I

EARLY SOCIETIES

From the Beginning of Time

Writing and City Life

EARLY SOCIETIES

IN this section, we will read about two themes relating to early societies. The first is about the beginnings of human existence, from the remote past, millions of years ago. You will learn how humans first emerged in Africa and how archaeologists have studied these early phases of history from remains of bones and stone tools.

Archaeologists have made attempts to reconstruct the lives of early people – to find out about the shelters in which they lived, the food they ate by gathering plant produce and hunting animals, and the ways in which they expressed themselves. Other important developments include the use of fire and of language. And, finally, you will see whether the lives of people who live by hunting and gathering today can help us to understand the past.

The second theme deals with some of the earliest cities – those of Mesopotamia, present-day Iraq. These cities developed around temples, and were centres of long-distance trade. Archaeological evidence – remains of old settlements – and an abundance of written material are used to reconstruct the lives of the different people who lived there – craftspeople, scribes, labourers, priests, kings and queens. You will notice how pastoral people played an important role in some of these towns. A question to think about is whether the many activities that went on in cities would have been possible if writing had not developed.

You may wonder as to how people who for millions of years had lived in forests, in caves or temporary shelters and rock shelters began to eventually live in villages and cities. Well, the story is a long one and is related to several developments that took place at least 5,000 years before the establishment of the first cities.

One of the most far-reaching changes was the gradual shift from nomadic life to settled agriculture, which began around 10,000 years ago. As you will see in Theme 1, prior to the adoption of agriculture, people had gathered plant produce as a source of food. Slowly, they learnt more about different kinds of plants – where they grew, the seasons when they bore fruit and so on.

From this, they learnt to grow plants. In West Asia, wheat and barley, peas and various kinds of pulses were grown. In East and Southeast Asia, the crops that grew easily were millet and rice. Millet was also grown in Africa. Around the same time, people learnt how to domesticate animals such as sheep, goat, cattle, pig and donkey. Plant fibres such as cotton and flax, and animal fibres such as wool were now woven into cloth. Somewhat later, about 5,000 years ago, domesticated animals such as cattle and donkeys were harnessed to ploughs and carts.

These developments led to other changes as well. When people grew crops, they had to stay in the same place till the crops ripened. So, settled life became more common. And with that, people built more permanent structures in which to live.

This was also the time when some communities learnt how to make earthen pots. These were used to store grain and other produce, and to prepare and cook a variety of foods made from the new grains that were cultivated. In fact, a great deal of attention was given to processing foods to make them tasty and digestible.

The way stone tools were made also changed. While earlier methods of making tools continued, some tools and equipment were now smoothened and polished by an elaborate process of grinding. New equipment included mortars and pestles for processing and grinding grain, as well as stone axes and hoes, which were used to clear land for cultivation, as well as for digging the earth to sow seeds.

In some areas, people learnt to tap the ores of metals such as copper and tin. Sometimes, copper ores were collected and used for their distinctive bluish-green colour. This prepared the way for the more extensive use of metal for jewellery and for tools subsequently.

There was also a growing familiarity with other kinds of produce from distant lands (and seas). This included wood, stones, including precious and semi-precious stones, metals and shell, and obsidian (hardened) volcanic lava. Clearly, people were going from place to place, carrying goods and ideas with them.

With increasing trade, the growth of villages and towns, and the movements of people, in place of the small communities of early people there now grew small states. While these changes took place slowly, over several thousand years, the pace quickened with the growth of the first cities. Also, the changes had far-reaching consequences. Some scholars have described this as a revolution, as the lives of people were probably transformed beyond recognition. Look out for continuities and changes as you explore these two contrasting themes in early history.

Remember too, that we have selected only some examples of early societies for detailed study. There were other kinds of early societies, including farming communities and pastoral peoples. And there were other peoples who were hunter-gatherers as well as city dwellers, apart from the examples selected.

How to Read Timelines

You will find a timeline like this one in every section.
Each of these will indicate some of the major processes and events in world history.

As you study the timelines, remember—

- Processes through which ordinary women and men have shaped history are far more difficult to date than events such as a war between kings.
- Some dates may indicate the beginning of a process, or when it reaches maturation.
- Historians are constantly revising dates in the light of new evidence, or new ways of assessing old data.
- While we have divided the timelines on a geographical basis as a matter of convenience, actual historical developments often transcend these divisions.
- Also, there is a chronological overlap in historical processes.
- Only some landmarks in human history have been shown here – we have highlighted the processes dealt with in the themes that follow, which also have separate timelines.
- Wherever you see a*, you will also find an illustration related to the date along the column.
- Blank spaces do not mean that nothing was happening – sometimes these indicate that we do not as yet know what was happening.
- You will be learning more about South Asian history in general and Indian history in particular next year. The dates selected for South Asia are only indicative of some of the developments in the subcontinent.

TIMELINE I

(6 MYA TO 1 BCE)

This timeline focuses on the emergence of humans and the domestication of plants and animals. It highlights some major technological developments such as the use of fire, metals, plough agriculture and the wheel. Other processes that are shown include the emergence of cities and the use of writing. You will also find mention of some of the earliest empires – a theme that will be developed in Timeline II.

DATES	AFRICA	EUROPE
6 mya-500,000 BP	*Australopithecus* fossils (5.6 mya) Evidence of use of fire (1.4 mya)	
500,000-150,000 BP	*Homo sapiens* fossils (195,000 BP)	Evidence of use of fire (400,000 BP)
150,000-50,000 BP		
50,000-30,000		*Homo sapiens* fossils (40,000)
30,000-10,000	Paintings in caves/rock shelters (27,500)	Paintings in caves/rock shelters (especially France and Spain)
8000-7000 BCE		
7000-6000	Domestication of cattle and dogs	
6000-5000		Cultivation of wheat and barley (Greece)
5000-4000		
4000-3000	Domestication of donkey, cultivation of millet, use of copper	Use of copper (Crete)
3000-2000	Plough agriculture, first kingdoms, cities, pyramids, calendar, hieroglyphic script*, writing on papyrus (Egypt)	Domestication of horse (eastern Europe)
2000-1900		Cities, palaces, use of bronze, the potter's wheel, development of trade (Crete)
1900-1800		
1800-1700		
1700-1600		Development of a script (Crete)*
1600-1500		
1500-1400	Use of glass bottles (Egypt)	
1400-1300		
1300-1200		
1200-1100		
1100-1000		Use of iron
1000-900		
900-800	City of Carthage established in North Africa by the Phoenicians from West Asia; growing trade around the Mediterranean	
800-700	Use of iron (Sudan)	First Olympic games (Greece, 776 BCE)
700-600	Use of iron (Egypt)	
600-500		Use of coins* (Greece); establishment of the Roman republic (510 BCE)
500-400	Persians invade Egypt	Establishment of a 'democracy' in Athens (Greece)
400-300	Establishment of Alexandria, Egypt (332 BCE), which becomes a major centre of learning	Alexander of Macedonia conquers Egypt and parts of West Asia (336-323 BCE) 
300-200		
200-100		
100-1 BCE		

DATES	ASIA	SOUTH ASIA
6mya-500,000 BP	Use of fire (700,000 BP, China)	Stone age site in Riwat (1,900,000 BP, Pakistan)
500,000-150,000 BP		
150,000-50,000 BP	*Homo sapiens* fossils (100,000 BP, West Asia)	
50,000-30,000 BP		
30,000-10,000 BP	Domestication of dog (14,000, West Asia)	Cave paintings at Bhimbetka (Madhya Pradesh); *Homo sapiens* fossils (25,500 BP, Sri Lanka)
8000-7000 BCE	Domestication of sheep and goat, cultivation of wheat and barley (West Asia)	
7000-6000	Domestication of pig and cattle (West and East Asia)	Early agricultural settlements (Baluchistan)
6000-5000	Domestication of chicken, cultivation of millet and yam (East Asia)	
5000-4000	Cultivation of cotton (South Asia); use of copper (West Asia)	
4000-3000	Use of the potter's wheel, wheel for transport (3600 BCE), writing (3200 BCE, Mesopotamia), use of bronze	Use of copper
3000-2000	Plough agriculture, cities (Mesopotamia); silk-making (China); domestication of horse (Central Asia); cultivation of rice (Southeast Asia)	Cities of the Harappan civilisation, use of script* (c.2700 BCE) 
2000-1900	Domestication of water-buffalo (East Asia)	
1900-1800		
1800-1700		
1700-1600		
1600-1500	Cities, writing, kingdoms (Shang dynasty), use of bronze (China)*	
1500-1400	Use of iron (West Asia) 	Composition of the *Rig Veda*
1400-1300		
1300-1200		
1200-1100		Use of iron, megaliths (Deccan and South India)
1100-1000	Domestication of the one-humped camel (Arabia)	
1000-900		
900-800		
800-700		
700-600		
600-500	Use of coins (Turkey); Persian empire (546 BCE) with capital at Persepolis; Chinese philosopher Confucius (c. 551 BCE)	Cities and states in several areas, first coins, spread of Jainism and Buddhism
500-400		
400-300		Establishment of the Mauryan empire (c. 321 BCE)
300-200	Establishment of an empire in China (221 BCE), beginning of the construction of the Great Wall	
200-100		
100-1 BCE		

DATES	AMERICAS	AUSTRALIA / PACIFIC ISLANDS
6 mya-500,000 BP		
500,000-150,000 BP		
150,000-50,000 BP		
50,000-30,000 BP		*Homo sapiens* fossils, earliest indications of sea-faring (45,000 BP)
30,000-10,000 BP	*Homo sapiens* fossils (12,000 BP)	Paintings (20,000 BP)
8000-7000 BCE		
7000-6000	Cultivation of squash	
6000-5000		
5000-4000	Cultivation of beans	
4000-3000	Cultivation of cotton, bottle gourd	
3000-2000	Domestication of guinea pig, turkey, cultivation of maize	
2000-1900	Cultivation of potato, chilli*, cassava, peanut, domestication of llama* and alpaca	
1900-1800		
1800-1700		
1700-1600		
1600-1500		
1500-1400		
1400-1300		
1300-1200		
1200-1100	Olmec settlements around the Gulf of Mexico, early temples and sculpture	Settlements in Polynesia and Micronesia
1100-1000		
1000-900	Development of a hieroglyphic script	
900-800		
800-700		
700-600		
600-500		
500-400		
400-300		
300-200		
200-100		
100-1 BCE		

ACTIVITY

Choose one date from each of the six columns and discuss the possible significance of the process/ event for men and women living in the region.

THEME 1

FROM THE BEGINNING OF TIME

THIS chapter traces the beginning of human existence. It was 5.6 million years ago (written as mya) that the first human-like creatures appeared on the earth's surface. After this, several forms of humans emerged and then became extinct. Human beings resembling us (henceforth referred to as 'modern humans') originated about 160,000 years ago. During this long period of human history, people obtained food by either scavenging or hunting animals and gathering plant produce. They also learnt how to make stone tools and to communicate with each other.

Although other ways of obtaining food were adopted later, hunting-gathering continued. Even today there are hunter-gatherer societies in some parts of the world. This makes us wonder whether the lifestyles of present-day hunter-gatherers can tell us anything about the past.

Fossils are the remains or impressions of a very old plant, animal or human which have turned into stone. These are often embedded in rock, and are thus preserved for millions of years.

Discoveries of human fossils, stone tools and cave paintings help us to understand early human history. Each of these discoveries has a history of its own. Very often, when such finds were first made, most scholars refused to accept that these fossils were the remains of early humans. They were also sceptical about the ability of early humans to make stone tools or paint. It was only over a period of time that the true significance of these finds was realised.

The evidence for human evolution comes from fossils of species of humans which have become extinct. Fossils can be dated either through direct chemical analysis or indirectly by dating the sediments in which they are buried. Once fossils are dated, a sequence of human evolution can be worked out.

Species is a group of organisms that can breed to produce fertile offspring. Members of one species cannot mate with those of other species to produce fertile offspring.

When such discoveries were first made, about 200 years ago, many scholars were often reluctant to accept that fossils and other finds including stone tools and paintings were actually connected with early forms of humans. This reluctance generally stemmed from their belief in the Old Testament of the Bible, according to which human origin was regarded as an act of Creation by God.

For instance, in August 1856, workmen who were quarrying for limestone in the Neander valley (see Map 2, p. 18), a gorge near the German city of Dusseldorf, found a skull and some skeletal fragments. These were handed over to Carl Fuhlrott, a local schoolmaster and natural historian, who realised that

they did not belong to a modern human. He then made a plaster cast of the skull and sent it to Herman Schaaffhausen, a professor of anatomy at Bonn University. The following year they jointly published a paper, claiming that this skull represented a form of human that was extinct. At that time, scholars did not accept this view and instead declared that the skull belonged to a person of more recent times.

RECOVERING FOSSILS

A painstaking process. The precise location of finds is important for dating.

Shows the equipment used to record the location of finds. The square frame to the left of the archaeologist is a grid divided into 10 cm squares. Placing it over the find spot helps to record the horizontal position of the find. The triangular apparatus to the right is used to record the vertical position.

Shows how a fossil fragment is recovered from the surrounding stone, in this case a variety of limestone, in which it is embedded. As you can see, this requires skill and patience.

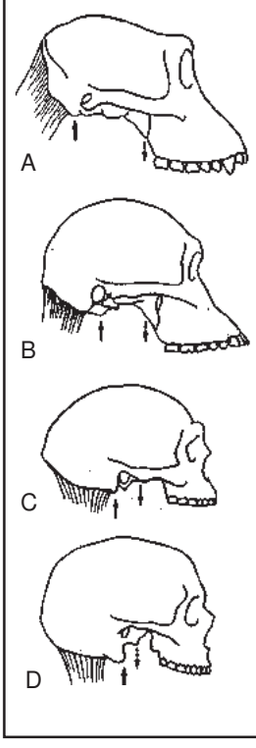
24 November 1859, when Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published, marked a landmark in the study of evolution. All 1,250 copies of the first print were sold out the same day. Darwin argued that humans had evolved from animals a long time ago.

The skull of Neanderthal man. Some of those who dismissed the antiquity of the skull regarded it as 'brutish' or that of a 'pathological idiot'.

ACTIVITY 1

Most religions have stories about the creation of human beings which often do not correspond with scientific discoveries. Find out about some of these and compare them with the history of human evolution as discussed in this chapter.

The Story of Human Evolution
(a) The Precursors of Modern Human Beings



Look at these four skulls.
A belongs to an ape.
B belongs to a species known as *Australopithecus* (see below).
C belongs to a species known as *Homo erectus* (literally 'upright man').
D belongs to a species known as *Homo sapiens* (literally 'thinking/wise man'} to which all present-day human beings belong.
List as many similarities and differences that you notice, looking carefully at the brain case, jaws and teeth.

The differences that you notice in the skulls shown in the illustration are some of the changes that came about as a result of human evolution. The story of human evolution is enormously long, and somewhat complicated. There are also many unanswered questions, and new data often lead to a revision and modification of earlier understandings. Let us look at some of the developments and their implications more closely.

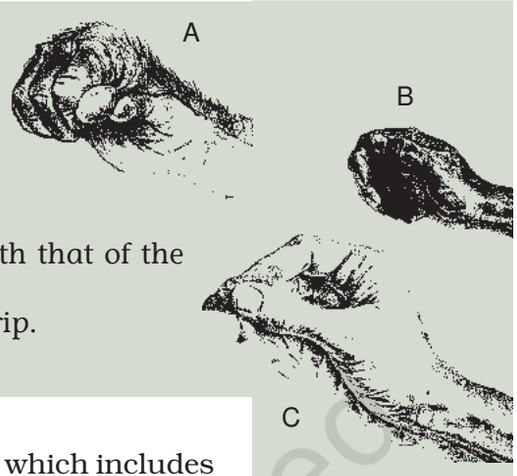
It is possible to trace these developments back to between 36 and 24 mya. We sometimes find it difficult to conceptualise such long spans of time. If you consider a page of your book to represent 10,000 years, in itself a vast span of time, 10 pages would represent 100,000 years, and a 100 pages would equal 1 million years. To think of 36 million years, you would have to imagine a book 3,600 pages long! That was when primates, a category of mammals, emerged in Asia and Africa. Subsequently, by about 24 mya, there emerged a subgroup amongst primates, called hominoids. This included apes. And, much later, about 5.6 mya, we find evidence of the first hominids.

Primates are a subgroup of a larger group of mammals. They include monkeys, apes and humans. They have body hair, a relatively long gestation period following birth, mammary glands, different types of teeth, and the ability to maintain a constant body temperature.

While hominids have evolved from hominoids and share certain common features, there are major differences as well. Hominoids have a smaller brain than hominids. They are quadrupeds, walking on all fours, but with flexible forelimbs. Hominids, by contrast, have an upright posture and bipedal locomotion (walking on two feet). There are also marked differences in the hand, which enables the making and use of tools. We will examine the kinds of tools made and their significance more closely later.

Two lines of evidence suggest an African origin for hominids. First, it is the group of African apes that are most closely related to hominids. Second, the earliest hominid fossils, which belong to the genus *Australopithecus*, have been found in East Africa and date back to about 5.6 mya. In contrast, fossils found outside Africa are no older than 1.8 million years.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE HAND



A shows the precision grip of the chimpanzee.
B shows the power grip of the human hand.
C shows the precision grip of the hominid.

The development of the power grip probably preceded the precision grip.

Compare the precision grip of the chimpanzee with that of the human hand.

Make a list of the things you do using a precision grip.

What are the things you do using a power grip?

Hominids belong to a family known as Hominidae, which includes all forms of human beings. The distinctive characteristics of hominids include a large brain size, upright posture, bipedal locomotion and specialisation of the hand.

Hominids are further subdivided into branches, known as genus, of which *Australopithecus* and *Homo* are important. Each of these in turn includes several species. The major differences between *Australopithecus* and *Homo* relate to brain size, jaws and teeth. The former has a smaller brain size, heavier jaws and larger teeth than the latter.

Virtually all the names given by scientists to species are derived from Latin and Greek words. For instance, the name *Australopithecus* comes from a Latin word, *'austral'*, meaning 'southern' and a Greek word, *'pithekos'*, meaning 'ape.' The name was given because this earliest form of humans still retained many features of an ape, such as a relatively small brain size in comparison to *Homo*, large back teeth and limited dexterity of the hands. Upright walking was also restricted, as they still spent a lot of time on trees. They retained characteristics

Hominoids are different from monkeys in a number of ways. They have a larger body and do not have a tail. Besides, there is a longer period of infant development and dependency amongst hominoids.

This is a view of the Olduvai Gorge in the Rift Valley, East Africa (see Map 1b, p.14), one of the areas from which traces of early human history have been recovered. Notice the different levels of earth at the centre of the photograph. Each of these represents a distinct geological phase.

(such as long forelimbs, curved hand and foot bones and mobile ankle joints) suited to life on trees. Over time, as tool making and long-distance walking increased, many human characteristics also developed.

The Discovery of *Australopithecus*, Olduvai Gorge, 17 July 1959

The Olduvai Gorge (see p. 14) was first 'discovered' in the early twentieth century by a German butterfly collector. However, Olduvai has come to be identified with Mary and Louis Leakey, who worked here for over 40 years. It was Mary Leakey who directed archaeological excavations at Olduvai and Laetoli and she made some of the most exciting discoveries. This is what Louis Leakey wrote about one of their most remarkable finds:

'That morning I woke with a headache and a slight fever. Reluctantly, I agreed to spend the day in camp.With one of us out of commission, it was even more vital for the other to continue the work, for our precarious seven-week season was running out. So Mary departed for the diggings with Sally and Toots [two of their dogs] in the Land-Rover [a jeep-like vehicle], and I settled back to a restless day off.

Some time later – perhaps I dozed off – I heard the Land-Rover coming up fast to camp. I had a momentary vision of Mary stung by one of our hundreds of resident scorpions or bitten by a snake that had slipped past the dogs.

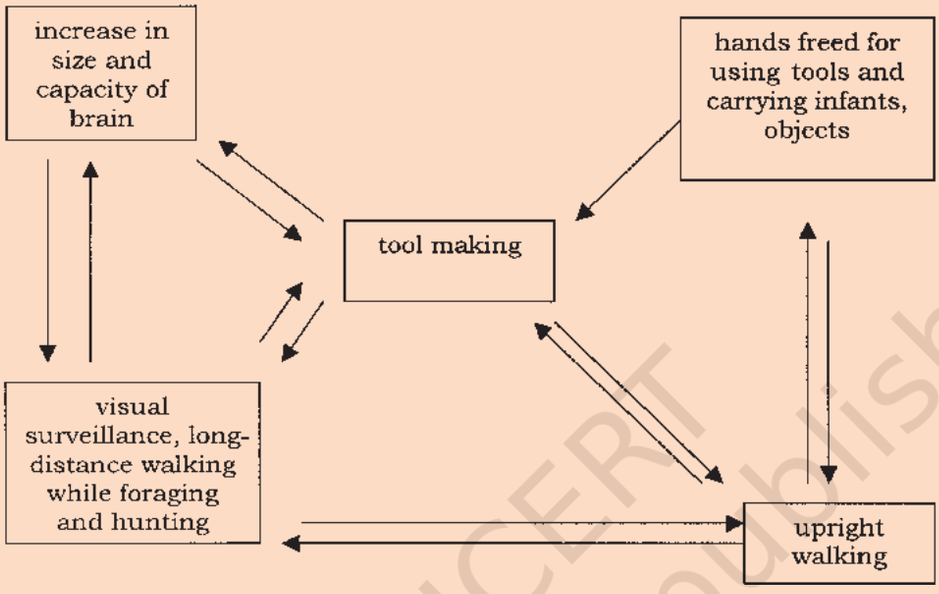
The Land-Rover rattled to a stop, and I heard Mary's voice calling over and over: "I've got him! I've got him! I've got him!" Still groggy from the headache, I couldn't make her out. "Got what? Are you hurt?" I asked. "Him, the man! Our man," Mary said. "The one we've been looking for 23 years. Come quick, I've found his teeth!" '

– From 'Finding the World's Earliest Man', by L.S.B. Leakey, *National Geographic*, 118 (September 1960).

The remains of early humans have been classified into different species. These are often distinguished from one another on the basis of differences in bone structure. For instance, species of early humans are differentiated in terms of their skull size and distinctive jaws (see illustration on p.10). These characteristics may have evolved due to what has been called the positive feedback mechanism.

THE POSITIVE FEEDBACK MECHANISM

The arrows pointing towards a box indicate the influences that shaped that particular development.



The arrows pointing away from a box indicate how developments mentioned in the box influenced other processes.

For example, bipedalism enabled hands to be freed for carrying infants or objects. In turn, as hands were used more and more, upright walking gradually became more efficient. Apart from the advantage of freeing hands for various uses, far less energy is consumed while walking as compared to the movement of a quadruped. However, the advantage in terms of saving energy is reversed while running. There is indirect evidence of bipedalism as early as 3.6 mya. This comes from the fossilised hominid footprints at Laetoli, Tanzania (see Section cover). Fossil limb bones recovered from Hadar, Ethiopia provide more direct evidence of bipedalism.

Around 2.5 mya, with the onset of a phase of glaciation (or an Ice Age), when large parts of the earth were covered with snow, there were major changes in climate and vegetation. Due to the reduction in temperatures as well as rainfall, grassland areas expanded at the expense of forests, leading to the gradual extinction of the early forms of *Australopithecus* (that were adapted to forests) and the replacement by species that were better adapted to the drier conditions. Among these were the earliest representatives of the genus *Homo*.

Homo is a Latin word, meaning 'man', although there were women as well! Scientists distinguish amongst several types of *Homo*. The names assigned to these species are derived from what are regarded as their typical characteristics. So fossils are classified as *Homo habilis* (the tool maker), *Homo erectus* (the upright man), and *Homo sapiens* (the wise or thinking man).

Fossils of *Homo habilis* have been discovered at Omo in Ethiopia and at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania. The earliest fossils of *Homo erectus* have been found both in Africa and Asia: Koobi Fora and west Turkana, Kenya, Modjokerto and Sangiran, Java. As the finds in Asia belong to a later date than those in Africa, it is likely that hominids migrated from East Africa to southern and northern Africa, to southern and north-eastern Asia, and perhaps to Europe, some time between 2 and 1.5 mya. This species survived for nearly a million years.

MAP 1(a): Africa

MAP 1(b): The East African Rift Valley

In some instances, the names for fossils are derived from the places where the first fossils of a particular type were found. So fossils found in Heidelberg, a city in Germany, were called *Homo heidelbergensis*, while those found in the Neander valley (see p. 18) were categorised as *Homo neanderthalensis.*

The earliest fossils from Europe are of *Homo heidelbergensis* and *Homo neanderthalensis*. Both belong to the species of archaic (that is, old) *Homo sapiens*. The fossils of *Homo heidelbergensis* (0.8-0.1 mya) have a wide distribution, having been found in Africa, Asia and Europe. The Neanderthals occupied Europe and western and Central Asia from roughly 130,000 to 35,000 years ago. They disappeared abruptly in western Europe around 35,000 years ago.

In general, compared with *Australopithecus*, *Homo* have a larger brain, jaws with a reduced outward protrusion and smaller teeth (see illustration on p. 10). An increase in brain size is associated with more intelligence and a better memory. The changes in the jaws and teeth were probably related to differences in dietary habits.

PEOPLING OF THE WORLD

WHEN	WHERE	WHO
5-1 mya	Sub-Saharan Africa	*Australopithecus,* early *Homo, Homo erectus*
1 mya-40,000 years ago	Africa, Asia and Europe in mid-latitudes	*Homo erectus,* archaic *Homo sapiens, Neanderthals, Homo sapiens sapiens*/modern humans
45,000 years ago	Australia	Modern humans
40,000 years ago to present	Europe in high-latitudes and Asia-Pacific islands	Late Neanderthals, modern humans
	North and South America in deserts, rain forests	

ACTIVITY 2

Plot the changes indicated in the chart above on an outline map of the world. Use different colours for the four time brackets. List the continents where you use (a) a single colour, (b) two colours, (c) more than two colours.

The Story of Human Evolution
(b) Modern Human Beings

THE EARLIEST FOSSILS OF MODERN HUMANS	
WHERE	**WHEN (years ago)**
ETHIOPIA Omo Kibish	195,000-160,000
SOUTH AFRICA Border Cave Die Kelders Klasies River Mouth	120,000-50,000
MOROCCO Dar es Solton	70,000-50,000
ISRAEL Qafzeh Skhul	100,000-80,000
AUSTRALIA Lake Mungo	45,000-35,000
BORNEO Niah Cave	40,000
FRANCE Cro-Magnon, near Les Eyzies	35,000

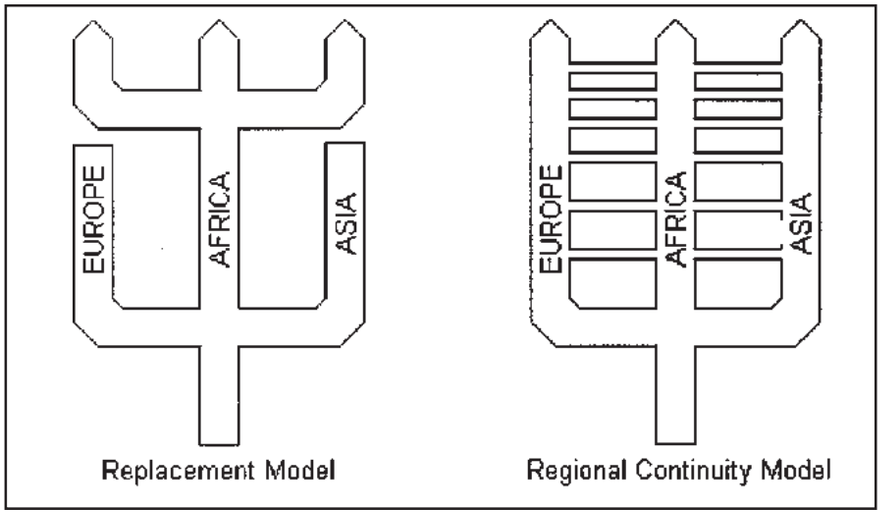
If you look at this chart, you will notice that some of the earliest evidence for *Homo sapiens* has been found in different parts of Africa. This raises the question of the centre of human origin. Was there a single centre or were there several?

The issue of the place of origin of modern humans has been much debated. Two totally divergent views have been expounded, one advocating the regional continuity model (with multiple regions of origin), the other the replacement model (with a single origin in Africa).

According to the regional continuity model, the archaic *Homo sapiens* in different regions gradually evolved at different rates into modern humans, and hence the variation in the first appearance of modern humans in different parts of the world. The argument is based on the regional differences in the features of present-day humans. According to those who advocate this view, these dissimilarities are due to differences between the pre-existing *Homo erectus* and *Homo heidelbergensis* populations that occupied the same regions.

The Replacement and Regional Continuity Models

The replacement model visualises the complete replacement everywhere of all older forms of humans with modern humans. In support of this view is the evidence of the genetic and anatomical homogeneity of modern humans. Those who suggest this argue that the enormous similarity amongst modern humans is due to their descent from a population that originated in a single region, which is Africa. The evidence of the earliest fossils of modern humans (from Omo in Ethiopia) also supports the replacement model. Scholars who hold this view suggest that the physical differences observed today among modern humans are the result of adaptation (over a span of thousands of years) by populations who migrated to the particular regions where they finally settled down.



Early Humans: Ways of Obtaining Food

So far, we have been considering the evidence of skeletal remains and seeing how these have been used to reconstruct the histories of the movements of peoples across continents. But, there are other, more routine aspects of human life as well. Let us see how these can be studied.

Early humans would have obtained food through a number of ways, such as gathering, hunting, scavenging and fishing. Gathering would involve collecting plant foods such as seeds, nuts, berries, fruits and tubers. That gathering was practised is generally assumed rather than conclusively established, as there is very little direct evidence for it. While we get a fair amount of fossil bones, fossilised plant remains are relatively rare. The only other way of getting information about plant intake would be if plant remains were accidentally burnt. This process results in carbonisation. In this form, organic matter is preserved for a long span of time. However, so far archaeologists have not found much evidence of carbonised seeds for this very early period.

In recent years, the term hunting has been under discussion by scholars. Increasingly, it is being suggested that the early hominids scavenged or foraged* for meat and marrow from the carcasses of animals that had died naturally or had been killed by other predators. It is equally possible that small mammals such as rodents, birds (and their eggs), reptiles and even insects (such as termites) were eaten by early hominids.

*Foraging means to search for food.

Hunting probably began later – about 500,000 years ago. The earliest clear evidence for the deliberate, planned hunting and butchery of large mammals comes from two sites: Boxgrove in southern England (500,000 years ago) and Schoningen in Germany (400,000 years ago)

(see Map 2). Fishing was also important, as is evident from the discovery of fish bones at different sites.

MAP 2: Europe

From about 35,000 years ago, there is evidence of planned hunting from some European sites. Some sites, such as Dolni Vestonice (in the Czech Republic, see Map 2), which was near a river, seem to have been deliberately chosen by early people. Herds of migratory animals such as reindeer and horse probably crossed the river during their autumn and spring migrations and were killed on a large scale. The choice of such sites indicates that people knew about the movement of these animals and also about the means of killing large numbers of animals quickly.

Did men and women have different roles in gathering, scavenging, hunting and fishing? We do not really know. Today we find societies that live by hunting and gathering, where women and men undertake a range of different activities, but, as we will see later in the chapter, it is not always possible to suggest parallels with the past.

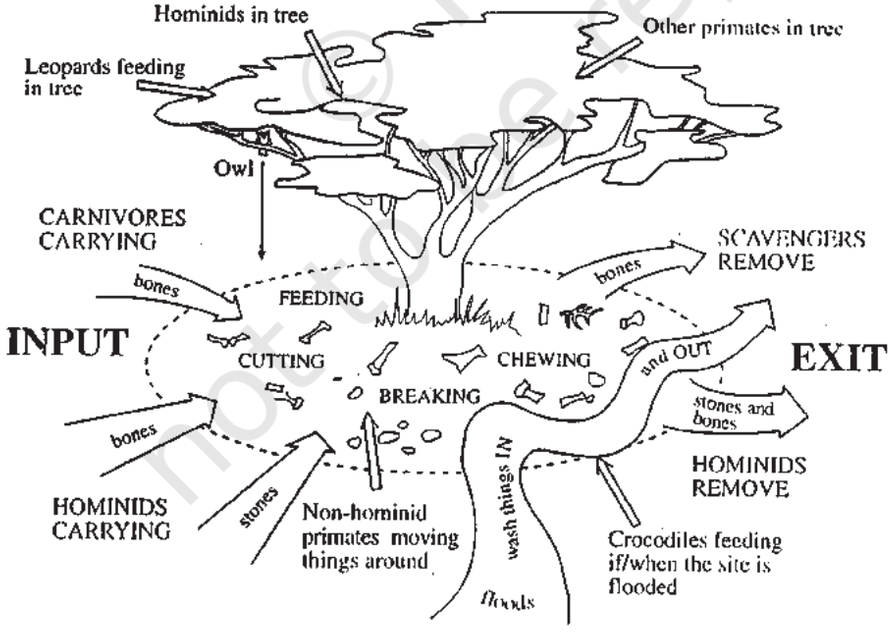
Early Humans
From Trees, to Caves and Open-air Sites

We are on surer ground when we try to reconstruct the evidence for patterns of residence. One way of doing this is by plotting the distribution of artefacts. For example, thousands of flake tools and hand axes have been excavated at Kilombe and Olorgesailie (Kenya). These finds are dated between 700,000 and 500,000 years ago.

Left: The site of Olorgesailie. The excavators, Mary and Louis Leakey, had a catwalk built around the site for observers. Above: A close-up of tools found at the site, including hand axes.

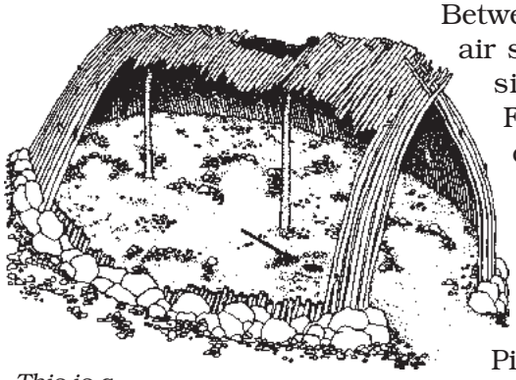
How did these tools accumulate in one place? It is possible that some places, where food resources were abundant, were visited repeatedly. In such areas, people would tend to leave behind traces of their activities and presence, including artefacts. The deposited artefacts would appear as patches on the landscape. The places that were less frequently visited would have fewer artefacts, which may have been scattered over the surface.

It is also important to remember that the same locations could have been shared by hominids, other primates and carnivores. Look at the diagram below to see how this may have worked.



Archaeologists suggest that early hominids such as Homo habilis *probably consumed most of the food where they found it, slept in different places, and spent much of their time in trees. How would bones have reached the site? How would stones have reached the site? Would bones have survived intact?*

Artefacts are objects that are made by human beings. The term can refer to a wide range of things – tools, paintings, sculpture, engravings.



This is a reconstruction of a hut at Terra Amata. The large stone boulders were used to support the sides of the hut. The small scatters of stone on the floor were places where people made stone tools. The black spot marked with an arrow indicates a hearth. In what ways do you think life for those who lived in this shelter would be different from that of the hominids who lived on trees?

Between 400,000 and 125,000 years ago, caves and open-air sites began to be used. Evidence for this comes from sites in Europe. In the Lazaret cave in southern France, a 12x4 metre shelter was built against the cave wall. Inside it were two hearths and evidence of different food sources: fruits, vegetables, seeds, nuts, bird eggs and freshwater fish (trout, perch and carp). At another site, Terra Amata on the coast of southern France, flimsy shelters with roofs of wood and grasses were built for short-term, seasonal visits.

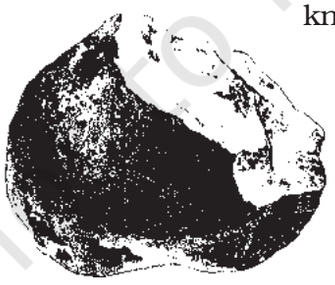
Pieces of baked clay and burnt bone along with stone tools, dated between 1.4 and 1 mya, have been found at Chesowanja, Kenya and Swartkrans, South Africa. Were these the result of a natural bushfire or volcanic eruption? Or were they produced through the deliberate, controlled use of fire? We do not really know.

Hearths, on the other hand, are indications of the controlled use of fire. This had several advantages – fire provided warmth and light inside caves, and could be used for cooking. Besides, fire was used to harden wood, as for instance the tip of the spear. The use of heat also facilitated the flaking of tools. As important, fire could be used to scare away dangerous animals.

Early Humans: Making Tools

To start with, it is useful to remember that the use of tools and tool making are not confined to humans. Birds are known to make objects to assist them with feeding, hygiene and social encounters; and while foraging for food some chimpanzees use tools that they have made.

However, there are some features of human tool making that are not known among apes. As we have seen (see p. 11), certain anatomical and neurological (related to the nervous system) adaptations have led to the skilled use of hands, probably due to the important role of tools in human lives. Moreover, the ways in which humans use and make tools often require greater memory and complex organisational skills, both of which are absent in apes.



Some early tools. These tools were found in Olduvai. The one above is a chopper. This is a large stone from which flakes have been removed to produce a working edge. The one below is a hand axe. Can you suggest what these tools may have been used for?

The earliest evidence for the making and use of stone tools comes from sites in Ethiopia and Kenya (see Map 1). It is likely that the earliest stone tool makers were the *Australopithecus*.

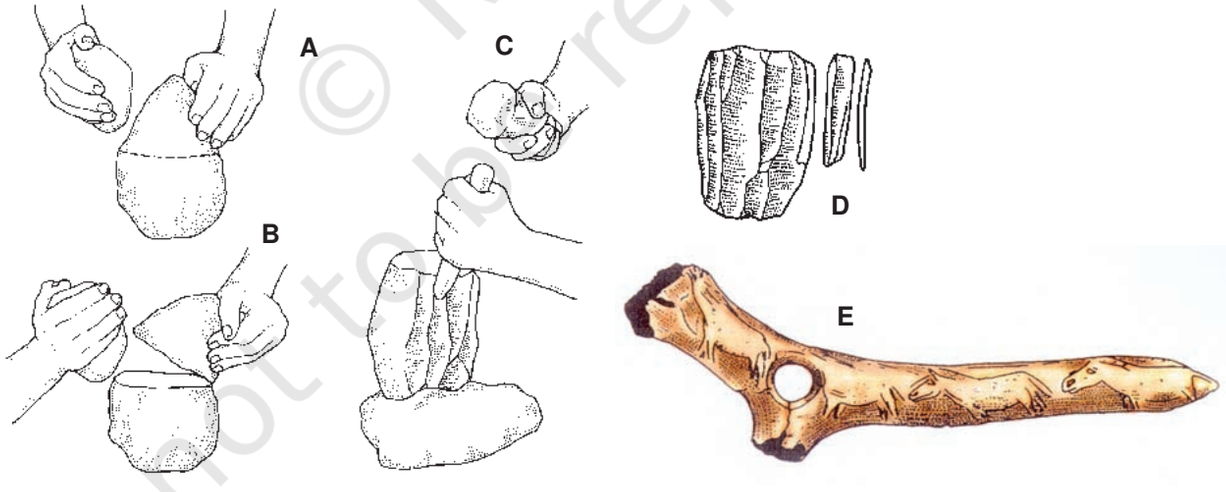
As in the case of other activities, we do not know whether tool making was done by men or women or both. It is possible that stone tool makers were both women and men. Women in particular may have made and used tools to obtain food for themselves as well as to sustain their children after weaning.

About 35,000 years ago, improvements in the techniques for killing animals are evident from the appearance of new kinds of tools such as spear-throwers and the bow and arrow. The meat thus obtained was probably processed by removing the bones, followed by drying, smoking and storage. Thus, food could be stored for later consumption.

A spear-thrower. Note the carving on the handle. The use of the spear-thrower enabled hunters to hurl spears over longer distances. Can you suggest any advantage in using such equipment?

There were other changes, such as the trapping of fur-bearing animals (to use the fur for clothing) and the invention of sewing needles. The earliest evidence of sewn clothing comes from about 21,000 years ago. Besides, with the introduction of the punch blade technique to make small chisel-like tools, it was now possible to make engravings on bone, antler, ivory or wood.

