may have had to send them tribute. In any event, these Cretans were clearly a remarkable people, even if we still don't know much about them. You only have to look at the paintings on the walls of their palaces to see that they are unlike any made at the same time in Egypt or in Babylon. If you remember, the Egyptian pictures were very beautiful, but rather severe and stiff, a bit like their priests. This was not the case in Crete. What mattered most to them was to catch animals or people in rapid motion: hounds chasing wild boar, and people leaping over bulls – nothing was too hard for them to paint. The kings of the Greek cities clearly learnt a great deal from them.

But by 1200 BC this time of splendour was over. For it was at around that time (some two hundred years before the reign of

King Solomon) that new tribes came down from the north. Whether they were related to the former builders of Mycenae nobody knows for sure, but it is likely. In any event, they drove out the kings and installed themselves in their place. Meanwhile, Crete had been destroyed. But the memory of its magnificence lived on in the minds of the invaders, even when they founded new cities and built their own shrines. And as the centuries went by, the tales of the kings of ancient Mycenae became confused with those of their own battles and conquests, until they became part of their own history.

These newcomers were the Greeks, and the myths and songs sung in the courts of their nobles were the very same Homeric poems with which this chapter began. It is worth remembering that they were composed shortly before 800 BC.

When the Greeks came to Greece, they were not yet Greeks. Does that sound strange? Yet it is true. For the fact is that when the tribes from the north first invaded the lands they were to occupy, they weren't yet a unified people. They spoke different dialects and were obedient to different chieftains. They were tribes rather like the Sioux or the Mohicans you read about in stories of the Wild West, and had names such as the Dorians, Ionians and Aeolians. Like the American Indians they were warlike and brave, but in other ways they were quite different. The native Americans were familiar with iron, while the people of Mycenae and Crete – just as the songs of Homer tell us – had weapons made of bronze. And so these tribes arrived, with their wives and their children. The Dorians pushed furthest, right down into the southernmost tip of Greece which looks like a maple leaf and is called the Peloponnese. There they subdued the inhabitants, and set them to work in the fields. They themselves founded a city where they lived, and called it Sparta.

The Ionians who arrived after the Dorians found there was not enough room for them all in Greece. Many of them settled above the maple leaf, to the north of its stalk, on a peninsula called Attica. They made their homes by the sea and planted vines, cereals and olive trees. And they, too, founded a city, which they dedicated to

the goddess Athena – she who, in the Homeric songs, so often came to the rescue of Ulysses the sailor. That city is Athens.

Like all the members of the Ionian tribe, the Athenians were great seafarers, and in due course they took possession of a number of small islands, known since that time as the Ionian Islands. Later, they went even further, and founded cities far across the sea away from Greece, along the fertile coast of Asia Minor, with its many sheltering bays. No sooner did the Phoenicians hear of these cities than they sailed there to trade. And the Greeks will have sold them olive oil and cereals, as well as silver and other metals found in those regions. But they soon learnt so much from the Phoenicians that they, too, sailed onwards, to distant shores, where they founded their own outposts, or colonies as we call them. And the Phoenicians passed on to them their wonderful way of writing using letters. You shall see what use they made of it.

8

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An Unequal Struggle

Something very strange happened between 550 and 500 BC. I don't really understand it myself, but perhaps that's what makes it so interesting. In the high mountain chain that runs north of Mesopotamia a wild mountain tribe had long been living. They had a beautiful religion: they worshipped light and the sun and believed it to be in a state of constant warfare with the dark – that is, with the dark powers of evil.

These mountain people were the Persians. For hundreds of years they had been dominated, first by the Assyrians, and then by the Babylonians. One day they had had enough. Their ruler was a man of exceptional courage and intelligence called Cyrus, who was no longer prepared to put up with the oppression of his people. He led his band of horsemen down onto the plain of Babylon. The Babylonians looked down from their mighty ramparts and laughed at the little band of warriors that dared attack their city. Yet, under Cyrus's leadership, they succeeded, through courage and guile. And so Cyrus became lord of that great realm. His first act was to free all the peoples held in captivity by the Babylonians.

Among them were the Jews, who went home to Jerusalem (that was, as you remember, in 538 BC). Not content with his great kingdom, however, Cyrus marched on to conquer Egypt, only to die on the way. But his son, Cambyses, succeeded. Egypt fell and the pharaoh was deposed. That was the end of the Egyptian empire, which had lasted almost three thousand years! And with its end, this little Persian tribe became master of nearly all the known world. But only nearly: they hadn't yet swallowed up Greece. That was still to come.

It came after the death of Cambyses, during the reign of a great king named Darius. He governed the vast Persian empire – which now stretched from Egypt to the frontiers of India – in such a way that nothing happened anywhere that he himself had not decreed. He built roads so that his orders might be carried without delay to the furthest parts of his kingdom. And even his highest officials, the satraps, were spied on by informers known as 'the king's eyes and ears'. Darius now began to extend his empire out into Asia Minor, along whose coasts lay the cities of the Ionian Greeks.

Now the Greeks were not used to being part of a great empire, with a ruler who sent orders from God knows where in the heart of Asia, expecting instant obedience. Many of the people who lived in the Greek colonies were rich merchants, used to running their own affairs and making their own decisions about the administration of their cities, jointly and independently. They had no wish to be ruled by a Persian king, nor would they pay him tribute. So they rebelled, and threw out the Persian governors.

In this they were supported by the Greeks in the motherland, the original founders of the colonies, and in particular by the Athenians, who sent them ships. Never before had the king of Persia, the King of Kings – for that was his title – been so insulted. That this insignificant tribe, these nobodies, should dare to challenge *him*, the ruler of the world! He dealt with the Ionian cities in Asia Minor in less than no time. But he wasn't finished yet. He was furious with the Athenians for meddling in his affairs. With the aim of destroying Athens and conquering Greece, he equipped a large fleet. But his ships were caught in a violent storm, dashed

against the cliffs and sunk. At this his anger knew no bounds. The story goes that he appointed a slave to call out three times at every meal: 'Sire, remember the Athenians!' So great was his fury.

He then sent his son-in-law, with a new and mighty fleet, to sail against Athens. They conquered many islands on their way and destroyed a lot of cities. They finally dropped anchor not far from Athens, at a place called Marathon. There, the whole great Persian army disembarked, ready to march on Athens. It is said that they numbered seventy thousand men, as many as the entire population of Athens. With roughly ten thousand soldiers the Athenian army was outnumbered seven to one. Their fate was surely sealed. But not quite. For the Athenians had a general named Miltiades, a brave and able man, who had lived for many years among the Persians, and knew their fighting tactics. Added to which, the Athenians all knew what was at stake: their freedom and their lives, and those of their wives and children. So there at Marathon they formed ranks, and fell upon the startled Persians. And they were victorious. The Persians suffered heavy losses. Those remaining took to their ships and fled.

Such a victory! And against such odds! Others in his place might have thought of nothing but celebration. But Miltiades was shrewd as well as brave. He had noted that instead of sailing back the way they had come, the Persian ships had turned towards Athens, which lay undefended and open to attack. But as luck would have it, the distance from Marathon to Athens was greater by sea than by land. For ships had to negotiate a long spit of land easily crossed on foot. This Miltiades did. He sent a messenger ahead, who was to run as fast as he could, to warn the Athenians. This was the famous Marathon Run after which we call our race. Famous, because the messenger ran so far and so fast that all he could do was deliver his message before he fell down dead.

Meanwhile Miltiades and his army had taken the same route, marching in tremendous haste. This was just as well, for no sooner had they reached the harbour at Athens than the Persian fleet appeared over the horizon. But there was no more fighting: at the sight of their heroic enemy, the disheartened Persians turned tail

The battles of the Persians in Greece.

and sailed for home. And not just Athens, but the whole of Greece was saved. This was 490 BC.

How the great Darius, King of Kings, must have cursed when he learnt of the defeat at Marathon! But at the time there was little he could do about Greece, for a revolt had broken out in Egypt which had to be suppressed. He died soon after, leaving his son and successor, Xerxes, to take revenge on Greece once and for all.

Xerxes, a hard, ambitious man, needed no urging. He assembled an army from among all the subject peoples of his empire. Dressed in their traditional costumes, with their weapons, their bows and arrows, shields and swords, lances, war-chariots and slings, they were a vast, swirling multitude, said by some to number more than a million men. What hope had the Greeks in the face of such a host? This time Xerxes himself took command. But when the Persians tried to cross the narrow neck of sea which separates Asia Minor from today's Istanbul, on a bridge made of boats, rough waves tore the bridge apart. In his fury Xerxes had the waves lashed with chains. But I doubt if the sea took any notice.

One part of this gigantic army attacked Greece by sea, while another part marched overland. In northern Greece, a small army of Spartans, who had made an alliance with the Athenians, tried to block the Persian advance in a narrow pass called Thermopylae. The Persians called on the Spartans to throw down their weapons. 'Come and get them yourselves!' was the reply. 'We've enough arrows here to blot out the sun!' threatened the Persians. 'So much the better', cried the Spartans, 'then we'll fight in the shade!' But a treacherous Greek showed the Persians a way over the mountains and the Spartan army was surrounded and trapped. All three hundred Spartans and seven hundred of their allies were killed in the battle, but not one of them tried to run away, for that was their law. Later, a Greek poet wrote these words in their memory:

Go tell the Spartans, thou who passest by,
That here obedient to their laws we lie.

