

THE ANCIENT WORLD

*A Social
and Cultural History*

D. BRENDAN NAGLE



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THE ANCIENT WORLD

For Garrett and Eliza

Preface

Modern authors of social and cultural history can generally assume that their readers will share with them a number of fundamental presuppositions about the nature of present-day society. They can take for granted, for example, that there will be no argument with the proposition that society is something very different or even opposed to the state and its institutions. Similarly, they do not have to establish that the modern state is a complex mosaic of classes and cultures which interact in turn with a large number of public, semi-public, and private bodies such as churches, corporations, educational institutions, labor unions, branches of government, cultural organizations, and the like.

Unfortunately, a similar set of shared presuppositions does not exist for the ancient world. In a majority of cases none of the institutions mentioned above existed in antiquity and those that did functioned at such a rudimentary level that they counted for little. Even the ancient world's class system operated on quite a different set of principles to that of the modern state. Particularly in their classical formulations ancient societies were tightly knit communities in which political, cultural, and religious life closely intermingled. Society was not something set apart from the state but was, rather, closely identified with it. As a result, it is possible to write of ancient society as an independent sphere of human activity in the modern sense in only a very limited way, and what this book seeks to do, instead, is to pursue the distinctive forms society took in the ancient world and especially the unusual relationship between society and the state that characterized the social order of antiquity. Detailed descriptions of the highly integrated world of the classical period are given, placing special emphasis on its culture, social structures, moral values, and political processes. The inner workings of the Athenian democracy and the Roman Republic are discussed at length, and art, literature, and religion—especially how they functioned *vis-à-vis* society—receive prominent attention. At the same time, recognizing that the closely unified societies of the classical period changed radically in the course of time, special consideration is given to the much altered

world of the Hellenistic period (third to second centuries B.C.) and the Roman Empire (first to fifth centuries A.D.). The last chapter describes the new society that began to make its appearance toward the end of antiquity and that laid the foundations for the modern world.

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Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are my own.

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ONE

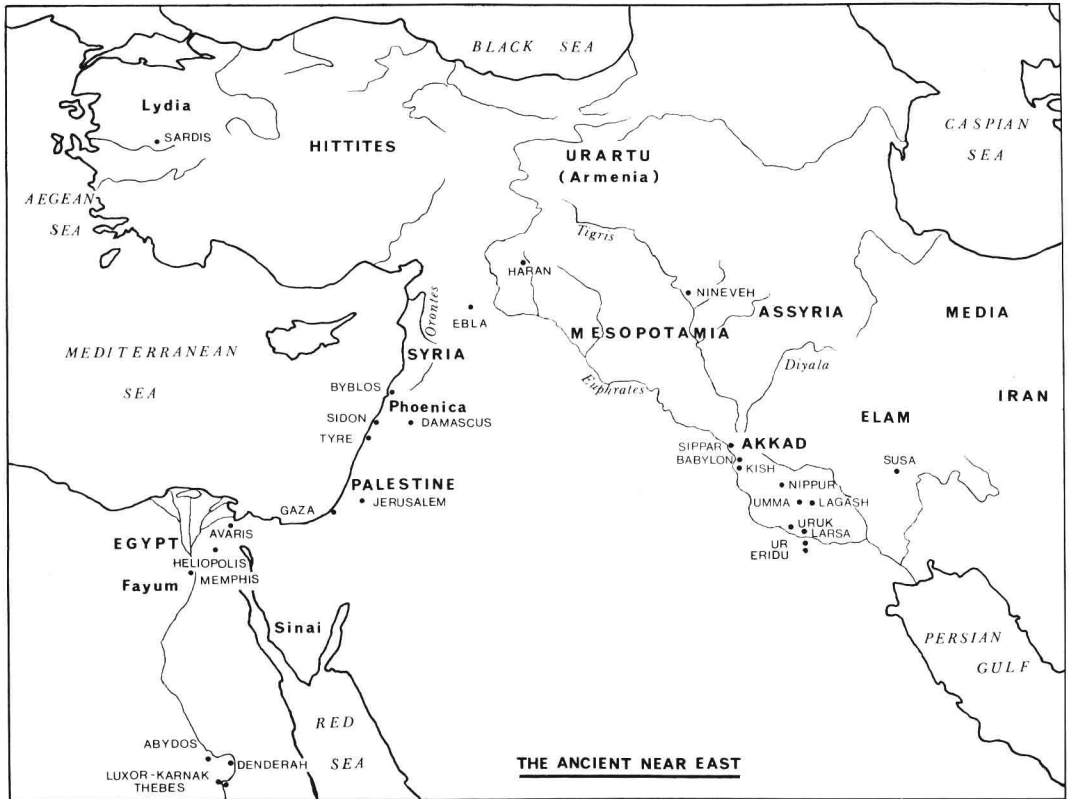
THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST



The Early Civilization of Mesopotamia and Egypt

So far as we can presently tell, the great leap from peasant village to true city occurred about 3000 B.C. in the land of Sumer in the southern part of Mesopotamia. Here for the first time human energies were directed to the creation of great temple complexes and large-scale irrigation and flood-control projects. Directing these operations was a talented elite who drew upon the then revolutionary information-recovery technique of writing to control the collection, storage, and redistribution of the agricultural surpluses on which this new mode of human organization depended. In time the capacity of writing evolved to the point where it was possible to record in different literary forms the religious and cultural values of the civilization. The resulting body of literature, through various intermediaries, has influenced western cultural values to the present time.

Paradoxically, this spectacular development took place in what is, from many viewpoints, a hostile environment. The climate of central and southern Mesopotamia is dry and subtropical, with temperatures reaching 120°F in the summers and an average annual rainfall of less than ten inches. Unlike the Nile in Egypt, which floods at a time suitable to the cereal crop cycle, the Tigris and the Euphrates flood between April and June, too late for the summer planting and too early for the winter planting. As a result, agriculture is possible only by means of artificial irrigation and careful crop management. In order to bring streams to the fields during the planting seasons, when river water levels are low, deep canals must be dug and maintained. Silting is a perennial problem and can be resolved only by unending labor and a high degree of community cooperation. Another difficulty is salinization, especially in the south where the low water-table encourages salt to collect and rise to the surface when the fields are not properly leached by fresh inundation. Without adequate drainage, the soil quickly becomes sterile, and difficult if not impossible to restore to productivity. The rivers themselves, with their unpredictable and often violent flood levels, are yet another threat to the cities and villages precariously located along their



banks. Without human intervention, southern Mesopotamia hovers between swamp and desert. Yet it offers immense advantages over the surrounding regions. When properly irrigated, the land is extraordinarily fertile and in antiquity it was one of the richest food-producing areas in the world. The rivers themselves provide excellent means of transportation, and their regular burden of alluvium, although not as rich as that of the Nile, constitutes the basis for the natural fertility of the region. It was these factors, together with the organizational abilities of the Mesopotamians that sustained the brilliant civilizations that flourished there for thousands of years.

THE FOOD-PRODUCING AND URBAN REVOLUTIONS

Broadly speaking, the development of Mesopotamian civilization occurred in two stages. The first, the Food-Producing Revolution, took place between 8000 and 4000 B.C. and the second, the Urban Revolution, about 1000 years later.