THE PUNCH BLADE TECHNIQUE



(a) The top of a large pebble is removed using a hammer stone.
(b) This produces a flat surface called the striking platform.
(c) This is then struck using a hammer and a punch, made of bone or antler.
(d) This leads to the production of blades that can be used as knives, or modified to serve as chisels or burins which could be used to engrave bone, antler, ivory or wood.
(e) An example of engraving on bone. Note the drawings of animals on it.

Modes of Communication: Language and Art

Among living beings, it is humans alone that have a language. There are several views on language development: (1) that hominid language involved gestures or hand movements; (2) that spoken language was preceded by vocal but non-verbal communication such as singing or humming; (3) that human speech probably began with calls like the ones that have been observed among primates. Humans may have possessed a small number of speech sounds in the initial stage. Gradually, these may have developed into language.

When did spoken language emerge? It has been suggested that the brain of *Homo habilis* had certain features which would have made it possible for them to speak. Thus, language may have developed as early as 2 mya. The evolution of the vocal tract was equally important. This occurred around 200,000 years ago. It is more specifically associated with modern humans.

A third suggestion is that language developed around the same time as art, that is, around 40,000-35,000 years ago. The development of spoken language has been seen as closely connected with art, since both are media for communication.

Cave Paintings at Altamira

A drawing of a bison at Altamira, northern Spain.

Altamira is a cave site in Spain. The paintings on the ceiling of the cave were first brought to the attention of Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola, a local landowner and an amateur archaeologist, by his daughter Maria in November 1879. The little girl was 'running about in the cavern and playing about here and there', while her father was digging the floor of the cave. Suddenly she noticed the paintings on the ceiling: 'Look, Papa, oxen!' At first, her father just laughed, but soon realised that some sort of paste rather than paint had been used for the paintings and became 'so enthusiastic that he could hardly speak'. He published a booklet the following year, but for almost two decades his findings were dismissed by European archaeologists on the ground that these were too good to be ancient.

Hundreds of paintings of animals (done between 30,000 and12,000 years ago) have been discovered in the caves of Lascaux and Chauvet, both in France, and Altamira, in Spain. These include depictions of bison, horses, ibex, deer, mammoths, rhinos, lions, bears, panthers, hyenas and owls.

More questions have been raised than answered regarding these paintings. For example, why do some areas of caves have paintings and not others? Why were some animals painted and not others? Why were men painted both individually and in groups, whereas women were depicted only in groups? Why were men painted near animals but never women? Why were groups of animals painted in the sections of caves where sounds carried well?

Several explanations have been offered. One is that because of the importance of hunting, the paintings of animals were associated with ritual and magic. The act of painting could have been a ritual to ensure a successful hunt. Another explanation offered is that these caves were possibly meeting places for small groups of people or locations for group activities. These groups could share hunting techniques and knowledge, while paintings and engravings served as the media for passing information from one generation to the next.

The above account of early societies has been based on archaeological evidence. Clearly, there is much that we still do not know. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, hunter-gatherer societies exist even today. Can one learn anything about past societies from present-day hunter-gatherers? This is a question we will address in the next section.

Early Encounters with Hunter-Gatherers in Africa

The following is an account by a member of an African pastoral group about its initial contact in 1870 with the !Kung San, a hunter-gatherer society living in the Kalahari desert:

> When we first came into this area, all we saw were strange footprints in the sand. We wondered what kind of people these were. They were very afraid of us and would hide whenever we came around. We found their villages, but they were always empty because as soon as they saw strangers coming, they would scatter and hide in the bush. We said: 'Oh, this is good; these people are afraid of us, they are weak and we can easily rule over them.' So we just ruled them. There was no killing or fighting.

You will read more about encounters with hunter-gatherers in Themes 8 and 10.

Anthropology is a discipline that studies human culture and evolutionary aspects of human biology.

The Hadza

'The Hadza are a small group of hunters and gatherers, living in the vicinity of Lake Eyasi, a salt, rift-valley lake...The country of the eastern Hadza, dry, rocky savanna, dominated by thorn scrub and acacia trees...is rich in wild foods. Animals are exceptionally numerous and were certainly commoner at the beginning of the century. Elephant, rhinoceros, buffalo, giraffe, zebra, waterbuck, gazelle, warthog, baboon, lion, leopard, and hyena are all common, as are smaller animals such as porcupine, hare, jackal, tortoise and many others. All of these animals, apart from the elephant, are hunted and eaten by the Hadza. The amount of meat that could be regularly eaten without endangering the future of the game is probably greater than anywhere else in the world where hunters and gatherers live or have lived in the recent past.

Vegetable food – roots, berries, the fruit of the baobab tree, etc. – though not often obvious to the casual observer, is always abundant even at the height of the dry season in a year of drought. The type of vegetable food available is different in the six-month wet season from the dry season but there is no period of shortage. The honey and grubs of seven species of wild bee are eaten; supplies of these vary from season to season and from year to year.

Sources of water are widely distributed over the country in the wet season but are very few in the dry season. The Hadza consider that about 5-6 kilometres is the maximum distance over which water can reasonably be carried and camps are normally sited within a kilometre of a water course.

Part of the country consists of open grass plains but the Hadza never build camps there. Camps are invariably sited among trees or rocks and, by preference, among both.

The eastern Hadza assert no rights over land and its resources. Any individual may live wherever he likes and may hunt animals, collect roots, berries, and honey and draw water anywhere in Hadza country without any sort of restriction...

In spite of the exceptional numbers of game animals in their area, the Hadza rely mainly on wild vegetable matter for their food. Probably as much as 80 per cent of their food by weight is vegetable, while meat and honey together account for the remaining 20 per cent.

Camps are commonly small and widely dispersed in the wet season, large and concentrated near the few available sources of water in the dry season.

There is never any shortage of food even in the time of drought.'

– Written in 1960 by James Woodburn, an anthropologist.

ACTIVITY 3

Why do the Hadza not assert rights over land and its resources? Why do the size and location of camps keep changing from season to season? Why is there never any shortage of food even in times of drought? Can you name any such hunter-gatherer societies in India today?

Hunter-Gatherer Societies
From the Present to the Past

As our knowledge of present-day hunter-gatherers increased through studies by anthropologists, a question that began to be posed was whether the information about living hunters and gatherers could be used to understand past societies. Currently, there are two opposing views on this issue.

On one side are scholars who have directly applied specific data from present-day hunter-gatherer societies to interpret the archaeological remains of the past. For example, some archaeologists have suggested that the hominid sites, dated to 2 mya, along the margins of Lake Turkana could have been dry season camps of early humans, because such a practice has been observed among the Hadza and the !Kung San.

Ethnography is the study of contemporary ethnic groups. It includes an examination of their modes of livelihood, technology, gender roles, rituals, political institutions and social customs.

On the other side are scholars who feel that ethnographic data cannot be used for understanding past societies as the two are totally different. For instance, present-day hunter-gatherer societies pursue several other economic activities along with hunting and gathering. These include engaging in exchange and trade in minor forest produce, or working as paid labourers in the fields of neighbouring farmers. Moreover, these societies are totally marginalised in all senses – geographically, politically and socially. The conditions in which they live are very different from those of early humans.

Another problem is that there is tremendous variation amongst living hunter-gatherer societies. There are conflicting data on many issues such as the relative importance of hunting and gathering, group sizes, or the movement from place to place.

Also, there is little consensus regarding the division of labour in food procurement. Although today generally women gather and men hunt, there are societies where both women and men hunt and gather and make tools. In any case, the important role of women in contributing to the food supply in such societies cannot be denied. It is perhaps this factor that ensures a relatively equal role for both women and men in present-day hunter-gatherer societies, although there are variations. While this may be the case today, it is difficult to make any such inference for the past.

ACTIVITY 4

What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of using ethnographic accounts to reconstruct the lives of the earliest peoples?

Epilogue

For several million years, humans lived by hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants. Then, between 10,000 and 4,500 years ago, people in different parts of the world learnt to domesticate certain plants and animals. This led to the development of farming and pastoralism as a way of life. The shift from foraging to farming was a

major turning point in human history. Why did this change take place at this point of time?

The last ice age came to an end about 13,000 years ago and with that warmer, wetter conditions prevailed. As a result, conditions were favourable for the growth of grasses such as wild barley and wheat. At the same time, as open forests and grasslands expanded, the population of certain animal species such as wild sheep, goat, cattle, pig and donkey increased. What we find is that human societies began to gradually prefer areas that had an abundance of wild grasses and animals. Now relatively large, permanent communities occupied such areas for most parts of the year. With some areas being clearly preferred, a pressure may have built up to increase the food supply. This may have triggered the process of domestication of certain plants and animals. It is likely that a combination of factors which included climatic change, population pressure, a greater reliance on and knowledge of a few species of plants (such as wheat, barley, rice and millet) and animals (such as sheep, goat, cattle, donkey and pig) played a role in this transformation.

One such area where farming and pastoralism began around 10,000 years ago was the Fertile Crescent, extending from the Mediterranean coast to the Zagros mountains in Iran. With the introduction of agriculture, more people began to stay in one place for even longer periods than they had done before. Thus permanent houses began to be built of mud, mud bricks and even stone. These are some of the earliest villages known to archaeologists.

Farming and pastoralism led to the introduction of many other changes such as the making of pots in which to store grain and other produce, and to cook food. Besides, new kinds of stone tools came into use. Other new tools such as the plough were used in agriculture. Gradually, people became familiar with metals such as copper and tin. The wheel, important for both pot making and transportation, came into use.

About 5,000 years ago, even larger concentrations of people began to live together in cities. Why did this happen? And what are the differences between cities and other settlements? Look out for answers to these and other questions in Theme 2.

TIMELINE 1 (mya)	
36-24 mya	Primates; Monkeys in Asia and Africa
24 mya	(Superfamily) Hominoids; Gibbons, Asian orang-utan and African apes (gorilla, chimpanzee and bonobo or 'pygmy' chimpanzee)
6.4 mya	Branching out of hominoids and hominids
5.6 mya	*Australopithecus*
2.6-2.5	Earliest stone tools
2.5-2.0	Cooling and drying of Africa, resulting in decrease in woodlands and increase in grasslands
2.5-2.0 mya	*Homo*
2.2 mya	*Homo habilis*
1.8 mya	*Homo erectus*
1.3 mya	Extinction of *Australopithecus*
0.8 mya	'Archaic' *sapiens, Homo heidelbergensis*
0.19-0.16 mya	*Homo sapiens sapiens* (modern humans)

TIMELINE 2 (years ago)	
Earliest evidence of burials	300,000
Extinction of *Homo erectus*	200,000
Development of voice box	200,000
Archaic *Homo sapiens* skull in the Narmada valley, India	200,000-130,000
Emergence of modern humans	195,000-160,000
Emergence of Neanderthals	130,000
Earliest evidence of hearths	125,000
Extinction of Neanderthals	35,000
Earliest evidence of figurines made of fired clay	27,000
Invention of sewing needles	21,000

The Rift Valley, East Africa.

Exercises

ANSWER IN BRIEF

1. Look at the diagram showing the positive feedback mechanism on page 13. Can you list the inputs that went into tool making? What were the processes that were strengthened by tool making?
2. Humans and mammals such as monkeys and apes have certain similarities in behaviour and anatomy. This indicates that humans possibly evolved from apes. List these resemblances in two columns under the headings of (a) behaviour and (b) anatomy. Are there any differences that you think are noteworthy?
3. Discuss the arguments advanced in favour of the regional continuity model of human origins. Do you think it provides a convincing explanation of the archaeological evidence? Give reasons for your answer.
4. Which of the following do you think is best documented in the archaeological record: (a) gathering, (b) tool making, (c) the use of fire?

ANSWER IN A SHORT ESSAY

5. Discuss the extent to which (a) hunting and (b) constructing shelters would have been facilitated by the use of language. What other modes of communication could have been used for these activities?
6. Choose any two developments each from Timelines 1 and 2 at the end of the chapter and indicate why you think these are significant.

THEME 2

WRITING AND CITY LIFE

CITY life began in Mesopotamia, the land between the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers that is now part of the Republic of Iraq. Mesopotamian civilisation is known for its prosperity, city life, its voluminous and rich literature and its mathematics and astronomy. Mesopotamia's writing system and literature spread to the eastern Mediterranean, northern Syria, and Turkey after 2000 BCE, so that the kingdoms of that entire region were writing to one another, and to the Pharaoh of Egypt, in the language and script of Mesopotamia. Here we shall explore the connection between city life and writing, and then look at some outcomes of a sustained tradition of writing.*

In the beginning of recorded history, the land, mainly the urbanised south (see discussion below), was called Sumer and Akkad. After 2000 BCE, when Babylon became an important city, the term Babylonia was used for the southern region. From about 1100 BCE, when the Assyrians established their kingdom in the north, the region became known as Assyria. The first known language of the land was Sumerian. It was gradually replaced by Akkadian around 2400 BCE when Akkadian speakers arrived. This language flourished till about Alexander's time (336-323 BCE), with some regional changes occurring. From 1400 BCE, Aramaic also trickled in. This language, similar to Hebrew, became widely spoken after 1000 BCE. It is still spoken in parts of Iraq.

Archaeology in Mesopotamia began in the 1840s. At one or two sites (including Uruk and Mari, which we discuss below), excavations continued for decades. (No Indian site has ever seen such long-term projects.) Not only can we study hundreds of Mesopotamian buildings, statues, ornaments, graves, tools and seals as sources, there are thousands of written documents.

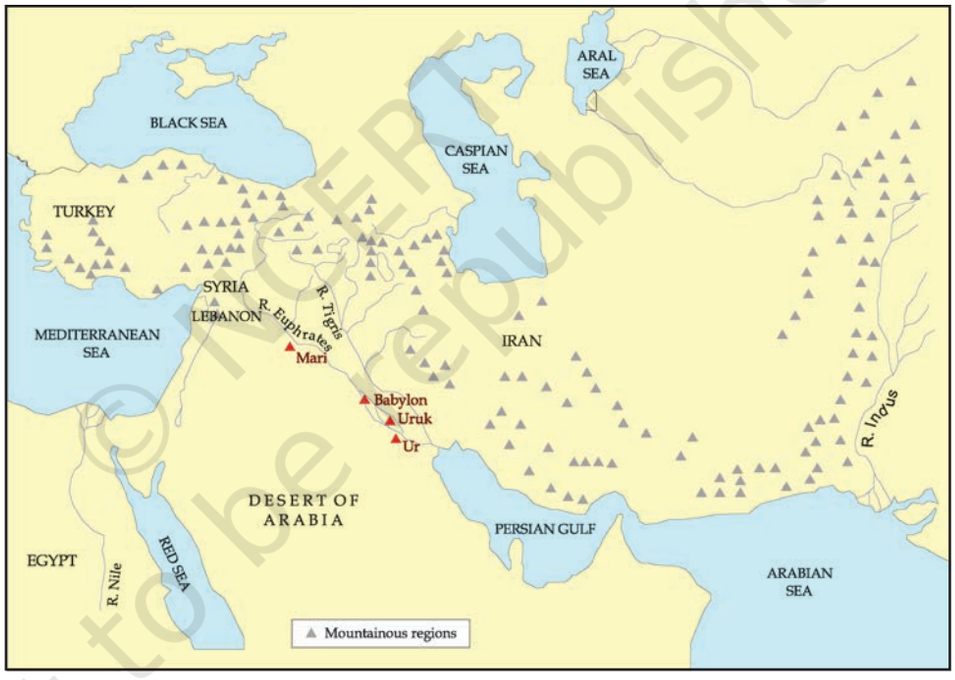
Mesopotamia was important to Europeans because of references to it in the Old Testament, the first part of the Bible. For instance, the Book of Genesis of the Old Testament refers to 'Shimar', meaning Sumer, as a land of brick-built cities. Travellers and scholars of Europe looked on Mesopotamia as a kind of ancestral land, and when archaeological work began in the area, there was an attempt to prove the literal truth of the Old Testament.

*The name Mesopotamia is derived from the Greek words *mesos*, meaning middle, and *potamos*, meaning river.

From the mid-nineteenth century there was no stopping the enthusiasm for exploring the ancient past of Mesopotamia. In 1873, a British newspaper funded an expedition of the British Museum to search for a tablet narrating the story of the Flood, mentioned in the Bible.

By the 1960s, it was understood that the stories of the Old Testament were not literally true, but may have been ways of expressing memories about important changes in history. Gradually, archaeological techniques became far more sophisticated and refined. What is more, attention was directed to different questions, including reconstructing the lives of ordinary people. Establishing the literal truth of Biblical narratives receded into the background. Much of what we discuss subsequently in the chapter is based on these later studies.

According to the Bible, the Flood was meant to destroy all life on earth. However, God chose a man, Noah, to ensure that life could continue after the Flood. Noah built a huge boat, an ark. He took a pair each of all known species of animals and birds on board the ark, which survived the Flood. There was a strikingly similar story in the Mesopotamian tradition, where the principal character was called Ziusudra or Utnapishtim.



MAP 1: West Asia

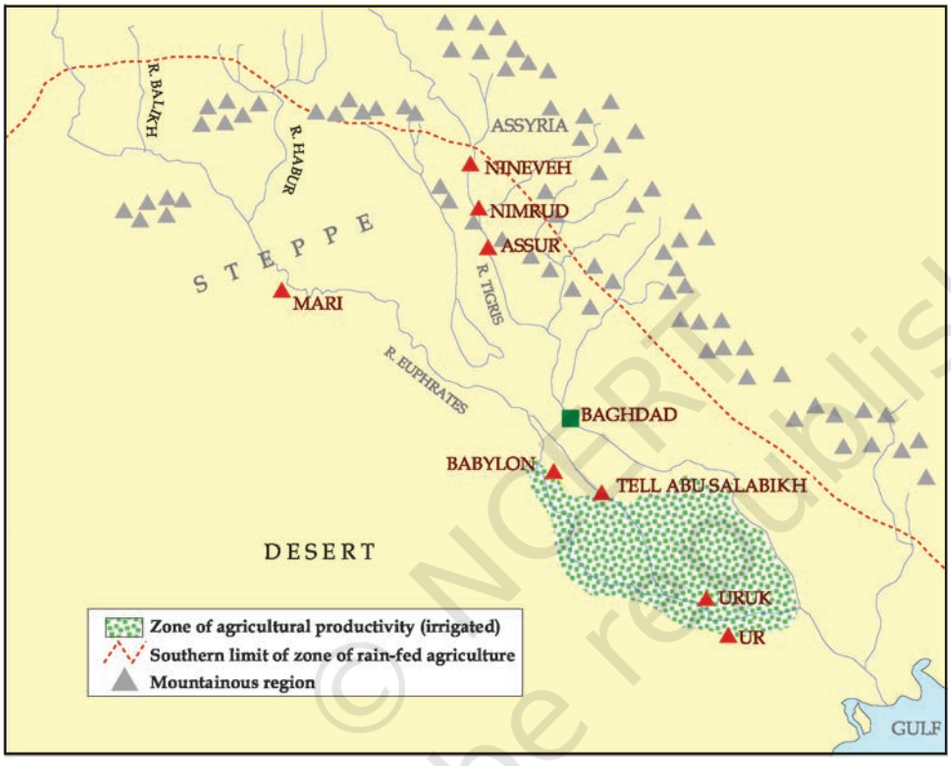
ACTIVITY 1

Many societies have myths about floods. These are often ways of preserving and expressing memories about important changes in history. Find out more about these, noting how life before and after the flood is represented.

Mesopotamia and its Geography

Iraq is a land of diverse environments. In the north-east lie green, undulating plains, gradually rising to tree-covered mountain ranges with clear streams and wild flowers, with enough rainfall to grow crops. Here, agriculture began between 7000 and 6000 BCE. In the north, there is a stretch of upland called a steppe, where animal herding offers people a better livelihood than agriculture – after the winter rains, sheep and goats feed on the grasses and low shrubs that grow here. To the east, tributaries of the Tigris provide routes of

communication into the mountains of Iran. The south is a desert – and this is where the first cities and writing emerged (see below). This desert could support cities because the rivers Euphrates and Tigris, which rise in the northern mountains, carry loads of silt (fine mud). When they flood or when their water is let out on to the fields, fertile silt is deposited.



MAP 2: Mesopotamia: Mountains, Steppe, Desert, Irrigated Zone of the South.

After the Euphrates has entered the desert, its water flows out into small channels. These channels flood their banks and, in the past, functioned as irrigation canals: water could be let into the fields of wheat, barley, peas or lentils when necessary. Of all ancient systems, that of the Roman Empire (Theme 3) included, it was the agriculture of southern Mesopotamia that was the most productive, even though the region did not have sufficient rainfall to grow crops.

Not only agriculture, Mesopotamian sheep and goats that grazed on the steppe, the north-eastern plains and the mountain slopes (that is, on tracts too high for the rivers to flood and fertilise) produced meat, milk and wool in abundance. Further, fish was available in rivers and date-palms gave fruit in summer. Let us not, however, make the mistake of thinking that cities grew simply because of rural prosperity. We shall discuss other factors by and by, but first let us be clear about city life.

The earliest cities in Mesopotamia date back to the bronze age, c.3000 BCE. Bronze is an alloy of copper and tin. Using bronze meant procuring these metals, often from great distances. Metal tools were necessary for accurate carpentry, drilling beads, carving stone seals, cutting shell for inlaid furniture, etc. Mesopotamian weapons were also of bronze – for example, the tips of the spears that you see in the illustration on p. 38.

The Significance of Urbanism

Cities and towns are not just places with large populations. It is when an economy develops in spheres other than food production that it becomes an advantage for people to cluster in towns. Urban economies comprise besides food production, trade, manufactures and services. City people, thus, cease to be self-sufficient and depend on the products or services of other (city or village) people. There is continuous interaction among them. For instance, the carver of a stone seal requires bronze tools that he himself cannot make, and coloured stones for the seals that he does not know where to get: his 'specialisation' is fine carving, not trading. The bronze tool maker does not himself go out to get the metals, copper and tin. Besides, he needs regular supplies of charcoal for fuel. The *division of labour* is a mark of urban life.

Further, there must be a social organisation in place. Fuel, metal, various stones, wood, etc., come from many different places for city manufacturers. Thus, organised trade and storage is needed. There are deliveries of grain and other food items from the village to the city, and food supplies need to be stored and distributed. Besides, many different activities have to be coordinated: there must be not only stones but also bronze tools and pots available for seal cutters. Obviously, in such a system some people give commands that others obey, and urban economies often require the keeping of written records.

The Warka Head

This woman's head was sculpted in white marble at Uruk before 3000 BCE. The eyes and eyebrows would probably have taken lapis lazuli (blue) and shell (white) and bitumen (black) inlays, respectively. There is a groove along the top of the head, perhaps for an ornament. This is a world-famous piece of sculpture, admired for the delicate modelling of the woman's mouth, chin and cheeks. And it was modelled in a hard stone that would have been imported from a distance.

Beginning with the procurement of stone, list all the specialists who would be involved in the production of such a piece of sculpture.

ACTIVITY 2

Discuss whether city life would have been possible without the use of metals.

Movement of Goods into Cities

However rich the food resources of Mesopotamia, its mineral resources were few. Most parts of the south lacked stones for tools, seals and jewels; the wood of the Iraqi date-palm and poplar was not good enough for carts, cart wheels or boats; and there was no metal for tools, vessels or ornaments. So we can surmise that the ancient Mesopotamians could have traded their abundant textiles and agricultural produce for wood, copper, tin, silver, gold, shell and various stones from Turkey and Iran, or across the Gulf. These latter regions had mineral resources, but much less scope for agriculture. Regular exchanges – possible only when there was a social organisation – to equip foreign expeditions and direct the exchanges were initiated by the people of southern Mesopotamia.

Besides crafts, trade and services, efficient transport is also important for urban development. If it takes too much time, or too much animal feed, to carry grain or charcoal into cities on pack animals or bullock carts, the city economy will not be viable. The cheapest mode of transportation is, everywhere, over water. River boats or barges loaded with sacks of grain are propelled by the current of the river and/or wind, but when animals transport goods, they need to be fed. The canals and natural channels of ancient Mesopotamia were in fact routes of goods transport between large and small settlements, and in the account on the city of Mari later in the chapter, the importance of the Euphrates as a 'world route' will become clear.

Clay tablets c.3200 BCE. Each tablet is 3.5 cm or less in height, with picture-like signs (ox, fish, grain, boat) and numbers (𒌋)

The Development of Writing

All societies have languages in which certain spoken sounds convey certain meanings. This is verbal communication. Writing too is verbal communication – but in a different way. When we talk about writing or a script, we mean that *spoken sounds* are represented in *visible signs*.

The first Mesopotamian tablets, written around 3200 BCE, contained picture-like signs and numbers. These were about 5,000 lists of oxen, fish, bread loaves, etc. – lists of goods that were brought into or distributed from the temples of Uruk, a city in the south. Clearly, writing began when society needed to keep records of transactions – because in city life transactions occurred at different times, and involved many people and a variety of goods.

Cuneiform syllabic signs.

Mesopotamians wrote on tablets of clay. A scribe would wet clay and pat it into a size he could hold comfortably in one hand. He would

A clay tablet written on both sides in cuneiform. It is a mathematical exercise – you can see a triangle and lines across the triangle on the top of the obverse side. You can see that the letters have been pressed into the clay.

carefully smoothen its surfaces. With the sharp end of a reed cut obliquely, he would press wedge-shaped ('cuneiform*') signs on to the smoothened surface while it was still moist. Once dried in the sun, the clay would harden and tablets would be almost as indestructible as pottery. When a written record of, say, the delivery of pieces of metal had ceased to be relevant, the tablet was thrown away. Once the surface dried, signs could not be pressed on to a tablet: so each transaction, however minor, required a separate written tablet. This is why tablets occur by the hundreds at Mesopotamian sites. And it is because of this wealth of sources that we know so much more about Mesopotamia than we do about contemporary India.

* Cuneiform is derived from the Latin words *cuneus*, meaning 'wedge' and *forma*, meaning 'shape'.

By 2600 BCE or so, the letters became cuneiform, and the language was Sumerian. Writing was now used not only for keeping records, but also for making dictionaries, giving legal validity to land transfers, narrating the deeds of kings, and announcing the changes a king had made in the customary laws of the land. Sumerian, the earliest known language of Mesopotamia, was gradually replaced after 2400 BCE by the Akkadian language. Cuneiform writing in the Akkadian language continued in use until the first century CE, that is, for more than 2,000 years.

The System of Writing

The sound that a cuneiform sign represented was not a single consonant or vowel (such as *m* or *a* in the English alphabet), but syllables (say, *-put-*, or *-la-*, or *-in-*). Thus, the signs that a Mesopotamian scribe had

to learn ran into hundreds, and he had to be able to handle a wet tablet and get it written before it dried. So, writing was a skilled craft but, more important, it was an enormous intellectual achievement, conveying in visual form the system of sounds of a particular language.

Literacy

Very few Mesopotamians could read and write. Not only were there hundreds of signs to learn, many of these were complex (see p. 33). If a king could read, he made sure that this was recorded in one of his boastful inscriptions! For the most part, however, writing reflected the mode of speaking.

A letter from an official would have to be read out to the king. So it would begin:

> 'To my lord A, speak: … Thus says your servant B: … I have carried out the work assigned to me …'

A long mythical poem about creation ends thus:

> 'Let these verses be held in remembrance and let the elder teach them;
> let the wise one and the scholar discuss them;
> let the father repeat them to his sons;
> let the ears of (even) the herdsman be opened to them.'

The Uses of Writing

The connection between city life, trade and writing is brought out in a long Sumerian epic poem about Enmerkar, one of the earliest rulers of Uruk. In Mesopotamian tradition, Uruk was the city par excellence, often known simply as The City.

Enmerkar is associated with the organisation of the first trade of Sumer: in the early days, the epic says, 'trade was not known'. Enmerkar wanted lapis lazuli and precious metals for the beautification of a city temple and sent his messenger out to get them from the chief of a very distant land called Aratta. 'The messenger heeded the word of the king. By night he went just by the stars. By day, he would go by heaven's sun divine. He had to go up into the mountain ranges, and had to come down out of the mountain ranges. The people of Susa (a city) below the mountains saluted him like tiny mice*. Five mountain ranges, six mountain ranges, seven mountain ranges he crossed…'

The messenger could not get the chief of Aratta to part with lapis lazuli or silver, and he had to make the long journey back and forth, again and again, carrying threats and promises from the king of Uruk. Ultimately, the messenger 'grew weary of mouth'. He got all the messages mixed up. Then, 'Enmerkar formed a clay tablet in his hand, and he wrote the words down. In those days, there had been no writing down of words on clay.'

*The poet means that once the messenger had climbed to a great height, everything appeared small in the valley far below.

Given the written tablet, 'the ruler of Aratta examined the clay. The spoken words were nails*. His face was frowning. He kept looking at the tablet.'

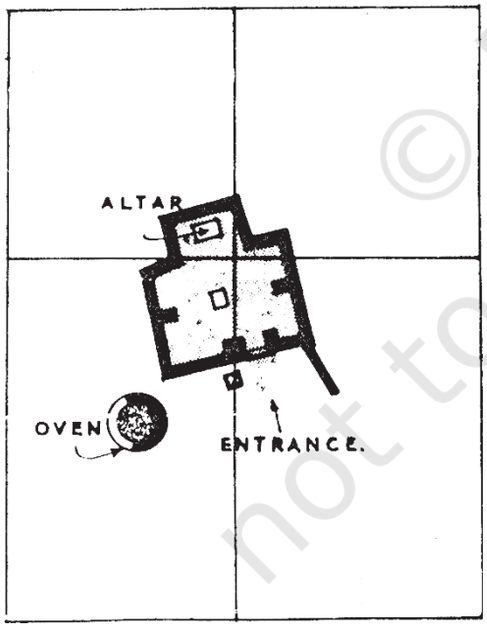
*Cuneiform letters were wedge shaped, hence, like nails.

This should not be taken as the literal truth, but it can be inferred that in Mesopotamian understanding it was kingship that organised trade and writing. This poem also tells us that, besides being a means of storing information and of sending messages afar, writing was seen as a sign of the superiority of Mesopotamian urban culture.

Urbanisation in Southern Mesopotamia: Temples and Kings

From 5000 BCE, settlements had begun to develop in southern Mesopotamia. The earliest cities emerged from some of these settlements. These were of various kinds: those that gradually developed around temples; those that developed as centres of trade; and imperial cities. It is cities of the first two kinds that will be discussed here.

Early settlers (their origins are unknown) began to build and rebuild temples at selected spots in their villages. The earliest known temple was a small shrine made of unbaked bricks. Temples were the residences of various gods: of the Moon God of Ur, or of Inanna the Goddess of Love and War. Constructed in brick, temples became larger over time, with several rooms around open courtyards. Some of the early ones were possibly not unlike the ordinary house – for the temple was the house of a god. But temples always had their outer walls going in and out at regular intervals, which no ordinary building ever had.



The earliest known temple of the south, c.5000 BCE (plan).

The god was the focus of worship: to him or her people brought grain, curd and fish (the floors of some early temples had thick layers of fish bones). The god was also the theoretical owner of the agricultural fields, the fisheries, and the herds of the local community. In time, the processing of produce (for example, oil pressing, grain grinding, spinning, and the weaving of woollen cloth) was also done in the temple. Organiser of production at a level above the household, employer of merchants and keeper of written records of distributions and allotments of grain, plough animals, bread, beer, fish, etc., the temple gradually developed its activities and became the main urban institution. But there was also another factor on the scene.

In spite of natural fertility, agriculture was subject to hazards. The natural outlet channels of the Euphrates would have too much water one year and flood the crops, and sometimes they would change course altogether. As the archaeological record shows, villages were periodically relocated in Mesopotamian history. There were man-made problems as well. Those who lived on the upstream

A temple of a later period, c.3000 BCE, with an open courtyard and in-and-out façade (as excavated).

stretches of a channel could divert so much water into their fields that villages downstream were left without water. Or they could neglect to clean out the silt from their stretch of the channel, blocking the flow of water further down. So the early Mesopotamian countryside saw repeated conflict over land and water.

When there was continuous warfare in a region, those chiefs who had been successful in war could oblige their followers by distributing the loot, and could take prisoners from the defeated groups to employ as their guards or servants. So they could increase their influence and clout. Such war leaders, however, would be here today and gone tomorrow – until a time came when such leadership came to increase the well-being of the community with the creation of new institutions or practices. In time, victorious chiefs began to offer precious booty to the gods and thus beautify the community's temples. They would send men out to fetch fine stones and metal for the benefit of the god and community and organise the distribution of temple wealth in an efficient way by accounting for things that came in and went out. As the poem about Enmerkar shows, this gave the king high status and the authority to command the community.

We can imagine a mutually reinforcing cycle of development in which leaders encouraged the settlement of villagers close to themselves, to be able to rapidly get an army together. Besides, people would be safe living in close proximity to one another. At Uruk, one of the earliest temple towns, we find depictions of armed heroes and their victims, and careful archaeological surveys have shown that around 3000 BCE, when Uruk grew to the enormous extent of 250 hectares – twice as large as Mohenjo-daro would be in later centuries – dozens of small villages were deserted. There had

Top: Basalt stele showing a bearded man twice. Note his headband and hair, waistband and long skirt. In the lower scene he attacks a lion with a huge bow and arrow. In the scene above, the hero finally kills the rampant lion with a spear (c.3200 BCE).*

been a major population shift. Significantly, Uruk also came to have a defensive wall at a very early date. The site was continuously occupied from about 4200 BCE to about 400 CE, and by about 2800 BCE it had expanded to 400 hectares.

War captives and local people were put to work for the temple, or directly for the ruler. This, rather than agricultural tax, was compulsory. Those who were put to work were paid rations. Hundreds of ration lists have been found, which give, against people's names, the quantities of grain, cloth or oil allotted to them. It has been estimated that one of the temples took 1,500 men working 10 hours a day, five years to build.

With rulers commanding people to fetch stones or metal ores, to come and make bricks or lay the bricks for a temple, or else to go to a distant country to fetch suitable materials, there were also technical advances at Uruk around 3000 BCE. Bronze tools came into use for various crafts. Architects learnt to construct brick columns, there being no suitable wood to bear the weight of the roof of large halls.

Hundreds of people were put to work at making and baking clay cones that could be pushed into temple walls, painted in different colours, creating a colourful mosaic. In sculpture, there were superb achievements, not in easily available clay but in imported stone. And then there was a technological landmark that we can say is appropriate to an urban economy: the potter's wheel. In the long run, the wheel enables a potter's workshop to 'mass produce' dozens of similar pots at a time.

*Steles are stone slabs with inscriptions or carvings.

Impression of a cylinder seal, c.3200 BCE. The bearded and armed standing figure is similar in dress and hairstyle to the hero in the stele shown above. Note three prisoners of war, their arms bound, and a fourth man beseeching the war leader.*

The Seal – An Urban Artefact

In India, early stone seals were stamped. In Mesopotamia until the end of the first millennium BCE, cylindrical stone seals, pierced down the centre, were fitted with a stick and rolled over wet clay so that a continuous picture was created. They were carved by very skilled craftsmen, and sometimes carry writing: the name of the owner, his god, his official position, etc. A seal could be rolled on clay covering the string knot of a cloth package or the mouth of a pot, keeping the contents safe. When rolled on a letter written on a clay tablet, it became a mark of authenticity. So the seal was the mark of a city dweller's role in public life.

Five early cylinder seals and their impressions.
Describe what you see in each of the impressions. Is the cuneiform script shown on them?

Life in the City

What we have seen is that a ruling elite had emerged: a small section of society had a major share of the wealth. Nothing makes this fact as clear as the enormous riches (jewellery, gold vessels, wooden musical instruments inlaid with white shell and lapis lazuli, ceremonial daggers of gold, etc.) buried with some kings and queens at Ur. But what of the ordinary people?

We know from the legal texts (disputes, inheritance matters, etc.) that in Mesopotamian society the nuclear family* was the norm, although a married son and his family often resided with his parents. The father was the head of the family. We know a little about the procedures for marriage. A declaration was made about the willingness to marry, the bride's parents giving their consent to the marriage. Then a gift was given by the groom's people to the bride's

*A nuclear family comprises a man, his wife and children.

people. When the wedding took place, gifts were exchanged by both parties, who ate together and made offerings in a temple. When her mother-in-law came to fetch her, the bride was given her share of the inheritance by her father. The father's house, herds, fields, etc., were inherited by the sons.

Let us look at Ur, one of the earliest cities to have been excavated. Ur was a town whose ordinary houses were systematically excavated in the 1930s. Narrow winding streets indicate that wheeled carts could not have reached many of the houses. Sacks of grain and firewood would have arrived on donkey-back. Narrow winding streets and the irregular shapes of house plots also indicate an absence of town planning. There were no street drains of the kind we find in contemporary Mohenjo-daro. Drains and clay pipes were instead found in the inner courtyards of the Ur houses and it is thought that house roofs sloped inwards and rainwater was channelled via the drainpipes into sumps* in the inner courtyards. This would have been a way of preventing the unpaved streets from becoming excessively slushy after a downpour.

*A sump is a covered basin in the ground into which water and sewage flow.

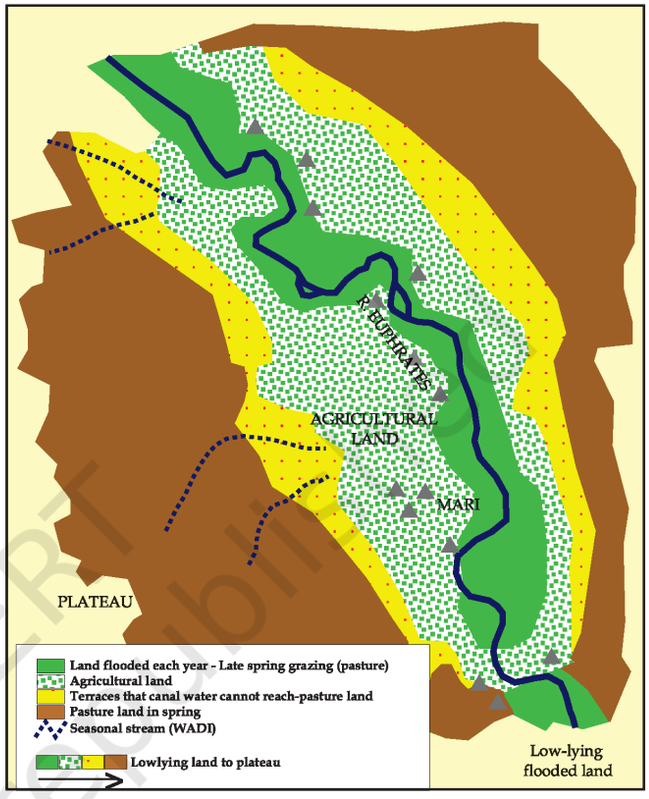
A residential area at Ur, c. 2000 BCE. Can you locate, besides the winding streets, two or three blind alleys?

Yet people seem to have swept all their household refuse into the streets, to be trodden underfoot! This made street levels rise, and over time the thresholds of houses had also to be raised so that no mud would flow inside after the rains. Light came into the rooms not from windows but from doorways opening into the courtyards: this would also have given families their privacy. There were superstitions about houses, recorded in omen tablets at Ur: a raised threshold brought wealth; a front door that did not open towards another house was lucky; but if the main wooden door of a house opened outwards (instead of inwards), the wife would be a torment to her husband!

There was a town cemetery at Ur in which the graves of royalty and commoners have been found, but a few individuals were found buried under the floors of ordinary houses.