Now the Athenians had not been idle since their great victory at Marathon. And they had a new leader called Themistocles, an

astute and far-sighted man, who repeatedly warned his fellow citizens that a miracle like Marathon could only happen once, and that if Athens were to continue to hold out against the Persians, it must have a fleet. So a fleet was built.

Themistocles had the whole of Athens evacuated – not that the population can have been very large in those days – and sent to the little island of Salamis nearby. The Athenian fleet then positioned itself by this island. When the Persian land army arrived and found Athens abandoned, they set fire to the city and razed it to the ground, while the Athenians on their island remained unharmed as they watched their burning city from afar. But now the Persian fleet appeared, and threatened to surround Salamis.

The allies panicked, and were all for taking to their ships and leaving the Athenians to their fate. At this moment Themistocles demonstrated his extraordinary ingenuity and daring. Having finally succeeded in persuading the allies not to leave, he secretly sent a messenger to Xerxes saying: 'Make haste and attack, or the Athenians' allies will escape you!' Xerxes, who must have heard from his spies that the allies were set on leaving, fell for it. The next morning he attacked with his many small and nimble warships. And he lost. The Greek ships were larger and less easy to manoeuvre, but once again they were fighting desperately for their freedom. Not only that, but their victory ten years earlier at Marathon had inspired them with confidence. From a vantage point Xerxes was forced to look on while his smaller, lighter galleys were rammed and sunk by the Greeks' heavy ships. Aghast, he ordered the retreat. And so for the second time the Athenians were victorious, and against an even greater army than before. This was in 480 BC.

Shortly afterwards, in 479 BC, the Persian land army was also defeated by the combined forces of the Greeks and their allies, near Plataea. After this the Persians never again dared attack the Greeks. And this is very interesting, because it wasn't as if the Persians were weaker or more stupid than the Greeks – far from it. But, as I said before, the Greeks were different. For, whereas the great empires of the East bound themselves so tightly to the traditions and teachings

of their ancestors that they could scarcely move, the Greeks – and the Athenians in particular – did the opposite. Almost every year they came up with something new. Everything was always changing. The same went for their leaders. Miltiades and Themistocles, the great heroes of the Persian wars, learnt this to their cost: one moment it was high praise, honours and monuments to their achievements, the next it was accusations, slander and exile. This was not the best feature of the Athenians, yet it was part of their nature. Always trying out new ideas, never satisfied, never at rest. Which explains why, during the hundred years that followed the Persian wars, more went on in the minds of the people of the little city of Athens than in a thousand years in all the great empires of the East. The ideas, the painting, sculpture and architecture, the plays and poetry, the inventions and experiments, the discussions and arguments which the young brought to the marketplaces and the old to their council chambers still continue to concern us today. It is strange that it should be so, and yet it's true. And what would it have been like if the Persians had won at Marathon? Or at Salamis, ten years later? That I cannot say.

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Two Small Cities in One Small Land

I said earlier that Greece, when set against the Persian empire, was no more than a small peninsula, dotted here and there with little cities of busy merchants, a country of barren mountain ranges and stony fields, able to sustain only a handful of people. And also, as you may remember, that the Greeks belonged to a number of tribes, the most important of them being the Dorians in the south and the Ionians and the Aeolians in the north. These tribes differed little from one another, either in appearance or in language. They spoke different dialects, which they could all understand if they chose. But they very rarely did. For, as is often the case, these close-related, neighbouring tribes were unable to get on with one another. They spent all their time exchanging insults and ridicule, when actually they were jealous of each other. For Greece had no one king or administration in common. Instead, each city was a kingdom in itself.

But one thing united the Greeks: their religion and their sport. And I say 'one thing' because, strangely enough, sport and religion weren't two separate things – they were closely connected. For

instance, in honour of Zeus, the Father of the Gods, great sporting contests were held every four years in his sanctuary at Olympia. As well as large temples there was a stadium at Olympia, and all the Greeks – the Dorians, Ionians, Spartans and Athenians – came there to show how well they could run, throw the discus and the javelin, fight hand to hand and race chariots. To be victorious at Olympia was the greatest honour in a man's life. The prize was no more than a simple garland made from sprigs of wild olive, but what fame for the winners: the greatest poets sang their praises, the greatest sculptors carved their statues to stand for ever in Olympia. They were shown in their chariots, throwing the discus, or rubbing oil into their bodies before the fight. Victory statues like these can still be seen today – there may even be one in your local museum.

Since the Olympic Games took place once every four years, and were attended by all the Greeks, they provided everyone with a convenient way to measure time. This was gradually adopted throughout Greece. Just as we say BC meaning 'Before the birth of Christ' or AD for after the birth of Christ (*Anno Domini* which means the year of our Lord in Latin), the Greeks would say: 'At the time of this or that Olympiad'. The first Olympiad was in 776 BC. Can you work out when the tenth would have been? But don't forget! They only happened every four years.

But it wasn't only the Olympic Games that brought all the Greeks together. There was another sanctuary which they all held sacred. This one was at Delphi, and belonged to the sun god Apollo, and there was something most peculiar about it. As sometimes happens in volcanic regions, there was a fissure in the ground from which vapour issued. If anyone inhaled it, it literally clouded their mind. It was as if they were drunk or delirious, and nothing they said made any sense.

The very meaninglessness of these utterances seemed deeply mysterious to the Greeks, who said that 'the god himself speaks through a mortal mouth'. So they had a priestess – whom they called Pythia – sit over the fissure on a three-legged stool, while other priests interpreted her babble as predictions of the future.

The shrine was known as the Delphic Oracle, and at difficult moments of their lives Greeks from everywhere made pilgrimages to Delphi, to consult the god Apollo. The answer they received was often far from clear, and could be understood in a variety of ways. And in fact we still say that a vague or enigmatic answer is 'oracular'.

Let us now take a closer look at two of Greece's most important cities: Sparta and Athens. We already know something about the Spartans: they were Dorians, who, when they arrived in Greece, in around 1100 BC, enslaved the former inhabitants and put them to work on the land. But the slaves outnumbered their masters, and the danger of rebellion meant that the Spartans had to be constantly on the alert lest they find themselves homeless again. They only had one aim in life: to be fighting fit, ready to crush any uprising by their slaves, and to protect themselves from the surrounding peoples still at liberty.

And they really did think of nothing else. Their lawgiver, Lycurgus, had already seen to that. A Spartan baby that appeared weak, and unlikely to grow up to be a warrior, was killed at birth. A strong infant had to be made stronger. From a very young age he must train from dawn till dusk, learn to endure pain, hunger and cold, must eat poorly and be denied all pleasure. Boys were beaten just to harden them to pain. A harsh upbringing is still called 'spartan' today, and as you know, it worked: at Thermopylae, in 480 BC, in obedience to their law, the Spartans allowed themselves to be massacred by the Persians. Knowing how to die like that isn't easy. But knowing how to live is, perhaps, even harder. And this is what the Athenians aimed to do. They weren't looking for an easy, comfortable life, but one which had meaning. A life of which something remained after one's death. Something of benefit to those who came after. You shall see how they succeeded.

Had they not lived in fear – fear of their own slaves – the Spartans might never have become so warlike and brave. Athenians had fewer reasons to be afraid and they didn't live under the same pressures. Things were different for them even though, as in Sparta, the nobles who once ruled Athens imposed harsh laws

drawn up by an Athenian named Draco. (These laws were so strict that people still speak of 'Draconian' severity.) But the people of Athens, who had roamed the seas in their ships, and had heard and seen so many different things, did not consent to this for long.

It was, in fact, a nobleman who had the wisdom to try to give the little state a new system of government. His name was Solon, and the laws he introduced in 594 BC – at the time of Nebuchadnezzar – were named after him. They stated that the people, that is, the city's inhabitants, should decide the city's affairs themselves. They should assemble in the marketplace of Athens and vote. The majority should decide and should elect a council of experts to put those decisions into effect. This sort of government is called democracy, or 'the rule of the people', in Greek. This didn't mean that everyone who lived in Athens was entitled to vote in the Assembly. Citizenship depended on wealth and influence, and many people, including women and slaves, played no part in government. But many Athenians could at least have their say, and so they took an interest in how their city was run. 'Polis' is Greek for city, 'politics', the affairs of a city.

For a while individual noblemen curried favour with the people to win their votes, and then seized power. Rulers like these were called tyrants. But the people soon expelled them and took better care next time to ensure that it was they themselves who really governed. I have already told you about the wayward nature of the Athenians. And it was this, together with a real fear of losing their freedom once again, which led them to banish any politician who showed signs of becoming too popular, lest he seize power for himself and rule as a tyrant. The same free people of Athens who defeated the Persians later treated Miltiades and Themistocles with just such ingratitude.

But there was one politician who avoided this fate. His name was Pericles. When he spoke in the Assembly, the Athenians always believed that it was they who had made the decisions, whereas in fact it was Pericles, who had made up his mind long before. This wasn't because he held any special office or had any particular power – he was simply the wisest and the most intelligent. And so

he gradually worked his way up until, by 444 BC – a number as beautiful as the time it represents – he was, in effect, the city's sole ruler. His chief concern was that Athens should maintain its power at sea, and this he achieved through alliances with other Ionian cities who paid Athens for its protection. In this way the Athenians grew rich and could at last afford to make use of their great gifts.

And now I can hear you asking: 'But what exactly *did* they do that was so great?' And I can only say 'everything'. But two things interested them most and these were truth and beauty.