A Trading Town in a Pastoral Zone

MAP 3: The Location of Mari



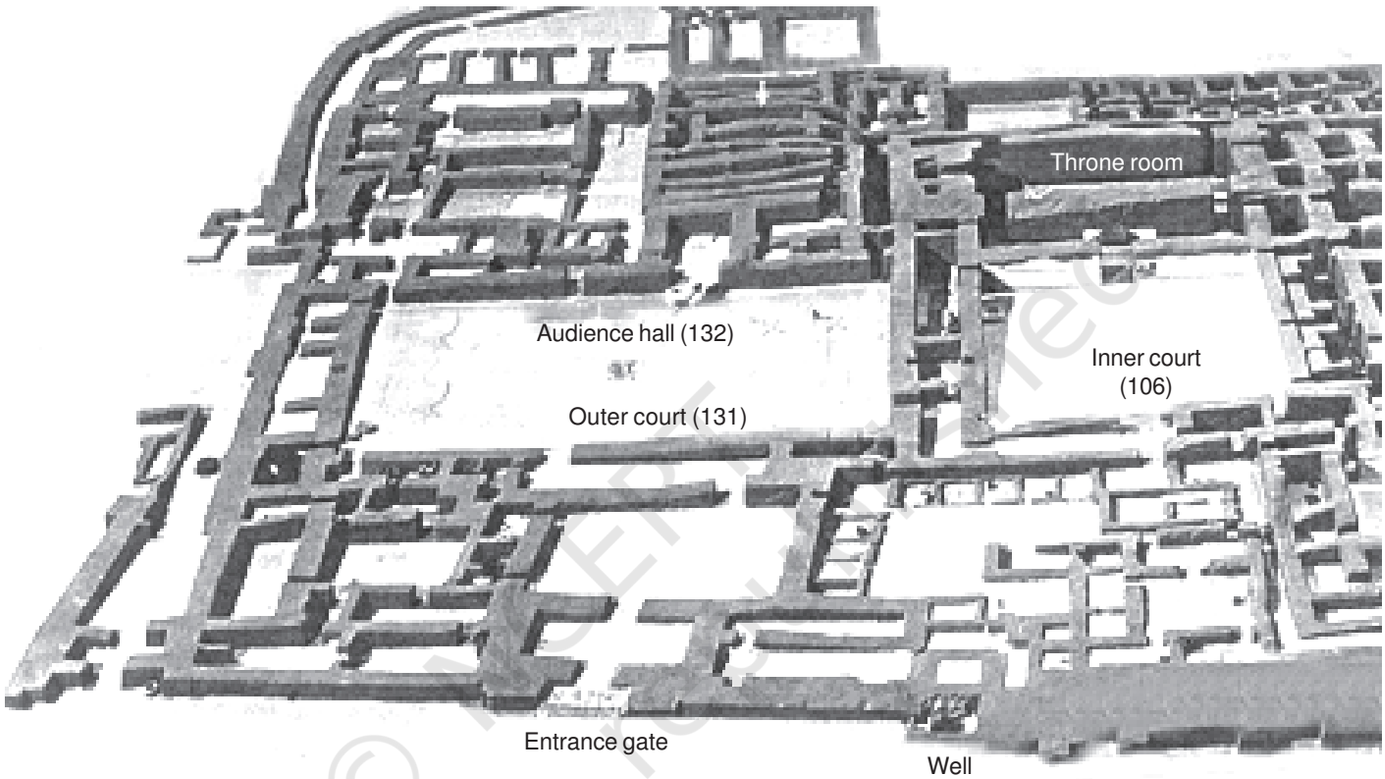
After 2000 BCE the royal capital of Mari flourished. You will have noticed (see Map 2) that Mari stands not on the southern plain with its highly productive agriculture but much further upstream on the Euphrates. Map 3 with its colour coding shows that agriculture and animal rearing were carried out close to each other in this region. Some communities in the kingdom of Mari had both farmers and pastoralists, but most of its territory was used for pasturing sheep and goats.

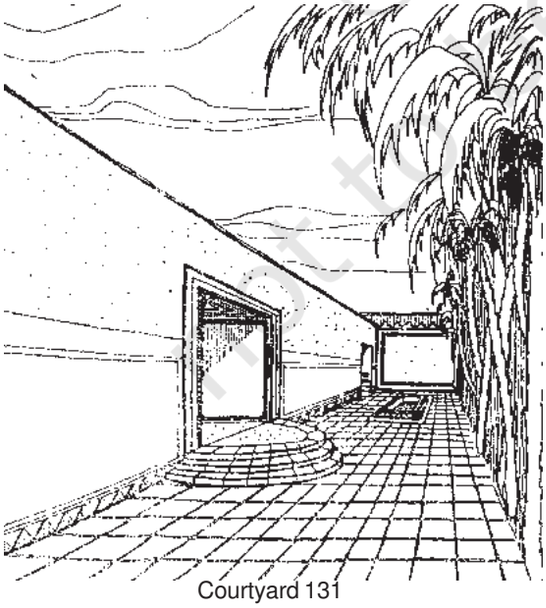
Herders need to exchange young animals, cheese, leather and meat in return for grain, metal tools, etc., and the manure of a penned flock is also of great use to a farmer. Yet, at the same time, there may be conflict. A shepherd may take his flock to water across a sown field, to the ruin of the crop. Herdsmen being mobile can raid agricultural villages and seize their stored goods. For their part, settled groups may deny pastoralists access to river and canal water along a certain set of paths.

Through Mesopotamian history, nomadic communities of the western desert filtered into the prosperous agricultural heartland. Shepherds would bring their flocks into the sown area in the summer. Such groups would come in as herders, harvest labourers or hired soldiers, occasionally become prosperous, and settle down. A few gained the power to establish their own rule. These included the Akkadians, Amorites, Assyrians and Aramaeans. (You will read more about rulers from pastoral societies in Theme 5.) The kings of Mari were Amorites whose dress differed from that of the original inhabitants and who respected not only the gods of Mesopotamia but also raised a temple at Mari for Dagan, god of the steppe. Mesopotamian society and culture were thus open to different people and cultures, and the vitality of the civilisation was perhaps due to this intermixture.

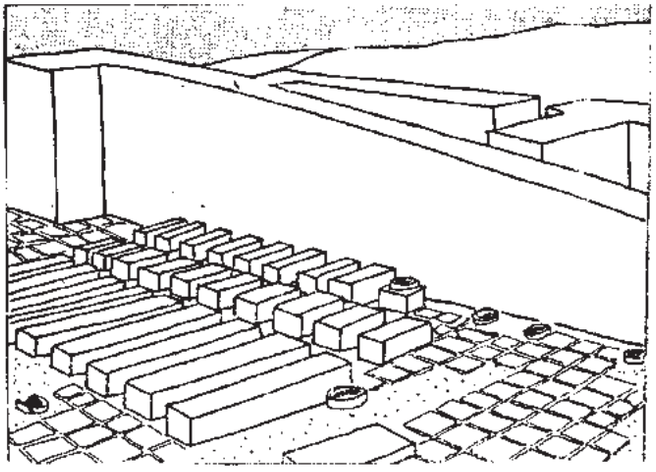
A warrior holding a long spear and a wicker shield. Note the dress, typical of Amorites, and different from that of the Sumerian warrior shown on p. 38. This picture was incised on shell, c.2600 BCE.

The Palace at Mari of King Zimrilim (1810-1760 BCE)

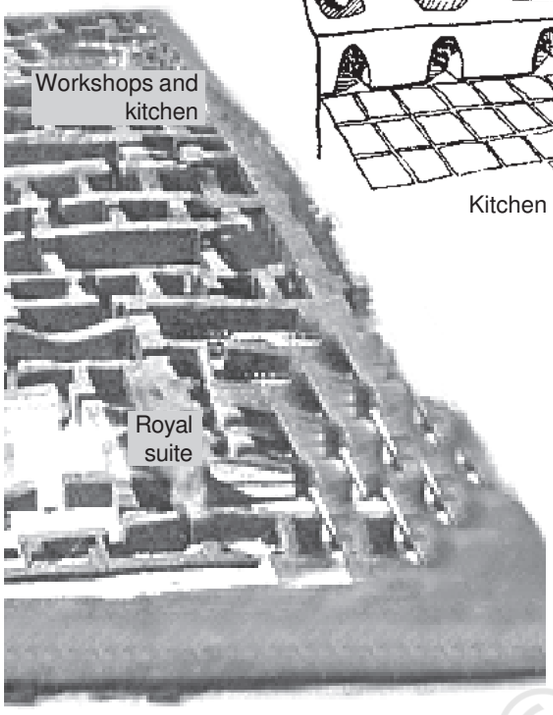


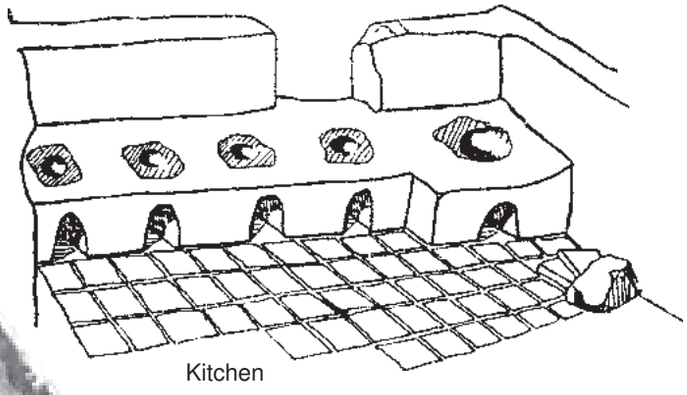


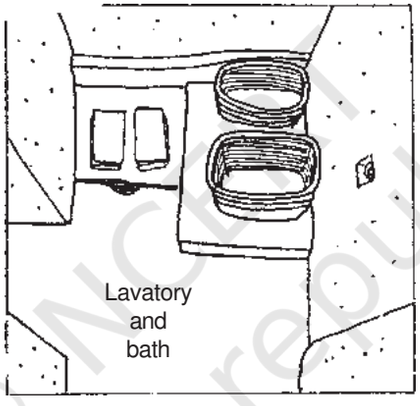
Courtyard 131

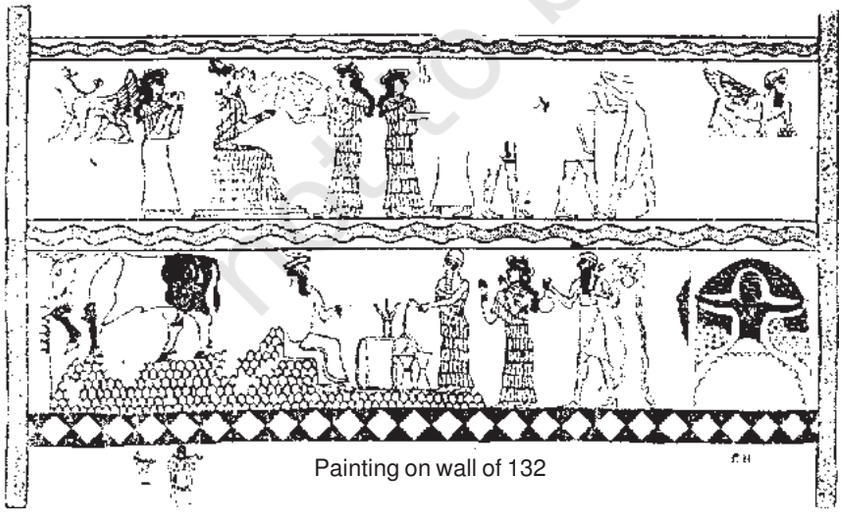


Scribes' office with benches and clay bins for storing tablets




Kitchen




Painting on wall of 132

The Palace at Mari of King Zimrilim (1810-1760 BCE)

The great palace of Mari was the residence of the royal family, the hub of administration, and a place of production, especially of precious metal ornaments. It was so famous in its time that a minor king came from north Syria just to see it, carrying with him a letter of introduction from a royal friend of the king of Mari, Zimrilim. Daily lists reveal that huge quantities of food were presented each day for the king's table: flour, bread, meat, fish, fruit, beer and wine. He probably ate in the company of many others, in or around courtyard **106**, paved white. You will notice from the plan that the palace had only one entrance, on the north. The large, open courtyards such as **131** were beautifully paved. The king would have received foreign dignitaries and his own people in **132**, a room with wall paintings that would have awed the visitors. The palace was a sprawling structure, with 260 rooms and covered an area of 2.4 hectares.

ACTIVITY 3

Trace the route from the entrance to the inner court. What do you think would have been kept in the storerooms?
How has the kitchen been identified?

The kings of Mari, however, had to be vigilant; herders of various tribes were allowed to move in the kingdom, but they were watched. The camps of herders are mentioned frequently in letters between kings and officials. In one letter, an officer writes to the king that he has been seeing frequent fire signals at night – sent by one camp to another – and he suspects that a raid or an attack is being planned.

Located on the Euphrates in a prime position for trade – in wood, copper, tin, oil, wine, and various other goods that were carried in boats along the Euphrates – between the south and the mineral-rich uplands of Turkey, Syria and Lebanon, Mari is a good example of an urban centre prospering on trade. Boats carrying grinding stones, wood, and wine and oil jars, would stop at Mari on their way to the southern cities. Officers of this town would go aboard, inspect the cargo (a single river boat could hold 300 wine jars), and levy a charge of about one-tenth the value of the goods before allowing the boat to continue downstream. Barley came in special grain boats. Most important, tablets refer to copper from 'Alashiya', the island of Cyprus, known for its copper, and tin was also an item of trade. As bronze was the main industrial material for tools and weapons, this trade was of great importance. Thus, although the kingdom of Mari was not militarily strong, it was exceptionally prosperous.

Excavating Mesopotamian Towns

Today, Mesopotamian excavators have much higher standards of accuracy and care in recording than in the old days, so that few dig huge areas the way Ur was excavated. Moreover, few archaeologists have the funds to employ large teams of excavators. Thus, the mode of obtaining data has changed.

Take the small town at Abu Salabikh, about 10 hectares in area in 2500 BCE with a population less than 10,000. The outlines of walls were at first traced by scraping surfaces. This involves scraping off the top few millimetres of the mound with the sharp and wide end of a shovel or other tool. While the soil underneath was still slightly moist, the archaeologist could make out different colours, textures and lines of brick walls or pits or other features. A few houses that were discovered were excavated. The archaeologists also sieved through tons of earth to recover plant and animal remains, and in the process identified many species of plants and animals and found large quantities of charred fish bones that had been swept out on to the streets. Plant seeds and fibre remained after dung cakes had been burned as fuel and thus kitchens were identified. Living rooms were those with fewer traces. Because they found the teeth of very young pigs on the streets, archaeologists concluded that pigs must have roamed freely here as in any other Mesopotamian town. In fact, one house burial contained some pig bones – the dead person must have been given some pork for his nourishment in the afterlife! The archaeologists also made microscopic studies of room floors to decide which rooms in a house were roofed (with poplar logs, palm leaves, straw, etc.) and which were open to the sky.

Cities in Mesopotamian Culture

Mesopotamians valued city life in which people of many communities and cultures lived side by side. After cities were destroyed in war, they recalled them in poetry.

The most poignant reminder to us of the pride Mesopotamians took in their cities comes at the end of the Gilgamesh Epic, which was written on twelve tablets. Gilgamesh is said to have ruled the city of Uruk some time after Enmerkar. A great hero who subdued people far and wide, he got a shock when his heroic friend died. He then set out to find the secret of immortality, crossing the waters that surround the world. After a heroic attempt, Gilgamesh failed, and returned to Uruk. There, he consoled himself by walking along the city wall, back and forth. He admired the foundations made of fired bricks that he had put into place. It is on the city wall of Uruk that the long tale of heroism and endeavour fizzles out. Gilgamesh does not say that even though he will die his sons will outlive him, as a tribal hero would have done. He takes consolation in the city that his people had built.

The Legacy of Writing

While moving narratives can be transmitted orally, science requires written texts that generations of scholars can read and build upon. Perhaps the greatest legacy of Mesopotamia to the world is its scholarly tradition of time reckoning and mathematics.

Dating around 1800 BCE are tablets with multiplication and division tables, square- and square-root tables, and tables of compound interest. The square root of 2 was given as:

$$1 + 24/60 + 51/60^2 + 10/60^3$$

If you work this out, you will find that the answer is 1.41421296, only slightly different from the correct answer, 1.41421356. Students had to solve problems such as the following: a field of area such and such is covered one finger deep in water; find out the volume of water.

The division of the year into 12 months according to the revolution of the moon around the earth, the division of the month into four weeks, the day into 24 hours, and the hour into 60 minutes – all that we take for granted in our daily lives – has come to us from the Mesopotamians. These time divisions were adopted by the successors of Alexander and from there transmitted to the Roman world, then to the world of Islam, and then to medieval Europe (see Theme 7 for how this happened).

Whenever solar and lunar eclipses were observed, their occurrence was noted according to year, month and day. So too there were records about the observed positions of stars and constellations in the night sky.

None of these momentous Mesopotamian achievements would have been possible without writing and the urban institution of schools, where students read and copied earlier written tablets, and where some boys were trained to become not record keepers for the administration, but intellectuals who could build on the work of their predecessors.

We would be mistaken if we think that the preoccupation with the urban world of Mesopotamia is a modern phenomenon. Let us look, finally, at two early attempts to locate and preserve the texts and traditions of the past.

An Early Library

In the iron age, the Assyrians of the north created an empire, at its height between 720 and 610 BCE, that stretched as far west as Egypt. The state economy was now a predatory one, extracting labour and tribute in the form of food, animals, metal and craft items from a vast subject population.

The great Assyrian kings, who had been immigrants, acknowledged the southern region, Babylonia, as the centre of high culture and the last of them, Assurbanipal (668-627 BCE), collected a library at his capital, Nineveh in the north. He made great efforts to gather tablets on history, epics, omen literature, astrology, hymns and poems. He sent his scribes south to find old tablets. Because scribes in the south were trained to read and write in schools where they all had to copy tablets by the dozen, there were towns in Babylonia where huge collections of tablets were created and acquired fame. And although Sumerian ceased to be spoken after about 1800 BCE, it continued to be taught in schools, through vocabulary texts, sign lists, bilingual (Sumerian and Akkadian) tablets, etc. So even in 650 BCE, cuneiform tablets written as far back as 2000 BCE were intelligible – and Assurbanipal's men knew where to look for early tablets or their copies.

Copies were made of important texts such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, the copier stating his name and writing the date. Some tablets ended with a reference to Assurbanipal:

> 'I, Assurbanipal, king of the universe, king of Assyria, on whom the gods bestowed vast intelligence, who could acquire the recondite details of scholarly erudition, I wrote down on tablets the wisdom of the gods … And I checked and collated the tablets. I placed them for the future in the library of the temple of my god, Nabu, at Nineveh, for my life and the well-being of my soul, and to sustain the foundations of my royal throne…'

More important, there was cataloguing: a basket of tablets would have a clay label that read: '*n* number of tablets about exorcism, written by X'. Assurbanipal's library had a total of some 1,000 texts, amounting to about 30,000 tablets, grouped according to subject.

And, an Early Archaeologist!

A man of the southern marshes, Nabopolassar, released Babylonia from Assyrian domination in 625 BCE. His successors increased their territory and organised building projects at Babylon. From that time, even after the Achaemenids of Iran conquered Babylon in 539 BCE and until 331 BCE when Alexander conquered Babylon, Babylon was the premier city of the world, more than 850 hectares, with a triple wall, great palaces and temples, a ziggurat or stepped tower, and a processional way to the ritual centre. Its trading houses had widespread dealings and its mathematicians and astronomers made some new discoveries.

Nabonidus was the last ruler of independent Babylon. He writes that the god of Ur came to him in a dream and ordered him to appoint a priestess to take charge of the cult in that ancient town in the deep south. He writes: 'Because for a very long time the office of High Priestess had been forgotten, her characteristic features nowhere indicated, I bethought myself day after day …'

Then, he says, he found the stele of a very early king whom we today date to about 1150 BCE and saw on that stele the carved image of the Priestess. He observed the clothing and the jewellery that was depicted. This is how he was able to dress his daughter for her consecration as Priestess.

On another occasion, Nabonidus's men brought to him a broken statue inscribed with the name of Sargon, king of Akkad. (We know today that the latter ruled around 2370 BCE.) Nabonidus, and indeed many intellectuals, had heard of this great king of remote times. Nabonidus felt he had to repair the statue. 'Because of my reverence for the gods and respect for kingship,' he writes, 'I summoned skilled craftsmen, and replaced the head.'

ACTIVITY 4

Why do you think Assurbanipal and Nabonidus cherished early Mesopotamian traditions?

TIMELINE	
c. 7000-6000 BCE	Beginning of agriculture in the northern Mesopotamian plains
c. 5000 BCE	Earliest temples in southern Mesopotamia built
c. 3200 BCE	First writing in Mesopotamia
c. 3000 BCE	Uruk develops into a huge city, increasing use of bronze tools
c. 2700-2500 BCE	Early kings, including, possibly, the legendary ruler Gilgamesh
c. 2600 BCE	Development of the cuneiform script
c. 2400 BCE	Replacement of Sumerian by Akkadian
2370 BCE	Sargon, king of Akkad
c. 2000 BCE	Spread of cuneiform writing to Syria, Turkey and Egypt; Mari and Babylon emerge as important urban centres
c.1800 BCE	Mathematical texts composed; Sumerian no longer spoken
c.1100 BCE	Establishment of the Assyrian kingdom
c. 1000 BCE	Use of iron
720-610 BCE	Assyrian empire
668-627 BCE	Rule of Assurbanipal
331 BCE	Alexander conquers Bablyon
c. 1st century CE	Akkadian and cuneiform remain in use
1850s	Decipherment of the cuneiform script

Exercises

ANSWER IN BRIEF

1. Why do we say that it was *not* natural fertility and high levels of food production that were the causes of early urbanisation?
2. Which of the following were necessary conditions and which the causes, of early urbanisation, and which would you say were the outcome of the growth of cities:
   (a) highly productive agriculture, (b) water transport, (c) the lack of metal and stone, (d) the division of labour, (e) the use of seals, (f) the military power of kings that made labour compulsory?
3. Why were mobile animal herders not necessarily a threat to town life?
4. Why would the early temple have been much like a house?

ANSWER IN A SHORT ESSAY

5. Of the new institutions that came into being once city life had begun, which would have depended on the initiative of the king?
6. What do ancient stories tell us about the civilisation of Mesopotamia?

At the time, Rome was a republic. Government was based on a complex system of election, but its political institutions gave some importance to birth and wealth and society benefited from slavery. The forces of Rome established a network for trade between the states that had once been part of Alexander's empire. In the middle of the first century BCE, under Julius Caesar, a high-born military commander, this 'Roman Empire' was extended to present-day Britain and Germany.

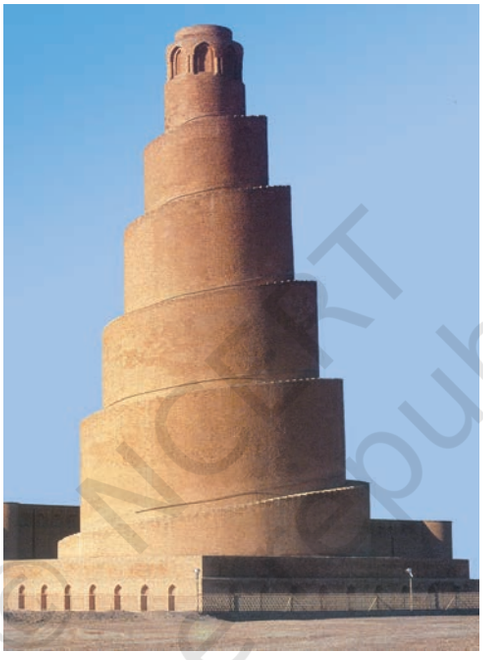
Latin (spoken in Rome) was the main language of the empire, though many in the east continued to use Greek, and the Romans had a great respect for Hellenic culture. There were changes in the political structure of the empire from the late first century BCE, and it was substantially Christianised after the emperor Constantine became a Christian in the fourth century CE.

To make government easier, the Roman Empire was divided into eastern and western halves in the fourth century CE. But in the west, there was a breakdown of the arrangements that existed between Rome and the tribes in frontier areas (Goths, Visigoths, Vandals and others). These arrangements dealt with trade, military recruitment and

Ruins at Greek city of Corinth.

TIMELINE II

(c. 100 BCE TO 1300 CE)



This timeline focuses on kingdoms and empires. Some of these such as the Roman Empire were very large, spreading across three continents. This was also the time when some of the major religious and cultural traditions developed. It was a time when institutions of intellectual activity emerged. Books were written and ideas travelled across continents. Some things that are now part of our everyday lives were used for the first time during this period.

DATES	AMERICAS	AUSTRALIA/PACIFIC ISLANDS
100-50 BCE		
50-1		
1-50 CE		
50-100		
100-150		
150-200		
200-250		
250-300		
300-350	City-state of Teotihuacan established in Mexico, with pyramid temples, Mayan ceremonial centres*, development of astronomy, pictorial script*	
350-400		
400-450		
450-500		
500-550		
550-600		
600-650		
650-700		
700-750		
750-800		
800-850		
850-900		
900-950		
950-1000	First city is built in North America (c.990)	Maori navigator from Polynesia 'discovers' New Zealand
1000-50		
1050-1100		Sweet potato (originally from South America) grown in the Polynesian islands
1100-1150		
1150-1200		
1200-50		
1250-1300		

ACTIVITY

Try and identify at least five events/processes that would have involved the movement of peoples across regions/ continents. What would have been the significance of these events/ processes?

The Early Empire

The Roman Empire can broadly be divided into two phases, 'early' and 'late', divided by the third century as a sort of historical watershed between them. In other words, the whole period down to the main part of the third century can be called the 'early empire', and the period after that the 'late empire'.

A major difference between the two superpowers and their respective empires was that the Roman Empire was culturally much more diverse than that of Iran. The Parthians and later the Sasanians, the dynasties that ruled Iran in this period, ruled over a population that was largely Iranian. The Roman Empire, by contrast, was a mosaic of territories and cultures that were chiefly bound together by a common system of government. Many languages were spoken in the empire, but for the purposes of administration Latin and Greek were the most widely used, indeed the *only* languages. The upper classes of the east spoke and wrote in Greek, those of the west in Latin, and the boundary between these broad language areas ran somewhere across the middle of the Mediterranean, between the African provinces of Tripolitania (which was Latin speaking) and Cyrenaica (Greek-speaking). All those who lived in the empire were subjects of a single ruler, the emperor, regardless of where they lived and what language they spoke.

The regime established by Augustus, the first emperor, in 27 BCE was called the 'Principate'. Although Augustus was the sole ruler and the only real source of authority, the fiction was kept alive that he was actually only the 'leading citizen' (*Princeps* in Latin), not the absolute ruler. This was done out of respect for the Senate, the body which had controlled Rome earlier, in the days when it was a Republic.* The Senate had existed in Rome for centuries, and had been and remained a body representing the aristocracy, that is, the wealthiest families of Roman and, later, Italian descent, mainly landowners. Most of the Roman histories that survive in Greek and Latin were written by people from a senatorial background. From these it is clear that emperors were judged by how they behaved towards the Senate. The worst emperors were those who were hostile to the senatorial class, behaving with suspicion or brutality and violence. Many senators yearned to go back to the days of the Republic, but most must have realised that this was impossible.

Next to the emperor and the Senate, the other key institution of imperial rule was the army. Unlike the army of its rival in the Persian empire, which was a conscripted** army, the Romans had a paid professional army where soldiers had to put in a minimum of 25 years of service. Indeed, the existence of a paid army was a distinctive feature of the Roman Empire. The army was the largest single organised body in the empire (600,000 by the fourth century) and it certainly had the power to determine the fate of emperors. The soldiers would constantly agitate for better wages and service conditions. These agitations often

*The Republic was the name for a regime in which the reality of power lay with the Senate, a body dominated by a small group of wealthy families who formed the 'nobility'. In practice, the Republic represented the government of the nobility, exercised through the body called the Senate. The Republic lasted from 509 BC to 27 BC, when it was overthrown by Octavian, the adopted son and heir of Julius Caesar, who later changed his name to Augustus. Membership of the Senate was for life, and wealth and office-holding counted for more than birth.

**A conscripted army is one which is forcibly recruited; military service is compulsory for certain groups or categories of the population.

To sum up, in the late first, second and early third centuries the army and administration were increasingly drawn from the provinces, as citizenship spread to these regions and was no longer confined to Italy. But individuals of Italian origin continued to dominate the senate at least till the third century, when senators of provincial origin became a majority. These trends reflected the general decline of Italy within the empire, both political and economic, and the rise of new elites in the wealthier and more urbanised parts of the Mediterranean, such as the south of Spain, Africa and the east. A city in the Roman sense was an urban centre with its own magistrates, city council and a 'territory' containing villages which were under its jurisdiction. Thus one city could not be in the territory of another city, but villages almost always were. Villages could be upgraded to the status of cities, and vice versa, usually as a mark of imperial favour (or the opposite). One crucial advantage of living in a city was simply that it might be better provided for during food shortages and even famines than the countryside.

ACTIVITY 1

Who were the three main players in the political history of the Roman Empire? Write one or two lines about each of them. And how did the Roman emperor manage to govern such a vast territory? Whose collaboration was crucial to this?

Doctor Galen on how Roman Cities Treated the Countryside

'The famine prevalent for many successive years in many provinces has clearly displayed for men of any understanding the effect of malnutrition in generating illness. The city-dwellers, as it was their custom to collect and store enough grain for the whole of the next year immediately after the harvest, carried off all the wheat, barley, beans and lentils, and left to the peasants various kinds of pulse – after taking quite a large proportion of these to the city. After consuming what was left in the course of the winter, the country people had to resort to unhealthy foods in the spring; they ate twigs and shoots of trees and bushes and bulbs and roots of inedible plants…'

– Galen, *On Good and Bad Diet.*

Public baths were a striking feature of Roman urban life (when one Iranian ruler tried to introduce them into Iran, he encountered the wrath of the clergy there! Water was a sacred element and to use it for *public* bathing may have seemed a desecration to them), and urban populations also enjoyed a much higher level of entertainment. For example, one calendar tells us that *spectacula* (shows) filled no less than 176 days of the year!

Amphitheatre at the Roman cantonment town of Vindonissa (in modern Switzerland), first century CE. *Used for military drill and for staging entertainments for the soldiers.*

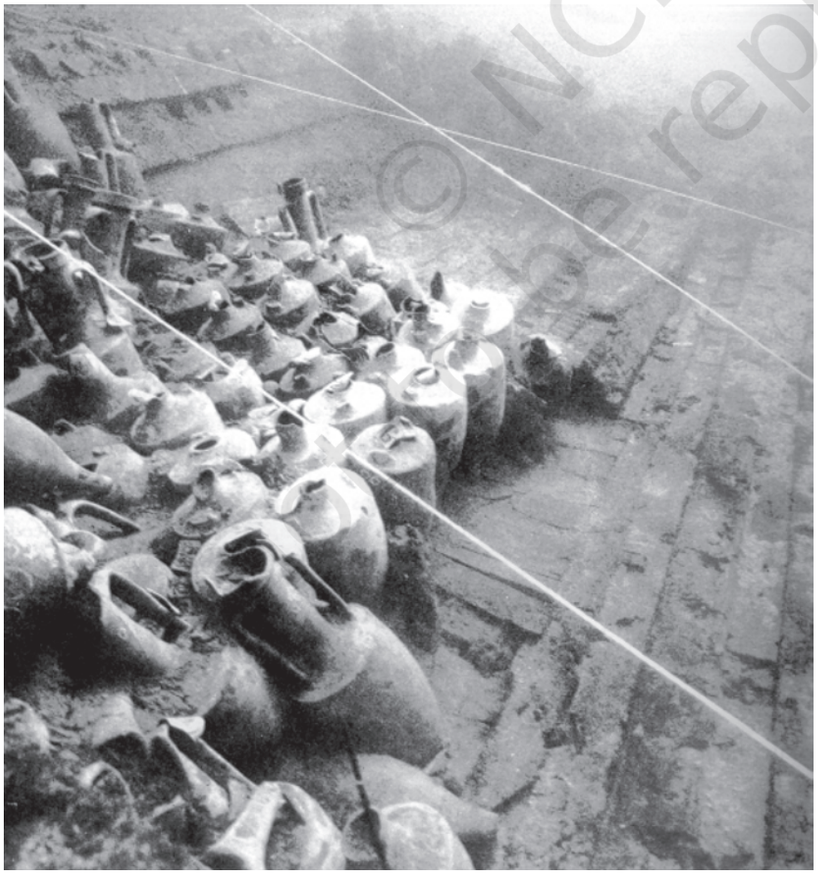
translation of the Bible by the middle of the third century. Elsewhere, the spread of Latin displaced the written form of languages that were otherwise widespread; this happened notably with Celtic, which ceased to be written after the first century.

ACTIVITY 2

How independent were women in the Roman world? Compare the situation of the Roman family with the family in India today.

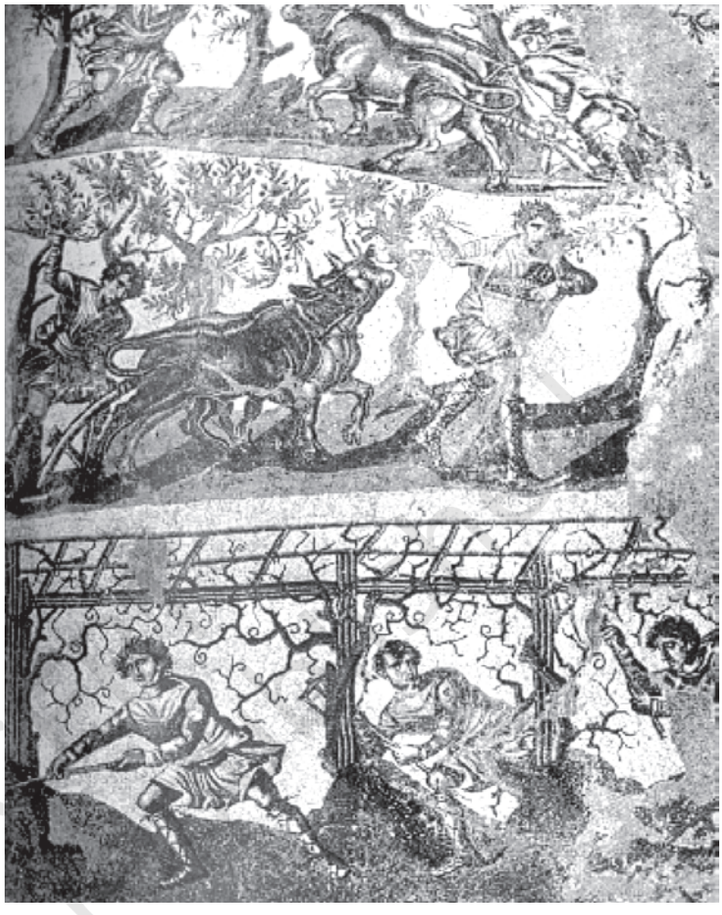
Economic Expansion

The empire had a substantial economic infrastructure of harbours, mines, quarries, brickyards, olive oil factories, etc. Wheat, wine and olive-oil were traded and consumed in huge quantities, and they came mainly from Spain, the Gallic provinces, North Africa, Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Italy, where conditions were best for these crops. Liquids like wine and olive oil were transported in containers called 'amphorae'. The fragments and sherds of a very large number of these survive (Monte Testaccio in Rome is said to contain the remnants of over 50 million vessels!), and it has been possible for archaeologists to reconstruct the precise *shapes* of these containers, tell us *what* they carried, and say exactly *where* they were made by examining the clay content and matching the finds with clay pits throughout the Mediterranean. In this way we can now say with some confidence that Spanish olive oil, to take just one example, was a vast commercial enterprise that reached its peak in the years 140-160. The Spanish olive oil of this period was mainly carried in a container called 'Dressel 20' (after the archaeologist who first established its form). If finds of Dressel 20 are widely scattered across sites in the Mediterranean, this suggests that Spanish olive oil circulated very widely indeed. By using such evidence (the remains of amphorae of different kinds and their 'distribution maps'), archaeologists are able to show that Spanish producers succeeded in capturing markets for olive oil from their Italian counterparts. This would only have happened if Spanish producers supplied a better quality oil at lower prices. In other words, the big landowners from different



Shipwreck off the south coast of France, first century BCE. The amphorae are Italian, bearing the stamp of a producer near the Lake of Fondi.

among employers that without supervision no work would ever get done, so supervision was paramount, for both free workers and slaves. To make supervision easier, workers were sometimes grouped into gangs or smaller teams. Columella recommended squads of ten, claiming it was easier to tell who was putting in effort and who was not in work groups of this size. This shows a detailed consideration of the management of labour. Pliny the Elder, the author of a very famous 'Natural History', condemned the use of slave gangs as the worst method of organising production, mainly because slaves who worked in gangs were usually chained together by their feet.



All this looks draconian*, but we should remember that most factories in the world today enforce similar principles of labour control. Indeed, some industrial establishments in the empire enforced even tighter controls. The Elder Pliny described conditions in the frankincense** factories (*officinae*) of Alexandria, where, he tells us, no amount of supervision seemed to suffice. 'A seal is put upon the workmen's aprons, they have to wear a mask or a net with a close mesh on their heads, and before they are allowed to leave the premises, they have to take off all their clothes.' Agricultural labour must have been fatiguing and disliked, for a famous edict of the early third century refers to Egyptian peasants deserting their villages 'in order not to engage in agricultural work'. The same was probably true of most factories and workshops. A law of 398 referred to workers being branded so they could be recognised if and when they run away and try to hide. Many private employers cast their agreements with workers in the form of debt contracts to be able to claim that their employees were in debt to them and thus ensure tighter control over them. An early, second-century writer tells us, 'Thousands surrender themselves to work in servitude, *although they are free.*' In other words, a lot of the poorer families went into debt bondage in order to survive. From one of the recently discovered letters of Augustine we learn that parents sometimes sold their children into servitude for periods of 25 years. Augustine asked a lawyer friend of his whether these children could be liberated once the father died. Rural indebtedness was even more

*Draconian: Harsh (so-called because of an early sixth-century BCE Greek lawmaker called Draco, who prescribed death as the penalty for most crimes!).

**Frankincense – the European name for an aromatic resin used in incense and perfumes. It is tapped from Boswellia trees by slashing the bark and allowing the exuded resins to harden. The best-quality frankincense came from the Arabian peninsula.

structure of the state that began with the emperor Diocletian (284-305), and it may be best to start with these.

Overexpansion had led Diocletian to 'cut back' by abandoning territories with little strategic or economic value. Diocletian also fortified the frontiers, reorganised provincial boundaries, and separated civilian from military functions, granting greater autonomy to the military commanders (*duces*), who now became a more powerful group. Constantine consolidated some of these changes and added others of his own. His chief innovations were in the monetary sphere, where he introduced a new denomination, the *solidus*, a coin of 4½ gm of pure gold that would in fact outlast the Roman Empire itself. *Solidi* were minted on a very large scale and their circulation ran into millions. The other area of innovation was the creation of a second capital at Constantinople (at the site of modern Istanbul in Turkey, and previously called Byzantium), surrounded on three sides by the sea. As the new capital required a new senate, the fourth century was a period of rapid expansion of the governing classes. Monetary stability and an expanding population stimulated economic growth, and the archaeological record shows considerable investment in rural establishments, including industrial installations like oil presses and glass factories, in newer technologies such as screw presses and multiple water-mills, and in a revival of the long-distance trade with the East.

Part of a colossal statue of Emperor Constantine, 313 CE.

All of this carried over into strong urban prosperity that was marked by new forms of architecture and an exaggerated sense of luxury. The ruling elites were wealthier and more powerful than ever before. In Egypt, hundreds of papyri survive from these later centuries and they show us a relatively affluent society where money was in extensive use and rural estates generated vast incomes in gold. For example, Egypt contributed taxes of over 2½ million *solidi* a year (roughly 35,000 lbs of gold) in the reign of Justinian in the sixth century. Indeed, large parts of the Near Eastern countryside were *more* developed and densely settled in the fifth and sixth centuries than they would be even in the twentieth century! This is the social background against which we should set the cultural developments of this period.

The traditional religious culture of the classical world, both Greek and Roman, had been polytheist. That is, it involved a multiplicity of cults that included both Roman/Italian gods like Jupiter, Juno, Minerva and Mars, as well as numerous Greek and eastern deities worshipped in thousands of temples, shrines and sanctuaries throughout the

RULERS	EVENTS	
27 BCE-14 CE Augustus, first Roman emperor	27 BCE	'Principate' founded by Octavian, now calls himself Augustus
14-37 Tiberius	c. 24-79	Life of the Elder Pliny; dies in the volcanic eruption of Vesuvius, which also buries the Roman town of Pompeii
98-117 Trajan	66-70	The great Jewish revolt and capture of Jerusalem by Roman forces
117-38 Hadrian	c. 115	Greatest extent of the Roman Empire, following Trajan's conquests in the East
193-211 Septimius Severus	212	All free inhabitants of the empire transformed into Roman citizens
241-72 reign of Shapur I in Iran	224	New dynasty founded in Iran, called 'Sasanians' after ancestor Sasan
253-68 Gallienus	250s	Persians invade Roman territories west of the Euphrates
284-305 the 'Tetrarchy'; Diocletian main ruler	258	Cyprian bishop of Carthage executed
312-37 Constantine	260s	Gallienus reorganises the army
309-79 reign of Shapur II in Iran	273	Caravan city of Palmyra destroyed by Romans
408-50 Theodosius II (compiler of the famous 'Theodosian Code')	297	Diocletian reorganises empire into 100 provinces
	c. 310	Constantine issues new gold coinage (the 'solidus')
	312	Constantine converts to Christianity
	324	Constantine now sole ruler of empire; founds city of Constantinople
	354-430	Life of Augustine, bishop of Hippo
	378	Goths inflict crushing defeat on Roman armies at Adrianople
	391	Destruction of the Serapeum (temple of Serapis) at Alexandria
	410	Sack of Rome by the Visigoths
	428	Vandals capture Africa
	434-53	Empire of Attila the Hun
490-518 Anastasius	493	Ostrogoths establish kingdom in Italy
527-65 Justinian	533-50	Recovery of Africa and Italy by Justinian
531-79 reign of Khusro I in Iran	541-70	Outbreaks of bubonic plague
610-41 Heraclius	568	Lombards invade Italy
	c. 570	Birth of Muhammad
	614-19	Persian ruler Khusro II invades and occupies eastern Roman territories
	622	Muhammad and companions leave Mecca for Medina
	633-42	First and crucial phase of the Arab conquests; Muslim armies take Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Iraq and parts of Iran
	661-750	Umayyad dynasty in Syria
	698	Arabs capture Carthage
	711	Arab invasion of Spain

in Arabic, the best being the *Tarikh* of Tabari (d. 923) which has been translated into English in 38 volumes. Persian chronicles are few but they are quite detailed in their treatment of Iran and Central Asia. Christian chronicles, written in Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic*), are fewer but they throw interesting light on the history of early Islam. Besides chronicles, we have legal texts, geographies, travelogues and literary works, such as stories and poems.

*Aramaic is a language related to Hebrew and Arabic. It has also been used in Ashokan inscriptions.

Documentary evidence (fragmentary pieces of writing, such as official orders or private correspondence) is the most valuable for writing histories because it does not consciously refer to events and persons. It comes almost entirely from Greek and Arabic papyri (good for administrative history) and the Geniza records. Some evidence has emerged from archaeological (excavations done at desert palaces), numismatic (study of coins) and epigraphic (study of inscriptions) sources which is of great value for economic history, art history, and for establishing names and dates.

Proper histories of Islam began to be written in the nineteenth century by university professors in Germany and the Netherlands. Colonial interests in the Middle East and North Africa encouraged French and British researchers to study Islam as well. Christian priests too paid close attention to the history of Islam and produced some good work, although their interest was mainly to compare Islam with Christianity. These scholars, called Orientalists, are known for their knowledge of Arabic and Persian and critical analysis of original texts. Ignaz Goldziher was a Hungarian Jew who studied at the Islamic college (al-Azhar) in Cairo and produced path-breaking studies in German of Islamic law and theology. Twentieth-century historians of Islam have largely followed the interests and methods of Orientalists. They have widened the scope of Islamic history by including new topics, and by using allied disciplines, such as economics, anthropology and statistics, have refined many aspects of Orientalist studies. The historiography of Islam is a good example of how religion can be studied with modern historical methods by those who may not share the customs and beliefs of the people they are studying.

The Rise of Islam in Arabia: Faith, Community and Politics

During 612-32, the Prophet Muhammad preached the worship of a single God, Allah, and the membership of a single community of believers (*umma*). This was the origin of Islam. Muhammad was an Arab by language and culture and a merchant by profession. Sixth-century Arab culture was largely confined to the Arabian peninsula and areas of southern Syria and Mesopotamia.

a series of battles, Mecca was conquered and Muhammad's reputation as a religious preacher and political leader spread far and wide. Muhammad now insisted on conversion as the sole criterion for membership of the community. In the harsh conditions of the desert, the Arabs attached great value to strength and solidarity. Impressed by Muhammad's achievements, many tribes, mostly Bedouins, joined the community by converting to Islam. Muhammad's alliances began to spread until they embraced the whole of Arabia. Medina became the administrative capital of the emerging Islamic state with Mecca as its religious centre. The Kaba was cleansed of idols as Muslims were required to face the shrine when offering prayers. In a short space of time, Muhammad was able to unite a large part of Arabia under a new faith, community and state. The early Islamic polity, however, remained a federation of Arab tribes and clans for a long time.

The Caliphate: Expansion, Civil Wars and Sect Formation

After Muhammad's death in 632, no one could legitimately claim to be the next prophet of Islam. As a result, his political authority was transferred to the *umma* with no established principle of succession. This created opportunities for innovations but also caused deep divisions among the Muslims. The biggest innovation was the creation of the institution of caliphate, in which the leader of the community (*amir al-muminin*) became the deputy (*khalifa*) of the Prophet. The first four caliphs (632-61) justified their powers on the basis of their close association with the Prophet and continued his work under the general guidelines he had provided. The twin objectives of the caliphate were to retain control over the tribes constituting the *umma* and to raise resources for the state.

Following Muhammad's death, many tribes broke away from the Islamic state. Some even raised their own prophets to establish communities modelled on the *umma*. The first caliph, Abu Bakr, suppressed the revolts by a series of campaigns. The second caliph, Umar, shaped the *umma's* policy of expansion of power. The caliph knew that the *umma* could not be maintained out of the modest income derived from trade and taxes. Realising that rich booty (*ghanima*) could be obtained from expeditionary raids, the caliph and his military commanders mustered their tribal strength to conquer lands belonging to the Byzantine Empire in the west and the Sasanian empire in the east. At the height of their power, the Byzantine and Sasanian empires ruled vast territories and commanded huge resources to pursue their political and commercial interests in Arabia. The Byzantine Empire promoted Christianity and the Sasanian empire patronised Zoroastrianism, the ancient religion of Iran. On the eve of the Arab invasions, these two empires had declined in strength due to religious conflicts and revolts by the aristocracy. This made it

The Dome of the Rock, built over a rocky mound by Abd al-Malik, is the earliest major work of Islamic architecture. Created as a monument to the Muslim presence in the city of Jerusalem, it acquired a mystical association connected with the Night Journey of the Prophet to Heaven (miraj).

unity and suppressed rebellions in the name of Islam. They also retained their Arab social identity. During the reign of Abd al-Malik (685-705) and his successors, both the Arab and Islamic identities were strongly emphasised. Among the measures Abd al-Malik took were the adoption of Arabic as the language of administration and the introduction of an Islamic coinage. The gold *dinar* and silver *dirham* that had been circulating in the caliphate were copies of Byzantine and Iranian coins (*denarius* and *drachm*), with symbols of crosses and fire altars and Greek and Pahlavi (the language of Iran) inscriptions. These symbols were removed and the coins now carried Arabic inscriptions. Abd al-Malik also made a highly visible contribution to the development of an Arab-Islamic identity, by building the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

Abd al-Malik's Coinage Reform

The three coin specimens show the transition from Byzantine to Arab-Islamic coinage. On the second coin, the bearded and long-haired caliph is dressed in traditional Arab robes and is holding a sword. It is the first extant portrait of a Muslim. It is also unique because later there developed an antipathy towards the representation of living beings in art and craft. Abd al-Malik's reform of coinage was linked with his reorganisation of state finances. It proved so successful that for hundreds of years, coins were struck according to the pattern and weight of the third specimen.

Byzantine gold solidus (denarius aureus) *showing the emperor Heraclius and his two sons.*

Portrait gold dinar *struck by Abd al-Malik with his name and image.*

The reformed dinar was purely epigraphic. It carries the kalima*: 'There is no God but Allah and He has no partner* (sharik)'

administrations as slaves and soldiers, rising to high positions on account of their loyalty and military abilities. The Ghaznavid sultanate was established by Alptegin (961) and consolidated by Mahmud of Ghazni (998-1030). Like the Buyids, the Ghaznavids were a military dynasty with a professional army of Turks and Indians (one of the generals of Mahmud was an Indian named Tilak). But their centre of power was in Khurasan and Afghanistan and for them, the Abbasid caliphs were not rivals but a source of legitimacy. Mahmud was conscious of being the son of a slave and was especially eager to receive the title of Sultan from the caliph. The caliph was willing to support the Sunni Ghaznavid as a counterweight to Shiite power.

The Saljuq Turks entered Turan as soldiers in the armies of the Samanids and Qarakhanids (non-Muslim Turks from further east). They later established themselves as a powerful group under the leadership of two brothers, Tughril and Chaghri Beg. Taking advantage of the chaos following the death of Mahmud of Ghazni, the Saljuqs conquered Khurasan in 1037 and made Nishapur* their first capital. The Saljuqs next turned their attention to western Persia and Iraq (ruled by the Buyids) and in 1055, restored Baghdad to Sunni rule. The caliph, al-Qaim, conferred on Tughril Beg the title of Sultan in a move that marked the separation of religious and political authority. The two Saljuq brothers ruled together in accordance with the tribal notion of rule by the family as a whole. Tughril (d. 1064) was succeeded by his nephew, Alp Arsalan. During Alp Arsalan's reign, the Saljuq empire expanded to Anatolia (modern Turkey).

*An important Perso-Islamic centre of learning and the birthplace of Umar Khayyam.

From the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, there was a series of conflicts between European Christians and the Arab states. This is discussed below. Then, at the start of the thirteenth century, the Muslim world found itself on the verge of a great disaster. This was the threat from the Mongols, the last but most decisive of all nomadic assaults on settled civilisations (see Theme 5).

The Crusades

In medieval Islamic societies, Christians were regarded as the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitab*) since they had their own scripture (the New Testament or *Injil*). Christians were granted safe conduct (*aman*) while venturing into Muslim states as merchants, pilgrims, ambassadors and travellers. These territories also included those which were once held by the Byzantine Empire, notably the Holy Land of Palestine. Jerusalem was conquered by the Arabs in 638 but it was ever-present in the Christian imagination as the place of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. This was an important factor in the formation of the image of Muslims in Christian Europe.

Hostility towards the Muslim world became more pronounced in the eleventh century. Normans, Hungarians and some Slavs had

Franks in Syria

The treatment of the subjugated Muslim population differed among the various Frankish lords. The earliest of the crusaders, who settled down in Syria and Palestine, were generally more tolerant of the Muslim population than those who came later. In his memoirs, Usama ibn Munqidh, a twelfth-century Syrian Muslim, has something interesting to say about his new neighbours:

'Among the Franks there are some who have settled down in this country and associated with Muslims. These are better than the newcomers, but they are exceptions to the rule, and no inference can be drawn from them.

Here is an example. Once I sent a man to Antioch on business. At that time, Chief Theodore Sophianos [an eastern Christian] was there, and he and I were friends. He was then all powerful in Antioch. One day he said to my man, "One of my Frankish friends has invited me. Come with me and see how they live." My man told me: "So I went with him, and we came to the house of one of the old knights, those who had come with the first Frankish expedition. He had already retired from state and military service, and had a property in Antioch from which he lived. He produced a fine table, with food both tasty and cleanly served. He saw that I was reluctant to eat, and said: "Eat to your heart's content, for I do not eat Frankish food. I have Egyptian women cooks and eat nothing but what they prepare, nor does swine flesh ever enter my house." So I ate, but with some caution, and we took our leave.

A crusader castle in Syria. Built during the crusades (1110), it was an important base to attack Arab-controlled areas. The towers and aqueducts were built by the Mamluk sultan, Baybars, when he captured it in 1271.

Later I was walking through the market, when suddenly a Frankish woman caught hold of me and began jabbering in their language, and I could not understand what she was saying. A crowd of Franks collected against me, and I was sure that my end had come. Then, suddenly, that same knight appeared and saw me, and came up to that woman, and asked her: "What do you want of this Muslim?" She replied: "He killed my brother Hurso." This Hurso was a knight of Afamiya who had been killed by someone from the army of Hama. Then the knight shouted at her and said, "This man is a *burjasi* [bourgeois, that is, a merchant]. He does not fight or go to war." And he shouted at the crowd and they dispersed; then he took my hand and went away. So the effect of that meal that I had was to save me from death." '

– *Kitab al-Itibar.*

From here, the merchandise was carried overland in camel caravans to the warehouses (*makhazin*, origin of the word magazine which has a similar collection of articles) of Baghdad, Damascus and Aleppo for local consumption or onward transmission. The caravans passing through Mecca got bigger whenever the *hajj* coincided with the sailing seasons (*mawasim*, origin of the word monsoon) in the Indian Ocean. At the Mediterranean end of these trade routes, exports to Europe from the port of Alexandria were handled by Jewish merchants, some of whom traded directly with India, as can be seen from their letters preserved in the Geniza collection. However, from the tenth century, the Red Sea route gained greater importance due to the rise of Cairo as a centre of commerce and power and growing demand for eastern goods from the trading cities of Italy.

ACTIVITY 2

Describe a morning scene in Basra.

Paper, Geniza Records and History

In the central Islamic lands, written works were widely circulated after the introduction of paper. Paper (made from linen) came from China, where the manufacturing process was a closely guarded secret. In 751, the Muslim governor of Samarqand took 20,000 Chinese invaders as prisoners, some of whom were good at making paper. For the next 100 years, Samarqand paper remained an important export item. Since Islam prohibited monopolies, paper began to be manufactured in the rest of the Islamic world. By the middle of the tenth century, it had more or less replaced papyrus, the writing material made from the inner stem of a plant that grew freely in the Nile valley. Demand for paper increased, and Abd al-Latif, a doctor from Baghdad (see his depiction of the ideal student on p. 98) and a resident of Egypt between 1193 and 1207, reported how Egyptian peasants robbed graves to obtain mummy wrappings made of linen to sell to paper factories.

Paper also facilitated the writing of commercial and personal documents of all kinds. In 1896, a huge collection of medieval Jewish documents was discovered in a sealed room (Geniza, pronounced *ghaniza*) of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat. The documents had been preserved thanks to the Jewish practice of not destroying any piece of writing that contained the name of God. The Geniza was found to contain over a quarter of a million manuscripts and fragments dating back as far as the mid-eighth century. Most of the material dated from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, that is, from the Fatimid, Ayyubid and early Mamluk periods. These included personal letters between merchants, family and friends, contracts, promises of dowry, sale documents, laundry lists, and other trivia. Most of the documents were written in Judaeo-Arabic, a version of Arabic written in Hebrew characters that was commonly used by Jewish communities throughout the medieval Mediterranean. The Geniza documents provide rich insights into personal and economic experiences as also into Mediterranean and Islamic culture. The documents also suggest that the business skills and commercial techniques of merchants of the medieval Islamic world were more advanced than those of their European counterparts. Goitein wrote a multi-volume history of the Mediterranean from Geniza records, and Amitav Ghosh was inspired by a Geniza letter to tell the story of an Indian slave in his book, *In an Antique Land*.

The Quran

'And if all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean were ink
with seven oceans behind it to add to its supply,
yet would not the words of Allah be exhausted in the writing.'

(Quran, chapter 31, verse 27)

Page from a Quran written on vellum in the ninth century. It is the beginning of Sura 18, 'al-Kahf' *(The Cave) which refers to Moses, the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus and Alexander (Zulqar Nayn). The angular Kufi script has vowel signs in red for the correct pronunciation of the language.*

The Quran is a book in Arabic divided into 114 chapters (*suras*) and arranged in descending order of length, the shortest being the last. The only exception to this is the first *sura* which is a short prayer (*al-fatiha* or opening). According to Muslim tradition, the Quran is a collection of messages (revelations) which God sent to the Prophet Muhammad between 610 and 632, first in Mecca and then in Medina. The task of compiling these revelations was completed some time in 650. The oldest complete Quran we have today dates from the ninth century. There are many fragments which are older, the earliest being the verses engraved on the Dome of the Rock and on coins in the seventh century.

The use of the Quran as a source material for the history of early Islam has posed some problems. The first is that it is a scripture, a text vested with religious authority. Theologians generally believed that as the speech of God (*kalam allah*), it has to be understood literally, but rationalists among them gave wider interpretations to the Quran. In 833, the Abbasid caliph al-Mamun imposed the view (in a trial of faith or *mihna*) that the Quran is God's creation rather than His speech. The second problem is that the Quran very often speaks in metaphors and, unlike the Old Testament (*Tawrit*), it does not narrate events but only refers to them. Medieval Islamic scholars thus had to make sense of many verses with the help of *hadith.* Many *hadith* were written to help the reading of the Quran.

The study of new subjects promoted critical inquiry and had a profound influence on Islamic intellectual life. Scholars with a theological bent of mind, such as the group known as Mutazila, used Greek logic and methods of reasoning (*kalam*) to defend Islamic beliefs. Philosophers (*falasifa*) posed wider questions and provided fresh answers. Ibn Sina (980-1037), a doctor by profession and a philosopher, did not believe in the resurrection of the body on the Day of Judgement. This was met with strong opposition from theologians. His medical writings were widely read. The most influential was *al-Qanun fil Tibb (Canon of Medicine)*, a million-word manuscript that lists 760 drugs sold by the pharmacists of his day and includes notes on his own experiments conducted in hospitals (*bimaristan*). The *Canon* points out the importance of dietetics (healing through dietary regulation), the influence of the climate and environment on health and the contagious nature of some diseases. The *Canon* was used as a textbook in Europe, where the author was known as Avicenna (see Theme 7). Just before his death, the scientist and poet Umar Khayyam was said to be reading the *Canon*. His gold toothpick was found between two pages of the chapter on metaphysics.

In medieval Islamic societies, fine language and a creative imagination were among the most appreciated qualities in a person. These qualities raised a person's communication to the level of *adab*, a term which implied literary and cultural refinement. *Adab* forms of expressions included poetry (*nazm* or orderly arrangement) and prose (*nathr* or scattered words) which were meant to be memorised and used when the occasion arose. The most popular poetic composition of pre-Islamic origin was the ode (*qasida*), developed by poets of the Abbasid period to glorify the achievements of their patrons. Poets of Persian origin revitalised and reinvented Arabic poetry and challenged the cultural hegemony of the Arabs. Abu Nuwas (d. 815), who was of Persian origin, broke new ground by composing classical poetry on new themes such as wine and male love with the intention of celebrating pleasures forbidden by Islam. After Abu Nuwas, the poets addressed the object of their passion in the masculine, even if the latter was a woman. Following the same tradition, the Sufis glorified the intoxication caused by the wine of mystical love.

By the time the Arabs conquered Iran, Pahlavi, the language of the sacred books of ancient Iran, was in decay. A version of Pahlavi, known as New Persian, with a huge Arabic vocabulary, soon developed. The formation of sultanates in Khurasan and Transoxiana took New Persian to great cultural heights. The Samanid court poet Rudaki (d. 940) was considered the father of New Persian poetry, which included new forms such as the short lyrical poem (*ghazal*) and the quatrain (*rubai,* plural *rubaiyyat*). The *rubai* is a four-line stanza in which the first two lines set the stage, the third is finely poised, and the fourth delivers the point. In contrast to its form, the subject matter of the *rubai* is unrestricted. It can be used to express the beauty of a beloved, praise

The Islamic decorative genius found full expression in the art of metal objects that are among the best-preserved specimens. This mosque lamp from fourteenth-century Syria has the Light verse inscribed on it.

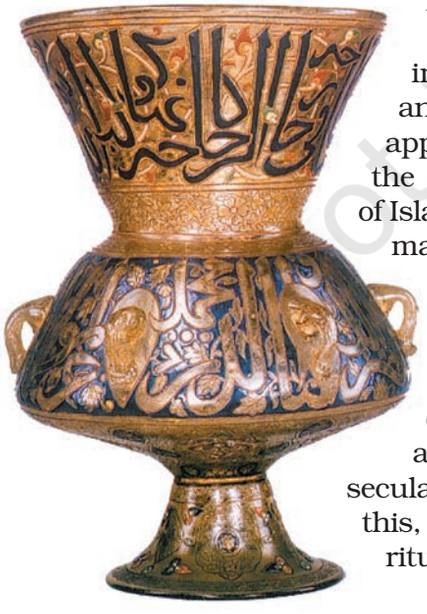
*'God is the Light (*nur*) of the heavens and the earth*
*His light is like a niche (*mishkat*) with a lamp (*misbah*)*
The lamp is in a glass which looks as if it were a glittering star
*Kindled from a blessed olive (*zaitun*) tree that is neither eastern nor western*
*Whose oil would always shine even if no fire (*nar*) touched it'*

(Quran, chapter 24, verse 35).

inside the hall: a niche (*mihrab*) in the wall indicating the direction of Mecca (*qibla*), and a pulpit (*minbar*, pronounced *mimbar*) from where sermons were delivered during noon prayers on Friday. Attached to the building was the minaret, a tower used to call the faithful to prayer at the appointed times and to symbolise the presence of the new faith. Time was marked in cities and villages by the five daily prayers and weekly sermons.

The same pattern of construction – of buildings built around a central courtyard (*iwan*) – appeared not only in mosques and mausoleums but also in caravanserais, hospitals and palaces. The Umayyads built 'desert palaces' in oases, such as Khirbat al-Mafjar in Palestine and Qusayr Amra in Jordan, which served as luxurious residences and retreats for hunting and pleasure. The palaces, modelled on Roman and Sasanian architecture, were lavishly decorated with sculptures, mosaics and paintings of people. The Abbasids built a new imperial city in Samarra amidst gardens and running waters which is mentioned in the stories and legends revolving round Harun al-Rashid. The great palaces of the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad or the Fatimids in Cairo have disappeared, leaving only traces in literary texts.

The rejection of representing living beings in the religious art of Islam promoted two art forms: calligraphy (*khattati* or the art of beautiful writing) and arabesque (geometric and vegetal designs). Small and big inscriptions, usually of religious quotations, were used to decorate architecture. Calligraphic art has been best preserved in manuscripts of the Quran dating from the eighth and ninth centuries. Literary works, such as the *Kitab al-Aghani* (*Book of Songs*), *Kalila wa Dimna*, and *Maqamat* of Hariri, were illustrated with miniature paintings. In addition, a wide variety of illumination techniques were introduced to enhance the beauty of a book. Plant and floral designs, based on the idea of the garden, were used in buildings and book illustrations.



The history of the central Islamic lands brings together three important aspects of human civilisation: religion, community and politics. We can see them as three circles which merge and appear as one in the seventh century. In the next five centuries the circles separate. Towards the end of our period, the influence of Islam over state and government was minimal, and politics involved many things which had no sanction in religion (kingship, civil wars, etc.). The circles of religion and community overlapped. The Muslim community was united in its observance of the *sharia* in rituals and personal matters. It was no more governing itself (poltics was a separate circle) but it was defining its religious identity. The only way the circles of religion and community could have separated was through the progressive secularisation of Muslim society. Philosophers and Sufis advocated this, suggesting that civil society should be made autonomous, and rituals be replaced by private spirituality.

mainly from chronicles, travelogues and documents produced by city-based litterateurs. These authors often produced extremely ignorant and biased reports of nomadic life. The imperial success of the Mongols, however, attracted many literati. Some of them produced travelogues of their experiences; others stayed to serve Mongol masters. These individuals came from a variety of backgrounds – Buddhist, Confucian, Christian, Turkish and Muslim. Although not always familiar with Mongol customs, many of them produced sympathetic accounts – even eulogies – that challenged and complicated the otherwise hostile, city-based tirade against the steppe marauders. The history of the Mongols, therefore, provides interesting details to question the manner in which sedentary societies usually characterised nomads as primitive barbarians*.

Perhaps the most valuable research on the Mongols was done by Russian scholars starting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the Tsarist regime consolidated its control over Central Asia. This work was produced within a colonial milieu and was largely survey notes produced by travellers, soldiers, merchants and antiquarian scholars. In the early twentieth century, after the extension of the soviet republics in the region, a new Marxist historiography argued that the prevalent mode of production determined the nature of social relations. It placed Genghis Khan and the emerging Mongol empire within a scale of human evolution that was witnessing a transition from a tribal to a feudal mode of production: from a relatively classless society to one where there were wide differences between the lord, the owners of land and the peasant. Despite following such a deterministic interpretation of history, excellent research on Mongol languages, their society and culture was carried out by scholars such as Boris Yakovlevich Vladimirtsov. Others such as Vasily Vladimirovich Bartold did not quite toe the official line. At a time when the Stalinist regime was extremely wary of regional nationalism, Bartold's sympathetic and positive assessment of the career and achievements of the Mongols under Genghis Khan and his successors got him into trouble with the censors. It severely curtailed the circulation of the work of the scholar and it was only in the 1960s, during and after the more liberal Khruschev era, that his writings were published in nine volumes.

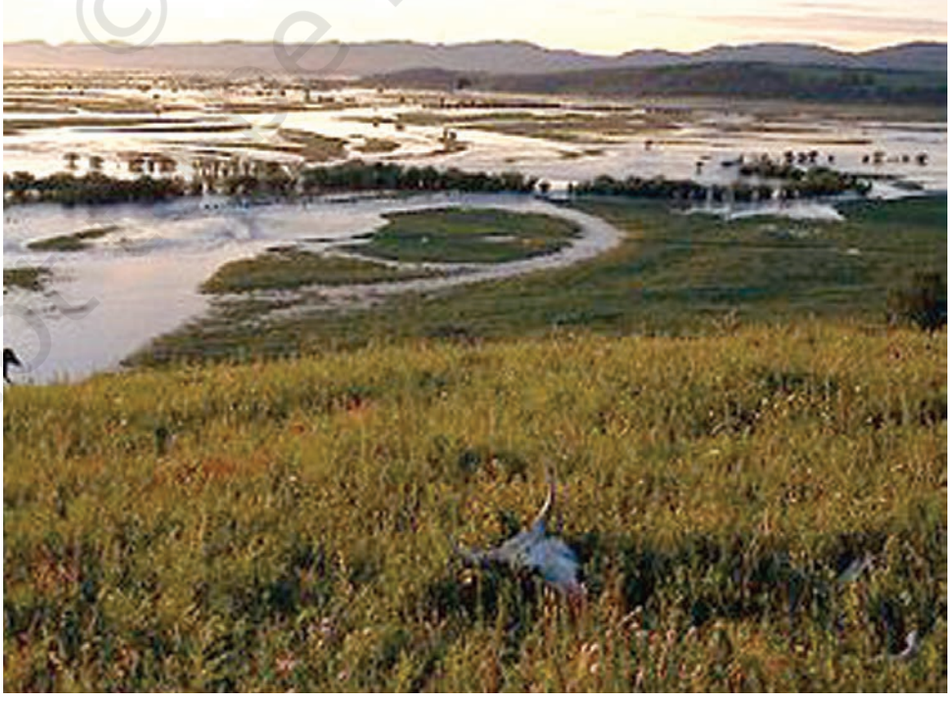
The transcontinental span of the Mongol empire also meant that the sources available to scholars are written in a vast number of languages. Perhaps the most crucial are the sources in Chinese, Mongolian, Persian and Arabic, but vital materials are also available in Italian, Latin, French and Russian. Often the same text was produced in two languages with differing contents. For example, the Mongolian and Chinese versions of the earliest narrative on Genghis Khan, titled *Mongqol-un niuèa tobèa'an* (*The Secret History of the*

*The term 'barbarian' is derived from the Greek *barbaros* which meant a non-Greek, someone whose language sounded like a random noise: 'bar-bar'. In Greek texts, barbarians were depicted like children, unable to speak or reason properly, cowardly, effeminate, luxurious, cruel, slothful, greedy and politically unable to govern themselves. The sterotype passed to the Romans who used the term for the Germanic tribes, the Gauls and the Huns. The Chinese had different terms for the steppe barbarians but none of them carried a positive meaning.

poor technological communications, what skills were deployed by the Mongols to administer and control such a vast dominion? For someone so self-confidently aware of his moral, divinely-dispensed right to rule, how did Genghis Khan relate to the diverse social and religious groups that comprised his dominion? In the making of his imperium what happened to this plurality? We need to start our discussion, however, with a humbler set of questions to better comprehend the social and political background of the Mongols and Genghis Khan: who were the Mongols? Where did they live? Who did they interact with and how do we know about their society and politics?

Social and Political Background

The Mongols were a diverse body of people, linked by similarities of language to the Tatars, Khitan and Manchus to the east, and the Turkic tribes to the west. Some of the Mongols were pastoralists while others were hunter-gatherers. The pastoralists tended horses, sheep and, to a lesser extent, cattle, goats and camels. They nomadised in the steppes of Central Asia in a tract of land in the area of the modern state of Mongolia. This was (and still is) a majestic landscape with wide horizons, rolling plains, ringed by the snow-capped Altai mountains to the west, the arid Gobi desert in the south and drained by the Onon and Selenga rivers and myriad springs from the melting snows of the hills in the north and the west. Lush, luxuriant grasses for pasture and considerable small game were available in a good season. The hunter-gatherers resided to the north of the



Onon river plain in flood.

that Temujin felt confident enough to move against other tribes: the powerful Tatars (his father's assassins), the Kereyits and Ong Khan himself in 1203. The final defeat of the Naiman people and the powerful Jamuqa in 1206, left Temujin as the dominant personality in the politics of the steppe lands, a position that was recognised at an assembly of Mongol chieftains (*quriltai*) where he was proclaimed the 'Great Khan of the Mongols' (*Qa'an*) with the title Genghis Khan, the 'Oceanic Khan' or 'Universal Ruler'.

Just before the *quriltai* of 1206, Genghis Khan had reorganised the Mongol people into a more effective, disciplined military force (*see following sections*) that facilitated the success of his future campaigns. The first of his concerns was to conquer China, divided at this time into three realms: the Hsi Hsia people of Tibetan origin in the north-western provinces; the Jurchen whose Chin dynasty ruled north China from Peking; the Sung dynasty who controlled south China. By 1209, the Hsi Hsia were defeated, the 'Great Wall of China' was breached in 1213 and Peking sacked in 1215. Long-drawn-out battles against the Chin continued until 1234 but Genghis Khan was satisfied enough with the progress of his campaigns to return to his Mongolian homeland in 1216 and leave the military affairs of the region to his subordinates.

After the defeat in 1218 of the Qara Khita who controlled the Tien Shan mountains north-west of China, Mongol dominions reached the Amu Darya, and the states of Transoxiana and Khwarazm. Sultan Muhammad, the ruler of Khwarazm, felt the fury of Genghis Khan's rage when he executed Mongol envoys. In the campaigns between 1219 and 1221 the great cities – Otrar, Bukhara, Samarqand, Balkh, Gurganj, Merv, Nishapur and Herat – surrendered to the Mongol forces. Towns that resisted were devastated. At Nishapur, where a Mongol prince was killed during the siege operation, Genghis Khan commanded that the 'town should be laid waste in such a manner that the site could be ploughed upon; and that in the exaction of vengeance [for the death of the prince] not even cats and dogs should be left alive'.

Estimated Extent of Mongol Destruction

All reports of Genghis Khan's campaigns agree at the vast number of people killed following the capture of cities that defied his authority. The numbers are staggering: at the capture of Nishapur in 1220, 1,747,000 people were massacred while the toll at Herat in 1222 was 1,600,000 people and at Baghdad in 1258, 800,000. Smaller towns suffered proportionately: Nasa, 70,000 dead; Baihaq district, 70,000; and at Tun in the Kuhistan province, 12,000 individuals were executed.

How did medieval chroniclers arrive at such figures?

Juwaini, the Persian chronicler of the Ilkhans stated that 1,300,000 people were killed in Merv. He reached the figure because it took thirteen days to count the dead and each day they counted 100,000 corpses.

The Mongols after Genghis Khan

We can divide Mongol expansion after Genghis Khan's death into two distinct phases: the first which spanned the years 1236-42 when the major gains were in the Russian steppes, Bulghar, Kiev, Poland and Hungary. The second phase including the years 1255-1300 led to the conquest of all of China (1279), Iran, Iraq and Syria. The frontier of the empire stabilised after these campaign.

The Mongol military forces met with few reversals in the decades after 1203 but, quite noticeably, after the 1260s the original impetus of campaigns could not be sustained in the West. Although Vienna, and beyond it western Europe, as well as Egypt was within the grasp of Mongol forces, their retreat from the Hungarian steppes and defeat at the hands of the Egyptian forces signalled the emergence of new political trends. There were two facets to this: the first was a consequence of the internal politics of succession within the Mongol family where the descendants of Jochi and Ogodei allied to control the office of the great Khan in the first two generations. These interests were more important than the pursuit of campaigns in Europe. The second compulsion occurred as the Jochi and Ogodei lineages were marginalised by the Toluyid branch of Genghis Khanid descendants. With the accession of Mongke, a descendant of Toluy, Genghis Khan's youngest son, military campaigns were pursued energetically in Iran during the 1250s. But as Toluyid interests in the conquest of China increased during the 1260s, forces and supplies were increasingly diverted into the heartlands of the Mongol dominion. As a result, the Mongols fielded a small, understaffed force against the Egyptian military. Their defeat and the increasing preoccupation with China of the Toluyid family marked the end of western expansion of the Mongols. Concurrently, conflict between the Jochid and Toluyid descendants along the Russian-Iranian frontier diverted the Jochids away from further European campaigns.

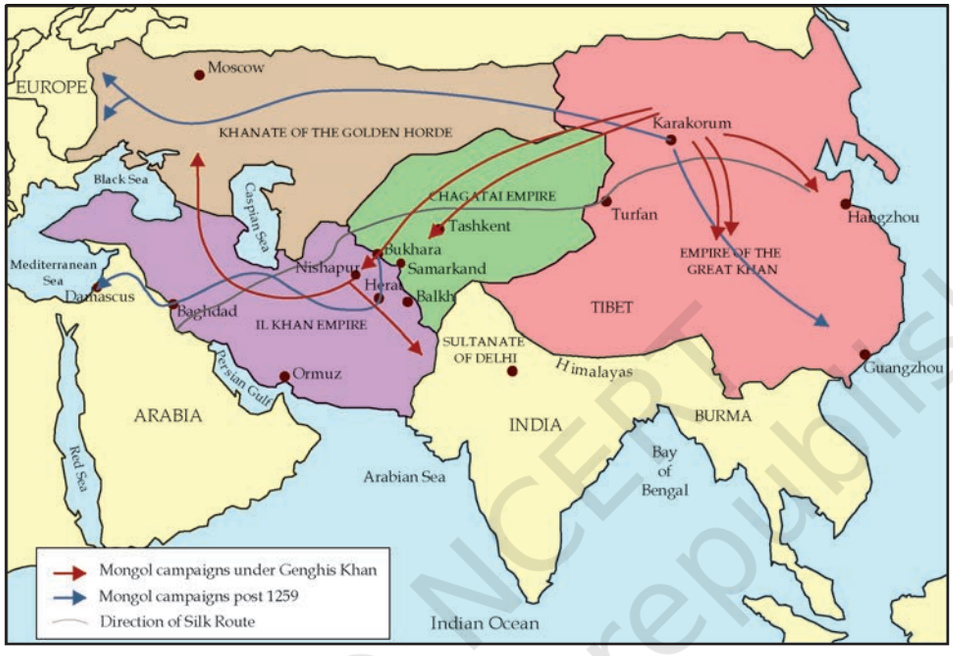
The suspension of Mongol expansion in the West did not arrest their campaigns in China which was reunited under the Mongols. Paradoxically, it was at the moment of its greatest successes that internal turbulence between members of the ruling family manifested itself. The next section discusses the factors that led to some of the greatest successes of the Mongol political enterprise but also inhibited its progress.

Social, Political and Military Organisation

Among the Mongols, and many other nomadic societies as well, all the able-bodied, adult males of the tribe bore arms: they constituted the armed forces when the occasion demanded. The unification of the different Mongol tribes and subsequent campaigns against diverse people introduced new members into Genghis Khan's army complicating the composition of this relatively small, undifferentiated body into an

(Pax Mongolica) trade connections matured. Commerce and travel along the Silk Route reached its peak under the Mongols but, unlike before, the trade routes did not terminate in China.

They continued north into Mongolia and to Karakorum, the heart of the new empire. Communication and ease of travel was vital to retain the coherence of the Mongol regime and travellers were given



MAP 2: The Mongol Campaigns

a pass (*paiza* in Persian; *gerege* in Mongolian) for safe conduct. Traders paid the *baj* tax for the same purpose, all acknowledging thereby the authority of the Mongol Khan.

The contradictions between the nomadic and sedentary elements within the Mongol empire eased through the thirteenth century. In the 1230s, for example, as the Mongols waged their successful war against the Chin dynasty in north China, there was a strong pressure group within the Mongol leadership that advocated the massacre of all peasantry and the conversion of their fields into pasture lands. But by the 1270s, when south China was annexed to the Mongol empire after the defeat of the Sung dynasty, Genghis Khan's grandson, Qubilai Khan (d. 1294), appeared as the protector of the peasants and the cities. In the 1290s, the Mongol ruler of Iran, Ghazan Khan (d. 1304), a descendant of Genghis Khan's youngest son Toluy, warned family members and other generals to avoid pillaging the peasantry. It did not lead to a stable prosperous realm, he advised in a speech whose sedentary overtones would have made Genghis Khan shudder.

ACTIVITY 2

Note the areas traversed by the Silk Route and the goods that were available to traders along the way. This map does not reflect one of the eastern terminal points of the silk route during the height of Mongol power.

Can you place the missing city? Could it have been on the Silk Route in the twelfth century? Why not?

identity and impose their 'law' upon their defeated subjects. It was an extremely empowering ideology and although Genghis Khan may not have planned such a legal code, it was certainly inspired by his vision and was vital in the construction of a Mongol universal dominion.

ACTIVITY 4

Did the meaning of *yasa* alter over the four centuries separating Genghis Khan from 'Abdullah Khan? Why did Hafiz-i Tanish make a reference to Genghis Khan's *yasa* in connection with 'Abdullah Khan's prayer at the Muslim festival ground?

Yasa

In 1221, after the conquest of Bukhara, Genghis Khan had assembled the rich Muslim residents at the festival ground and had admonished them. He called them sinners and warned them to compensate for their sins by parting with their hidden wealth. The episode was dramatic enough to be painted and for a long time afterwards people still remembered the incident. In the late sixteenth century, 'Abdullah Khan, a distant descendant of Jochi, Genghis Khan's eldest son, went to the same festival ground in Bukhara. Unlike Genghis Khan, however, 'Abdullah Khan went to perform his holiday prayers there. His chronicler, Hafiz-i Tanish, reported this performance of Muslim piety by his master and included the surprising comment: 'this was according to the *yasa* of Genghis Khan'.

Conclusion: Situating Genghis Khan and the Mongols in World History

When we remember Genghis Khan today the only images that appear in our imagination are those of the conqueror, the destroyer of cities, and an individual who was responsible for the death of thousands of people. Many thirteenth-century residents of towns in China, Iran and eastern Europe looked at the hordes from the steppes with fear and distaste. And yet, for the Mongols, Genghis Khan was the greatest leader of all time: he united the Mongol people, freed them from interminable tribal wars and Chinese exploitation, brought them prosperity, fashioned a grand transcontinental empire and restored trade routes and markets that attracted distant travellers like the Venetian Marco Polo. The contrasting images are not simply a case of dissimilar perspectives; they should make us pause and reflect on how one (dominant) perspective can completely erase all others.

Beyond the opinions of the defeated sedentary people, consider for a moment the sheer size of the Mongol dominion in the thirteenth century and the diverse body of people and faiths that it embraced. Although the Mongol Khans themselves belonged to a variety of

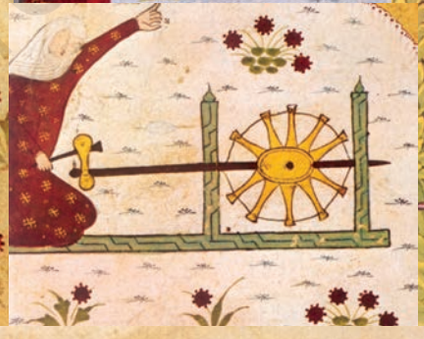
II

EMPIRES

An Empire Across Three Continents

The Central Islamic Lands

Nomadic Empires



EMPIRES

OVER the two millennia that followed the establishment of empires in Mesopotamia, various attempts at empire-building took place across the region and in the area to the west and east of it.

By the sixth century BCE, Iranians had established control over major parts of the Assyrian empire. Networks of trade developed overland, as well as along the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea.