Their assemblies had taught the Athenians how to discuss all matters openly, with arguments for and against. This was good training in learning how to think. Soon they were using arguments and counter-arguments, not just when they were debating everyday matters like whether or not to increase taxation, but in discussions about the whole of nature. The Ionians in the colonial outposts may have been ahead of them here, for they had already reflected on what the world was actually made of, and what might be the cause of all events and experiences.

This sort of reflection is what we call philosophy. In Athens, however, their reflecting – or philosophising – went much further. They also wanted to know how people should act, what was good and what was evil, and what was just and what was unjust. They wanted to find an explanation for human existence and discover the essence of all things. Of course, not everyone agreed on matters as complex as these – there were various theories and opinions that were argued back and forth, just as in the people's Assembly. And since that time, the sort of reflection and reasoned argument we call philosophy has never stopped.

But the Athenians didn't only pace up and down their porticos and sports fields talking about things like the essence of life and how to recognise it, and where it came from. They didn't just picture the world in a new way in their minds, they saw it with new eyes. When you look at the works of Greek artists, and see how fresh and simple and beautiful they are, it is as if their creators were seeing the world for the first time. We spoke of the statues of Olympic champions earlier. They show fine human beings, not

posed, but looking as if the position they are shown in is the most natural one in the world. And it is *because* they seem so natural that they are so beautiful.

The Greeks portrayed their gods with the same beauty and humanity. The most famous sculptor of such statues was Phidias. He did not create mysterious and supernatural images, like the colossal statues in Egyptian temples. Although some of his temple statues were large and splendid and made of precious materials like ivory and gold, their beauty was never insipid, and they had a noble and natural grace which must have inspired confidence in the gods they represented, and the same can be said for Athenian paintings and buildings. But nothing remains of the pictures they painted on the walls of their halls and assembly rooms. All we have are little paintings on pottery – on vases and urns. Their loveliness tells us what we have lost.

However, the temples are still standing. Even in Athens. And best of all, the citadel of Athens is still there – the Acropolis – where new sanctuaries made of marble were erected in the time of Pericles, because the old ones had been burnt and destroyed by the Persians while the Athenians watched from the island of Salamis. The Acropolis still contains the most beautiful buildings we know. Not the grandest, or the most splendid. Simply the most beautiful. Every detail is so clear and so simple that one cannot imagine it otherwise. All the forms which the Greeks employed in these buildings were to be used again and again in architecture. You will find Greek columns – of which there are several kinds – in almost every city of the world, once you have learnt to recognise them. But none of them is as beautiful as those on the Acropolis where they are used not for show and decoration but for the purpose for which they were invented: as elegant supports for the roof.

Both wisdom of thought and beauty of form were to be united by the Athenians in a third art: the art of poetry. And here, too, they invented something new: the theatre. Their theatre, like their sport, was also once bound up with their religion, with festivals held in honour of their god Dionysus (also known as Bacchus). On his feast-day a performance was held which could last all day. It

took place in the open air, and the actors wore huge masks and high heels, so that they could be easily seen from a distance. We still have plays which they performed. Some are serious, grand and solemn. They are called tragedies. But there were other ones that were very sharp, witty and lively, which made fun of certain Athenian citizens. These are called comedies. I could tell you lots more about the Athenians – about their historians and their doctors, their singers, their thinkers and their artists, but I think it would be better for you to find out about them yourself, one day. Then you'll see that I haven't exaggerated.

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The Enlightened One and his Land

And now let us go to the opposite end of the world. To India and then to China, so that we can find out what was going on in these vast lands at the time of the Persian wars. Like Mesopotamia, India also had a very ancient civilisation, and at about the same time as the Sumerians were holding sway at Ur – that is, around 2500 BC – there was a mighty city in the valley of the Indus. (The Indus is a great river which flows through what is Pakistan today.) It had well-drained streets, canals, granaries and workshops, and was called Mohenjo Daro, and until its discovery in the 1920s nobody had even dreamt of its existence. When it was excavated, things came to light that were as remarkable as any found in the rubble mounds at Ur. Although we know almost nothing about the people who built Mohenjo Daro, we do know that different people arrived much later, and that they are ancestors of the people who inhabit northern India and Pakistan today. These people spoke a language similar not only to those spoken by the Persians and Greeks, but also to those of the Romans and the Teutons. An example of this is the word for 'father': in ancient Indian it was *pitar*, the Greek is *patèr*, the Latin, *páter*.

Since both Indians and Europeans speak these languages, they are known as the Indo-European family of languages. Whether the fact that the languages are similar means that the people who speak them are actually distant relatives we don't yet know for sure. But in any event, the people who spoke an Indo-European language invaded India much as the Dorians invaded Greece, and may have enslaved the native population just as they did.

In time, most of the continent was subdued by the descendants of these invaders, who, like the Spartans, maintained a distance between themselves and the peoples they had conquered. Traces of this division persist today in what is known as the 'caste system'. In it, professions or occupations are strictly separated from each other. Men who were warriors had to remain warriors, and their sons had to be warriors too, because they belonged to the warrior caste. Other castes were similarly closed, like those of farmers and craftsmen. A farmer could never become a craftsman, or a craftsman a farmer – nor could their sons. Someone who was a member of one caste couldn't marry a girl from another – or even share a meal with a member of another caste.

At the top were the priests, or Brahmins – even higher than the warriors. Their task was to perform sacrifices to the gods and look after the temples, and, as in Egypt, they were in charge of sacred knowledge. They had to learn all the chants and prayers off by heart so that they were preserved and handed down, unchanged. They did this for more than a thousand years until the texts were finally written down.

A tiny part of the population was excluded from any caste. They were pariahs – people who were given the dirtiest and most unpleasant tasks. Not even members of the lowest castes could associate with them – their very touch was thought to be defiling. So they became known as the 'untouchables'. They weren't allowed to fetch water from the streams that other Indians used, and had to make sure that their shadow never touched another person, because even that was thought to be defiling. People can be very cruel.

But it would be wrong to say that the Indians were a cruel people. On the contrary, their priests were serious and profound

thinkers, who often withdrew into the forest to meditate, alone and undisturbed, on the most difficult questions. They meditated on their many fierce gods, and on Brahma, the Sublime, the highest divinity of all. They seemed to sense the breath of this one Supreme Being throughout the natural world – in gods as well as men, and in every animal and plant. They felt him active in all things: in the shining of the sun and in the sprouting of crops, in growing and in dying. He was everywhere, just as a little salt dropped in water makes all the water salty, down to the last drop. In all the variety of nature, in all her cycles and transformations, we only see the surface. A soul may inhabit the body of a man, and after his death, that of a tiger, or a cobra, or any other living creature – the cycle will only end when that soul has become so pure that it can at last become one with the Supreme Being. For the divine breath of Brahma is the essence of all things. To help their pupils understand this, Indian priests had a lovely formula which you may turn over in your mind. All they said was 'This is you', by which they meant that everything around you – all the animals and plants and your fellow human beings – are, with you yourself, part of the breath of God.

The priests had invented an extraordinary way of actually *feeling* this all-embracing unity. They would sit down somewhere in the depths of the ancient Indian forest and think about it, and nothing else, for hours, days, weeks, months, years. They sat on the ground, upright and still, their legs crossed and their eyes lowered. They breathed as little as possible and they ate as little as possible – indeed, some of them even tormented themselves in special ways to purify themselves and help them sense the divine breath within them.

Holy men like these penitents and hermits, were common in India three thousand years ago, and there are still many there today. But one of them was different from all the others. He was a nobleman called Gautama, and he lived about five hundred years before Christ.

The story goes that Gautama, whom they were later to call the 'Enlightened One', the 'Buddha', grew up in Eastern luxury and

splendour. It is said that he had three palaces which he never left – one for summer, one for winter, and one for the rainy season – and that they were always filled with the most beautiful music. His father wouldn't allow him to leave their lofty terraces because he wanted to keep him far away from all the sorrows of the world. And no one who was sick or unhappy was ever allowed near him. However, one day Gautama summoned his carriage and went out. On the way he caught sight of a man, bent with age, and he asked his driver what it was. The driver was forced to explain that this was an old man. Deep in thought, Gautama returned to his palace. On another occasion he saw someone who was sick. No one had ever told him about illness. Pondering even more deeply, he went home to his wife and his small son. The third time he went out he saw a dead man. This time he didn't go home to his palace. Coming across a hermit in the road, he decided that he, too, would go into the wilderness, where he would meditate on the sufferings of this world which had been revealed to him in the forms of old age, sickness and death.

Later in his life Gautama told the story of his decision in a sermon: 'And so it came about that, in the full freshness and enjoyment of my youth, in glowing health, my hair still black, and against the wishes of my weeping and imploring elders, I shaved my head and beard, dressed in coarse robes, and forsook the shelter of my home.'

For six years he led the life of a hermit and penitent. But his meditations were deeper and his sufferings greater than those of any other hermit. As he sat, he almost stopped breathing altogether, and endured the most terrible pains. He ate so little that he would often faint with weakness. And yet, in all those years, he found no inner peace. For he didn't only reflect on the nature of the world, and whether all things were really one. He thought about its sadness, of all the pain and suffering of mankind – of old age, sickness and death. And no amount of penitence could help him there.