In the eastern Mediterranean, Greek cities and their colonies benefited from improvements in trade that were the result of these changes. They also benefited from close trade with nomadic people to the north of the Black Sea. In Greece, for the most part, city-states such as Athens and Sparta were the focus of civic life. From among the Greek states, in the late fourth century BCE, the ruler of the kingdom of Macedon, Alexander, undertook a series of military campaigns and conquered parts of North Africa, West Asia and Iran, reaching up to the Beas. Here, his soldiers refused to proceed further east. Alexander's troops retreated, though many Greeks stayed behind.

Throughout the area under Alexander's control, ideals and cultural traditions were shared amongst the Greeks and the local population. The region on the whole became 'Hellenised' (the Greeks were called Hellenes), and Greek became a well-known language throughout. The political unity of Alexander's empire disintegrated quickly after his death, but for almost three centuries after, Hellenistic culture remained important in the area. The period is often referred to as the 'Hellenistic period' in the history of the region, but this ignores the way in which other cultures (especially Iranian culture associated with the old empire of Iran) were as important as – if not often *more* important than – Hellenistic notions and ideas.

This section deals with important aspects of what happened after this.

Small but well-organised military forces of the central Italian city-state of Rome took advantage of the political discord that followed the disintegration of Alexander's empire and established control over North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean from the second century BCE.

At the time, Rome was a republic. Government was based on a complex system of election, but its political institutions gave some importance to birth and wealth and society benefited from slavery. The forces of Rome established a network for trade between the states that had once been part of Alexander's empire. In the middle of the first century BCE, under Julius Caesar, a high-born military commander, this 'Roman Empire' was extended to present-day Britain and Germany.

Latin (spoken in Rome) was the main language of the empire, though many in the east continued to use Greek, and the Romans had a great respect for Hellenic culture. There were changes in the political structure of the empire from the late first century BCE, and it was substantially Christianised after the emperor Constantine became a Christian in the fourth century CE.

To make government easier, the Roman Empire was divided into eastern and western halves in the fourth century CE. But in the west, there was a breakdown of the arrangements that existed between Rome and the tribes in frontier areas (Goths, Visigoths, Vandals and others). These arrangements dealt with trade, military recruitment and

Ruins at Greek city of Corinth.

settlement, and the tribes increasingly attacked the Roman administration. Conflicts increased in scale, and coincided with internal dissensions in the empire, leading to the collapse of the empire in the west by the fifth century CE. Tribes established their own kingdoms within the former empire, though, with the prompting of the Christian Church, a Holy Roman Empire was formed from some of these kingdoms from the ninth century CE. This claimed some continuity with the Roman Empire.

Between the seventh century and the fifteenth century, almost all the lands of the eastern Roman Empire (centred on Constantinople) came to be taken over by the Arab empire – created by the followers of the Prophet Muhammad (who founded the faith of Islam in the seventh century) and centred on Damascus – or by its successors (who ruled from Baghdad initially). There was a close interaction between Greek and Islamic traditions in the region. The trading networks of the area and its prosperity attracted the attention of pastoral peoples to the north including various Turkic tribes, who often attacked the cities of the region and established control. The last of these peoples to attack the area and attempt to control it were the Mongols, under Genghis Khan and his successors, who moved into West Asia, Europe, Central Asia and China in the thirteenth century.

All these attempts to make and maintain empires were driven by the search to control the resources of the trading networks that existed in the region as a whole, and to derive benefit from the links of the region with other areas such as India or China. All the empires evolved administrative systems to give stability to trade. They also evolved

The Great Mosque, Damascus, completed in 714.

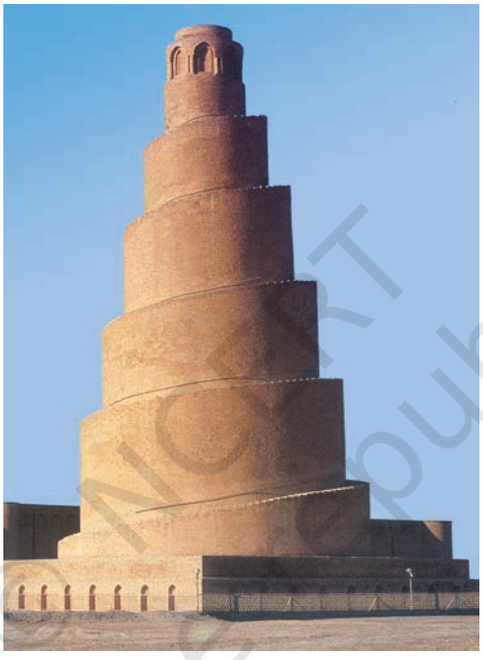
different types of military organisation. The achievements of one empire were often taken up by its successor. Over time, the area came to be marked by Persian, Greek, Latin and Arabic above many other languages that were spoken and written.

The empires were not very stable. This was partly due to disputes and conflict over resources in various regions. It was also due to the crisis that developed in relations between empires and pastoral peoples to the north – from whom empires derived support both for their trade and to provide them with labour for production of manufactures and for their armies. It is worth noting that not all empires were city-centric. The Mongol empire of Genghis Khan and his successors is a good example of how an empire could be maintained by pastoral people for a long time and with success.

Religions that appealed to peoples of different ethnic origins, who often spoke different languages, were important in the making of large empires. This was true in the case of Christianity (which originated in Palestine in the early first century CE) and Islam (which originated in the seventh century CE).

TIMELINE II

(c. 100 BCE TO 1300 CE)



This timeline focuses on kingdoms and empires. Some of these such as the Roman Empire were very large, spreading across three continents. This was also the time when some of the major religious and cultural traditions developed. It was a time when institutions of intellectual activity emerged. Books were written and ideas travelled across continents. Some things that are now part of our everyday lives were used for the first time during this period.

DATES	AFRICA	EUROPE
100-50 BCE	Bananas introduced from Southeast Asia to East Africa through sea routes	Spartacus leads revolt of about 100,000 slaves (73 BCE)
50-1	Cleopatra, queen of Egypt (51-30 BCE)	Building of Colosseum in Rome
1-50 CE		
50-100		
100-150	Hero of Alexandria makes a machine that runs on steam	Roman Empire at is peak*
150-200	Ptolemy of Alexandria writes a work on geography	
200-250		
250-300		
300-350	Christianity introduced in Axum* (330)	Constantine becomes emperor, establishes city of Constantinople
350-400		Roman Empire divided into eastern and western halves
400-450	Vandals from Europe set up a kingdom in North Africa (429)	Roman Empire invaded by tribes from North and Central Europe
450-500		Conversion of Clovis of Gaul (France) to Christianity (496)
500-550		St Benedict establishes a monastery in Italy (526), St Augustine introduces Christianity in England (596), Gregory the Great (590) lays the foundations of the power of the Roman Catholic Church
550-600		
600-650	Emigration (*hijra*) of some Muslims to Abyssinia (615)	
650-700	Muslim Arabs sign treaty with Nubia, south of Egypt (652)	Bede writes the *History of the English Church and People*
700-750		
750-800		
800-850	Rise of kingdom in Ghana	Charlemagne, king of the Franks, crowned Holy Roman Emperor (800)
850-900		First Russian states founded at Kiev and Novgorod
900-950		Viking raids across western Europe
950-1000		
1000-50		Medical school set up in Salerno, Italy (1030)
1050-1100	Almoravid kingdom (1056-1147) extends from Ghana to southern Spain	William of Normandy invades England and becomes king (1066); proclamation of the first crusade (1095)
1100-50	Zimbabwe (1120-1450) emerges as a centre for production of gold and copper artefacts, and of long-distance trade	
1150-1200	Christian churches established in Ethiopia	Construction of the cathedral of Notre Dame begins (1163)
1200-50	(1200), kingdom of Mali in West Africa, with Timbuktu as a centre of learning	St Francis of Assisi sets up a monastic order, emphasising austerity and compassion (1209); lords in England rebel against the king who signs the Magna Carta, accepting to rule according to law
1250-1300		Establishment of the Hapsburg dynasty that continued to rule Austria till 1918

DATES	ASIA	SOUTH ASIA
100-50 BCE	Han empire in China, development of the Silk Route from Asia to Europe	Bactrian Greeks and Shakas establish kingdoms in the north-west; rise of the Satavahanas in the Deccan
50-1		Growing trade between South Asia, Southeast and East Asia, and Europe
1-50 CE	Jesus Christ in Judaea, a province of the Roman Empire; Roman invasion of Arabia (24)	
50-100		Establishment of the Kushana state in the northwest and Central Asia
100-150	Paper invented in China (118); development of the first seismograph (132)	
150-200		
200-250	End of Han empire (221); Sasanid rule in Persia (226)	
250-300	Tea at the royal court, China (262), use of the magnetic compass, China (270)	
300-350	Chinese start using stirrups while riding horses*	Establishment of the Gupta* dynasty (320)
350-400		Fa Xian travels from China to India (399)
400-450		
450-500		Aryabhata, astronomer and mathematician
500-550		
550-600	Buddhism introduced in Japan (594); Grand Canal to transport grain built in China (584-618), by 5,000,000 workers over 34 years	Chalukya temples in Badami and Aihole
600-650	Tang dynasty in China (618); Prophet Muhammad goes to Medina; the beginning of the Hijri era (622); collapse of the Sasanian empire (642)	Xuan Zang travels from China to India; Nalanda emerges as an important educational centre
650-700	Umayyad caliphate (661-750)	
700-750	A branch of the Umayyads conquers Spain; Tang dynasty established in China	Arabs conquer Sind (712)
750-800	Abbasid caliphate established and Baghdad becomes a major cultural and commercial centre	
800-850	Khmer state founded in Cambodia (802)	
850-900	First printed book, China (868)	
900-950		
950-1000	Use of paper money in China	
1000-50	Ibn Sina, a Persian doctor, writes a medical text that is followed for centuries	Mahmud of Ghazni raids the north-west; Alberuni travels to India; Rajarajesvara temple built at Thanjavur
1050-1100	Establishment of the Turkish empire by Alp Arsalan (1075)	
1100-50	First recorded display of fireworks in China	Kalhana writes the *Rajatarangini*
1150-1200	Angkor empire, Cambodia, at its height (1180), temple complex at Angkor Wat	
1200-50	Genghis Khan consolidates power (1206)	Establishment of Delhi sultanate (1206)
1250-1300	Qubilai Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, becomes emperor of China	Amir Khusrau (1253-1325) introduces new forms of poetry and music*; Sun Temple at Konark

DATES	AMERICAS	AUSTRALIA/PACIFIC ISLANDS
100-50 BCE		
50-1		
1-50 CE		
50-100		
100-150		
150-200		
200-250		
250-300		
300-350	City-state of Teotihuacan established in Mexico, with pyramid temples, Mayan ceremonial centres*, development of astronomy, pictorial script*	
350-400		
400-450		
450-500		
500-550		
550-600		
600-650		
650-700		
700-750		
750-800		
800-850		
850-900		
900-950		
950-1000	First city is built in North America (c.990)	Maori navigator from Polynesia 'discovers' New Zealand
1000-50		
1050-1100		Sweet potato (originally from South America) grown in the Polynesian islands
1100-1150		
1150-1200		
1200-50		
1250-1300		

ACTIVITY

Try and identify at least five events/processes that would have involved the movement of peoples across regions/ continents. What would have been the significance of these events/ processes?

THEME 3

AN EMPIRE ACROSS THREE CONTINENTS

THE Roman Empire covered a vast stretch of territory that included most of Europe as we know it today and a large part of the Fertile Crescent and North Africa. In this chapter we shall look at the way this empire was organised, the political forces that shaped its destiny, and the social groups into which people were divided. You will see that the empire embraced a wealth of local cultures and languages; that women had a stronger legal position then than they do in many countries today; but also that much of the economy was run on slave labour, denying freedom to substantial numbers of persons. From the fifth century on, the empire fell apart in the west but remained intact and exceptionally prosperous in its eastern half. The caliphate which you will read about in the next chapter built on this prosperity and inherited its urban and religious traditions.

Roman historians have a rich collection of sources to go on, which we can broadly divide into three groups: (a) texts, (b) documents and (c) material remains. Textual sources include histories of the period written by contemporaries (these were usually called 'Annals', because the narrative was constructed on a year-by-year basis), letters, speeches, sermons, laws, and so on. Documentary sources include mainly inscriptions and papyri. Inscriptions were usually cut on stone, so a large number survive, in both Greek and Latin. The 'papyrus' was a reed-like plant that grew along the banks of the Nile in Egypt and was processed to produce a writing material that was very widely used in everyday life. Thousands of contracts, accounts, letters and official documents survive 'on papyrus' and have been published by scholars who are called 'papyrologists'. Material remains include a very wide assortment of items that mainly archaeologists discover (for example, through excavation and field survey), for example, buildings, monuments and other kinds of structures, pottery, coins, mosaics, even entire landscapes (for example, through the use of aerial photography). Each of these sources can only tell us just so much about the past, and combining them can be a fruitful exercise, but how well this is done depends on the historian's skill!

Papyrus scrolls

Two powerful empires ruled over most of Europe,North Africa and the Middle East in the period between the birth of Christ and the early part of the seventh century, say, down to the 630s. The two empires were those of Rome and Iran. The Romans and Iranians were rivals and fought against each other for much of their history. Their empires lay next to each other, separated only by a narrow strip of land that ran along the river Euphrates. In this chapter we shall be looking at the Roman Empire, but we shall also refer, in passing, to Rome's rival, Iran.

If you look at the map, you will see that the continents of Europe and Africa are separated by a sea that stretches all the way from Spain in the west to Syria in the east. This sea is called the Mediterranean, and it was the heart of Rome's empire. Rome dominated the Mediterranean and all the regions around that sea in both directions, north as well as south. To the north, the boundaries of the empire were formed by two great rivers, the Rhine and the Danube; to the south, by the huge expanse of

MAP 1: Europe and North Africa

desert called the Sahara. This vast stretch of territory was the Roman Empire. Iran controlled the whole area south of the Caspian Sea down to eastern Arabia, and sometimes large parts of Afghanistan as well. These two superpowers had divided up most of the world that the Chinese called *Ta Ch'in* ('greater Ch'in', roughly the west).

The Early Empire

The Roman Empire can broadly be divided into two phases, 'early' and 'late', divided by the third century as a sort of historical watershed between them. In other words, the whole period down to the main part of the third century can be called the 'early empire', and the period after that the 'late empire'.

A major difference between the two superpowers and their respective empires was that the Roman Empire was culturally much more diverse than that of Iran. The Parthians and later the Sasanians, the dynasties that ruled Iran in this period, ruled over a population that was largely Iranian. The Roman Empire, by contrast, was a mosaic of territories and cultures that were chiefly bound together by a common system of government. Many languages were spoken in the empire, but for the purposes of administration Latin and Greek were the most widely used, indeed the *only* languages. The upper classes of the east spoke and wrote in Greek, those of the west in Latin, and the boundary between these broad language areas ran somewhere across the middle of the Mediterranean, between the African provinces of Tripolitania (which was Latin speaking) and Cyrenaica (Greek-speaking). All those who lived in the empire were subjects of a single ruler, the emperor, regardless of where they lived and what language they spoke.

The regime established by Augustus, the first emperor, in 27 BCE was called the 'Principate'. Although Augustus was the sole ruler and the only real source of authority, the fiction was kept alive that he was actually only the 'leading citizen' (*Princeps* in Latin), not the absolute ruler. This was done out of respect for the Senate, the body which had controlled Rome earlier, in the days when it was a Republic.* The Senate had existed in Rome for centuries, and had been and remained a body representing the aristocracy, that is, the wealthiest families of Roman and, later, Italian descent, mainly landowners. Most of the Roman histories that survive in Greek and Latin were written by people from a senatorial background. From these it is clear that emperors were judged by how they behaved towards the Senate. The worst emperors were those who were hostile to the senatorial class, behaving with suspicion or brutality and violence. Many senators yearned to go back to the days of the Republic, but most must have realised that this was impossible.

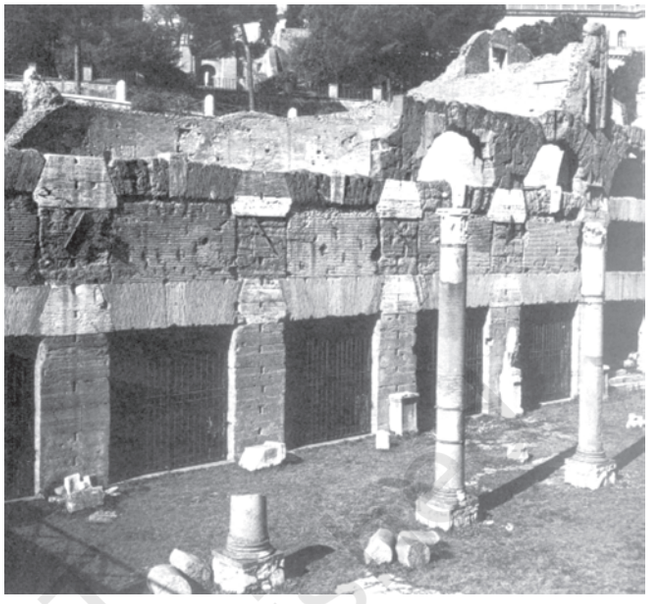
Next to the emperor and the Senate, the other key institution of imperial rule was the army. Unlike the army of its rival in the Persian empire, which was a conscripted** army, the Romans had a paid professional army where soldiers had to put in a minimum of 25 years of service. Indeed, the existence of a paid army was a distinctive feature of the Roman Empire. The army was the largest single organised body in the empire (600,000 by the fourth century) and it certainly had the power to determine the fate of emperors. The soldiers would constantly agitate for better wages and service conditions. These agitations often

*The Republic was the name for a regime in which the reality of power lay with the Senate, a body dominated by a small group of wealthy families who formed the 'nobility'. In practice, the Republic represented the government of the nobility, exercised through the body called the Senate. The Republic lasted from 509 BC to 27 BC, when it was overthrown by Octavian, the adopted son and heir of Julius Caesar, who later changed his name to Augustus. Membership of the Senate was for life, and wealth and office-holding counted for more than birth.

**A conscripted army is one which is forcibly recruited; military service is compulsory for certain groups or categories of the population.

took the form of mutinies, if the soldiers felt let down by their generals or even the emperor. Again, our picture of the Roman army depends largely on the way they were portrayed by historians with senatorial sympathies. The Senate hated and feared the army, because it was a source of often-unpredictable violence, especially in the tense conditions of the third century when government was forced to tax more heavily to pay for its mounting military expenditures.

To sum up, the emperor, the aristocracy and the army were the three main 'players' in the political history of the empire. The success of individual emperors depended on their control of the army, and when the armies were divided, the result usually was civil war*. Except for one notorious year (69 CE), when four emperors mounted the throne in quick succession, the first two centuries were on the whole free from civil war and in this sense relatively stable. Succession to the throne was based as far as possible on family descent, either natural or adoptive, and even the army was strongly wedded to this principle. For example, Tiberius (14-37 CE), the second in the long line of Roman emperors, was not the natural son of Augustus, the ruler who founded the Principate, but Augustus adopted him to ensure a smooth transition.



Shops in Forum Julium, Rome. This piazza with columns was built after 51 BCE, to enlarge the older Roman Forum.

External warfare was also much less common in the first two centuries. The empire inherited by Tiberius from Augustus was already so vast that further expansion was felt to be unnecessary. In fact, the 'Augustan age' is remembered for the *peace* it ushered in after decades of internal strife and centuries of military conquest. The only major campaign of expansion in the early empire was Trajan's fruitless occupation of territory across the Euphrates, in the years 113-17 CE abandoned by his successors.

*Civil war refers to armed struggles for power within the same country, in contrast to conflicts between different countries.

The Emperor Trajan's Dream – A Conquest of India?

'Then, after a winter (115/16) in Antioch marked by a great earthquake, in 116 Trajan marched down the Euphrates to Ctesiphon, the Parthian capital, and then to the head of the Persian Gulf. There [the historian] Cassius Dio describes him looking longingly at a merchant-ship setting off for India, and wishing that he were as young as Alexander.'

– Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East*.

The Near East. From the perspective of someone who lived in the Roman Mediterranean, this referred to all the territory east of the Mediterranean, chiefly the Roman provinces of Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia, and in a looser sense the surrounding territories, for example Arabia.

Much more characteristic was the gradual extension of Roman direct rule. This was accomplished by absorbing a whole series of 'dependent' kingdoms into Roman provincial territory. The Near East was full of such kingdoms*, but by the early second century those which lay west of the Euphrates (towards Roman territory) had disappeared, swallowed up by Rome. (Incidentally, some of these kingdoms were exceedingly wealthy, for example Herod's kingdom yielded the equivalent of 5.4 million *denarii* per year, equal to over 125,000 kg of gold! The *denarius* was a Roman silver coin containing about 4½ gm of pure silver.)

In fact, except for Italy, which was not considered a province in these centuries, *all* the territories of the empire were organised into *provinces* and subject to taxation. At its peak in the second century, the Roman Empire stretched from Scotland to the borders of Armenia, and from the Sahara to the Euphrates and sometimes beyond. Given that there was no government in the modern sense to help them to run things, you may well ask, how was it possible for the emperor to cope with the control and administration of such a vast and diverse set of territories, with a population of some 60 million in the mid-second century? The answer lies in the *urbanisation* of the empire.

The great urban centres that lined the shores of the Mediterranean (Carthage, Alexandria, Antioch were the biggest among them) were the true bedrock of the imperial system. It was through the *cities* that 'government' was able to tax the provincial countrysides which generated much of the wealth of the empire. What this means is that the local upper classes actively collaborated with the Roman state in administering their own territories and raising taxes from them. In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of Roman political history is the dramatic shift in power between Italy and the provinces. Throughout the second and third centuries, it was the *provincial* upper classes who supplied most of the cadre that governed the provinces and commanded the armies. They came to form a new elite of administrators and military commanders who became much more powerful than the senatorial class because they had the backing of the emperors. As this new group emerged, the emperor Gallienus (253-68) consolidated their rise to power by *excluding* senators from military command. We are told that Gallienus forbade senators from serving in the army or having access to it, in order to prevent control of the empire from falling into their hands.

*These were local kingdoms that were 'clients' of Rome. Their rulers could be relied on to use their forces in support of Rome, and in return Rome allowed them to exist.

Pont du Gard, near Nimes, France, first century BCE. Roman engineers built massive aqueducts over three continents to carry water.

To sum up, in the late first, second and early third centuries the army and administration were increasingly drawn from the provinces, as citizenship spread to these regions and was no longer confined to Italy. But individuals of Italian origin continued to dominate the senate at least till the third century, when senators of provincial origin became a majority. These trends reflected the general decline of Italy within the empire, both political and economic, and the rise of new elites in the wealthier and more urbanised parts of the Mediterranean, such as the south of Spain, Africa and the east. A city in the Roman sense was an urban centre with its own magistrates, city council and a 'territory' containing villages which were under its jurisdiction. Thus one city could not be in the territory of another city, but villages almost always were. Villages could be upgraded to the status of cities, and vice versa, usually as a mark of imperial favour (or the opposite). One crucial advantage of living in a city was simply that it might be better provided for during food shortages and even famines than the countryside.

ACTIVITY 1

Who were the three main players in the political history of the Roman Empire? Write one or two lines about each of them. And how did the Roman emperor manage to govern such a vast territory? Whose collaboration was crucial to this?

Doctor Galen on how Roman Cities Treated the Countryside

'The famine prevalent for many successive years in many provinces has clearly displayed for men of any understanding the effect of malnutrition in generating illness. The city-dwellers, as it was their custom to collect and store enough grain for the whole of the next year immediately after the harvest, carried off all the wheat, barley, beans and lentils, and left to the peasants various kinds of pulse – after taking quite a large proportion of these to the city. After consuming what was left in the course of the winter, the country people had to resort to unhealthy foods in the spring; they ate twigs and shoots of trees and bushes and bulbs and roots of inedible plants…'

– Galen, *On Good and Bad Diet.*

Public baths were a striking feature of Roman urban life (when one Iranian ruler tried to introduce them into Iran, he encountered the wrath of the clergy there! Water was a sacred element and to use it for *public* bathing may have seemed a desecration to them), and urban populations also enjoyed a much higher level of entertainment. For example, one calendar tells us that *spectacula* (shows) filled no less than 176 days of the year!

Amphitheatre at the Roman cantonment town of Vindonissa (in modern Switzerland), first century CE. *Used for military drill and for staging entertainments for the soldiers.*

The Third-Century Crisis

If the first and second centuries were by and large a period of peace, prosperity and economic expansion, the third century brought the first major signs of internal strain. From the 230s, the empire found itself fighting on several fronts simultaneously. In Iran a new and more aggressive dynasty emerged in 225 (they called themselves the 'Sasanians') and within just 15 years were expanding rapidly in the direction of the Euphrates. In a famous rock inscription cut in three languages, Shapur I, the Iranian ruler, claimed he had annihilated a Roman army of 60,000 and even captured the eastern capital of Antioch. Meanwhile, a whole series of Germanic tribes or rather tribal confederacies (most notably, the Alamanni, the Franks and the Goths) began to move against the Rhine and Danube frontiers, and the whole period from 233 to 280 saw repeated invasions of a whole line of provinces that stretched from the Black Sea to the Alps and southern Germany. The Romans were forced to abandon much of the territory beyond the Danube, while the emperors of this period were constantly in the field against what the Romans called 'barbarians'. The rapid succession of emperors in the third century (25 emperors in 47 years!) is an obvious symptom of the strains faced by the empire in this period.

Gender, Literacy, Culture

One of the more modern features of Roman society was the widespread prevalence of the nuclear family. Adult sons did not live with their families, and it was exceptional for adult brothers to share a common household. On the other hand, slaves *were* included in the family as the Romans understood this. By the late Republic (the first century BCE), the typical form of marriage was one where the wife did not transfer to her husband's authority but retained full rights in the property of her natal family. While the woman's dowry went to the husband for the duration of the marriage, the woman remained a primary heir of her father and became an independent property owner on her father's death. Thus Roman women enjoyed considerable legal rights in owning and managing property. In other words, in law the married couple was not one financial entity but two, and the wife enjoyed complete legal independence. Divorce was relatively easy and needed no more than a notice of intent to dissolve the marriage by either husband or wife. On the other hand, whereas males married in their late twenties or early thirties, women were married off in the late teens or early twenties, so there was an age gap between husband and wife and this would have encouraged a certain inequality. Marriages were generally arranged, and there is no doubt that women were often subject to domination by their husbands. Augustine*, the great Catholic bishop who spent most of his life in North Africa, tells us that his mother was regularly beaten by his father and that most other wives

*Saint Augustine (354-430) was bishop of the North African city of Hippo from 396 and a towering figure in the intellectual history of the Church. Bishops were the most important religious figures in a Christian community, and often very powerful.

in the small town where he grew up had similar bruises to show! Finally, fathers had substantial legal control over their children – sometimes to a shocking degree, for example, a legal power of life and death in exposing unwanted children, by leaving them out in the cold to die.

What about literacy? It is certain that rates of casual literacy* varied greatly between different parts of the empire. For example, in Pompeii, which was buried in a volcanic eruption in 79 CE, there is strong evidence of widespread casual literacy. Walls on the main streets of Pompeii often carried advertisements, and graffiti were found all over the city.

By contrast, in Egypt where hundreds of papyri survive, most formal documents such as contracts were usually written by professional scribes, and they often tell us that X or Y is unable to read and write. But even here literacy was certainly more widespread among certain categories such as soldiers, army officers and estate managers.

The cultural diversity of the empire was reflected in many ways and at many levels: in the vast diversity of religious cults and local deities; the plurality of languages that were spoken; the styles of dress and costume, the food people ate, their forms of social organisation (tribal/non-tribal), even their patterns of settlement. Aramaic was the dominant language group of the Near East (at least west of the Euphrates), Coptic was spoken in Egypt, Punic and Berber in North Africa, Celtic in Spain and the northwest. But many of these linguistic cultures were purely oral, at least until a script was invented for them. Armenian, for example, only began to be written as late as the fifth century, whereas there was already a Coptic

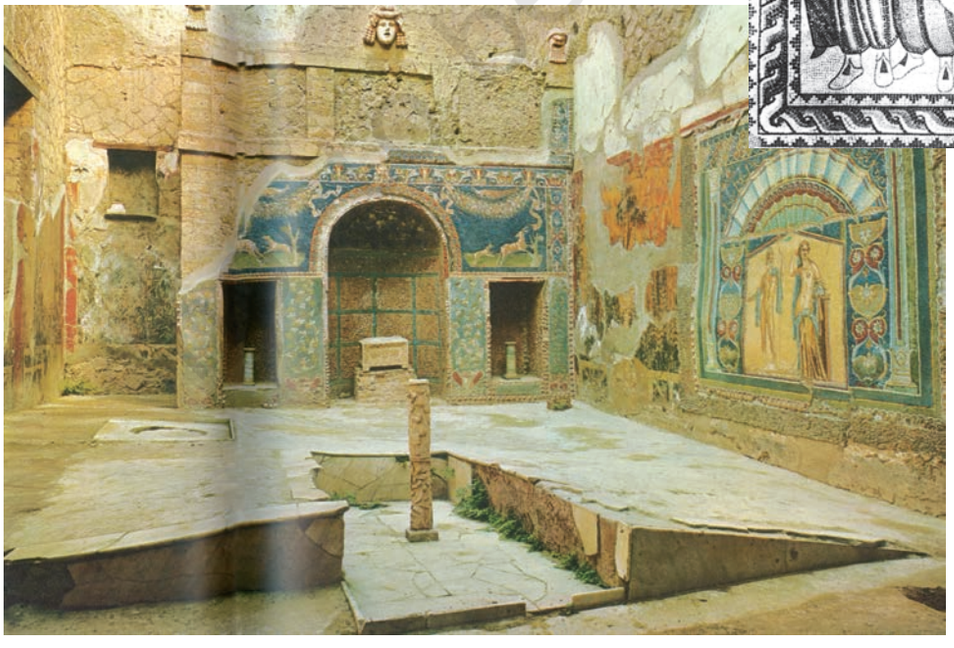
*The use of reading and writing in everyday, often trivial, contexts.

One of the funniest of these graffiti found on the walls of Pompeii says:

'Wall, I admire you for not collapsing in ruins

When you have to support so much boring writing on you.'

Mosaic in Edessa, second century CE. The Syriac inscription suggests that those depicted are the wife of king Abgar and her family.



Pompeii: A wine-merchant's dining-room, its walls decorated with scenes depicting mythical animals.

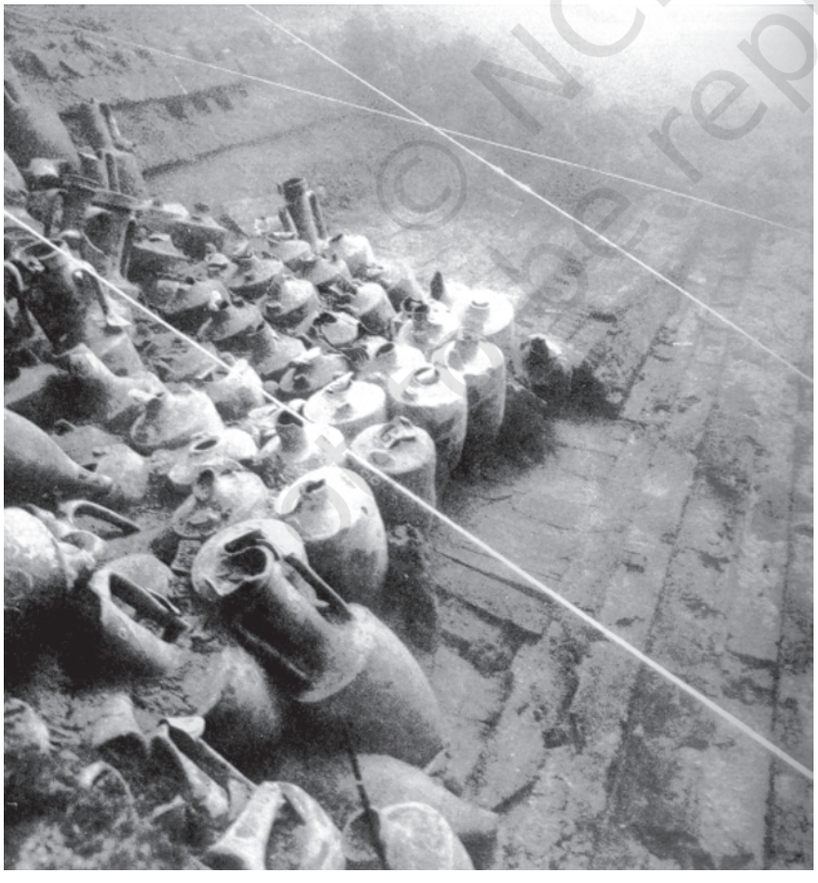
translation of the Bible by the middle of the third century. Elsewhere, the spread of Latin displaced the written form of languages that were otherwise widespread; this happened notably with Celtic, which ceased to be written after the first century.

ACTIVITY 2

How independent were women in the Roman world? Compare the situation of the Roman family with the family in India today.

Economic Expansion

The empire had a substantial economic infrastructure of harbours, mines, quarries, brickyards, olive oil factories, etc. Wheat, wine and olive-oil were traded and consumed in huge quantities, and they came mainly from Spain, the Gallic provinces, North Africa, Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Italy, where conditions were best for these crops. Liquids like wine and olive oil were transported in containers called 'amphorae'. The fragments and sherds of a very large number of these survive (Monte Testaccio in Rome is said to contain the remnants of over 50 million vessels!), and it has been possible for archaeologists to reconstruct the precise *shapes* of these containers, tell us *what* they carried, and say exactly *where* they were made by examining the clay content and matching the finds with clay pits throughout the Mediterranean. In this way we can now say with some confidence that Spanish olive oil, to take just one example, was a vast commercial enterprise that reached its peak in the years 140-160. The Spanish olive oil of this period was mainly carried in a container called 'Dressel 20' (after the archaeologist who first established its form). If finds of Dressel 20 are widely scattered across sites in the Mediterranean, this suggests that Spanish olive oil circulated very widely indeed. By using such evidence (the remains of amphorae of different kinds and their 'distribution maps'), archaeologists are able to show that Spanish producers succeeded in capturing markets for olive oil from their Italian counterparts. This would only have happened if Spanish producers supplied a better quality oil at lower prices. In other words, the big landowners from different



Shipwreck off the south coast of France, first century BCE. The amphorae are Italian, bearing the stamp of a producer near the Lake of Fondi.

regions *competed* with each other for control of the main markets for the goods they produced. The success of the Spanish olive growers was then repeated by North African producers – olive estates in this part of the empire dominated production through most of the third and fourth centuries. Later, after 425, North African dominance was broken by the East: in the later fifth and sixth centuries the Aegean, southern Asia Minor (Turkey), Syria and Palestine became major exporters of wine and olive oil, and containers from Africa show a dramatically reduced presence on Mediterranean markets. Behind these broad movements the prosperity of individual regions rose and fell depending on how effectively they could organise the production and transport of particular goods, and on the quality of those goods.

The empire included many regions that had a reputation for exceptional fertility. Campania in Italy, Sicily, the Fayum in Egypt, Galilee, Byzacium (Tunisia), southern Gaul (called Gallia Narbonensis), and Baetica (southern Spain) were all among the most densely settled or wealthiest parts of the empire, according to writers like Strabo and Pliny. The best kinds of wine came from Campania. Sicily and Byzacium exported large quantities of wheat to Rome. Galilee was densely cultivated ('every inch of the soil has been cultivated by the inhabitants', wrote the historian Josephus), and Spanish olive oil came mainly from numerous estates (*fundi*) along the banks of the river Guadalquivir in the south of Spain.

On the other hand, large expanses of Roman territory were in a much less advanced state. For example, transhumance* was widespread in the countryside of Numidia (modern Algeria). These pastoral and semi-nomadic communities were often on the move, carrying their oven-shaped huts (called *mapalia*) with them. As Roman estates expanded in North Africa, the pastures of those communities were drastically reduced and their movements more tightly regulated. Even in Spain the north was much less developed, and inhabited largely by a Celtic-speaking peasantry that lived in hilltop villages called *castella*. When we think of the Roman Empire, we should never forget these differences.

We should also be careful not to imagine that because this was the 'ancient' world, their forms of cultural and economic life were necessarily backward or primitive. On the contrary, diversified applications of water power around the Mediterranean as well as advances in water-powered milling technology, the use of hydraulic mining techniques in the Spanish gold and silver mines and the gigantic industrial scale on which those mines were worked in the first and second centuries (with levels of output that would not be reached again till the nineteenth century, some 1,700 years later!), the existence of well-organised commercial and banking networks, and the widespread use of money are *all* indications of how much we tend to *under*-estimate the sophistication of the Roman economy. This raises the issue of labour and of the use of slavery.

ACTIVITY 3

Archaeologists who work on the remains of pottery are a bit like detectives. Can you explain why? Also, what can amphorae tell us about the economic life of the Mediterranean in the Roman period?

*Transhumance is the herdsman's regular annual movement between the higher mountain regions and low-lying ground in search of pasture for sheep and other flocks.

Controlling Workers

Slavery was an institution deeply rooted in the ancient world, both in the Mediterranean and in the Near East, and not even Christianity when it emerged and triumphed as the state religion (in the fourth century) seriously challenged this institution. It does not follow that the bulk of the labour in the Roman economy was performed by slaves. That may have been true of large parts of Italy in the Republican period (under Augustus there were still 3 million slaves in a total Italian population of 7.5 million) but it was no longer true of the empire as a whole. Slaves were an investment, and at least one Roman agricultural writer advised landowners against using them in contexts where too many might be required (for example, for harvests) or where their health could be damaged (for example, by malaria). These considerations were not based on any sympathy for the slaves but on hard economic calculation. On the other hand, if the Roman upper classes were often brutal towards their slaves, ordinary people did sometimes show much more compassion. See what one historian says about a famous incident that occurred in the reign of Nero.

On the Treatment of Slaves

'Soon afterwards the City Prefect, Lucius Pedanius Secundus, was murdered by one of his slaves. After the murder, ancient custom required that every slave residing under the same roof must be executed. But a crowd gathered, eager to save so many innocent lives; and rioting began. The senate-house was besieged. Inside, there was feeling against excessive severity, but the majority opposed any change (....) [The senators] favouring execution prevailed. However, great crowds ready with stones and torches prevented the order from being carried out. Nero rebuked the population by edict, and lined with troops the whole route along which those condemned were taken for execution.'

– Tacitus (55-117), historian of the early empire.

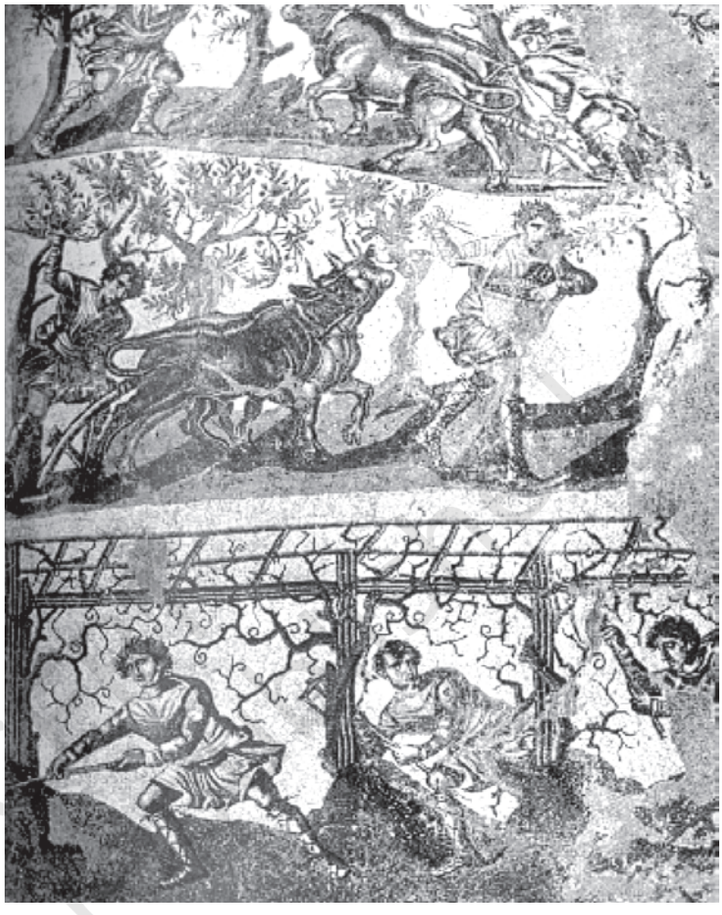
As warfare became less widespread with the establishment of peace in the first century, the supply of slaves tended to decline and the users of slave labour thus had to turn either to slave breeding* or to cheaper substitutes such as wage labour which was more easily dispensable. In fact, free labour was extensively used on public works at Rome precisely because an extensive use of slave labour would have been too expensive. Unlike hired workers, slaves had to be fed and maintained throughout the year, which increased the cost of holding this kind of labour. This is probably why slaves are not widely found in the agriculture of the later period, at least not in the eastern provinces. On the other hand, they and freedmen, that is, slaves who had been set free by their masters, *were* extensively used as business managers, where, obviously, they were not required in large numbers. Masters often gave their slaves or freedmen capital to run businesses on their behalf or even businesses of their own.

The Roman agricultural writers paid a great deal of attention to the management of labour. Columella, a first-century writer who came from the south of Spain, recommended that landowners should keep a reserve stock of implements and tools, twice as many as they needed, so that production could be continuous, 'for the loss in slave labour-time exceeds the cost of such items'. There was a general presumption

*The practice of encouraging female slaves and their partners to have more children, who would of course also be slaves.

Opp page: Mosaic at Cherchel, Algeria, early third century CE, with agricultural scenes.
Above: Ploughing and sowing.
Below: Working in vineyards.

among employers that without supervision no work would ever get done, so supervision was paramount, for both free workers and slaves. To make supervision easier, workers were sometimes grouped into gangs or smaller teams. Columella recommended squads of ten, claiming it was easier to tell who was putting in effort and who was not in work groups of this size. This shows a detailed consideration of the management of labour. Pliny the Elder, the author of a very famous 'Natural History', condemned the use of slave gangs as the worst method of organising production, mainly because slaves who worked in gangs were usually chained together by their feet.



All this looks draconian*, but we should remember that most factories in the world today enforce similar principles of labour control. Indeed, some industrial establishments in the empire enforced even tighter controls. The Elder Pliny described conditions in the frankincense** factories (*officinae*) of Alexandria, where, he tells us, no amount of supervision seemed to suffice. 'A seal is put upon the workmen's aprons, they have to wear a mask or a net with a close mesh on their heads, and before they are allowed to leave the premises, they have to take off all their clothes.' Agricultural labour must have been fatiguing and disliked, for a famous edict of the early third century refers to Egyptian peasants deserting their villages 'in order not to engage in agricultural work'. The same was probably true of most factories and workshops. A law of 398 referred to workers being branded so they could be recognised if and when they run away and try to hide. Many private employers cast their agreements with workers in the form of debt contracts to be able to claim that their employees were in debt to them and thus ensure tighter control over them. An early, second-century writer tells us, 'Thousands surrender themselves to work in servitude, *although they are free.*' In other words, a lot of the poorer families went into debt bondage in order to survive. From one of the recently discovered letters of Augustine we learn that parents sometimes sold their children into servitude for periods of 25 years. Augustine asked a lawyer friend of his whether these children could be liberated once the father died. Rural indebtedness was even more

*Draconian: Harsh (so-called because of an early sixth-century BCE Greek lawmaker called Draco, who prescribed death as the penalty for most crimes!).

**Frankincense – the European name for an aromatic resin used in incense and perfumes. It is tapped from Boswellia trees by slashing the bark and allowing the exuded resins to harden. The best-quality frankincense came from the Arabian peninsula.

widespread; to take just one example, in the great Jewish revolt of 66 CE* the revolutionaries destroyed the moneylenders' bonds to win popular support.

*A rebellion in Judaea against Roman domination, which was ruthlessly suppressed by the Romans in what is called the 'Jewish war'.

Again, we should be careful not to conclude that the bulk of labour was coerced in these ways. The late-fifth-century emperor Anastasius built the eastern frontier city of Dara in less than three weeks by attracting labour from all over the East by offering high wages. From the papyri we can even form some estimate of how widespread wage labour had become in parts of the Mediterranean by the sixth century, especially in the East.

ACTIVITY 4

The text has referred to three writers whose work is used to say something about how the Romans treated their workers. Can you identify them? Reread the section for yourself and describe any two methods the Romans used to control labour.

Social Hierarchies

Let us stand back from the details now and try and get a sense of the social structures of the empire. Tacitus described the leading social groups of the *early* empire as follows: senators (*patres*, lit. 'fathers'); leading members of the equestrian class; the respectable section of the people, those attached to the great houses; the unkempt lower class (*plebs sordida*) who, he tells us, were addicted to the circus and theatrical displays; and finally the slaves. In the early third century when the Senate numbered roughly 1,000, approximately half of all senators still came from Italian families. By the *late* empire, which starts with the reign of Constantine I in the early part of the fourth century, the first two groups mentioned by Tacitus (the senators and the *equites**) had *merged* into a unified and expanded aristocracy, and at least half of all families were of African or eastern origin. This 'late Roman' aristocracy was enormously wealthy but in many ways less powerful than the purely military elites who came almost entirely from non-aristocratic backgrounds. The 'middle' class now consisted of the considerable mass of persons connected with imperial service in the bureaucracy and army but also the more prosperous merchants and farmers of whom there were many in the eastern provinces. Tacitus described this 'respectable' middle class as clients of the great senatorial houses. Now it was chiefly government service and dependence on the State that sustained many of these families. Below them were the vast mass of the lower classes known collectively as *humiliores* (lit. 'lower'). They comprised a rural labour force of which many were permanently employed on the large estates; workers in industrial and mining establishments; migrant workers who supplied much of the labour for the grain and olive harvests and for the building industry; self-employed artisans who, it was said, were better fed than wage labourers; a large mass of casual labourers, especially in the big cities; and of course the many thousands of slaves that were still found all over the western empire in particular.

*The *equites*, ('knights' or 'horsemen') were traditionally the second most powerful and wealthy group. Originally, they were families whose property qualified them to serve in the cavalry, hence the name. Like senators, most 'knights' were landowners, but unlike senators many of them were shipowners, traders and bankers, that is, involved in business activities.

One writer of the early fifth century, the historian Olympiodorus who was also an ambassador, tells us that the aristocracy based in the City of Rome drew annual incomes of up to 4,000 lbs of gold

from their estates, not counting the produce they consumed directly!

The monetary system of the late empire broke with the silver-based currencies of the first three centuries because the Spanish silver mines were exhausted and government ran out of sufficient stocks of the metal to support a stable coinage in silver. Constantine founded the new monetary system on gold and there were vast amounts of this in circulation throughout late antiquity.

The late Roman bureaucracy, both the higher and middle echelons, was a comparatively affluent group because it drew the bulk of its salary in gold and invested much of this in buying up assets like land. There was of course also a great deal of corruption, especially in the judicial system and in the administration of military supplies. The extortion of the higher bureaucracy and the greed of the provincial governors were proverbial. But government intervened repeatedly to curb these forms of corruption – we only know about them in the first place because of the laws that tried to put an end to them, and because historians and other members of the intelligentsia denounced such practices. This element of 'criticism' is a remarkable feature of the classical world. The Roman state was an authoritarian regime; in other words, dissent was rarely tolerated and government usually responded to protest with violence (especially in the cities of the East where people were often fearless in making fun of emperors). Yet a strong tradition of Roman law had emerged by the fourth century, and this acted as a brake on even the most fearsome emperors. Emperors were *not* free to do whatever they liked, and the law was actively used to protect civil rights. That is why in the later fourth century it was possible for powerful bishops like Ambrose to confront equally powerful emperors when they were excessively harsh or repressive in their handling of the civilian population.

Incomes of the Roman Aristocracy, Early Fifth Century

'Each of the great houses of Rome contained within itself everything which a medium-sized city could hold, a hippodrome, fora, temples, fountains and different kinds of baths... Many of the Roman households received an income of four thousand pounds of gold per year from their properties, not including grain, wine and other produce which, if sold, would have amounted to one-third of the income in gold. The income of the households at Rome of the second class was one thousand or fifteen hundred pounds of gold.'

– Olympiodorus of Thebes.

Late Antiquity

We shall conclude this chapter by looking at the cultural transformation of the Roman world in its final centuries. 'Late antiquity' is the term now used to describe the final, fascinating period in the evolution and break-up of the Roman Empire and refers broadly to the fourth to seventh centuries. The fourth century itself was one of considerable ferment, both cultural and economic. At the cultural level, the period saw momentous developments in religious life, with the emperor Constantine deciding to make Christianity the official religion, and with the rise of Islam in the seventh century. But there were equally important changes in the

structure of the state that began with the emperor Diocletian (284-305), and it may be best to start with these.

Overexpansion had led Diocletian to 'cut back' by abandoning territories with little strategic or economic value. Diocletian also fortified the frontiers, reorganised provincial boundaries, and separated civilian from military functions, granting greater autonomy to the military commanders (*duces*), who now became a more powerful group. Constantine consolidated some of these changes and added others of his own. His chief innovations were in the monetary sphere, where he introduced a new denomination, the *solidus*, a coin of 4½ gm of pure gold that would in fact outlast the Roman Empire itself. *Solidi* were minted on a very large scale and their circulation ran into millions. The other area of innovation was the creation of a second capital at Constantinople (at the site of modern Istanbul in Turkey, and previously called Byzantium), surrounded on three sides by the sea. As the new capital required a new senate, the fourth century was a period of rapid expansion of the governing classes. Monetary stability and an expanding population stimulated economic growth, and the archaeological record shows considerable investment in rural establishments, including industrial installations like oil presses and glass factories, in newer technologies such as screw presses and multiple water-mills, and in a revival of the long-distance trade with the East.

Part of a colossal statue of Emperor Constantine, 313 CE.

All of this carried over into strong urban prosperity that was marked by new forms of architecture and an exaggerated sense of luxury. The ruling elites were wealthier and more powerful than ever before. In Egypt, hundreds of papyri survive from these later centuries and they show us a relatively affluent society where money was in extensive use and rural estates generated vast incomes in gold. For example, Egypt contributed taxes of over 2½ million *solidi* a year (roughly 35,000 lbs of gold) in the reign of Justinian in the sixth century. Indeed, large parts of the Near Eastern countryside were *more* developed and densely settled in the fifth and sixth centuries than they would be even in the twentieth century! This is the social background against which we should set the cultural developments of this period.

The traditional religious culture of the classical world, both Greek and Roman, had been polytheist. That is, it involved a multiplicity of cults that included both Roman/Italian gods like Jupiter, Juno, Minerva and Mars, as well as numerous Greek and eastern deities worshipped in thousands of temples, shrines and sanctuaries throughout the

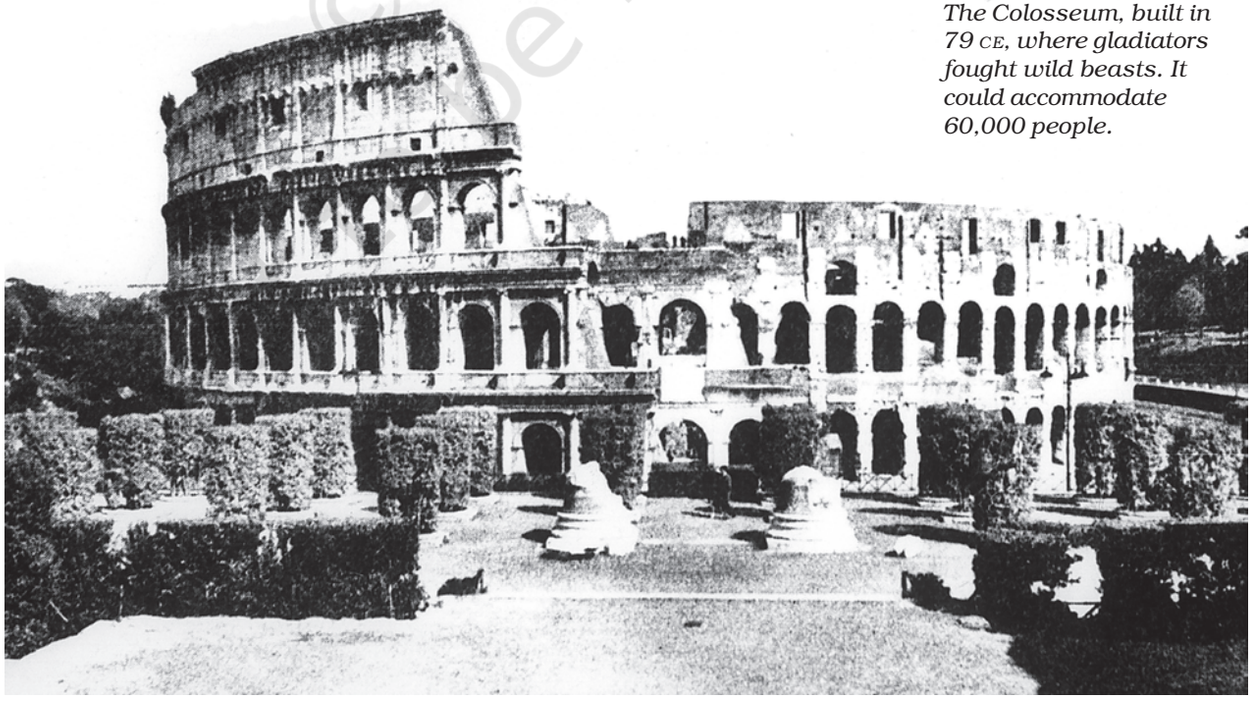
empire. Polytheists had no common name or label to describe themselves. The other great religious tradition in the empire was Judaism. But Judaism was not a monolith* either, and there was a great deal of diversity within the Jewish communities of late antiquity. Thus, the 'Christianisation'** of the empire in the fourth and fifth centuries was a gradual and complex process. Polytheism did not disappear overnight, especially in the western provinces, where the Christian bishops waged a running battle against beliefs and practices *they* condemned more than the Christian laity*** did. The *boundaries* between religious communities were much more fluid in the fourth century than they would become thanks to the repeated efforts of religious leaders, the powerful bishops who now led the Church, to rein in their followers and enforce a more rigid set of beliefs and practices.

The general prosperity was especially marked in the East where population was still expanding till the sixth century, despite the impact of the plague which affected the Mediterranean in the 540s. In the West, by contrast, the empire fragmented politically as Germanic groups from the North (Goths, Vandals, Lombards, etc.) took over all the major provinces and established kingdoms that are best described as 'post-Roman'. The most important of these were that of the Visigoths in Spain, destroyed by the Arabs between 711 and 720, that of the Franks in Gaul (c.511-687) and that of the Lombards in Italy (568-774). These kingdoms foreshadowed the beginnings of a different kind of world that is usually called 'medieval'. In the East, where the empire remained united, the reign of Justinian is the highwater mark of prosperity and imperial ambition. Justinian

*Monolith – literally a large block of stone, but the expression is used to refer to anything (for example a society or culture) that lacks variety and is all of the same type.

**Christianisation – the process by which Christianity spread among different groups of the population and became the dominant religion.

***Laity – the ordinary members of a religious community as opposed to the priests or clergy who have official positions within the community.



The Colosseum, built in 79 CE, where gladiators fought wild beasts. It could accommodate 60,000 people.

recaptured Africa from the Vandals (in 533) but his recovery of Italy (from the Ostrogoths) left that country devastated and paved the way for the Lombard invasion. By the early seventh century, the war between Rome and Iran had flared up again, and the Sasanians who had ruled Iran since the third century launched a wholesale invasion of all the major eastern provinces (including Egypt). When Byzantium, as the Roman Empire was now increasingly known, recovered these provinces in the 620s, it was just a few years away, literally, from the final major blow which came, this time, from the south-east.

The expansion of Islam from its beginnings in Arabia has been called 'the greatest political revolution ever to occur in the history of the ancient world'. By 642, barely ten years after the Prophet Muhammad's death, large parts of *both* the eastern Roman and Sasanian empires had fallen to the Arabs in a series of stunning confrontations. However, we should bear in mind that those conquests, which eventually (a century later) extended as far afield as Spain, Sind and Central Asia, began in fact with the subjection of the Arab tribes by the emerging Islamic state, first within Arabia and then in the Syrian desert and on the fringes of Iraq. As we will see in Theme 4, the unification of the Arabian peninsula and its numerous tribes was the key factor behind the territorial expansion of Islam.

MAP 2: West Asia

RULERS	EVENTS	
27 BCE-14 CE Augustus, first Roman emperor	27 BCE	'Principate' founded by Octavian, now calls himself Augustus
14-37 Tiberius	c. 24-79	Life of the Elder Pliny; dies in the volcanic eruption of Vesuvius, which also buries the Roman town of Pompeii
98-117 Trajan	66-70	The great Jewish revolt and capture of Jerusalem by Roman forces
117-38 Hadrian	c. 115	Greatest extent of the Roman Empire, following Trajan's conquests in the East
193-211 Septimius Severus	212	All free inhabitants of the empire transformed into Roman citizens
241-72 reign of Shapur I in Iran	224	New dynasty founded in Iran, called 'Sasanians' after ancestor Sasan
253-68 Gallienus	250s	Persians invade Roman territories west of the Euphrates
284-305 the 'Tetrarchy'; Diocletian main ruler	258	Cyprian bishop of Carthage executed
312-37 Constantine	260s	Gallienus reorganises the army
309-79 reign of Shapur II in Iran	273	Caravan city of Palmyra destroyed by Romans
408-50 Theodosius II (compiler of the famous 'Theodosian Code')	297	Diocletian reorganises empire into 100 provinces
	c. 310	Constantine issues new gold coinage (the 'solidus')
	312	Constantine converts to Christianity
	324	Constantine now sole ruler of empire; founds city of Constantinople
	354-430	Life of Augustine, bishop of Hippo
	378	Goths inflict crushing defeat on Roman armies at Adrianople
	391	Destruction of the Serapeum (temple of Serapis) at Alexandria
	410	Sack of Rome by the Visigoths
	428	Vandals capture Africa
	434-53	Empire of Attila the Hun
490-518 Anastasius	493	Ostrogoths establish kingdom in Italy
527-65 Justinian	533-50	Recovery of Africa and Italy by Justinian
531-79 reign of Khusro I in Iran	541-70	Outbreaks of bubonic plague
610-41 Heraclius	568	Lombards invade Italy
	c. 570	Birth of Muhammad
	614-19	Persian ruler Khusro II invades and occupies eastern Roman territories
	622	Muhammad and companions leave Mecca for Medina
	633-42	First and crucial phase of the Arab conquests; Muslim armies take Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Iraq and parts of Iran
	661-750	Umayyad dynasty in Syria
	698	Arabs capture Carthage
	711	Arab invasion of Spain

Mosaic at Ravenna, 547 CE, showing Emperor Justinian.

Exercises

ANSWER IN BRIEF

1. If you had lived in the Roman Empire, where would you rather have lived – in the towns or in the countryside? Explain why.
2. Compile a list of some of the towns, cities, rivers, seas and provinces mentioned in this chapter, and then try and find them on the maps. Can you say something about any three of the items in the list you have compiled?
3. Imagine that you are a Roman housewife preparing a shopping list for household requirements. What would be on the list?
4. Why do you think the Roman government stopped coining in silver? And which metal did it begin to use for the production of coinage?

ANSWER IN A SHORT ESSAY

5. Suppose the emperor Trajan had actually managed to conquer India and the Romans had held on to the country for several centuries. In what ways do you think India might be different today?
6. Go through the chapter carefully and pick out some basic features of Roman society and economy which you think make it look quite modern.

THEME 4

THE CENTRAL ISLAMIC LANDS

AS we enter the twenty-first century, there are over 1 billion Muslims living in all parts of the world. They are citizens of different nations, speak different languages, and dress differently. The processes by which they became Muslims were varied, and so were the circumstances in which they went their separate ways. Yet, the Islamic community has its roots in a more unified past which unfolded roughly 1,400 years ago in the Arabian peninsula. In this chapter we are going to read about the rise of Islam and its expansion over a vast territory extending from Egypt to Afghanistan, the core area of Islamic civilisation from 600 to 1200. In these centuries, Islamic society exhibited multiple political and cultural patterns. The term Islamic is used here not only in its purely religious sense but also for the overall society and culture historically associated with Islam. In this society not everything that was happening originated directly from religion, but it took place in a society where Muslims and their faith were recognised as socially dominant. Non-Muslims always formed an integral, if subordinate, part of this society as did Jews in Christendom.

Our understanding of the history of the central Islamic lands between 600 and 1200 is based on chronicles or *tawarikh* (which narrate events in order of time) and semi-historical works, such as biographies (*sira*), records of the sayings and doings of the Prophet (*hadith*) and commentaries on the Quran (*tafsir*). The material from which these works were produced was a large collection of eyewitness reports (*akhbar*) transmitted over a period of time either orally or on paper. The authenticity of each report (*khabar*) was tested by a critical method which traced the chain of transmission (*isnad*) and established the reliability of the narrator. Although the method was not foolproof, medieval Muslim writers were more careful in selecting their information and understanding the motives of their informants than were their contemporaries in other parts of the world. On controversial issues, they reproduced different versions of the same event, as they found in their sources, leaving the task of judgement to their readers. Their description of events closer to their own times is more systematic and analytical and less of a collection of *akhbar*. Most of the chronicles and semi-historical works are

in Arabic, the best being the *Tarikh* of Tabari (d. 923) which has been translated into English in 38 volumes. Persian chronicles are few but they are quite detailed in their treatment of Iran and Central Asia. Christian chronicles, written in Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic*), are fewer but they throw interesting light on the history of early Islam. Besides chronicles, we have legal texts, geographies, travelogues and literary works, such as stories and poems.

*Aramaic is a language related to Hebrew and Arabic. It has also been used in Ashokan inscriptions.

Documentary evidence (fragmentary pieces of writing, such as official orders or private correspondence) is the most valuable for writing histories because it does not consciously refer to events and persons. It comes almost entirely from Greek and Arabic papyri (good for administrative history) and the Geniza records. Some evidence has emerged from archaeological (excavations done at desert palaces), numismatic (study of coins) and epigraphic (study of inscriptions) sources which is of great value for economic history, art history, and for establishing names and dates.

Proper histories of Islam began to be written in the nineteenth century by university professors in Germany and the Netherlands. Colonial interests in the Middle East and North Africa encouraged French and British researchers to study Islam as well. Christian priests too paid close attention to the history of Islam and produced some good work, although their interest was mainly to compare Islam with Christianity. These scholars, called Orientalists, are known for their knowledge of Arabic and Persian and critical analysis of original texts. Ignaz Goldziher was a Hungarian Jew who studied at the Islamic college (al-Azhar) in Cairo and produced path-breaking studies in German of Islamic law and theology. Twentieth-century historians of Islam have largely followed the interests and methods of Orientalists. They have widened the scope of Islamic history by including new topics, and by using allied disciplines, such as economics, anthropology and statistics, have refined many aspects of Orientalist studies. The historiography of Islam is a good example of how religion can be studied with modern historical methods by those who may not share the customs and beliefs of the people they are studying.

The Rise of Islam in Arabia: Faith, Community and Politics

During 612-32, the Prophet Muhammad preached the worship of a single God, Allah, and the membership of a single community of believers (*umma*). This was the origin of Islam. Muhammad was an Arab by language and culture and a merchant by profession. Sixth-century Arab culture was largely confined to the Arabian peninsula and areas of southern Syria and Mesopotamia.

The Arabs were divided into tribes* (*qabila*), each led by a chief who was chosen partly on the basis of his family connections but more for his personal courage, wisdom and generosity (*murawwa*). Each tribe had its own god or goddess, who was worshipped as an idol (*sanam*) in a shrine. Many Arab tribes were nomadic (Bedouins), moving from dry to green areas (oases) of the desert in search of food (mainly dates) and fodder for their camels. Some settled in cities and practised trade or agriculture. Muhammad's own tribe, Quraysh, lived in Mecca and controlled the main shrine there, a cube-like structure called Kaba, in which idols were placed. Even tribes outside Mecca considered the Kaba holy and installed their own idols at this shrine, making annual pilgrimages (*hajj*) to the shrine. Mecca was located on the crossroads of a trade route between Yemen and Syria which further enhanced the city's importance (see Map p. 82). The Meccan shrine was a sanctuary (*haram*) where violence was forbidden and protection given to all visitors. Pilgrimage and commerce gave the nomadic and settled tribes opportunities to communicate with one another and share their beliefs and customs. Although the polytheistic Arabs were vaguely familiar with the notion of a Supreme God, Allah (possibly under the influence of the Jewish and Christian tribes living in their midst), their attachment to idols and shrines was more immediate and stronger.

Around 612, Muhammad declared himself to be the messenger (*rasul*) of God who had been commanded to preach that Allah alone should be worshipped. The worship involved simple rituals, such as daily prayers (*salat*), and moral principles, such as distributing alms and abstaining from theft. Muhammad was to found a community of believers (*umma*) bound by a common set of religious beliefs. The community would bear witness (*shahada*) to the existence of the religion before God as well as before members of other religious communities. Muhammad's message particularly appealed to those Meccans who felt deprived of the gains from trade and religion and were looking for a new community identity. Those who accepted the doctrine were called Muslims. They were promised salvation on the Day of Judgement (*qiyama*) and a share of the resources of the community while on earth. The Muslims soon faced considerable opposition from affluent Meccans who took offence to the rejection of their deities and found the new religion a threat to the status and prosperity of Mecca. In 622, Muhammad was forced to migrate with his followers to Medina. Muhammad's journey from Mecca (*hijra*) was a turning point in the history of Islam, with the year of his arrival in Medina marking the beginning of the Muslim calendar.

*Tribes are societies organised on the basis of blood relationships. The Arab tribes were made up of clans or combinations of large families. Unrelated clans also merged to make a tribe stronger. Non-Arab individuals *(mawali)* became members through the patronage of prominent tribesmen. Even after converting to Islam, the *mawali* were never treated as equals by the Arab Muslims and had to pray in separate mosques.

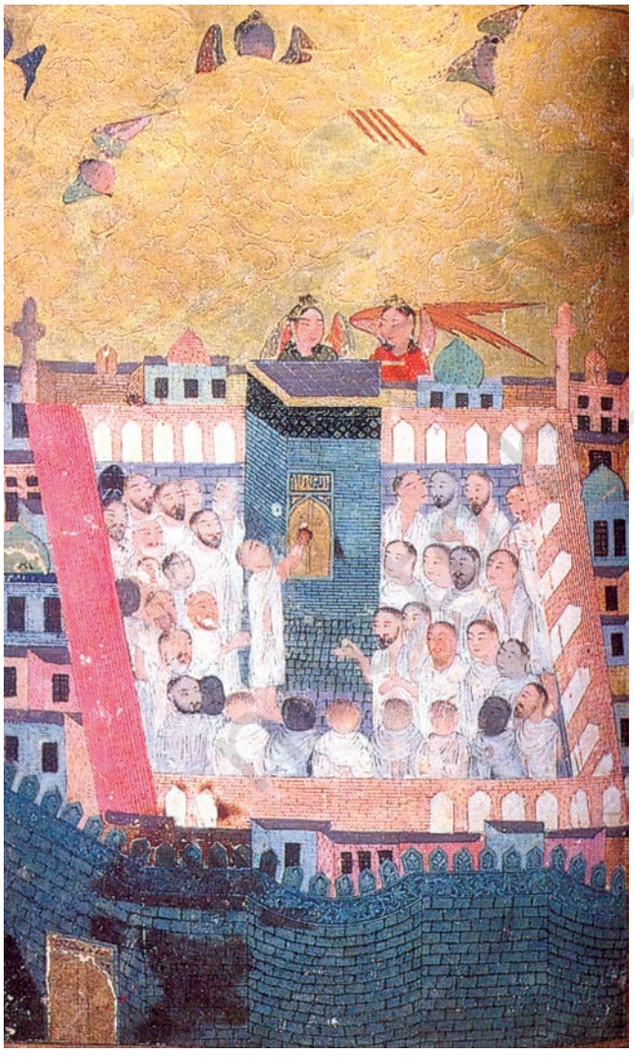
A thirteenth century painting from 'Ajaibul Makhluqat' depicting the artist's imagination of the Archangel Gabriel (Jibril) *who brought messages to Muhammad. The first word he spoke was 'recite'* (iqra) *from which has come the word Quran. In Islamic cosmology, angels are one of the three intelligent forms of life in the Universe. The other two are humans and jinns.*

Islamic Calendar

The Hijri era was established during the caliphate of Umar, with the first year falling in 622 CE. A date in the Hijri calendar is followed by the letters AH.

The Hijri year is a lunar year of 354 days, 12 months (Muharram to Dhul Hijja) of 29 or 30 days. Each day begins at sunset and each month with the sighting of the crescent moon. The Hijri year is about 11 days shorter than the solar year. Therefore, none of the Islamic religious festivals, including the Ramazan fast, Id and *hajj*, corresponds in any way to seasons. There is no easy way to match the dates in the Hijri calendar with the dates in the Gregorian calendar (established by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 CE). One can calculate the rough equivalents between the Islamic (H) and Gregorian Christian (C) years with the following formulae:

$$(H \times 32 / 33) + 622 = C$$
$$(C - 622) \times 33 / 32 = H$$



Pilgrims at the Kaba, illustration from a fifteenth-century Persian manuscript.

The survival of a religion rests on the survival of the community of believers. The community has to be consolidated internally and protected from external dangers. Consolidation and protection require political institutions such as states and governments which are either inherited from the past, borrowed from outside or created from scratch. In Medina, Muhammad created a political order from all three sources which gave his followers the protection they needed as well as resolved the city's ongoing civil strife. The *umma* was converted into a wider community to include polytheists and the Jews of Medina under the political leadership of Muhammad. Muhammad consolidated the faith for his followers by adding and refining rituals (such as fasting) and ethical principles. The community survived on agriculture and trade, as well as an alms tax (*zakat*). In addition, the Muslims organised expeditionary raids on Meccan caravans and nearby oases. These raids provoked reactions from the Meccans and caused a breach with the Jews of Medina. After

a series of battles, Mecca was conquered and Muhammad's reputation as a religious preacher and political leader spread far and wide. Muhammad now insisted on conversion as the sole criterion for membership of the community. In the harsh conditions of the desert, the Arabs attached great value to strength and solidarity. Impressed by Muhammad's achievements, many tribes, mostly Bedouins, joined the community by converting to Islam. Muhammad's alliances began to spread until they embraced the whole of Arabia. Medina became the administrative capital of the emerging Islamic state with Mecca as its religious centre. The Kaba was cleansed of idols as Muslims were required to face the shrine when offering prayers. In a short space of time, Muhammad was able to unite a large part of Arabia under a new faith, community and state. The early Islamic polity, however, remained a federation of Arab tribes and clans for a long time.

The Caliphate: Expansion, Civil Wars and Sect Formation

After Muhammad's death in 632, no one could legitimately claim to be the next prophet of Islam. As a result, his political authority was transferred to the *umma* with no established principle of succession. This created opportunities for innovations but also caused deep divisions among the Muslims. The biggest innovation was the creation of the institution of caliphate, in which the leader of the community (*amir al-muminin*) became the deputy (*khalifa*) of the Prophet. The first four caliphs (632-61) justified their powers on the basis of their close association with the Prophet and continued his work under the general guidelines he had provided. The twin objectives of the caliphate were to retain control over the tribes constituting the *umma* and to raise resources for the state.

Following Muhammad's death, many tribes broke away from the Islamic state. Some even raised their own prophets to establish communities modelled on the *umma*. The first caliph, Abu Bakr, suppressed the revolts by a series of campaigns. The second caliph, Umar, shaped the *umma's* policy of expansion of power. The caliph knew that the *umma* could not be maintained out of the modest income derived from trade and taxes. Realising that rich booty (*ghanima*) could be obtained from expeditionary raids, the caliph and his military commanders mustered their tribal strength to conquer lands belonging to the Byzantine Empire in the west and the Sasanian empire in the east. At the height of their power, the Byzantine and Sasanian empires ruled vast territories and commanded huge resources to pursue their political and commercial interests in Arabia. The Byzantine Empire promoted Christianity and the Sasanian empire patronised Zoroastrianism, the ancient religion of Iran. On the eve of the Arab invasions, these two empires had declined in strength due to religious conflicts and revolts by the aristocracy. This made it

MAP 1: The Islamic Lands

easier for the Arabs to annex territories through wars and treaties. In three successful campaigns (637-642), the Arabs brought Syria, Iraq, Iran and Egypt under the control of Medina. Military strategy, religious fervour and the weakness of the opposition contributed to the success of the Arabs. Further campaigns were launched by the third caliph, Uthman, to extend the control to Central Asia. Within a decade of the death of Muhammad, the Arab-Islamic state controlled the vast territory between the Nile and the Oxus. These lands remain under Muslim rule to this day.

In all the conquered provinces, the caliphs imposed a new administrative structure headed by governors (*amirs*) and tribal chieftains (*ashraf*). The central treasury (*bait al-mal*) obtained its revenue from taxes paid by Muslims as well as its share of the booty from raids. The caliph's soldiers, mostly Bedouins, settled in camp cities at the edge of the desert, such as Kufa and Basra, to remain within reach of their natural habitat as well as the caliph's command. The ruling class and soldiers received shares of the booty and monthly payments (*ata*). The non-Muslim population retained their rights to property and religious practices on payment of taxes (*kharaj* and *jiziya*). Jews and Christians were declared protected subjects of the state (*dhimmis*) and given a large measure of autonomy in the conduct of their communal affairs.

Political expansion and unification did not come easily to the Arab tribesmen. With territorial expansion, the unity of the *umma* became threatened by conflicts over the distribution of resources and offices. The ruling class of the early Islamic state comprised almost entirely the Quraysh of Mecca. The third caliph, Uthman (644-56), also a Quraysh, packed his administration with his own men to secure greater control. This further intensified the Meccan character of the state and the conflict with the other tribesmen. Opposition in Iraq and Egypt, combined with opposition in Medina, led to the assassination of Uthman. With Uthman's death, Ali became the fourth caliph.

The rifts among the Muslims deepened after Ali (656-61) fought two wars against those who represented the Meccan aristocracy. Ali established himself at Kufa and defeated an army led by Muhammad's wife, Aisha, in the Battle of the Camel (657). He was, however, not able to suppress the faction led by Muawiya, a kinsman of Uthman and the governor of Syria. Ali's second battle, at Siffin (northern Mesopotamia), ended in a truce which split his followers into two groups: some remained loyal to him, while others left the camp and came to be known as Kharjis. Soon after, Ali was assassinated by a Kharji in a mosque at Kufa. After his death, his followers paid allegiance to his son, Hussain, and his descendants. Muawiya made himself the next caliph in 661, founding the Umayyad dynasty which lasted till 750.

After the civil wars, it appeared as if Arab domination would disintegrate. There were also signs that the tribal conquerors were adopting the sophisticated culture of their subjects. It was under the Umayyads, a prosperous clan of the Quraysh tribe, that a second round of consolidation took place.

The Umayyads and the Centralisation of Polity

The conquest of large territories destroyed the caliphate based in Medina and replaced it with an increasingly authoritarian polity. The Umayyads implemented a series of political measures which consolidated their leadership within the *umma*. The first Umayyad caliph, Muawiya, moved his capital to Damascus and adopted the court ceremonies and administrative institutions of the Byzantine Empire. He also introduced hereditary succession and persuaded the leading Muslims to accept his son as his heir. These innovations were adopted by the caliphs who followed him, and allowed the Umayyads to retain power for 90 years and the Abbasids, for two centuries.

The Umayyad state was now an imperial power, no longer based directly on Islam but on statecraft and the loyalty of Syrian troops. There were Christian advisers in the administration, as well as Zoroastrian scribes and bureaucrats. However, Islam continued to provide legitimacy to their rule. The Umayyads always appealed for

The Dome of the Rock, built over a rocky mound by Abd al-Malik, is the earliest major work of Islamic architecture. Created as a monument to the Muslim presence in the city of Jerusalem, it acquired a mystical association connected with the Night Journey of the Prophet to Heaven (miraj).

unity and suppressed rebellions in the name of Islam. They also retained their Arab social identity. During the reign of Abd al-Malik (685-705) and his successors, both the Arab and Islamic identities were strongly emphasised. Among the measures Abd al-Malik took were the adoption of Arabic as the language of administration and the introduction of an Islamic coinage. The gold *dinar* and silver *dirham* that had been circulating in the caliphate were copies of Byzantine and Iranian coins (*denarius* and *drachm*), with symbols of crosses and fire altars and Greek and Pahlavi (the language of Iran) inscriptions. These symbols were removed and the coins now carried Arabic inscriptions. Abd al-Malik also made a highly visible contribution to the development of an Arab-Islamic identity, by building the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

Abd al-Malik's Coinage Reform

The three coin specimens show the transition from Byzantine to Arab-Islamic coinage. On the second coin, the bearded and long-haired caliph is dressed in traditional Arab robes and is holding a sword. It is the first extant portrait of a Muslim. It is also unique because later there developed an antipathy towards the representation of living beings in art and craft. Abd al-Malik's reform of coinage was linked with his reorganisation of state finances. It proved so successful that for hundreds of years, coins were struck according to the pattern and weight of the third specimen.

Byzantine gold solidus (denarius aureus) *showing the emperor Heraclius and his two sons.*

Portrait gold dinar *struck by Abd al-Malik with his name and image.*

The reformed dinar was purely epigraphic. It carries the kalima*: 'There is no God but Allah and He has no partner* (sharik)'

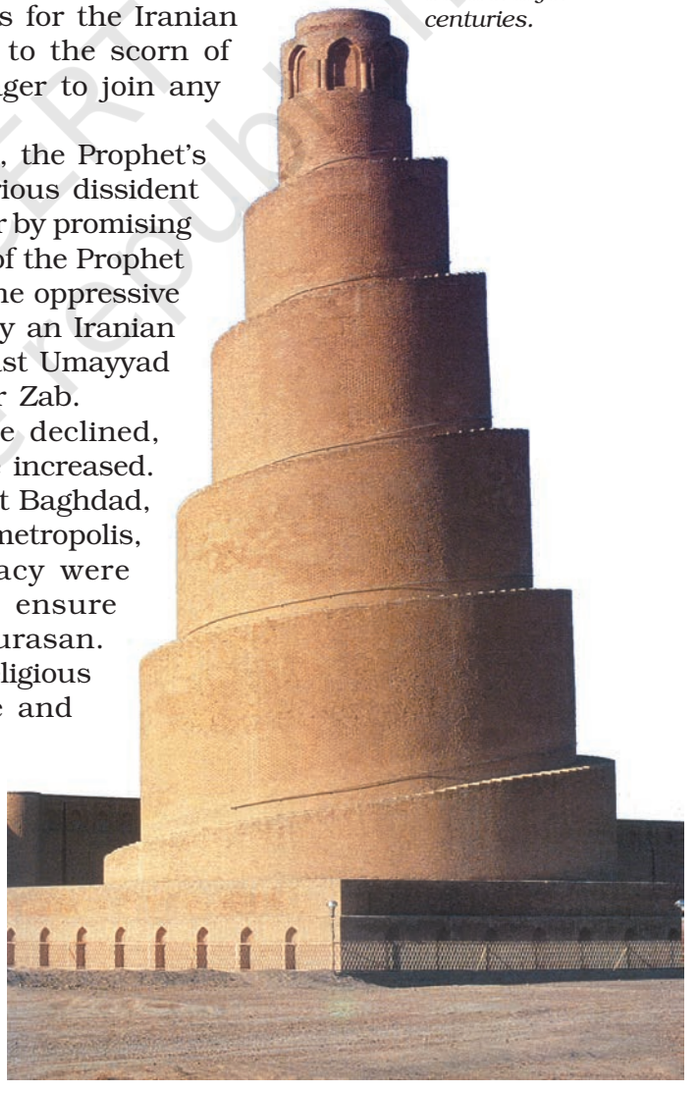
The Abbasid Revolution

For their success in centralising the Muslim polity, the Umayyads paid a heavy price. A well-organised movement, called *dawa*, brought down the Umayyads and replaced them with another family of Meccan origin, the Abbasids, in 750. The Abbasids portrayed the Umayyad regime as evil and promised a restoration of the original Islam of the Prophet. The revolution led not only to a change of dynasty but changes in the political structure and culture of Islam.