And so, gradually, he began to eat again. His strength returned, and he breathed like other people. Other hermits who had

formerly admired him now despised him, but he took no notice of them. Then, one night, as he sat beneath a fig tree in a beautiful clearing in a wood, understanding came. Suddenly he realised what he had been seeking all those years. It was as if an inner light had made everything clear. Now, as the 'Enlightened One', the Buddha, he went out to proclaim his discovery to all men.

It wasn't long before he found like-minded people who were soon convinced that he had found a way out of human suffering. And because these followers admired the Buddha, they formed what we would call an 'order' of monks and nuns. This order lived on after his death, and still exists today in many Eastern countries. You can recognise its members by their yellow robes and their austere way of life.

I imagine that you'd like to know exactly what happened to Gautama, as he sat under that fig tree – the Tree of Enlightenment, as it became known – that took away his doubts and brought him inner peace. But if you want me to try and explain it, you will have to do some hard thinking too. After all, Gautama spent six whole years thinking about this and nothing else. The idea that came to him, his great Enlightenment, the solution to human suffering, was this: if we want to avoid suffering, we must start with ourselves, because all suffering comes from our own desires. Think of it like this. If you are sad because you can't have something you want – maybe a book or a toy – you can do one of two things: you can do your best to get it, or you can stop wanting it. Either way, if you succeed, you won't be sad any more. This is what the Buddha taught. If we can stop ourselves wanting all the beautiful and pleasant things in life, and can learn to control our greed for happiness, comfort, recognition and affection, we shan't feel sad any more when, as so often happens, we fail to get what we want. He who ceases to wish for anything ceases to feel sad. If the appetite goes, the pain goes with it.

I can already hear you saying: 'That's all very well, but people can't help wanting things!' The Buddha thought otherwise. He said that it is possible to control our desires, but to do so we need to work on ourselves, perhaps even for years, so that in the end we

only have the desires we want to have. In other words, we can become masters of ourselves, in the same way that an elephant driver learns to control his elephant. A person's highest achievement on earth is to reach the point at which he or she no longer has any desires. This is the Buddha's 'inner calm', the blissful peace of someone who no longer has any wishes, someone who is kind to everyone and demands nothing. The Buddha also taught that a person who is master of all his wishes will no longer be reborn after his death. Only souls which cling to life are reborn – or so the Buddha's followers believe. He who no longer clings to life is released from the unending cycle of birth and death, and is at last freed from all suffering. Buddhists call this state 'Nirvana'.

So this was the Enlightenment that the Buddha experienced under the fig tree: the realisation that, instead of giving in to our wishes, we can break free from them – rather like when we are feeling thirsty and take no notice, and the feeling goes away. You can see that the way to do this is far from easy. The Buddha called it the 'middle way', because it lay between useless self-torment and thoughtless pleasure-seeking. The important thing is to find the right balance: in what we believe, in the decisions we make, in what we say and what we do, in the way we live, in our ambitions, in our conscience and our innermost thoughts.

That was the essential message of the Buddha's sermons, and these sermons made such a deep impression on people that many followed him and worshipped him as a god. Today there are almost as many Buddhists in the world as there are Christians, especially in South East Asia, in Sri Lanka, Tibet, China and Japan. But not many of them are able to live their lives in accordance with the Buddha's teachings, and so achieve that inner calm.

11

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The Great Teacher of a Great People

When I was a schoolboy, China was to us, as it were, 'at the other end of the world'. At most we had seen the odd picture on a teacup or a vase, so that we imagined a country of stiff little men with long plaits down their backs, and artful gardens full of hump-backed bridges and little turrets hung with tinkling bells.

Of course there never was such a fairyland, although it is true that for more than two hundred years, until 1912, Chinese men were made to wear their hair plaited in a pigtail, and that we first learnt about them through delicate objects of porcelain and ivory made by skilled craftsmen. From their palace in the capital emperors had ruled over China for more than a thousand years. The fabled emperors of China who called themselves the 'Son of Heaven', just as the Egyptian pharaoh called himself 'Son of the Sun'. But at the time I am going to talk about, around 2,500 years ago, all this was yet to come, though China was already a vast and ancient kingdom. In its fields many millions of hard-working peasants grew rice and other crops, while in the towns people strolled through the streets in sumptuous, silken gowns.

Over all these people a king ruled, and beneath him many princes who governed the many provinces of this immense country which was larger than Egypt, and larger than Assyria and Babylonia put together. But soon these princes had become so mighty that the king could no longer command their obedience. They were constantly at war with each other, the big provinces gobbling up the smaller ones. And because the empire was so vast that in all its corners the Chinese spoke quite different languages, it would probably have fallen apart altogether had they not had one thing in common. This was their script.

'But wait a minute!' you say. 'If they all spoke different languages, how could using the same script make any difference?' Well, Chinese writing is special. You can read and understand it even if you don't know a single word of the spoken language. That must be magic! No, absolutely not, it is really quite simple. Instead of writing words you write things. If you want to write 'sun', you make a picture like this:  . Then you can read it in any language: sun in English, *soleil* in French or *jih* in Mandarin Chinese. Everyone who knows the sign will know what it means. Now I'll show you how to make the sign for 'tree'. Again it is quite easy, just a couple of strokes like this:  . In Mandarin it is pronounced 'mu', but you hardly need know the sign to guess it is a tree.

'All right,' you say, 'I can see that works quite well for things you can draw, but what if you want to write "white"? Do you just paint a blob of white paint? And what if you want to write "East"? You can hardly draw a picture of "East"!' On the contrary, you'll see that it's all quite straightforward. We can write 'white' by drawing something that is white – in this case, a sunbeam. A stroke coming out of a sun  stands for 'white' – *blanc* – *pai*, and so on. 'And "East"?' East is where the sun rises, behind the trees. So I draw a picture of a sun behind a tree:  !

That is clever, isn't it? Well, it is and it isn't. There are two sides to everything! For when you think how many words and things there are in the world, in Chinese each one has its own sign which must be learnt. There are already more than forty thousand of them, and some are really complicated and hard to learn. So I think

we should congratulate our Phoenicians on their twenty-six letters, don't you? However, the Chinese have been writing like this for many thousands of years, and their signs are read in many parts of Asia, even where no Chinese is spoken. And this meant that the thoughts and principles of the great men of China were able to spread quickly and influence many people.

Now at the same time as the Buddha was seeking to relieve man's suffering in India (as you remember, that was around 500 BC), there was in China another great man who was also trying to make people happy through his teachings. And yet he was as different from the Buddha as he could possibly be. He wasn't a wealthy nobleman's son but came from a family that had fallen on hard times. He didn't become a hermit, but an adviser and teacher. Rather than helping individuals not to want things, and therefore not to suffer, what mattered most to Confucius was that everybody should live peacefully together – parents with their children and rulers with their subjects. That was his goal: to teach the right way of living together. And he succeeded. Thanks to his teachings all the peoples of China lived together for thousands of years, more contentedly and more peacefully than many other peoples of the world. So I am sure you will be interested in the teachings of Confucius – or K'ung Fu-tzu, as he was called in Chinese. They aren't hard to understand. Nor to remember. Perhaps that's why he was so successful.

What Confucius proposed is quite simple. You may not like it, but there is more wisdom in it than first meets the eye. What he taught was this: outward appearances are more important than we think – bowing to our elders, letting others go through a door first, standing up to speak to a superior, and many other similar things for which they had more rules in China than we have. All such practices, so he believed, were not just a matter of chance. They meant something, or had done once. Usually something beautiful. Which is why Confucius said: 'I believe in Antiquity, and I love it.' By this he meant that he believed in the sound good sense of all the many-thousand-year-old customs and habits, and he repeatedly urged his fellow countrymen to observe them. He thought that

everything in life ran more smoothly if people did. Almost by itself, as it were, without the need to think too hard about it. Of course such behaviour does not *make* people good, but it helps them *stay* good.

For Confucius had a very good opinion of humanity. He said that all people were born honest and good, and that, deep down, they remained so. Anyone seeing a small child playing near the water's edge will worry lest it fall in, he said. Concern for our fellow human beings and sympathy for the misfortunes of others are inborn sentiments. All we need do is to make sure we do not lose them. And that, said Confucius, is why we have families. Someone who is always good to his parents, who obeys them and cares for them – and this comes naturally to us – will treat others in the same way, and will obey the laws of the state in the same way that he obeys his father. Thus, for Confucius, the family, with its brotherly and sisterly love and respect for parents, was the most important thing of all. He called it 'the root of humanity'.

However, he didn't mean that respect and obedience should be shown only by a subject to his ruler, and not the other way round as well. On the contrary, Confucius and his disciples often came up against obstinate princes, and would usually tell them exactly what they thought of them. For a prince must take the lead in observing the forms. He must demonstrate a father's love in providing for his people and deal with them justly. If he neglects to do so, and brings suffering on his subjects, then it serves him right if they rise up and overthrow him. So taught Confucius and his followers. For a prince's first duty was to be an example to all who lived in his kingdom.

It may seem to you that what Confucius taught was obvious. But that was exactly his intention. He wanted to teach something that everyone would find easy to grasp, because it was so just and fair. Then living together would become much easier. I have already told you that he succeeded. And, thanks to his teaching, that enormous empire, with all its provinces, was saved from falling apart.

But you mustn't think that in China there weren't other people more like the Buddha, for whom what mattered was not living together and bowing to one another, but the great mysteries of the world. A wise man of this sort lived in China at about the same time as Confucius. His name was Lao-tzu. He is said to have been an official who became tired of the way people lived at court. So he gave up his job and wandered off into the lonely mountains at the frontier of China to be a hermit.

A simple border guard at a frontier pass asked him to set down his thoughts in writing, before leaving the world of men. And this Lao-tzu did. But whether the border guard could make head or tail of them I do not know, for they are very mysterious and hard to grasp. Their meaning is roughly this: in all the world – in wind and rain, in plants and animals, in the passage from day to night, in the movements of the stars – everything acts in accordance with one great law. This he calls the 'Tao', which means the Way, or the Path. Only man in his restless striving, in his many plans and projects, even in his prayers and sacrifices, resists, as it were, this law, obstructs its path and prevents its fulfilment.

Therefore the one thing we must do, said Lao-tzu, is: do nothing. Be still within ourselves. Neither look nor listen to anything around us, have no wishes or opinions. Only when a person has become like a tree or a flower, empty of all will or purpose, will he begin to feel the Tao – that great universal law which makes the heavens turn and brings the spring – begin to work within him. This teaching, as you see, is hard to grasp and harder still to follow. Perhaps, in the solitude of the distant mountains, Lao-tzu was able to take 'doing nothing' so far that the law began to work within him in the way he described. But maybe it is just as well that it was Confucius, and not Lao-tzu, who became the great teacher of his people. What do you think?

12

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The Greatest Adventure of All

Greece's age of splendour was short-lived. The Greeks could do everything but live in peace with one another. Above all, it was Athens and Sparta who could not put up with one another for long. By 430 BC the two states were locked in a long and bitter conflict. This was the Peloponnesian War. The Spartans marched on Athens, savagely laying waste to the countryside all around. They uprooted all the olive trees and this was a terrible misfortune because it takes years for a newly planted olive tree to bear fruit. The Athenians hit back, attacking the Spartan colonies to the south of Italy, at Syracuse in Sicily. There was a great deal of fighting and retaliation, a terrible plague in Athens in which Pericles died and, in the end, Athens lost the war and the city walls were torn down. As is usually the case with wars, not only Athens but the whole country was exhausted by the conflict, and the victors were no exception. To add to it all, a small tribe near Delphi, provoked by the priests of the Oracle, invaded and plundered the sanctuary of Apollo. Utter confusion followed.

A foreign tribe – though not so very foreign – took advantage of this confusion to interfere. These were the Macedonians, a

people who lived in the mountains to the north of Greece. The Macedonians were related to the Greeks, but they were barbarous and warlike. Their king, Philip, was a man of great cunning. He spoke excellent Greek and was familiar with Greek customs and culture, and his aim was to be king of all Greece. Since the invasion of the sanctuary at Delphi concerned all tribes loyal to the Greek religion, he had a good excuse to intervene. There was a politician in Athens, however, who was suspicious of Philip of Macedon. This was the famous orator Demosthenes, whose fulminating speeches at the Assembly, in which he repeatedly warned people against King Philip's schemes, are known as 'Philippics'. But Greece was too divided to put up any real defence.

At Chaeronea, in 338 BC, the Greeks, who hardly a hundred years before had held their own against the gigantic Persian host, were defeated by King Philip and tiny Macedonia. So ended the freedom of the Greeks – not that it could be said that they had made good use of it lately. But it wasn't Philip's intention to enslave or plunder Greece. He had other ideas: he planned to create a great army made up of Greeks and Macedonians with which to invade and conquer Persia.

At the time of the Persian wars such a task would have proved impossible, but things had changed. The great kings of Persia were no longer able and ambitious like Darius or mighty like Xerxes. They had long given up ruling the country themselves and contented themselves with the money their satraps sent back from the provinces. They used it to build themselves magnificent palaces and held court in great style. They ate off golden dishes and even their slaves – both male and female – were dressed in splendid robes. They loved good food, and good wines even more. So did their satraps. A kingdom like this, thought King Philip, should be easy to conquer. But before he had even completed the preparations for his campaign he was assassinated.

His son, who now inherited the whole of Greece, along with his native Macedonia, was barely twenty years old at the time. His name was Alexander. The Greeks were convinced that freedom was in their grasp – he was only a boy and they'd make short work of

him. But Alexander was no ordinary boy. From his youth he had been impatient to be king. When he was little, he was said to cry whenever his father, King Philip, conquered another Greek city, saying: 'Father won't leave anything for me to conquer when I'm king!' Now his father had left him everything. A Greek city that tried to free itself was razed, and its inhabitants sold into slavery as a warning to all. Then Alexander summoned all the Greek leaders to a meeting in the town of Corinth, to discuss the Persian campaign.

Now Alexander wasn't just a brave and ambitious warrior – there was much more to him than that. He was exceptionally handsome, with long curly hair, and he knew just about everything there was to know at the time. His tutor was the most famous teacher living: the Greek philosopher Aristotle. And if I tell you that Aristotle wasn't just Alexander's tutor but – in a manner of speaking – the teacher of mankind for 2,000 years, you'll have an idea of what I mean. In the 2,000 years that followed, whenever people failed to agree on one thing or another, they turned to his writings. He was their referee. What Aristotle said must be right. For what he had done was to gather together all the knowledge of his time. He wrote about the natural sciences – the stars, animals and plants; about history and people living together in a state – what we call politics; about the right way to reason – logic; and the right way to behave – ethics. He wrote about poetry and its beauty. And last of all he wrote down his own thoughts on a god who hovered impassive and unseen above the vault of heaven.

All this Alexander studied too, and no doubt he was a good student. Best of all he loved the stories about heroes in Homer's great lyric poems – they say he kept them under his pillow at night. But Alexander didn't spend all his time with his nose in a book. He loved sport, and riding more than anything. No one rode better than he. His father once bought a beautiful stallion that no one could tame. His name was Bucephalus. Whenever anyone tried to mount him they were thrown off. But Alexander worked out why he did it: the horse was afraid of his own shadow. So Alexander turned the horse's head towards the sun so that he couldn't see his

shadow on the ground. Stroking him gently, he swung himself onto his back and rode round to the applause of the whole court. From that time on, Bucephalus would always be his favourite horse.

Now when Alexander appeared before the Greek leaders in Corinth they greeted him warmly and paid him lavish compliments – all of them, that is, but one. A funny fellow, a philosopher named Diogenes. He had views not unlike those of the Buddha. According to him, possessions and all the things we think we need only serve to distract us and get in the way of our simple enjoyment of life. So he had given away everything he owned and now sat, almost naked, in a barrel in the market square in Corinth where he lived, as free and independent as a stray dog. Curious to meet this strange fellow, Alexander went to call on him. Dressed in shining armour, the plume on his helmet waving in the breeze, he walked up to the barrel and said to Diogenes: 'I like you. Let me know your wish and I shall grant it.' Diogenes, who had until then been comfortably sunning himself, replied: 'Indeed, Sire, I have a wish.' 'Well, what is it?' 'Your shadow has fallen over me: stand a little less between me and the sun.' Alexander is said to have been so struck by this that he said: 'If I weren't Alexander I should like to be Diogenes.'

A king like this was soon as popular with the Greek soldiers as he was with the Macedonians. They were more than willing to fight for him. So, with increasing confidence, Alexander marched on Persia. He gave everything he owned to his friends. They were horrified and said: 'But what are you leaving for yourself?' 'Hope', he is said to have replied. And that hope didn't deceive him. His army reached Asia Minor first. There he came up against the first Persian army. Although larger than his own, it turned out to be no more than a milling host of soldiers with no effective leader. The Persians were quickly put to flight, for Alexander's army fought bravely, and Alexander most bravely of all in the heat of the fray.

It so happens that vanquished Asia Minor is the scene of the famous story of the Gordian Knot. It went like this. In the city of Gordium there was a temple, and in it an old chariot whose shaft

was held fast by a strap that was tightly and intricately knotted. Now it had been foretold that he who could untie the enchanted knot would become master of the world. Alexander wasted little time fiddling with a knot that was clearly far worse than the sort you get in your shoelace when you are in a hurry. He did something my mother never let me do: he took his sword and simply chopped it through. The story's meaning is twofold: Alexander would conquer the world in fulfilment of the ancient prophecy, and he would do it with the sword. As indeed he did.

You will find it easier to follow the rest of this story of conquest if you take a look at the map (on pages 70 and 71). Alexander could have gone on to attack Persia directly, but rather than risk an attack from the rear by the Persian provinces of Phoenicia and Egypt, he chose to subdue them first. The Persians tried to block his way near a town called Issus, but Alexander crushed them. He plundered the magnificent royal tents and made off with the king's treasure. He captured the king's wife and sisters, too, and treated them with the utmost respect and courtesy. That was in 333 BC, an easy date to remember.

Phoenicia was less easy to conquer. For seven long months Alexander laid siege to the city of Tyre. Its destruction, when it came, was all the more brutal. Egypt was easier. Glad to be rid of the Persians, the Egyptians soon surrended to Persia's foe. But Alexander was determined to be a true ruler of Egypt, the sort they were used to. He marched across the desert to a temple of the sun god and had the priests proclaim him Son of the Sun, and therefore righteous Pharaoh. Before he left Egypt to continue his campaign, he founded a new city by the sea and named it after himself: Alexandria. It is still there today, and was for a long time one of the richest and most powerful cities in the world.