The Abbasid uprising broke out in the distant region of Khurasan (eastern Iran), a 20-day journey from Damascus on a fast horse. Khurasan had a mixed Arab-Iranian population which could be mobilised for various reasons. The Arab soldiers here were mostly from Iraq and resented the dominance of the Syrians. The civilian Arabs of Khurasan disliked the Umayyad regime for having made promises of tax concessions and privileges which were never fulfilled. As for the Iranian Muslims (*mawali*), they were exposed to the scorn of the race-conscious Arabs and were eager to join any campaign to oust the Umayyads.

The Abbasids, descendants of Abbas, the Prophet's uncle, mustered the support of the various dissident groups and legitimised their bid for power by promising that a messiah (*mahdi*) from the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*) would liberate them from the oppressive Umayyad regime. Their army was led by an Iranian slave, Abu Muslim, who defeated the last Umayyad caliph, Marwan, in a battle at the river Zab.

Under Abbasid rule, Arab influence declined, while the importance of Iranian culture increased. The Abbasids established their capital at Baghdad, near the ruins of the ancient Iranian metropolis, Ctesiphon. The army and bureaucracy were reorganised on a non-tribal basis to ensure greater participation by Iraq and Khurasan. The Abbasid rulers strengthened the religious status and functions of the caliphate and patronised Islamic institutions and scholars. But they were forced by the needs of government and empire to retain the centralised nature of the state. They maintained the magnificent imperial architecture and elaborate court ceremonials of the Umayyads. The regime which took pride in having brought down the monarchy found itself compelled to establish it again.



The Great Mosque of al-Mutawwakil in Samarra (the second Abbasid capital) built in 850. The minar is 50 metres high, and is made of brick. Inspired by Mesopotamian architectural traditions, this was the largest mosque in the world for centuries.

ACTIVITY 1

Identify the changing locations of the caliphate's capital. Which would you say was most centrally situated?

Break-up of the Caliphate and the Rise of Sultanates

The Abbasid state became weaker from the ninth century because Baghdad's control over the distant provinces declined, and because of conflict between pro-Arab and pro-Iranian factions in the army and bureaucracy. In 810, a civil war broke out between supporters of Amin and Mamun, sons of the caliph Harun al-Rashid, which deepened the factionalism and created a new power bloc of Turkish slave officers (*mamluk*). Shiism once again competed with Sunni orthodoxy for power. A number of minor dynasties arose, such as the Tahirids and Samanids in Khurasan and Transoxiana (Turan or lands beyond the Oxus), and the Tulunids in Egypt and Syria. Abbasid power was soon limited to central Iraq and western Iran. That too was lost in 945 when the Buyids, a Shiite clan from the Caspian region of Iran (Daylam), captured Baghdad. The Buyid rulers assumed various titles, including the ancient Iranian title *shahanshah* (king of kings), but not that of caliph. They kept the Abbasid caliph as the symbolic head of their Sunni subjects.

The decision not to abolish the caliphate was a shrewd one, because another Shiite dynasty, the Fatimids, had ambitions to rule the Islamic world. The Fatimids belonged to the Ismaili sub-sect of Shiism and claimed to be descended from the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, and hence, the sole rightful rulers of Islam. From their base in North Africa, they conquered Egypt in 969 and established the Fatimid caliphate. The old capital of Egypt, Fustat, was replaced by a new city, Qahira (Cairo), founded on the day of the rise of the planet Mars (*Mirrikh*, also called *al-Qahir*). The two rival dynasties patronised Shiite administrators, poets and scholars.

Between 950 and 1200, Islamic society was held together not by a single political order or a single language of culture (Arabic) but by common economic and cultural patterns. Unity in the face of political divisions was maintained by the separation between state and society, the development of Persian as a language of Islamic high culture, and the maturity of the dialogue between intellectual traditions. Scholars, artists and merchants moved freely within the central Islamic lands and assured the circulation of ideas and manners. Some of these also percolated down to the level of villages due to conversion. The Muslim population, less than 10 per cent in the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods, increased enormously. The identity of Islam as a religion and a cultural system separate from other religions became much sharper, which made conversion possible and meaningful.

A third ethnic group was added to the Arabs and Iranians, with the rise of the Turkish sultanates in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The Turks were nomadic tribes from the Central Asian steppes (grasslands) of Turkistan (north-east of the Aral Sea up to the borders of China) who gradually converted to Islam (see Theme 5). They were skilled riders and warriors and entered the Abbasid, Samanid and Buyid

administrations as slaves and soldiers, rising to high positions on account of their loyalty and military abilities. The Ghaznavid sultanate was established by Alptegin (961) and consolidated by Mahmud of Ghazni (998-1030). Like the Buyids, the Ghaznavids were a military dynasty with a professional army of Turks and Indians (one of the generals of Mahmud was an Indian named Tilak). But their centre of power was in Khurasan and Afghanistan and for them, the Abbasid caliphs were not rivals but a source of legitimacy. Mahmud was conscious of being the son of a slave and was especially eager to receive the title of Sultan from the caliph. The caliph was willing to support the Sunni Ghaznavid as a counterweight to Shiite power.

The Saljuq Turks entered Turan as soldiers in the armies of the Samanids and Qarakhanids (non-Muslim Turks from further east). They later established themselves as a powerful group under the leadership of two brothers, Tughril and Chaghri Beg. Taking advantage of the chaos following the death of Mahmud of Ghazni, the Saljuqs conquered Khurasan in 1037 and made Nishapur* their first capital. The Saljuqs next turned their attention to western Persia and Iraq (ruled by the Buyids) and in 1055, restored Baghdad to Sunni rule. The caliph, al-Qaim, conferred on Tughril Beg the title of Sultan in a move that marked the separation of religious and political authority. The two Saljuq brothers ruled together in accordance with the tribal notion of rule by the family as a whole. Tughril (d. 1064) was succeeded by his nephew, Alp Arsalan. During Alp Arsalan's reign, the Saljuq empire expanded to Anatolia (modern Turkey).

*An important Perso-Islamic centre of learning and the birthplace of Umar Khayyam.

From the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, there was a series of conflicts between European Christians and the Arab states. This is discussed below. Then, at the start of the thirteenth century, the Muslim world found itself on the verge of a great disaster. This was the threat from the Mongols, the last but most decisive of all nomadic assaults on settled civilisations (see Theme 5).

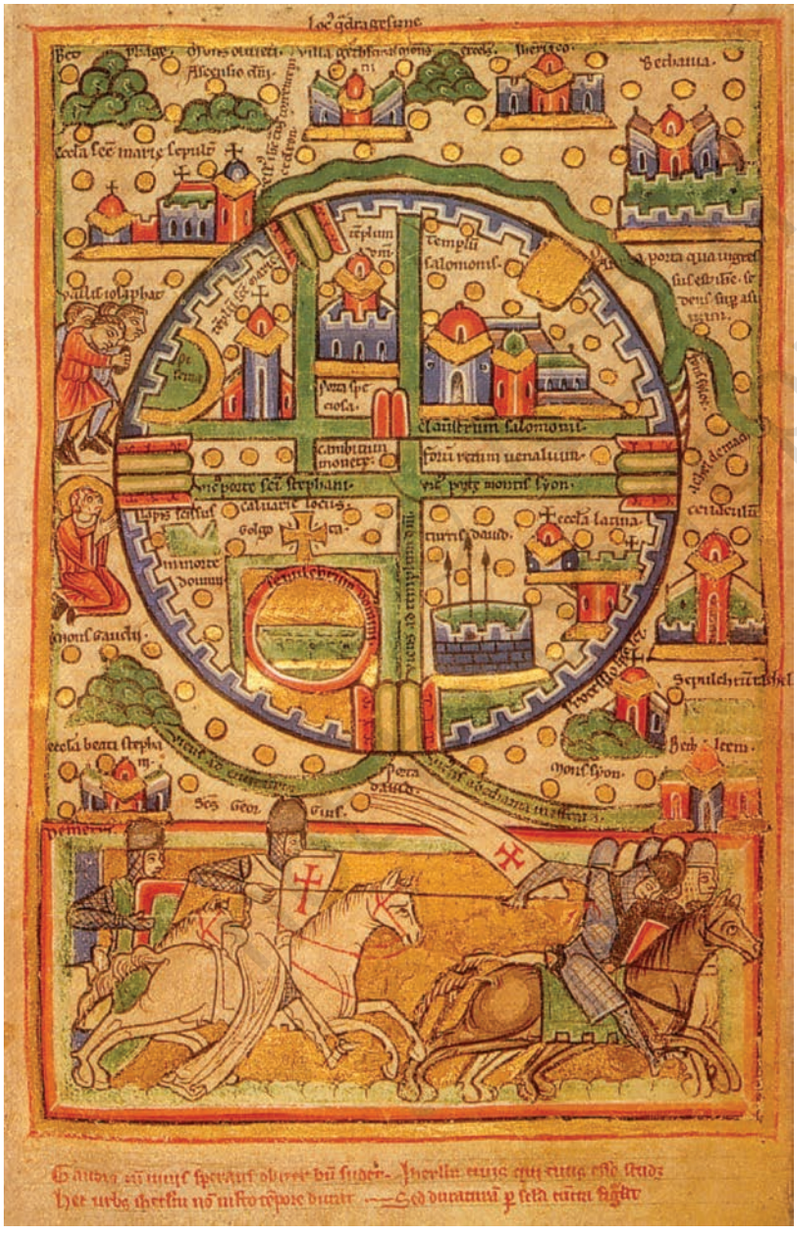
The Crusades

In medieval Islamic societies, Christians were regarded as the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitab*) since they had their own scripture (the New Testament or *Injil*). Christians were granted safe conduct (*aman*) while venturing into Muslim states as merchants, pilgrims, ambassadors and travellers. These territories also included those which were once held by the Byzantine Empire, notably the Holy Land of Palestine. Jerusalem was conquered by the Arabs in 638 but it was ever-present in the Christian imagination as the place of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. This was an important factor in the formation of the image of Muslims in Christian Europe.

Hostility towards the Muslim world became more pronounced in the eleventh century. Normans, Hungarians and some Slavs had

been converted to Christianity, and the Muslims alone remained as the main enemy. There was also a change in the social and economic organisation of western Europe in the eleventh century which contributed to the hostility between Christendom and the Islamic world. The clergy and the warrior class (the first two orders – see Theme 6) were making efforts to ensure political stability as well as economic growth based on agriculture and trade. The possibilities of military confrontation between competing feudal principalities and a return to economic organisation based on plunder were contained by the Peace of God movement. All military violence was forbidden inside certain areas, near places of worship, during certain periods considered sacred in the Church's calendar, and against certain vulnerable social groups, such as churchmen and the common people. The Peace of God deflected the aggressive tendencies of feudal society away from the Christian world and towards the 'enemies' of God. It built a climate in which fighting against the infidels (non-believers) became not only permissible but also commendable.

Aleppo, a Hittite, Assyrian and Hellenistic site, which was occupied by the Arabs in 636. It was fought over for the next 1,000 years; note the Crusaders seen in action.
–Nasuh al-Matraki's Itinerary, *1534-36.*



The death in 1092 of Malik Shah, the Saljuq sultan of Baghdad, was followed by the disintegration of his empire. This offered the Byzantine emperor, Alexius I, a chance to regain Asia Minor and northern Syria. For Pope Urban II, this was an opportunity to revive the spirit of Christianity. In 1095, the Pope joined the Byzantine emperor in calling for a war in the name of God to liberate the Holy Land. Between 1095 and 1291, western European Christians planned and fought

wars against Muslim cities on the coastal plains of the eastern Mediterranean (Levant). These wars were later designated as Crusades*.

*The Pope ordered the ceremonial granting of crosses to those who had sworn to fight.

In the first crusade (1098-99), soldiers from France and Italy captured Antioch in Syria, and claimed Jerusalem. Their victory was accompanied by the slaughter of Muslims and Jews in the city, chronicled by both Christians and Muslims. Muslim writers referred to the arrival of the Christians (called *ifrinji* or *firangi*) as a Frankish invasion. The Franks quickly established four crusader states in the region of Syria-Palestine. Collectively, these territories were known as Outremer (the land overseas) and later crusades were directed at its defence and expansion.

The Outremer survived well for some time, but when the Turks captured Edessa in 1144, an appeal was made by the Pope for a second crusade (1145-49). A combined German and French army made an attempt to capture Damascus but they were defeated and forced to return home. After this, there was a gradual erosion of the strength of Outremer. Crusader zeal gave way to living in luxury and to battles over territory among the Christian rulers. Salah al-Din (Saladin) created an Egypto-Syrian empire and gave the call for *jihad* or holy war against the Christians, and defeated them in 1187. He regained Jerusalem, nearly a century after the first crusade. Records of the time indicate that Salah al-Din's treatment of the Christian population was humane, in marked contrast to the way in which Christians had earlier dealt with Muslims and Jews. Although he gave custody of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to the Christians, a number of churches were turned into mosques, and Jerusalem once again became a Muslim city.

The loss of the city prompted a third crusade in 1189, but the crusaders gained little except for some coastal towns in Palestine and free access to Jerusalem for Christian pilgrims. The Mamluks, the rulers of Egypt, finally drove the crusading Christians from all of Palestine in 1291. Europe gradually lost military interest in Islam and focused on its internal political and cultural development.

The Crusades left a lasting impact on two aspects of Christian-Muslim relations. One was the harsher attitude of the Muslim state towards its Christian subjects which resulted from the bitter memories of the conflict as well as the needs for security in areas of mixed populations. The other was the greater influence of Italian mercantile communities (from Pisa, Genoa and Venice) in the trade between the East and the West even after the restoration of Muslim power.

Franks in Syria

The treatment of the subjugated Muslim population differed among the various Frankish lords. The earliest of the crusaders, who settled down in Syria and Palestine, were generally more tolerant of the Muslim population than those who came later. In his memoirs, Usama ibn Munqidh, a twelfth-century Syrian Muslim, has something interesting to say about his new neighbours:

'Among the Franks there are some who have settled down in this country and associated with Muslims. These are better than the newcomers, but they are exceptions to the rule, and no inference can be drawn from them.

Here is an example. Once I sent a man to Antioch on business. At that time, Chief Theodore Sophianos [an eastern Christian] was there, and he and I were friends. He was then all powerful in Antioch. One day he said to my man, "One of my Frankish friends has invited me. Come with me and see how they live." My man told me: "So I went with him, and we came to the house of one of the old knights, those who had come with the first Frankish expedition. He had already retired from state and military service, and had a property in Antioch from which he lived. He produced a fine table, with food both tasty and cleanly served. He saw that I was reluctant to eat, and said: "Eat to your heart's content, for I do not eat Frankish food. I have Egyptian women cooks and eat nothing but what they prepare, nor does swine flesh ever enter my house." So I ate, but with some caution, and we took our leave.

A crusader castle in Syria. Built during the crusades (1110), it was an important base to attack Arab-controlled areas. The towers and aqueducts were built by the Mamluk sultan, Baybars, when he captured it in 1271.

Later I was walking through the market, when suddenly a Frankish woman caught hold of me and began jabbering in their language, and I could not understand what she was saying. A crowd of Franks collected against me, and I was sure that my end had come. Then, suddenly, that same knight appeared and saw me, and came up to that woman, and asked her: "What do you want of this Muslim?" She replied: "He killed my brother Hurso." This Hurso was a knight of Afamiya who had been killed by someone from the army of Hama. Then the knight shouted at her and said, "This man is a *burjasi* [bourgeois, that is, a merchant]. He does not fight or go to war." And he shouted at the crowd and they dispersed; then he took my hand and went away. So the effect of that meal that I had was to save me from death." '

– *Kitab al-Itibar.*

Economy: Agriculture, Urbanisation and Commerce

Agriculture was the principal occupation of the settled populations in the newly conquered territories. The Islamic state made no changes in this. Land was owned by big and small peasants and, in some cases, by the state. In Iraq and Iran, land existed in fairly large units cultivated by peasants. The estate owners collected taxes on behalf of the state during the Sasanian as well as Islamic periods. In areas that had moved from a pastoral to a settled agricultural system, land was the common property of the village. Finally, big estates that were abandoned by their owners after the Islamic conquests were acquired by the state and handed over mainly to the Muslim elites of the empire, particularly members of the caliph's family.

The state had overall control of agricultural lands, deriving the bulk of its income from land revenue once the conquests were over. The lands conquered by the Arabs that remained in the hands of the owners were subject to a tax (*kharaj*), which varied from half to a fifth of the produce, according to the conditions of cultivation. On land held or cultivated by Muslims, the tax levied was one-tenth (*ushr*) of the produce. When non-Muslims started to convert to Islam to pay lower taxes, this reduced the income of the state. To address the shortfall, the caliphs first discouraged conversions and later adopted a uniform policy of taxation. From the tenth century onwards, the state authorised its officials to claim their salaries from agricultural revenues from territories, called *iqtas* (revenue assignments).

Grain harvesting; the labourers' lunch is being brought on a tray.
–Arabic version of the Pseudo-Galen's Book of Antidotes, *1199 (see the story of Doctor Galen, p. 63).*

Agricultural prosperity went hand in hand with political stability. In many areas, especially in the Nile valley, the state supported irrigation systems, the construction of dams and canals, and the digging of wells (often equipped with waterwheels or *noria*), all of which were crucial for good harvests. Islamic law gave tax concessions to people who brought land under cultivation. Through peasant initiatives and state support, cultivable land expanded and productivity rose, even in the absence of major technological changes. Many new crops such as cotton, oranges, bananas, watermelons, spinach and brinjals (*badinjan*) were grown and even exported to Europe.

Islamic civilisation flourished as the number of cities grew phenomenally. Many new cities were founded, mainly to settle Arab soldiers (*jund*) who formed the backbone of the local administration. Among this class of garrison-cities, called *misr* (the Arabic name for Egypt), were Kufa and Basra in Iraq, and Fustat and Cairo in Egypt. Within half a century of its establishment as the capital of the Abbasid caliphate (800), the population of Baghdad had reached around 1 million. Alongside these cities were older towns such as Damascus, Isfahan and Samarqand, which received a new lease of life. Their size and population surged, supported by an expansion in the production of foodgrains and raw materials such as cotton and sugar for urban manufactures. A vast urban network developed, linking one town with another and forming a circuit.

At the heart of the city were two building complexes radiating cultural and economic power: the congregational mosque (*masjid al-jami*), big enough to be seen from a distance, and the central marketplace (*suq*), with shops in a row, merchants' lodgings (*fanduq*) and the office of the money-changer. The cities were homes to administrators (*ayan* or eyes of the state), and scholars and merchants (*tujjar*) who lived close to the centre. Ordinary citizens and soldiers had their living quarters in the outer circle, each fitted with its own mosque, church or synagogue (Jewish temple), subsidiary market and public bath (*hammam*), an important meeting place. At the outskirts were the houses of the urban poor, a market for green vegetables and fruits brought from the countryside, caravan stations and 'unclean' shops, such as those dealing in tanning or butchering. Beyond the city walls were inns for people to rest when the city gates were shut and cemeteries. There were variations on this typology depending on the nature of the landscape, political traditions and historical events.

A boat sailing to Basra. The crew are Indian and the passengers Arab. The transport of goods and passengers by water was cheaper, quicker and safer in pre-modern times. Illustration from the Maqamat *written by Hariri (twelfth-century manuscript). The* Maqamat *(Assemblies) were a genre of popular Arabic literature in which a narrator tells stories of a trickster and his escapades.*

Political unification and urban demand for foodstuffs and luxuries enlarged the circuit of exchange. Geography favoured the Muslim empire, which spread between the trading zones of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. For five centuries, Arab and Iranian traders monopolised the maritime trade between China, India and Europe. This trade passed through two major routes, namely, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. High-value goods suitable for long-distance trade, such as spices, textile, porcelain and gunpowder, were shipped from India and China to the Red Sea ports of Aden and Aydhab and the Gulf ports of Siraf and Basra.

From here, the merchandise was carried overland in camel caravans to the warehouses (*makhazin*, origin of the word magazine which has a similar collection of articles) of Baghdad, Damascus and Aleppo for local consumption or onward transmission. The caravans passing through Mecca got bigger whenever the *hajj* coincided with the sailing seasons (*mawasim*, origin of the word monsoon) in the Indian Ocean. At the Mediterranean end of these trade routes, exports to Europe from the port of Alexandria were handled by Jewish merchants, some of whom traded directly with India, as can be seen from their letters preserved in the Geniza collection. However, from the tenth century, the Red Sea route gained greater importance due to the rise of Cairo as a centre of commerce and power and growing demand for eastern goods from the trading cities of Italy.

ACTIVITY 2

Describe a morning scene in Basra.

Paper, Geniza Records and History

In the central Islamic lands, written works were widely circulated after the introduction of paper. Paper (made from linen) came from China, where the manufacturing process was a closely guarded secret. In 751, the Muslim governor of Samarqand took 20,000 Chinese invaders as prisoners, some of whom were good at making paper. For the next 100 years, Samarqand paper remained an important export item. Since Islam prohibited monopolies, paper began to be manufactured in the rest of the Islamic world. By the middle of the tenth century, it had more or less replaced papyrus, the writing material made from the inner stem of a plant that grew freely in the Nile valley. Demand for paper increased, and Abd al-Latif, a doctor from Baghdad (see his depiction of the ideal student on p. 98) and a resident of Egypt between 1193 and 1207, reported how Egyptian peasants robbed graves to obtain mummy wrappings made of linen to sell to paper factories.

Paper also facilitated the writing of commercial and personal documents of all kinds. In 1896, a huge collection of medieval Jewish documents was discovered in a sealed room (Geniza, pronounced *ghaniza*) of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat. The documents had been preserved thanks to the Jewish practice of not destroying any piece of writing that contained the name of God. The Geniza was found to contain over a quarter of a million manuscripts and fragments dating back as far as the mid-eighth century. Most of the material dated from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, that is, from the Fatimid, Ayyubid and early Mamluk periods. These included personal letters between merchants, family and friends, contracts, promises of dowry, sale documents, laundry lists, and other trivia. Most of the documents were written in Judaeo-Arabic, a version of Arabic written in Hebrew characters that was commonly used by Jewish communities throughout the medieval Mediterranean. The Geniza documents provide rich insights into personal and economic experiences as also into Mediterranean and Islamic culture. The documents also suggest that the business skills and commercial techniques of merchants of the medieval Islamic world were more advanced than those of their European counterparts. Goitein wrote a multi-volume history of the Mediterranean from Geniza records, and Amitav Ghosh was inspired by a Geniza letter to tell the story of an Indian slave in his book, *In an Antique Land*.

Towards the eastern end, caravans of Iranian merchants set out from Baghdad along the Silk Route to China, via the oasis cities of Bukhara and Samarqand (Transoxiana), to bring Central Asian and Chinese goods, including paper. Transoxiana also formed an important link in the commercial network which extended north to Russia and Scandinavia for the exchange of European goods, (mainly fur) and Slavic captives (hence the word, slave). Islamic coins, used for the payment of these goods, were found in hoards discovered along the Volga river and in the Baltic region. Male and female Turkish slaves (*ghulam*) too were purchased in these markets for the courts of the caliphs and sultans.

The fiscal system (income and expenditure of the state) and market exchange increased the importance of money in the central Islamic lands. Coins of gold, silver and copper (*fulus*) were minted and circulated, often in bags sealed by money-changers, to pay for goods and services. Gold came from Africa (Sudan) and silver from Central Asia (Zarafshan valley). Precious metals and coins also came from Europe, which used these to pay for its trade with the East. Rising demand for money forced people to release their accumulated reserves and idle wealth into circulation. Credit combined with currencies to oil the wheels of commerce. The greatest contribution of the Muslim world to medieval economic life was the development of superior methods of payment and business organisation. Letters of credit (*sakk*, origin of the word cheque) and bills of exchange (*suftaja*) were used by merchants and bankers to transfer money from one place or individual to another. The widespread use of commercial papers freed merchants from the need to carry cash everywhere and also made their journeys safer. The caliph too used the *sakk* to pay salaries or reward poets and minstrels.

Although it was customary for merchants to set up family businesses or employ slaves to run their affairs, formal business arrangements (*muzarba*) were also common in which sleeping partners entrusted capital to travelling merchants and shared profits and losses in an agreed proportion. Islam did not stop people from making money so long as certain prohibitions were respected. For instance, interest-bearing transactions (*riba*) were unlawful, although people circumvented usury in ingenious ways (*hiyal*), such as borrowing money in one type of coin and paying in another while disguising the interest as a commission on currency exchange (the origin of the bill of exchange).

Many tales from the *Thousand and One Nights (Alf Layla wa Layla)* give us a picture of medieval Islamic society, featuring characters such as sailors, slaves, merchants and money-changers.

Learning and Culture

As the religious and social experiences of the Muslims deepened through contact with other people, the community was obliged to reflect on itself and confront issues pertaining to God and the world. What should be the ideal conduct of a Muslim in public and private? What is the object of Creation and how does one know what God wants from His creatures? How can one understand the mysteries of the universe? Answers to such questions came from learned Muslims who acquired and organised knowledge of different kinds to strengthen the social identity of the community as well as to satisfy their intellectual curiosity.

For religious scholars (*ulama*), knowledge (*ilm*) derived from the Quran and the model behaviour of the Prophet (*sunna*) was the only way to know the will of God and provide guidance in this world. The *ulama* in medieval times devoted themselves to writing *tafsir* and documenting Muhammad's authentic *hadith*. Some went on to prepare a body of laws or *sharia* (the straight path) to govern the relationship of Muslims with God through rituals (*ibadat*) and with the rest of the humanity through social affairs (*muamalat*). In framing Islamic law, jurists also made use of reasoning (*qiyas*) since not everything was apparent in the Quran or *hadith* and life had become increasingly complex with urbanisation. Differences in the interpretation of the sources and methods of jurisprudence led to the formation of four schools of law (*mazhab*) in the eight and ninth centuries. These were the Maliki, Hanafi, Shafii and Hanbali schools, each named after a leading jurist (*faqih*), the last being the most conservative. The *sharia* provided guidance on all possible legal issues within Sunni society, though it was more precise on questions of personal status (marriage, divorce and inheritance) than on commercial matters or penal and constitutional issues.

Courtyard of Mustansiriya Madrasa of Baghdad, founded in 1233. The madrasa was a college of learning for students who had finished their schooling in maktab. *Madrasas were attached to mosques but big madrasas had a mosque attached to them.*

The Quran

'And if all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean were ink
with seven oceans behind it to add to its supply,
yet would not the words of Allah be exhausted in the writing.'

(Quran, chapter 31, verse 27)

Page from a Quran written on vellum in the ninth century. It is the beginning of Sura 18, 'al-Kahf' *(The Cave) which refers to Moses, the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus and Alexander (Zulqar Nayn). The angular Kufi script has vowel signs in red for the correct pronunciation of the language.*

The Quran is a book in Arabic divided into 114 chapters (*suras*) and arranged in descending order of length, the shortest being the last. The only exception to this is the first *sura* which is a short prayer (*al-fatiha* or opening). According to Muslim tradition, the Quran is a collection of messages (revelations) which God sent to the Prophet Muhammad between 610 and 632, first in Mecca and then in Medina. The task of compiling these revelations was completed some time in 650. The oldest complete Quran we have today dates from the ninth century. There are many fragments which are older, the earliest being the verses engraved on the Dome of the Rock and on coins in the seventh century.

The use of the Quran as a source material for the history of early Islam has posed some problems. The first is that it is a scripture, a text vested with religious authority. Theologians generally believed that as the speech of God (*kalam allah*), it has to be understood literally, but rationalists among them gave wider interpretations to the Quran. In 833, the Abbasid caliph al-Mamun imposed the view (in a trial of faith or *mihna*) that the Quran is God's creation rather than His speech. The second problem is that the Quran very often speaks in metaphors and, unlike the Old Testament (*Tawrit*), it does not narrate events but only refers to them. Medieval Islamic scholars thus had to make sense of many verses with the help of *hadith.* Many *hadith* were written to help the reading of the Quran.

Before it took its final form, the *sharia* was adjusted to take into account the customary laws (*urf*) of the various regions as well as the laws of the state on political and social order (*siyasa sharia*). Customary laws, however, retained their strength in large parts of the countryside and continued to bypass the *sharia* in matters such as the inheritance of land by daughters. In most regimes, the ruler or his officials dealt routinely with matters of state security and sent only selected cases to the *qazi* (judge). The *qazi*, appointed by the state in each city or locality, often acted as an arbitrator in disputes, rather than as a strict enforcer of the *sharia*.

A group of religious-minded people in medieval Islam, known as Sufis, sought a deeper and more personal knowledge of God through asceticism (*rahbaniya*) and mysticism. The more society gave itself up to material pursuits and pleasures, the more the Sufis sought to renounce the world (*zuhd*) and rely on God alone (*tawakkul*). In the eighth and ninth centuries, ascetic inclinations were elevated to the higher stage of mysticism (*tasawwuf*) by the ideas of pantheism and love. Pantheism is the idea of oneness of God and His creation which implies that the human soul must be united with its Maker. Unity with God can be achieved through an intense love for God (*ishq*), which the woman-saint Rabia of Basra (d. 891) preached in her poems. Bayazid Bistami (d. 874), an Iranian Sufi, was the first to teach the importance of submerging the self (*fana*) in God. Sufis used musical concerts (*sama*) to induce ecstasy and stimulate emotions of love and passion.

Sufism is open to all regardless of religious affiliation, status and gender. Dhulnun Misri (d. 861), whose grave can still be seen near the Pyramids in Egypt, declared before the Abbasid caliph, al-Mutawakkil, that he 'learnt true Islam from an old woman, and true chivalry from a water carrier'. By making religion more personal and less institutional, Sufism gained popularity and posed a challenge to orthodox Islam.

An alternative vision of God and the universe was developed by Islamic philosophers and scientists under the influence of Greek philosophy and science. During the seventh century, remnants of late Greek culture could still

Painting of whirling dervishes, Iranian manuscript, 1490. Of the four men dancing, only one is shown with his hands in the 'correct' position. Some have succumbed to vertigo and are being led away.

be found in the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, although they were slowly dying. In the schools of Alexandria, Syria and Mesopotamia, once part of Alexander's empire, Greek philosophy, mathematics and medicine were taught along with other subjects. The Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs commissioned the translation of Greek and Syriac books into Arabic by Christian scholars. Translation became a well-organised activity under al-Mamun, who supported the Library cum Institute of Science (Bayt al-Hikma) in Baghdad where the scholars worked. The works of Aristotle, the *Elements* of Euclid and Ptolemy's *Almagest* were brought to the attention of Arabic-reading scholars. Indian works on astronomy, mathematics and medicine were also translated into Arabic during the same period. These works reached Europe and kindled interest in philosophy and science.

ACTIVITY 3

Comment on this passage. Would it be relevant to a student today?

The Ideal Student

Abd al-Latif, a twelfth-century legal and medical scholar of Baghdad, talks to his ideal student:

'I commend you not to learn your sciences from books unaided, even though you may trust your ability to understand. Resort to teachers for each science you seek to acquire; and should your teacher be limited in his knowledge take all that he can offer, until you find another more accomplished than he. You must venerate and respect him. When you read a book, make every effort to learn it by heart and master its meaning. Imagine the book to have disappeared and that you can dispense with it, unaffected by its loss. One should read histories, study biographies and the experiences of nations. By doing this, it will be as though, in his short life space, he lived contemporaneously with peoples of the past, was on intimate terms with them, and knew the good and bad among them. You should model your conduct on that of the early Muslims. Therefore, read the biography of the Prophet and follow in his footsteps. You should frequently distrust your nature, rather than have a good opinion of it, submitting your thoughts to men of learning and their works, proceeding with caution and avoiding haste. He who has not endured the stress of study will not taste the joy of knowledge. When you have finished your study and reflection, occupy your tongue with the mention of God's name, and sing His praises. Do not complain if the world turns its back on you. Know that learning leaves a trail and a scent proclaiming its possessor; a ray of light and brightness shining on him, pointing him out.'

– Ahmad ibn al Qasim ibn Abi Usaybia, *Uyun al Anba.*

The study of new subjects promoted critical inquiry and had a profound influence on Islamic intellectual life. Scholars with a theological bent of mind, such as the group known as Mutazila, used Greek logic and methods of reasoning (*kalam*) to defend Islamic beliefs. Philosophers (*falasifa*) posed wider questions and provided fresh answers. Ibn Sina (980-1037), a doctor by profession and a philosopher, did not believe in the resurrection of the body on the Day of Judgement. This was met with strong opposition from theologians. His medical writings were widely read. The most influential was *al-Qanun fil Tibb (Canon of Medicine)*, a million-word manuscript that lists 760 drugs sold by the pharmacists of his day and includes notes on his own experiments conducted in hospitals (*bimaristan*). The *Canon* points out the importance of dietetics (healing through dietary regulation), the influence of the climate and environment on health and the contagious nature of some diseases. The *Canon* was used as a textbook in Europe, where the author was known as Avicenna (see Theme 7). Just before his death, the scientist and poet Umar Khayyam was said to be reading the *Canon*. His gold toothpick was found between two pages of the chapter on metaphysics.

In medieval Islamic societies, fine language and a creative imagination were among the most appreciated qualities in a person. These qualities raised a person's communication to the level of *adab*, a term which implied literary and cultural refinement. *Adab* forms of expressions included poetry (*nazm* or orderly arrangement) and prose (*nathr* or scattered words) which were meant to be memorised and used when the occasion arose. The most popular poetic composition of pre-Islamic origin was the ode (*qasida*), developed by poets of the Abbasid period to glorify the achievements of their patrons. Poets of Persian origin revitalised and reinvented Arabic poetry and challenged the cultural hegemony of the Arabs. Abu Nuwas (d. 815), who was of Persian origin, broke new ground by composing classical poetry on new themes such as wine and male love with the intention of celebrating pleasures forbidden by Islam. After Abu Nuwas, the poets addressed the object of their passion in the masculine, even if the latter was a woman. Following the same tradition, the Sufis glorified the intoxication caused by the wine of mystical love.

By the time the Arabs conquered Iran, Pahlavi, the language of the sacred books of ancient Iran, was in decay. A version of Pahlavi, known as New Persian, with a huge Arabic vocabulary, soon developed. The formation of sultanates in Khurasan and Transoxiana took New Persian to great cultural heights. The Samanid court poet Rudaki (d. 940) was considered the father of New Persian poetry, which included new forms such as the short lyrical poem (*ghazal*) and the quatrain (*rubai,* plural *rubaiyyat*). The *rubai* is a four-line stanza in which the first two lines set the stage, the third is finely poised, and the fourth delivers the point. In contrast to its form, the subject matter of the *rubai* is unrestricted. It can be used to express the beauty of a beloved, praise

a patron, or express the thoughts of the philosopher. The *rubai* reached its zenith in the hands of Umar Khayyam (1048-1131), also an astronomer and mathematician, who lived at various times in Bukhara, Samarqand and Isfahan.

Dimna is talking to the lion (asad) *in this miniature painting of a thirteenth-century Arabic manuscript.*

At the beginning of the eleventh century, Ghazni became the centre of Persian literary life. Poets were naturally attracted by the brilliance of the imperial court. Rulers, too, realised the importance of patronising arts and learning for enhancing their prestige. Mahmud of Ghazni gathered around him a group of poets who composed anthologies (*diwans*) and epic poetry (*mathnavi*). The most outstanding was Firdausi (d. 1020), who took 30 years to complete the *Shahnama (Book of Kings)*, an epic of 50,000 couplets which has become a masterpiece of Islamic literature. The *Shahnama* is a collection of traditions and legends (the most popular being that of Rustam), which poetically depicts Iran from Creation up until the Arab conquest. It was in keeping with the Ghaznavid tradition that Persian later became the language of administration and culture in India.

The catalogue (*Kitab al-Fihrist*) of a Baghdad bookseller, Ibn Nadim (d. 895), describes a large number of works written in prose for the moral education and amusement of readers. The oldest of these is a collection of animal fables called *Kalila wa Dimna* (the names of the two jackals who were the leading characters) which is the Arabic translation of a Pahlavi version of the *Panchtantra*. The most widespread and lasting literary works are the stories of hero-adventurers such as Alexander (al-Iskandar) and Sindbad, or those of unhappy lovers such as Qays (known as Majnun or the Madman). These have developed over the centuries into oral and written traditions. The *Thousand and One Nights* is another collection of stories told by a single narrator, Shahrzad, to her husband night after night. The collection was originally in Indo-Persian and was translated into Arabic in Baghdad in the eighth century. More stories were later added in Cairo during the Mamluk period. These stories depict human beings of different types – the generous, the stupid, the gullible, the crafty – and were told to educate and entertain. In his *Kitab al-Bukhala (Book of Misers)*, Jahiz of Basra (d. 868) collected amusing anecdotes about misers and also analysed greed.

From the ninth century onwards, the scope of *adab* was expanded to include biographies, manuals of ethics (*akhlaq*), Mirrors for Princes (books on statecraft) and, above all, history (*tarikh*) and geography.

The tradition of history writing was well established in literate Muslim societies. History books were read by scholars and students as well as by the broader literate public. For rulers and officials, history provided a good record of the glories and achievements of a dynasty as well as examples of the techniques of administration. In the two major historical works, *Ansab al-Ashraf (Genealogies of the Nobles)* of Baladhuri (d. 892) and *Tarikh al-Rusul wal Muluk (History of Prophets and Kings)* of Tabari, the whole of human history was treated with the Islamic period as the focal point. The tradition of local history writing developed with the break-up of the caliphate. Books were written in Persian about dynasties, cities or regions to explore the unity and variety of the world of Islam.

Geography and travel (*rihla*) constituted a special branch of *adab*. These combined knowledge from Greek, Iranian and Indian books with the observations of merchants and travellers. In mathematical geography, the inhabited world was divided into seven climes *(singular iqlim)* parallel with the Equator, corresponding to our three continents. The exact position of each city was determined astronomically. Muqaddasi's (d. 1000) descriptive geography, *Ahsan al-Taqasim (The Best Divisions)* is a comparative study of the countries and peoples of the world and a treasure trove of exotic curiosities. Geography and general history were combined in *Muruj al-Dhahab* (*Golden Meadows*) of Masudi (written in 943) to illustrate the wide variety of worldly cultures. Alberuni's famous *Tahqiq ma lil-Hind (History of India*) was the greatest attempt by an eleventh-century Muslim writer to look beyond the world of Islam and observe what was of value in another cultural tradition.

Mosaic floor in the bath-house of the palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar, Palestine, eighth century. Imagine the caliph enthroned on the tree; the scene below depicts peace and war.

By the tenth century, an Islamic world had emerged which was easily recognisable by travellers. Religious buildings were the greatest external symbols of this world. Mosques, shrines and tombs from Spain to Central Asia showed the same basic design – arches, domes, minarets and open courtyards – and expressed the spiritual and practical needs of Muslims. In the first Islamic century, the mosque acquired a distinct architectural form (roof supported by pillars) which transcended regional variations. The mosque had an open courtyard (*sahn*) where a fountain or pond was placed, leading to a vaulted hall which could accommodate long lines of worshippers and the prayer leader (*imam*). Two special features were located

The Islamic decorative genius found full expression in the art of metal objects that are among the best-preserved specimens. This mosque lamp from fourteenth-century Syria has the Light verse inscribed on it.

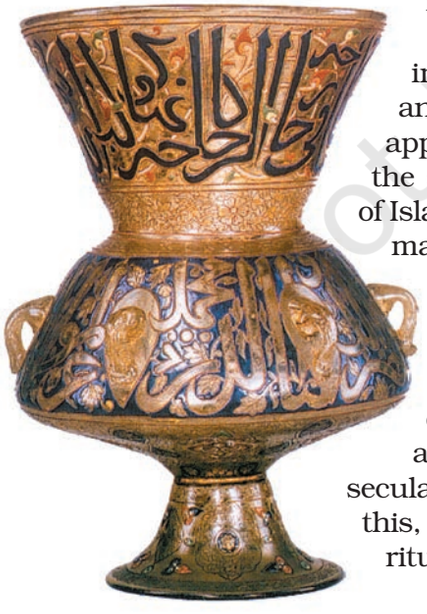
*'God is the Light (*nur*) of the heavens and the earth*
*His light is like a niche (*mishkat*) with a lamp (*misbah*)*
The lamp is in a glass which looks as if it were a glittering star
*Kindled from a blessed olive (*zaitun*) tree that is neither eastern nor western*
*Whose oil would always shine even if no fire (*nar*) touched it'*

(Quran, chapter 24, verse 35).

inside the hall: a niche (*mihrab*) in the wall indicating the direction of Mecca (*qibla*), and a pulpit (*minbar*, pronounced *mimbar*) from where sermons were delivered during noon prayers on Friday. Attached to the building was the minaret, a tower used to call the faithful to prayer at the appointed times and to symbolise the presence of the new faith. Time was marked in cities and villages by the five daily prayers and weekly sermons.