Only now did he march on Persia. In the meantime the Persian king had assembled a huge army and was waiting for Alexander near ancient Nineveh at a place called Gaugamela. He sent messengers ahead to meet Alexander and offered him half his kingdom and his daughter in marriage, if only he would agree not to fight. 'If I were Alexander, I'd take it,' said Alexander's friend, Parmenios.

'And so would I, if I were Parmenios,' was Alexander's reply. Half the world wasn't enough for Alexander. With that, he defeated the last and greatest Persian army. The king of Persia fled into the mountains, where he was assassinated.

Alexander punished the assassins. Now he was king of the whole of Persia. Greece, Egypt, Phoenicia, Palestine, Babylonia, Assyria, Asia Minor and Persia – all these were now part of his empire. He set about putting it in order. His commands could now be said to reach all the way from the Nile to Samarkand.

This would probably have been enough for you or me, but Alexander was far from satisfied. He wanted to rule over new, undiscovered lands. He longed to see the mysterious, far-off peoples merchants talked about when they came to Persia with rare goods from the East. Like Dionysus in the Greek legend, he wanted to ride in triumph to the sun-burnished Indians of the East, and there receive their tribute. So he spent little time in the Persian capital, and in 327 BC led his army on the most perilous adventures over unknown and unexplored mountain passes and down along the valley of the Indus into India. But the Indians did not submit to him willingly. The hermits and penitents in the forests denounced the conquerors from the distant West in their sermons. And the soldiers of the warrior caste fought valiantly, so that every city had to be besieged and conquered in its turn.

Alexander himself was no less valiant, as is shown by his encounter with an Indian king. King Porus had lain in wait for him on a branch of the Indus River, with a mighty army of war elephants and foot soldiers. When Alexander reached the river the king's army was positioned on the far bank, and Alexander and his soldiers had no choice but to cross the river in the face of the enemy host. His success was one of his greatest feats. Yet even more remarkable was his victory over that army, in the stifling heat of India. Porus was brought before him in chains. 'What do you want of me?' asked Alexander. 'Only that you treat me as befits a king.' 'And that is all?' 'That is all,' came the reply, 'there is no more to be said.' Alexander was so impressed that he gave Porus back his kingdom.

He himself wished to march on even further towards the east, to the even more mysterious and unknown peoples who lived in the valley of the River Ganges. But his soldiers had had enough. They didn't want to march on to the end of the world. They wanted to go home. Alexander begged and pleaded and threatened to go on alone. He shut himself up in his tent and refused to come out for three whole days. But in the end the soldiers had their way, and he was forced to turn back.

But they did agree to one thing: they wouldn't go home by the same route. Of course it would have been far the simplest thing to do, since those regions had already been conquered. But Alexander wanted new sights and new conquests. So they followed the Indus down as far as the sea. There he put part of his army onto ships and sent them home that way. He himself chose to endure new and terrible hardships as he marched with the rest of the army over pitiless desert wastes. Alexander bore all the privations his army endured and took no more water and slept no more than the next man. He fought in the foremost ranks.

On one occasion, he only escaped death by a miracle. That day they were besieging a fortress. Ladders had been set in place to scale the walls. Alexander was first up. He had reached the top when the ladder snapped under the weight of the soldiers behind, leaving him alone on top of the wall. His men shouted to him to jump back down. Instead he leapt straight into the city and, with his back to the ramparts, defended himself with his shield against overwhelming odds. By the time the others were able to scale the wall to rescue him, he had already been hit by an arrow. It must have been thrilling!

In the end they returned to the Persian capital. But since Alexander had burnt it down when he conquered it, he chose to set up his court in Babylon. This was no idle choice: Son of the Sun to the Egyptians, King of Kings to the Persians, with troops in India and in Athens, he was determined to show the world that he was its rightful ruler.

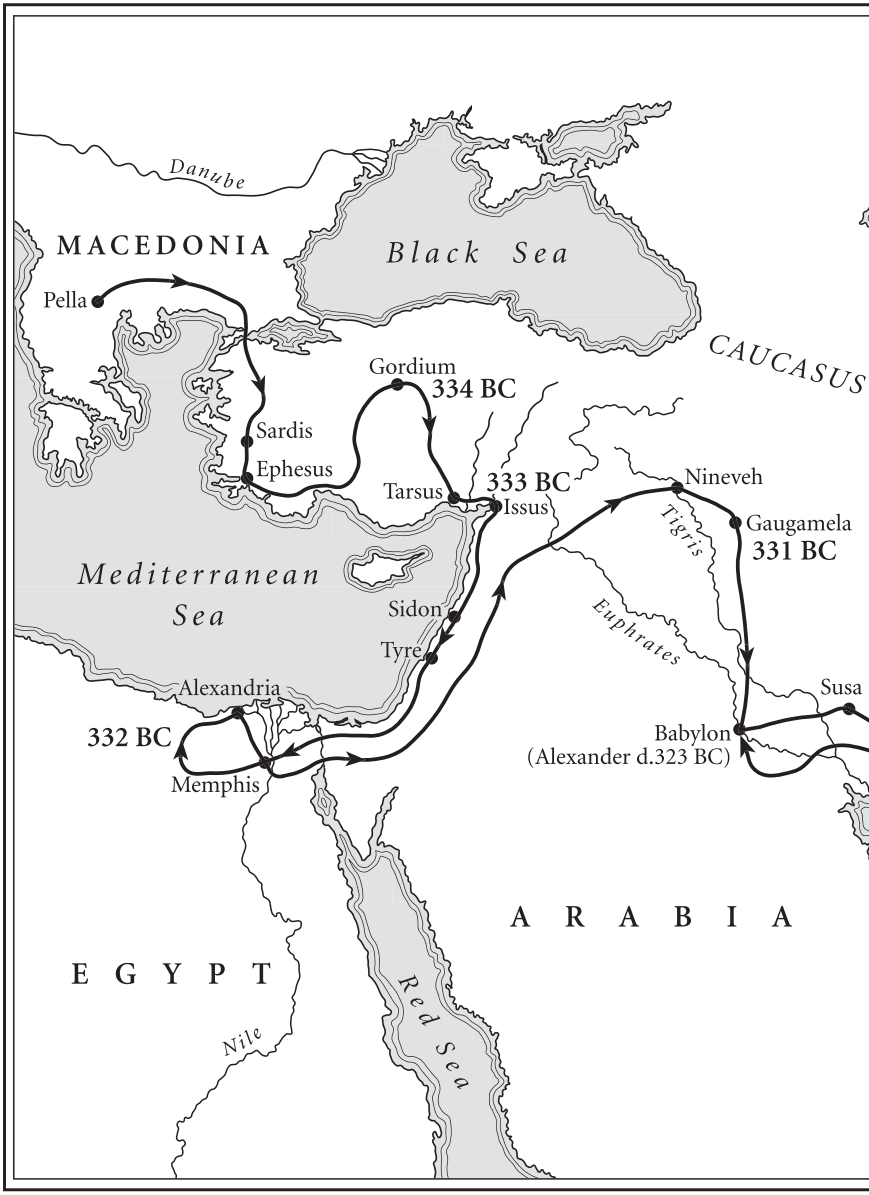
It may not have been pride that prompted him to do so. As a pupil of Aristotle he understood human nature and knew that

power needs pomp and dignity if it wants to make the right impression. So he introduced all the age-old ceremonies of the Babylonian and Persian courts. Anyone who came into his presence had to fall on their knees before him and speak to him as if he were a god. And in the manner of Oriental kings he had several wives, among them the daughter of the Persian king, Darius, which made him that king's rightful successor. For Alexander didn't wish to be seen as a foreign conqueror. His aim was to combine the wisdom and splendour of the East with the clear thinking and vitality of the Greeks, and so create something entirely new and wonderful.

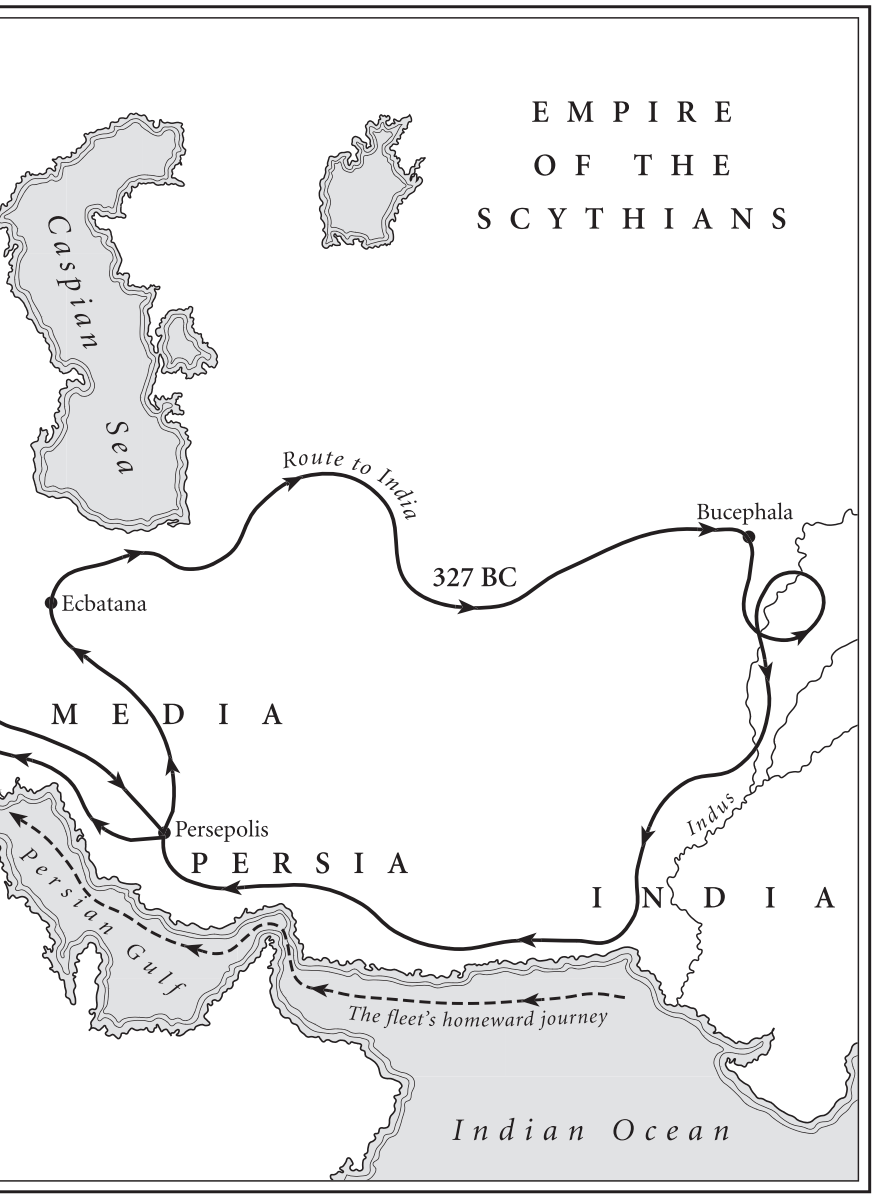
But this idea didn't please the Greeks and Macedonians at all. They were the conquerors, so they should be the masters. What was more, they were free men, and used to their freedom. They weren't going to bow down to any man on earth – or, as they put it, lick any man's boots. His Greek friends and the soldiers became increasingly rebellious, and he was forced to send them home. Alexander never realised his great ambition of mingling the two peoples, even though he handed out rich dowries to ten thousand Macedonian and Greek soldiers so that they could marry Persian women, and laid on a great wedding feast for all.

He had great plans. He wanted to found many more cities like Alexandria. He wanted to build roads, and change the face of the world with his military campaigns, whether the Greeks liked it or not. Just imagine, in those days, to have a regular postal service running from India to Athens! But in the midst of all his plans he died, in Nebuchadnezzar's summer palace, in 323 BC. He was thirty-two years old – an age when most people's lives have barely begun.

To the question of who should succeed him, he answered, in his fever: 'He who is most worthy.' But there was no one. The generals and princes in his entourage were greedy, dissolute and dishonest. They fought over the empire until it fell apart. Egypt was then governed by a family of generals – the Ptolemies. The Seleucids ruled Mesopotamia, and the Attalids Asia Minor. India was simply abandoned.



Follow the arrows! They will take you in Alexander's footsteps as he conquers half the world.


EMPIRE
OF THE
SCYTHIANS
Caspian
Sea
Route to India
327 BC
Bucephala
Ecbatana
MEDIA
Persepolis
PERSIA
Indus
INDIA
Persian Gulf
The fleet's homeward journey
Indian Ocean

But although the empire was in pieces, Alexander's grand project slowly went on taking shape. Greek art and the spirit of Greece had penetrated Persia and passed on through India to China. Meanwhile the Greeks themselves had learnt that there was more to the world than Athens and Sparta, and more to do than waste their lives in endless squabbling between Dorians and Ionians. And, having lost the little political power they once had, the Greeks went on to be the bearers of the greatest intellectual force there has ever been, the force we know as Greek culture. This force was protected and preserved in some very special fortresses. Can you guess what those fortresses were? They were libraries. Alexandria, for instance, had a Greek library that held around seven hundred thousand scrolls. Those seven hundred thousand scrolls were the Greek soldiers who set off to conquer the world. And that empire is still standing today.

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New Wars and New Warriors

Alexander only went east. Although 'only' may not be quite the right word! But the lands that lay to the west of Greece did not tempt him – just a couple of Phoenician and Greek colonies and a handful of densely wooded peninsulas inhabited by tribes of stubborn and unruly peasants. One of these peninsulas was Italy, and one of the peasant tribes, the Romans. At the time of Alexander the Great, the Roman empire was no more than a little patch of land in the heart of Italy, and Rome a tiny city of twisting streets within strong walls. But Rome's inhabitants were a proud people. They loved recounting stories of the greatness of their past and were convinced of a great future. Their history, as they told it, went back to ancient Troy. A Trojan named Aeneas fled to Italy. His descendants were the twin brothers Romulus and Remus, sons of Mars, the god of war, who were suckled and raised in the forest by a wild she-wolf. Romulus, so the myth goes, founded Rome. They even had a date for it, 753 BC, and would later count the years from that date as the Greeks did from the Olympiads. They would say: in such-and-such a year after the city's founding. So, for example, the

Roman year 100 is what we would call the 653rd year before the birth of Christ – or 653 BC.

The Romans had lots of other stories about the glorious past of their little city. Tales of kings, both good and bad, and their wars with neighbouring cities – I almost said with neighbouring villages. The seventh and last king was called Tarquin the Proud, and he was said to have been assassinated by a nobleman named Brutus. From that time onwards, power was in the hands of the nobility. These were the patricians – the word means something like 'city fathers' – although in those days they weren't citizens as we know them, but old landowning families with vast estates of fields and meadows. And they alone had the right to choose officials to govern the city, once there were no more kings.

In Rome the highest officials were the consuls. There were always two of them ruling jointly, and they held office for just one year. Then they had to stand down. Of course, the patricians weren't the only people who lived in the city, but if you didn't have illustrious ancestors or great estates you weren't noble. The others were the plebeians, and they were almost a caste of their own as in India. A plebeian couldn't marry a patrician. Still less could he become a consul. He wasn't even allowed to voice his opinion at the People's Assembly on the Field of Mars outside the city gates. But the plebeians were many and every inch as strong-willed and stubborn as the patricians. Unlike the gentle Indians they didn't willingly submit. On more than one occasion they threatened to leave the city unless they were treated better and given a share of the fields and pastures which the patricians liked to keep for themselves. After a relentless struggle which went on for more than a hundred years, the plebeians of Rome finally succeeded in obtaining the same rights as the patricians. Of the two consuls, one would be a patrician, the other a plebeian. So justice was done. The end of this long and complicated struggle coincided with the time of Alexander the Great.

From this struggle you will have gained some idea of what the Romans were like. They were not as quick-thinking or as inventive as the Athenians. Nor did they take such delight in beautiful things,

in buildings, statues and poetry. Nor was reflecting on the world and on life so vital to them. But when they set out to do something, they did it, even if it took two hundred years, for they were peasants through and through, not restless seafarers like the Athenians. Their homes, their livestock and their land – these were what mattered. They cared little for travel, they founded no colonies. They loved their native city and its soil and would do anything and everything to increase its prosperity and power. They would fight for it and they would die for it. Beside their native soil there was one other thing that was important to them: their law. Not the law that is just and fair and before which all men are equal, but the law which is law. The law that is laid down. Their laws were inscribed on twelve bronze tablets set out in the marketplace. And those few, stern words meant precisely what they said. No exceptions, no compassion, no mercy. For these were the laws of their ancestors and they must be right.

There are many old and wonderful stories telling of the love Romans had for their native land and of their faithfulness to its laws. Stories of fathers who sentenced their own sons to death without turning a hair, because the law so demanded, and of heroes who didn't hesitate to give their lives for their fellow countrymen on the battlefield or in captivity. While we don't have to believe every word of them, such stories give us an idea of what was expected of a Roman: the harshness and discipline that it was his duty to show towards himself and to others whenever his native land or the law were involved. Nothing could shake these Romans. They never gave up. Not even when their city was captured and burnt to the ground by tribesmen from the north called Gauls, in 390 BC. They just rebuilt it, fortified it, and gradually brought the small surrounding towns back under their control.

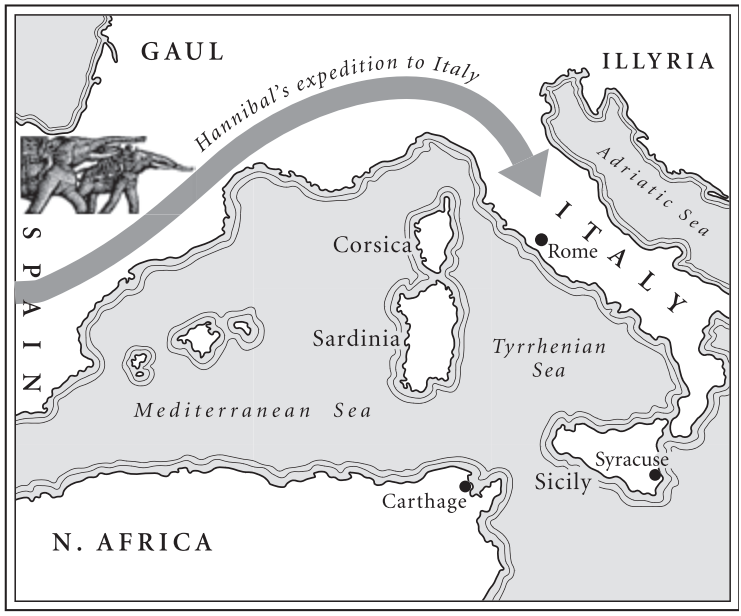
After the time of Alexander the Great, however, small wars against small towns ceased to satisfy them and they set about conquering the entire peninsula. Not, as Alexander had done, in one single great campaign, but in easy stages – town by town, region by region, and with all their characteristic single-mindedness and determination. It usually went like this. Because Rome was a powerful city, other Italian cities wanted to be its allies. This suited the

Romans very well, and all would go smoothly as long as the allies behaved themselves. But if a disagreement arose that led to an ally's refusing to follow Rome's instructions, it would mean war – a war which Rome's regiments or legions usually won. Now it so happened that one day a city in the south of Italy asked a Greek prince and commander called Pyrrhus to come to its aid against Rome. He arrived with war elephants – whose use the Greeks had learnt from the Indians – and succeeded in defeating the Roman legions. But at a cost: he lost so many of his men that he is said to have cried out, 'One more such victory and we are lost!' Which is why people still speak of a 'Pyrrhic victory' if it has been won at too great a cost.

Pyrrhus soon withdrew his forces, leaving the Romans to become lords of the whole of southern Italy. But even that was not enough for them. They aimed to conquer Sicily as well, drawn by the island's fertile soil which produced such good crops, and by its wealthy Greek colonies. But Sicily didn't belong to the Greeks any more: it was under the control of the Phoenicians.

Now as you remember, even before the Greeks, the Phoenicians had set up trading posts and founded cities everywhere they went. These were mainly in southern Spain and along the coasts of North Africa. One of the African cities was Carthage, and it lay immediately opposite Sicily. Carthage was the richest and mightiest city for miles around and the Romans referred to its Phoenician inhabitants as 'Punics'. Its ships went far across the seas, taking goods from one country to another and, since they were so near Sicily, they fetched grain from there.

Because of this the Carthaginians had become Rome's first real opponents – and very dangerous ones too. Unlike the Romans they didn't usually fight themselves, but could afford to pay foreign mercenaries to fight on their behalf. In the war which now broke out in Sicily they won the early battles – not least because the Romans didn't have many ships, weren't used to sea voyages and sea warfare, and knew next to nothing about shipbuilding. But one day a Carthaginian ship ran aground off Italy. Using it as a model, and working in furious haste, the Romans managed to build a whole fleet of identical ships within two months. It took all the



Carthage and Rome, fighting for the possession of Sicily, drove Hannibal to bring his army over the Alps.

money they had, but with their brand new fleet they defeated the Carthaginians, who were soon forced to cede Sicily to the Romans. This happened in 241 BC.

However, it was only the start of the war between the two cities. They've taken Sicily, the Carthaginians said to themselves, so we'll take Spain. Now at the time we're talking about there weren't any Romans in Spain, only wild tribes. Even so, the Romans would not allow it. It so happened that there was a Carthaginian commander in Spain whose son Hannibal was a truly extraordinary young man. Reared among soldiers, he knew everything there was to know about warfare. Hunger and cold, heat and thirst, forced marches night and day, he had seen them all. He was fearless, unbelievably tenacious and a born leader. He could outwit the enemy with his cunning and sum up a situation in an instant, and he had a cool head. He was that rare thing: a man who made war like a chess-player, carefully considering each move before he made it.

But above all he was a good Carthaginian. He already hated the Romans for trying to subdue his native city, and their meddling in Spain was the last straw. He left Spain immediately for Italy, equipped with war elephants and a large army – a truly formidable force. To reach Italy he had to take his army and all his elephants across the whole of southern France, across rivers and over mountains and right up over the Alps. He may have taken the pass that goes over the shoulder of Mount Cenis, as it is known today. I've been there myself, following a wide, winding road. But how they found their way over those wild mountains in those days, with no roads to follow, is impossible to imagine. Surrounded by deep ravines, sheer precipices and slippery grass ledges – I wouldn't want to be up there with one elephant, let alone forty, and by then it was already September and there was snow on the mountain tops. But Hannibal found a way through for his army and they finally reached Italy. There he was confronted by the Romans, but he defeated them in a bloody battle. Later a second Roman army surprised his camp under cover of darkness. But Hannibal, having been forewarned, saved himself with a cunning trick. He tied flaming torches to the horns of a herd of cattle and drove them down the mountainside where his camp was billeted. In the darkness the Roman soldiers mistook them for Hannibal's soldiers and rushed off in hot pursuit. How I would love to have seen their faces when they finally caught up with them and found they were cows!

The Romans had a very gifted general called Quintus Fabius Maximus, who wanted to avoid meeting Hannibal in battle. He believed that Hannibal would eventually become impatient and, being in a foreign country, was bound to make a blunder. But the Romans didn't like his waiting game and mocked Quintus Fabius Maximus, calling him 'Cunctator' – 'Hesitator'. Ignoring his advice, they attacked Hannibal at a place called Cannae. There they were decisively beaten: forty thousand dead on the Roman side. This battle, which took place in 217 BC, was their bloodiest defeat. Yet despite his victory Hannibal did not march on Rome. Favouring caution, he stayed put and waited for reinforcements from home. And this was his undoing. For Carthage sent no fresh troops and

his men began to run wild, robbing and plundering the Italian cities. Though the Romans no longer dared attack him directly, they called up all their men to fight. Every one of them – even young boys and slaves. Every man in Italy became a soldier, and these weren't hired soldiers like Hannibal's. They were Romans, and you know what that means. They fought the Carthaginians both in Sicily and in Spain. And everywhere they fought, as long as it wasn't Hannibal they were fighting, they always won.

After fourteen years in Italy Hannibal finally returned to Africa, where his countrymen needed him. The Romans, led by Scipio their general, had reached the gates of Carthage. And there Hannibal met his defeat. In 202 BC the Romans conquered Carthage. The Carthaginians were made to burn their entire fleet and pay the Romans a huge sum of money. Hannibal fled, and later poisoned himself rather than fall into the hands of the Romans. Emboldened by its great victory, Rome now conquered Greece, still under Macedonian rule and as disunited and fragmented as ever. They brought home the most beautiful works of art from Corinth and reduced the city to ashes.

Rome also expanded northwards into the land of the Gauls who, two hundred years earlier, had sacked Rome. They conquered the region we know as northern Italy. Yet even this was not enough. Carthage was still standing, a fact which many Romans would not accept, in particular a patrician named Cato. Cato was a just and honourable man, but notoriously severe. Whenever the city council met at the Senate, no matter what was discussed, he is said to have ended every speech with the words: 'For the rest, I propose that Carthage be destroyed.' And in the end that is precisely what they did. The Romans invented a pretext to attack. The Carthaginians defended themselves desperately, and even after the city had fallen the Roman soldiers had to fight on, house by house, through the streets for six more days. When the city was finally conquered, every Carthaginian had either been killed or captured. The Romans razed all the houses and turned the land where Carthage had once stood into a plain. It was 146 BC. And that was the end of Hannibal's city. Now Rome was the mightiest city in the world.

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An Enemy of History

If you have always found history boring, you are going to enjoy this chapter.

At about the same time as Hannibal was in Italy (that is, shortly after 220 BC), an emperor was ruling over China who hated history so much that, in 213 BC, he ordered all history books and all old reports and records to be burnt, along with all collections of songs and poems and the writings of Confucius and Lao-tzu – in fact everything he considered to be useless rubbish. The only books he permitted were ones on agriculture and other useful subjects. Anybody found in possession of any other sort of book was to be put to death.

This emperor was Shih Huang-ti, the first emperor of all China and one of the greatest warriors there has ever been. He was not born into an imperial family but was the son of one of the princes I told you about, who ruled the many Chinese provinces. His province was called Ch'in, from which his family took its name, and it is likely that the whole country now known as China was named after him.

There are certainly more than enough reasons for China to take its name from the Prince of Ch'in. Not only did he make himself the first emperor of all China, by conquering all the other provinces one by one, but he transformed the entire country. He threw out all the princes and totally reorganised his empire. And if you ask me why he hated history and destroyed all those books, it was because he wanted to wipe out every trace of how things had been done before, so he could build an entirely new China – *his* China – starting from scratch. He built roads everywhere and began work on an enormous project: the Great Wall of China. Today it is still a massive construction, a double wall made of stone with tall towers and castellations, winding its symmetrical way over plains, through deep ravines and up steep mountain slopes as it follows the line of the frontier for all of four thousand miles. Shih Huang-ti built it to protect China's many hardworking and peaceable peasants and townspeople from the wild tribes of the steppes, whose warlike horsemen roamed the vast plains of inner Asia. It had to be strong enough to resist their incessant raids, with all their looting and killing. And he succeeded. Of course, over the centuries the wall has often been rebuilt and strengthened, but it is still there today.

Shih Huang-ti didn't have a long reign. Soon a new family ascended the throne of the Son of Heaven. This was the Han family. They saw no need to undo all Shih Huang-ti's good works, and under their rule China remained strong and unified. But by now the Hans were no longer enemies of history. On the contrary, they remembered China's debt to the teachings of Confucius and set about searching high and low for all those ancient writings. It turned out that many people had had the courage not to burn them after all. Now they were carefully collected and valued twice as highly as before. And to become a government official, you had to know them all.

China is, in fact, the only country in the world to be ruled for hundreds of years, not by the nobility, nor by soldiers, nor even by the priesthood, but by scholars. No matter where you came from, or whether you were rich or poor, as long as you gained high marks