The same pattern of construction – of buildings built around a central courtyard (*iwan*) – appeared not only in mosques and mausoleums but also in caravanserais, hospitals and palaces. The Umayyads built 'desert palaces' in oases, such as Khirbat al-Mafjar in Palestine and Qusayr Amra in Jordan, which served as luxurious residences and retreats for hunting and pleasure. The palaces, modelled on Roman and Sasanian architecture, were lavishly decorated with sculptures, mosaics and paintings of people. The Abbasids built a new imperial city in Samarra amidst gardens and running waters which is mentioned in the stories and legends revolving round Harun al-Rashid. The great palaces of the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad or the Fatimids in Cairo have disappeared, leaving only traces in literary texts.

The rejection of representing living beings in the religious art of Islam promoted two art forms: calligraphy (*khattati* or the art of beautiful writing) and arabesque (geometric and vegetal designs). Small and big inscriptions, usually of religious quotations, were used to decorate architecture. Calligraphic art has been best preserved in manuscripts of the Quran dating from the eighth and ninth centuries. Literary works, such as the *Kitab al-Aghani* (*Book of Songs*), *Kalila wa Dimna*, and *Maqamat* of Hariri, were illustrated with miniature paintings. In addition, a wide variety of illumination techniques were introduced to enhance the beauty of a book. Plant and floral designs, based on the idea of the garden, were used in buildings and book illustrations.



The history of the central Islamic lands brings together three important aspects of human civilisation: religion, community and politics. We can see them as three circles which merge and appear as one in the seventh century. In the next five centuries the circles separate. Towards the end of our period, the influence of Islam over state and government was minimal, and politics involved many things which had no sanction in religion (kingship, civil wars, etc.). The circles of religion and community overlapped. The Muslim community was united in its observance of the *sharia* in rituals and personal matters. It was no more governing itself (poltics was a separate circle) but it was defining its religious identity. The only way the circles of religion and community could have separated was through the progressive secularisation of Muslim society. Philosophers and Sufis advocated this, suggesting that civil society should be made autonomous, and rituals be replaced by private spirituality.

ACTIVITY 4

Which of the pictures in the chapter do you like best and why?

595	Muhammad marries Khadija, a wealthy Meccan trader who later supports Islam
610-12	Muhammad has first revelation; first public preaching of Islam (612)
621	First agreement at Aqaba with Medinan converts
622	Migration from Mecca to Medina. Arab tribes of Medina (*ansar*) shelter Meccan migrants (*muhajir*)
632-61	Early caliphate; conquests of Syria, Iraq, Iran and Egypt; civil wars
661-750	Umayyad rule; Damascus becomes the capital
750-945	Abbasid rule; Baghdad becomes the capital
945	Buyids capture Baghdad; literary and cultural efflorescence
1063-92	Rule of Nizamul mulk, the powerful Saljuq *wazir* who established a string of *madrasas* called Nizamiyya; killed by Hashishayn (Assassins)
1095-1291	Crusades; contacts between Muslims and Christians
1111	Death of Ghazali, influential Iranian scholar who opposed rationalism
1258	Mongols capture Baghdad

Exercises

ANSWER IN BRIEF

1. What were the features of the lives of the Bedouins in the early seventh century?
2. What is meant by the term 'Abbasid revolution'?
3. Give examples of the cosmopolitan character of the states set up by Arabs, Iranians and Turks.
4. What were the effects of the Crusades on Europe and Asia?

ANSWER IN A SHORT ESSAY

5. How were Islamic architectural forms different from those of the Roman Empire?
6. Describe a journey from Samarqand to Damascus, referring to the cities on the route.

THEME 5

NOMADIC EMPIRES

THE term 'noma1dic empires' can appear contradictory: nomads are arguably quintessential wanderers, organised in family assemblies with a relatively undifferentiated economic life and rudimentary systems of political organisation. The term 'empire', on the other hand, carries with it the sense of a material location, a stability derived from complex social and economic structures and the governance of an extensive territorial dominion through an elaborate administrative system. But the juxtapositions on which these definitions are framed may be too narrowly and ahistorically conceived. They certainly collapse when we study some imperial formations constructed by nomadic groups.

In Theme 4 we studied state formations in the central Islamic lands whose origins lay in the Bedouin nomadic traditions of the Arabian peninsula. This chapter studies a different group of nomads: the Mongols of Central Asia who established a transcontinental empire under the leadership of Genghis Khan, straddling Europe and Asia during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Relative to the agrarian-based imperial formations in China, the neighbouring nomads of Mongolia may have inhabited a humbler, less complex, social and economic world. But the Central Asian nomadic societies were not insulated 'islands' that were impervious to historical change. These societies interacted, had an impact on and learnt from the larger world of which they were very much a part.

This chapter studies the manner in which the Mongols under Genghis Khan adapted their traditional social and political customs to create a fearsome military machine and a sophisticated method of governance. The challenge of ruling a dominion spanning a melange of people, economies, and confessional systems meant that the Mongols could not simply impose their steppe traditions over their recently annexed territories. They innovated and compromised, creating a nomadic empire that had a huge impact on the history of Eurasia even as it changed the character and composition of their own society forever.

The steppe dwellers themselves usually produced no literature, so our knowledge of nomadic societies comes

mainly from chronicles, travelogues and documents produced by city-based litterateurs. These authors often produced extremely ignorant and biased reports of nomadic life. The imperial success of the Mongols, however, attracted many literati. Some of them produced travelogues of their experiences; others stayed to serve Mongol masters. These individuals came from a variety of backgrounds – Buddhist, Confucian, Christian, Turkish and Muslim. Although not always familiar with Mongol customs, many of them produced sympathetic accounts – even eulogies – that challenged and complicated the otherwise hostile, city-based tirade against the steppe marauders. The history of the Mongols, therefore, provides interesting details to question the manner in which sedentary societies usually characterised nomads as primitive barbarians*.

Perhaps the most valuable research on the Mongols was done by Russian scholars starting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the Tsarist regime consolidated its control over Central Asia. This work was produced within a colonial milieu and was largely survey notes produced by travellers, soldiers, merchants and antiquarian scholars. In the early twentieth century, after the extension of the soviet republics in the region, a new Marxist historiography argued that the prevalent mode of production determined the nature of social relations. It placed Genghis Khan and the emerging Mongol empire within a scale of human evolution that was witnessing a transition from a tribal to a feudal mode of production: from a relatively classless society to one where there were wide differences between the lord, the owners of land and the peasant. Despite following such a deterministic interpretation of history, excellent research on Mongol languages, their society and culture was carried out by scholars such as Boris Yakovlevich Vladimirtsov. Others such as Vasily Vladimirovich Bartold did not quite toe the official line. At a time when the Stalinist regime was extremely wary of regional nationalism, Bartold's sympathetic and positive assessment of the career and achievements of the Mongols under Genghis Khan and his successors got him into trouble with the censors. It severely curtailed the circulation of the work of the scholar and it was only in the 1960s, during and after the more liberal Khruschev era, that his writings were published in nine volumes.

The transcontinental span of the Mongol empire also meant that the sources available to scholars are written in a vast number of languages. Perhaps the most crucial are the sources in Chinese, Mongolian, Persian and Arabic, but vital materials are also available in Italian, Latin, French and Russian. Often the same text was produced in two languages with differing contents. For example, the Mongolian and Chinese versions of the earliest narrative on Genghis Khan, titled *Mongqol-un niuèa tobèa'an* (*The Secret History of the*

*The term 'barbarian' is derived from the Greek *barbaros* which meant a non-Greek, someone whose language sounded like a random noise: 'bar-bar'. In Greek texts, barbarians were depicted like children, unable to speak or reason properly, cowardly, effeminate, luxurious, cruel, slothful, greedy and politically unable to govern themselves. The sterotype passed to the Romans who used the term for the Germanic tribes, the Gauls and the Huns. The Chinese had different terms for the steppe barbarians but none of them carried a positive meaning.

Mongols) are quite different and the Italian and Latin versions of Marco Polo's travels to the Mongol court do not match. Since the Mongols produced little literature on their own and were instead 'written about' by literati from foreign cultural milieus, historians have to often double as philologists to pick out the meanings of phrases for their closest approximation to Mongol usage. The work of scholars like Igor de Rachewiltz on *The Secret History of the Mongols* and Gerhard Doerfer on Mongol and Turkic terminologies that infiltrated into the Persian language brings out the difficulties involved in studying the history of the Central Asian nomads. As we will notice through the remainder of this chapter, despite their incredible achievements there is much about Genghis Khan and the Mongol world empire still awaiting the diligent scholar's scrutiny.

Introduction

In the early decades of the thirteenth century the great empires of the Euro-Asian continent realised the dangers posed to them by the arrival of a new political power in the steppes of Central Asia: Genghis Khan (d. 1227) had united the Mongol people. Genghis Khan's political vision, however, went far beyond the creation of a confederacy of Mongol

MAP 1: The Mongol Empire

tribes in the steppes of Central Asia: he had a mandate from God to rule the world. Even though his own lifetime was spent consolidating his hold over the Mongol tribes, leading and directing campaigns into adjoining areas in north China, Transoxiana, Afghanistan, eastern Iran and the Russian steppes, his descendants travelled further afield to fulfil Genghis Khan's vision and create the largest empire the world had ever seen.

It was in the spirit of Genghis Khan's ideals that his grandson Mongke (1251-60) warned the French ruler, Louis IX (1226-70): 'In Heaven there is only one Eternal Sky, on Earth there is only one Lord, Genghis Khan, the Son of Heaven... When by the power of the Eternal Heaven the whole world from the rising of the sun to its setting shall be at one in joy and peace, then it will be made clear what we are going to do: if when you have understood the decree of the Eternal Heaven, you are unwilling to pay attention and believe it, saying, "Our country is far away, our mountains are mighty, our sea is vast", and in this confidence you bring an army against us, we know what we can do. He who made easy what was difficult and near what was far off, the Eternal Heaven knows.'

These were not empty threats and the 1236-41 campaigns of Batu, another grandson of Genghis Khan, devastated Russian lands up to Moscow, seized Poland and Hungary and camped outside Vienna. In the thirteenth century it did seem that the Eternal Sky was on the side of the Mongols and many parts of China, the Middle East and Europe saw in Genghis Khan's conquests of the inhabited world the 'wrath of God', the beginning of the Day of Judgement.

The Capture of Bukhara

Juwaini, a late-thirteenth-century Persian chronicler of the Mongol rulers of Iran, carried an account of the capture of Bukhara in 1220. After the conquest of the city, Juwaini reported, Genghis Khan went to the festival ground where the rich residents of the city were and addressed them: 'O people know that you have committed great sins, and that the great ones among you have committed these sins. If you ask me what proof I have for these words, I say it is because I am the punishment of God. If you had not committed great sins, God would not have sent a punishment like me upon you'... Now one man had escaped from Bukhara after its capture and had come to Khurasan. He was questioned about the fate of the city and replied: 'They came, they [mined the walls], they burnt, they slew, they plundered and they departed.'

ACTIVITY 1

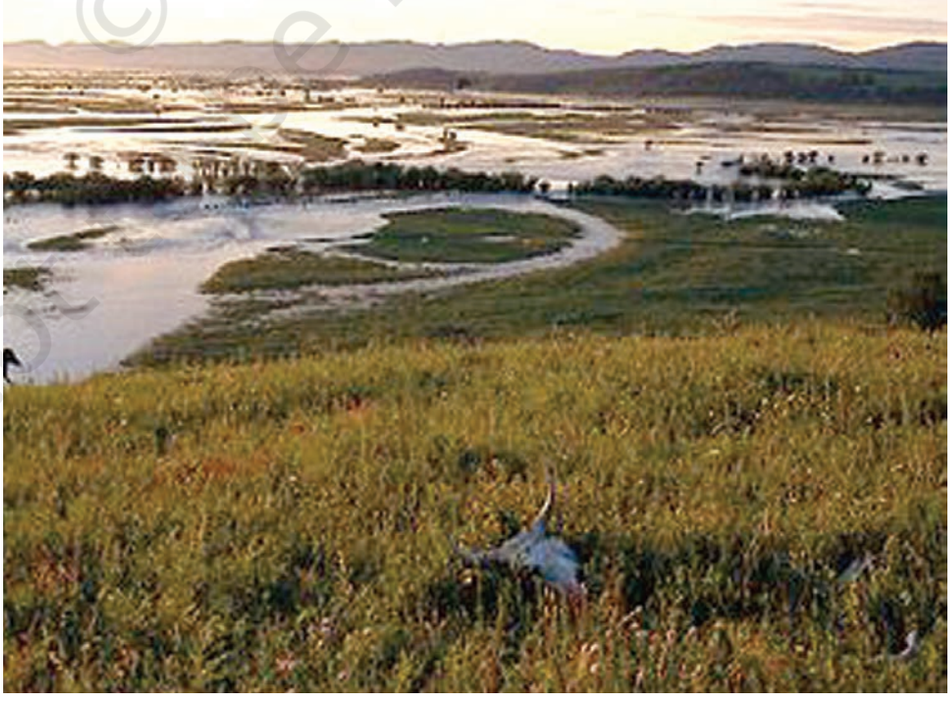
Assume that Juwaini's account of the capture of Bukhara is accurate. Imagine yourself as a resident of Bukhara and Khurasan who heard the speeches. What impact would they have had on you?

How did the Mongols create an empire that dwarfed the achievements of the other 'World Conqueror', Alexander? In a pre-industrial age of

poor technological communications, what skills were deployed by the Mongols to administer and control such a vast dominion? For someone so self-confidently aware of his moral, divinely-dispensed right to rule, how did Genghis Khan relate to the diverse social and religious groups that comprised his dominion? In the making of his imperium what happened to this plurality? We need to start our discussion, however, with a humbler set of questions to better comprehend the social and political background of the Mongols and Genghis Khan: who were the Mongols? Where did they live? Who did they interact with and how do we know about their society and politics?

Social and Political Background

The Mongols were a diverse body of people, linked by similarities of language to the Tatars, Khitan and Manchus to the east, and the Turkic tribes to the west. Some of the Mongols were pastoralists while others were hunter-gatherers. The pastoralists tended horses, sheep and, to a lesser extent, cattle, goats and camels. They nomadised in the steppes of Central Asia in a tract of land in the area of the modern state of Mongolia. This was (and still is) a majestic landscape with wide horizons, rolling plains, ringed by the snow-capped Altai mountains to the west, the arid Gobi desert in the south and drained by the Onon and Selenga rivers and myriad springs from the melting snows of the hills in the north and the west. Lush, luxuriant grasses for pasture and considerable small game were available in a good season. The hunter-gatherers resided to the north of the



Onon river plain in flood.

pastoralists in the Siberian forests. They were a humbler body of people than the pastoralists, making a living from trade in furs of animals trapped in the summer months. There were extremes of temperature in the entire region: harsh, long winters followed by brief, dry summers. Agriculture was possible in the pastoral regions during short parts of the year but the Mongols (unlike some of the Turks further west) did not take to farming. Neither the pastoral nor the hunting-gathering economies could sustain dense population settlements and as a result the region possessed no cities. The Mongols lived in tents, *gers*, and travelled with their herds from their winter to summer pasture lands.

Ethnic and language ties united the Mongol people but the scarce resources meant that their society was divided into patrilineal lineages; the richer families were larger, possessed more animals and pasture lands. They therefore had many followers and were more influential in local politics. Periodic natural calamities – either unusually harsh, cold winters when game and stored provisions ran out or drought which parched the grasslands – would force families to forage further afield leading to conflict over pasture lands and predatory raids in search of livestock. Groups of families would occasionally ally for offensive and defensive purposes around richer and more powerful lineages but, barring the few exceptions, these confederacies were usually small and short-lived. The size of Genghis Khan's confederation of Mongol and Turkish tribes was perhaps matched in size only by that which had been stitched together in the fifth century by Attila (d. 453).

Unlike Attila, however, Genghis Khan's political system was far more durable and survived its founder. It was stable enough to counter larger armies with superior equipment in China, Iran and eastern Europe. And, as they established control over these regions, the Mongols administered complex agrarian economies and urban settlements – sedentary societies – that were quite distant from their own social experience and habitat.

Although the social and political organisations of the nomadic and agrarian economies were very different, the two societies were hardly foreign to each other. In fact, the scant resources of the steppe lands drove Mongols and other Central Asian nomads to trade and barter with their sedentary neighbours in China. This was mutually beneficial to both parties: agricultural produce and iron utensils from China were exchanged for horses, furs and game trapped in the steppe. Commerce was not without its tensions, especially as the two groups unhesitatingly applied military pressure to enhance profit. When the Mongol lineages allied they could force their Chinese neighbours to offer better terms and trade ties were sometimes discarded in favour of outright plunder. This relationship would alter when the Mongols were in disarray. The Chinese would then confidently assert their influence in the steppe. These frontier wars were more debilitating to settled societies. They dislocated agriculture and plundered cities. Nomads, on the other hand, could retreat away from the zone of conflict with

Listed below are some of the great Central Asian steppe confederacies of the Turks and Mongol people. They did not all occupy the same region and were not equally large and complex in their internal organisation. They had a considerable impact on the history of the nomadic population but their impact on China and the adjoining regions varied.

Hsiung-nu (200 BCE) (Turks)

Juan-juan (400 CE) (Mongols)

Epthalite Huns (400 CE) (Mongols)

T'u-chueh (550 CE) (Turks)

Uighurs (740 CE) (Turks)

Khitan (940 CE) (Mongols)

marginal losses. Throughout its history, China suffered extensively from nomad intrusion and different regimes – even as early as the eighth century BCE – built fortifications to protect their subjects. Starting from the third century BCE, these fortifications started to be integrated into a common defensive outwork known today as the 'Great Wall of China' a dramatic visual testament to the disturbance and fear perpetrated by nomadic raids on the agrarian societies of north China.

The Great Wall of China.

The Career of Genghis Khan

Genghis Khan was born some time around 1162 near the Onon river in the north of present-day Mongolia. Named Temujin, he was the son of Yesugei, the chieftain of the Kiyat, a group of families related to the Borjigid clan. His father was murdered at an early age and his mother, Oelun-eke, raised Temujin, his brothers and step-brothers in great hardship. The following decade was full of reversals – Temujin was captured and enslaved and soon after his marriage, his wife, Borte, was kidnapped, and he had to fight to recover her. During these years of hardship he also managed to make important friends. The young Boghurchu was his first ally and remained a trusted friend; Jamuqa, his blood-brother (*anda*), was another. Temujin also restored old alliances with the ruler of the Kereyits, Tughril/Ong Khan, his father's old blood-brother.

Through the 1180s and 1190s, Temujin remained an ally of Ong Khan and used the alliance to defeat powerful adversaries like Jamuqa, his old friend who had become a hostile foe. It was after defeating him

that Temujin felt confident enough to move against other tribes: the powerful Tatars (his father's assassins), the Kereyits and Ong Khan himself in 1203. The final defeat of the Naiman people and the powerful Jamuqa in 1206, left Temujin as the dominant personality in the politics of the steppe lands, a position that was recognised at an assembly of Mongol chieftains (*quriltai*) where he was proclaimed the 'Great Khan of the Mongols' (*Qa'an*) with the title Genghis Khan, the 'Oceanic Khan' or 'Universal Ruler'.

Just before the *quriltai* of 1206, Genghis Khan had reorganised the Mongol people into a more effective, disciplined military force (*see following sections*) that facilitated the success of his future campaigns. The first of his concerns was to conquer China, divided at this time into three realms: the Hsi Hsia people of Tibetan origin in the north-western provinces; the Jurchen whose Chin dynasty ruled north China from Peking; the Sung dynasty who controlled south China. By 1209, the Hsi Hsia were defeated, the 'Great Wall of China' was breached in 1213 and Peking sacked in 1215. Long-drawn-out battles against the Chin continued until 1234 but Genghis Khan was satisfied enough with the progress of his campaigns to return to his Mongolian homeland in 1216 and leave the military affairs of the region to his subordinates.

After the defeat in 1218 of the Qara Khita who controlled the Tien Shan mountains north-west of China, Mongol dominions reached the Amu Darya, and the states of Transoxiana and Khwarazm. Sultan Muhammad, the ruler of Khwarazm, felt the fury of Genghis Khan's rage when he executed Mongol envoys. In the campaigns between 1219 and 1221 the great cities – Otrar, Bukhara, Samarqand, Balkh, Gurganj, Merv, Nishapur and Herat – surrendered to the Mongol forces. Towns that resisted were devastated. At Nishapur, where a Mongol prince was killed during the siege operation, Genghis Khan commanded that the 'town should be laid waste in such a manner that the site could be ploughed upon; and that in the exaction of vengeance [for the death of the prince] not even cats and dogs should be left alive'.

Estimated Extent of Mongol Destruction

All reports of Genghis Khan's campaigns agree at the vast number of people killed following the capture of cities that defied his authority. The numbers are staggering: at the capture of Nishapur in 1220, 1,747,000 people were massacred while the toll at Herat in 1222 was 1,600,000 people and at Baghdad in 1258, 800,000. Smaller towns suffered proportionately: Nasa, 70,000 dead; Baihaq district, 70,000; and at Tun in the Kuhistan province, 12,000 individuals were executed.

How did medieval chroniclers arrive at such figures?

Juwaini, the Persian chronicler of the Ilkhans stated that 1,300,000 people were killed in Merv. He reached the figure because it took thirteen days to count the dead and each day they counted 100,000 corpses.

Opp. page: 'Barbarians' as imagined by a European artist.

Mongol forces in pursuit of Sultan Muhammad pushed into Azerbaijan, defeated Russian forces at the Crimea and encircled the Caspian Sea. Another wing followed the Sultan's son, Jalaluddin, into Afghanistan and the Sindh province. At the banks of the Indus, Genghis Khan considered returning to Mongolia through North India and Assam, but the heat, the natural habitat and the ill portents reported by his Shaman soothsayer made him change his mind.

Genghis Khan died in 1227, having spent most of his life in military combat. His military achievements were astounding and they were largely a result of his ability to innovate and transform different aspects of steppe combat into extremely effective military strategies. The horse-riding skills of the Mongols and the Turks provided speed and mobility to the army; their abilities as rapid-shooting archers from horseback were further perfected during regular hunting expeditions which doubled as field manoeuvres. The steppe cavalry had always travelled light and moved quickly, but now it brought all its knowledge of the terrain and the weather to do the unimaginable: they carried out campaigns in the depths of winter, treating frozen rivers as highways to enemy cities and camps. Nomads were conventionally at a loss against fortified encampments but Genghis Khan learnt the importance of siege engines and naphtha bombardment very quickly. His engineers prepared lightportable equipment, which was used against opponents with devastating effect.

c. 1167	Birth of Temujin
1160s-70s	Years spent in slavery and struggle
1180s-90s	Period of alliance formation
1203-27	Expansion and triumph
1206	Temujin proclaimed Genghis Khan, 'Universal Ruler' of the Mongols
1227	Death of Genghis Khan
1227-60	Rule of the three Great Khans and continued Mongol unity
1227-41	Ogodei, son of Genghis Khan
1246-49	Guyuk, son of Ogodei
1251-60	Mongke, son of Genghis Khan's youngest son, Toluy
1236-42	Campaigns in Russia, Hungary, Poland and Austria under Batu, son of Jochi, Genghis Khan's eldest son
1253-55	Beginning of fresh campaigns in Iran and China under Mongke
1258	Capture of Baghdad and the end of the Abbasid caliphate. Establishment of the Il-Khanid state of Iran under Hulegu, younger brother of Mongke. Beginning of conflict between the Jochids and the Il-Khans

1260	Accession of Qubilai Khan as Grand Khan in Peking; conflict amongst descendants of Genghis Khan; fragmentation of Mongol realm into independent lineages – Toluy, Chaghatai and Jochi (Ogodei's lineage defeated and absorbed into the Toluyid) Toluyids: Yuan dynasty in China and Il-Khanid state in Iran; Chaghataids in steppes north of Transoxiana and 'Turkistan'; Jochid lineages in the Russian steppes, described as the 'Golden Horde' by observers
1257-67	Reign of Berke, son of Batu; reorientation of the Golden Horde from Nestorian Christianity towards Islam. Definitive conversion takes place only in the 1350s. Start of the alliance between the Golden Horde and Egypt against the Il-Khans
1295-1304	Reign of Il-Khanid ruler Ghazan Khan in Iran. His conversion from Buddhism to Islam is followed gradually by other Il-Khanid chieftains
1368	End of Yuan dynasty in China
1370-1405 and marries	Rule of Timur, a Barlas Turk who claimed Genghis Khanid descent through the lineage of Chaghatai. Establishes a steppe empire that assimilates part of the dominions of Toluy (excluding China), Chaghatai and Jochi. Proclaims himself 'Guregen' – 'royal son-in- law' – a princess of the Genghis Khanid lineage
1495-1530	Zahiruddin Babur, descendant of Timur and Genghis Khan, succeeds to Timurid territory of Ferghana and Samarqand, is expelled, captures Kabul and in 1526 seizes Delhi and Agra; founds the Mughal empire in India
1500	Capture of Transoxiana by Shaybani Khan, descendant of Jochi's youngest son, Shiban. Consolidates Shaybani power (Shaybanids also described as Uzbeg, from whom Uzbekistan, today, gets its name) in Transoxiana and expels Babur and other Timurids from the region
1759	Manchus of China conquer Mongolia
1921	Republic of Mongolia

The Mongols after Genghis Khan

We can divide Mongol expansion after Genghis Khan's death into two distinct phases: the first which spanned the years 1236-42 when the major gains were in the Russian steppes, Bulghar, Kiev, Poland and Hungary. The second phase including the years 1255-1300 led to the conquest of all of China (1279), Iran, Iraq and Syria. The frontier of the empire stabilised after these campaign.

The Mongol military forces met with few reversals in the decades after 1203 but, quite noticeably, after the 1260s the original impetus of campaigns could not be sustained in the West. Although Vienna, and beyond it western Europe, as well as Egypt was within the grasp of Mongol forces, their retreat from the Hungarian steppes and defeat at the hands of the Egyptian forces signalled the emergence of new political trends. There were two facets to this: the first was a consequence of the internal politics of succession within the Mongol family where the descendants of Jochi and Ogodei allied to control the office of the great Khan in the first two generations. These interests were more important than the pursuit of campaigns in Europe. The second compulsion occurred as the Jochi and Ogodei lineages were marginalised by the Toluyid branch of Genghis Khanid descendants. With the accession of Mongke, a descendant of Toluy, Genghis Khan's youngest son, military campaigns were pursued energetically in Iran during the 1250s. But as Toluyid interests in the conquest of China increased during the 1260s, forces and supplies were increasingly diverted into the heartlands of the Mongol dominion. As a result, the Mongols fielded a small, understaffed force against the Egyptian military. Their defeat and the increasing preoccupation with China of the Toluyid family marked the end of western expansion of the Mongols. Concurrently, conflict between the Jochid and Toluyid descendants along the Russian-Iranian frontier diverted the Jochids away from further European campaigns.

The suspension of Mongol expansion in the West did not arrest their campaigns in China which was reunited under the Mongols. Paradoxically, it was at the moment of its greatest successes that internal turbulence between members of the ruling family manifested itself. The next section discusses the factors that led to some of the greatest successes of the Mongol political enterprise but also inhibited its progress.

Social, Political and Military Organisation

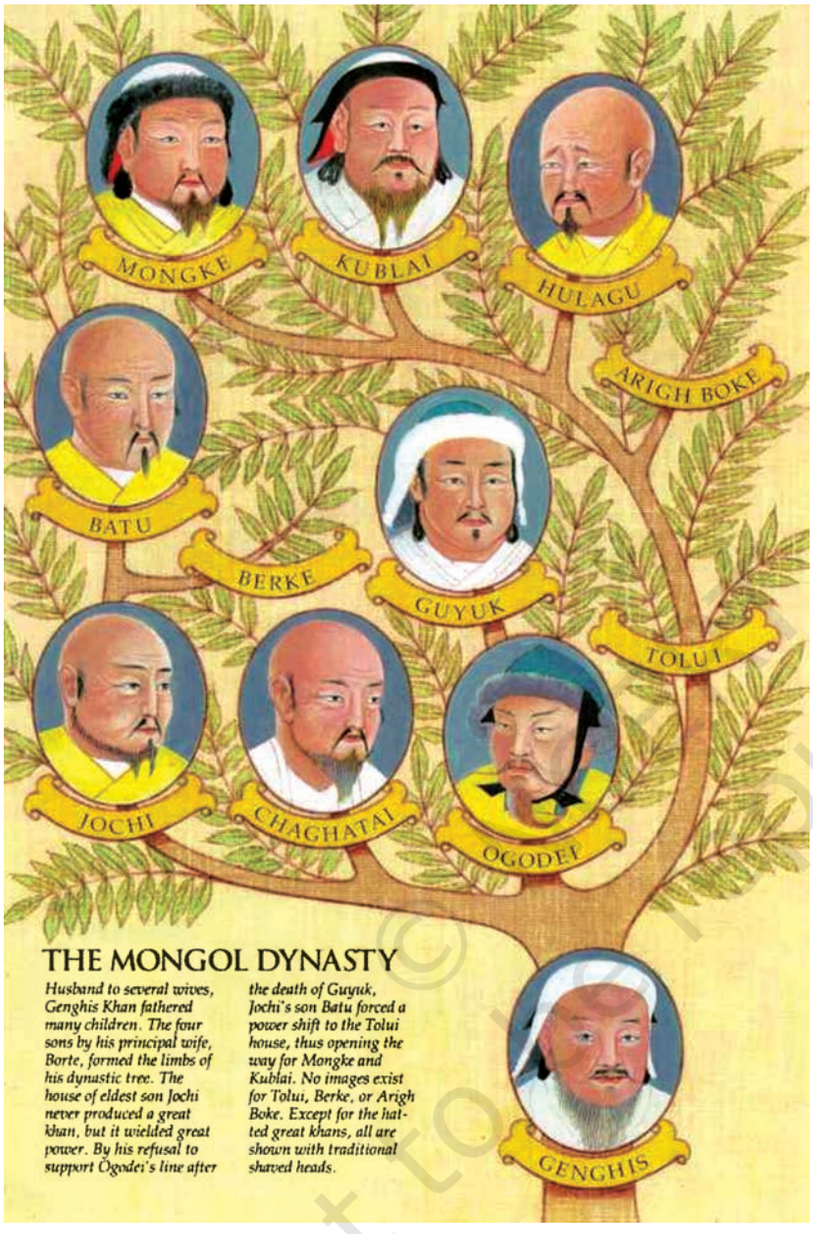
Among the Mongols, and many other nomadic societies as well, all the able-bodied, adult males of the tribe bore arms: they constituted the armed forces when the occasion demanded. The unification of the different Mongol tribes and subsequent campaigns against diverse people introduced new members into Genghis Khan's army complicating the composition of this relatively small, undifferentiated body into an

incredibly heterogeneous mass of people. It included groups like the Turkic Uighurs, who had accepted his authority willingly. It also included defeated people, like the Kereyits, who were accommodated in the confederacy despite their earlier hostility.

Genghis Khan worked to systematically erase the old tribal identities of the different groups who joined his confederacy. His army was organised according to the old steppe system of decimal units: in divisions of 10s, 100s, 1,000s and [notionally] 10,000 soldiers. In the old system the clan and the tribe would have coexisted within the decimal units. Genghis Khan stopped this practice. He divided the old tribal groupings and distributed their members into new military units. Any individual who tried to move from his/her allotted group without permission received harsh punishment. The largest unit of soldiers, approximating 10,000 soldiers (*tuman*) now included fragmented groups of people from a variety of different tribes and clans. This altered the old steppe social order integrating different lineages and clans and providing them with a new identity derived from its progenitor, Genghis Khan.

The new military contingents were required to serve under his four sons and specially chosen captains of his army units called *noyan*. Also important within the new realm were a band of followers who had served Genghis Khan loyally through grave adversity for many years. Genghis Khan publicly honoured some of these individuals as his 'blood-brothers' (*anda*); yet others, freemen of a humbler rank, were given special ranking as his bondsmen (*naukar*), a title that marked their close relationship with their master. This ranking did not preserve the rights of the old clan chieftains; the new aristocracy derived its status from a close relationship with the Great Khan of the Mongols.

In this new hierarchy, Genghis Khan assigned the responsibility of governing the newly conquered people to his four sons. These comprised the four *ulus*, a term that did not originally mean fixed territories. Genghis Khan's lifetime was still the age of rapid conquests and expanding domains, where frontiers were still extremely fluid. For example, the eldest son, Jochi, received the Russian steppes but the farthest extent of his territory, *ulus*, was indeterminate: it extended as far west as his horses could roam. The second son, Chaghatai, was given the Transoxianian steppe and lands north of the Pamir mountains adjacent to those of his brother. Presumably, these lands would shift as Jochi marched westward. Genghis Khan had indicated that his third son, Ogodei, would succeed him as the Great Khan and on accession the Prince established his capital at Karakorum. The youngest son, Toluy, received the ancestral lands of Mongolia. Genghis Khan envisaged that his sons would rule the empire collectively, and to underline this point, military contingents (*tama*) of the individual princes were placed in each *ulus*. The sense of a dominion shared by the members of the family was underlined at the assembly of chieftains, *quriltais*, where all decisions relating to the family or the state for the forthcoming season – campaigns, distribution of plunder, pasture lands and succession – were collectively taken.



Family tree of Genghis Khan.

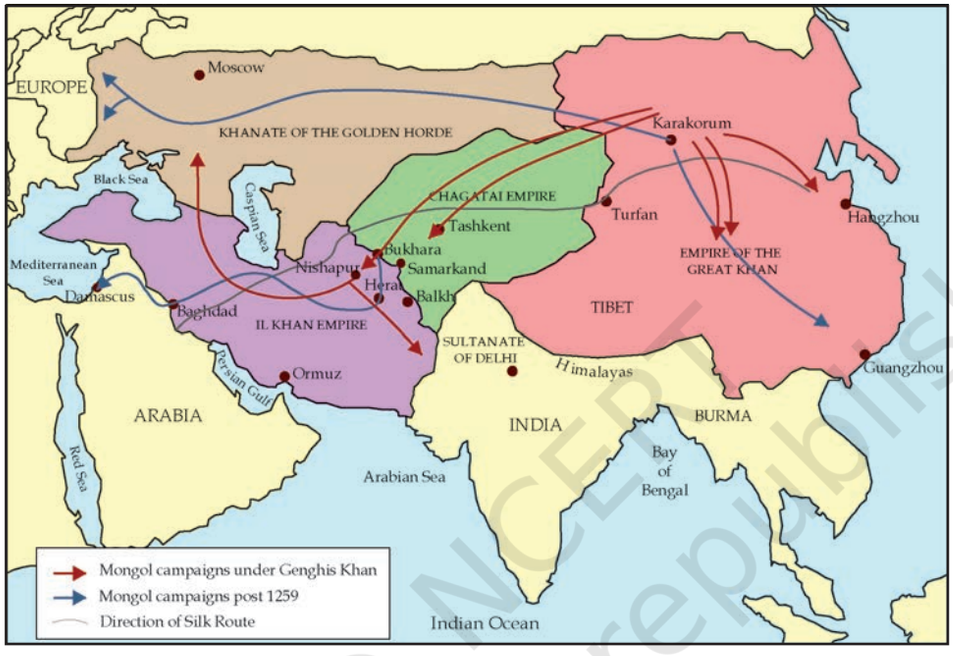
Genghis Khan had already fashioned a rapid courier system that connected the distant areas of his regime. Fresh mounts and despatch riders were placed in outposts at regularly spaced distances. For the maintenance of this communication system the Mongol nomads contributed a tenth of their herd – either horses or livestock – as provisions. This was called the *qubcur* tax, a levy that the nomads paid willingly for the multiple benefits that it brought. The courier system (*yam*) was further refined after Genghis Khan's death and its speed and reliability surprised travellers. It enabled the Great Khans to keep a check on developments at the farthest end of their regime across the continental landmass.

The conquered people, however, hardly felt a sense of affinity with their new nomadic masters. During the campaigns in the first half of the thirteenth century, cities were destroyed, agricultural lands laid waste, trade and handicraft production disrupted. Tens of thousands of people – the exact figures are lost in the exaggerated reports of the time – were killed, even more enslaved. All classes of people, from the elites to the peasantry suffered. In the resulting instability, the underground canals, called *qanats*, in the arid Iranian plateau could no longer receive periodic maintenance. As they fell into disrepair, the desert crept in. This led to an ecological devastation from which parts of Khurasan never recovered.

Once the dust from the campaigns had settled, Europe and China were territorially linked. In the peace ushered in by Mongol conquest

(Pax Mongolica) trade connections matured. Commerce and travel along the Silk Route reached its peak under the Mongols but, unlike before, the trade routes did not terminate in China.

They continued north into Mongolia and to Karakorum, the heart of the new empire. Communication and ease of travel was vital to retain the coherence of the Mongol regime and travellers were given



MAP 2: The Mongol Campaigns

a pass (*paiza* in Persian; *gerege* in Mongolian) for safe conduct. Traders paid the *baj* tax for the same purpose, all acknowledging thereby the authority of the Mongol Khan.

The contradictions between the nomadic and sedentary elements within the Mongol empire eased through the thirteenth century. In the 1230s, for example, as the Mongols waged their successful war against the Chin dynasty in north China, there was a strong pressure group within the Mongol leadership that advocated the massacre of all peasantry and the conversion of their fields into pasture lands. But by the 1270s, when south China was annexed to the Mongol empire after the defeat of the Sung dynasty, Genghis Khan's grandson, Qubilai Khan (d. 1294), appeared as the protector of the peasants and the cities. In the 1290s, the Mongol ruler of Iran, Ghazan Khan (d. 1304), a descendant of Genghis Khan's youngest son Toluy, warned family members and other generals to avoid pillaging the peasantry. It did not lead to a stable prosperous realm, he advised in a speech whose sedentary overtones would have made Genghis Khan shudder.

ACTIVITY 2

Note the areas traversed by the Silk Route and the goods that were available to traders along the way. This map does not reflect one of the eastern terminal points of the silk route during the height of Mongol power.

Can you place the missing city? Could it have been on the Silk Route in the twelfth century? Why not?

ACTIVITY 3

Why was there a conflict of interests between pastoralists and peasants? Would Genghis Khan have expressed sentiments of this nature in a speech to his nomad commanders?

Ghazan Khan's Speech

Ghazan Khan (1295-1304) was the first Il-Khanid ruler to convert to Islam. He gave the following speech to the Mongol-Turkish nomad commanders, a speech that was probably drafted by his Persian *wazir* Rashiduddin and included in the minister's letters:

'I am not on the side of the Persian peasantry. If there is a purpose in pillaging them all, there is no one with more power to do this than I. Let us rob them together. But if you wish to be certain of collecting grain and food for your tables in the future, I must be harsh with you. You must be taught reason. If you insult the peasantry, take their oxen and seed and trample their crops into the ground, what will you do in the future? ... The obedient peasantry must be distinguished from the peasantry who are rebels...'

From Genghis Khan's reign itself, the Mongols had recruited civil administrators from the conquered societies. They were sometimes moved around: Chinese secretaries deployed in Iran and Persians in China. They helped in integrating the distant dominions and their backgrounds and training were always useful in blunting the harsher edges of nomadic predation on sedentary life. The Mongol Khans trusted them as long as they continued to raise revenue for their masters and these administrators could sometimes command considerable influence. In the 1230s, the Chinese minister Yeh-lu Ch'u-ts'ai, muted some of Ogedei's more rapacious instincts; the Juwaini family played a similar role in Iran through the latter half of the thirteenth century and at the end of the century, the *wazir*, Rashiduddin, drafted the speech that Ghazan Khan delivered to his Mongol compatriots asking them to protect, not harass, the peasantry.

The pressure to sedentarise was greater in the new areas of Mongol domicile, areas distant from the original steppe habitat of the nomads. By the middle of the thirteenth century the sense of a common patrimony shared by all the brothers was gradually replaced by individual dynasties each ruling their separate *ulus*, a term which now carried the sense of a territorial dominion. This was, in part, a result of succession struggles, where Genghis Khanid descendants competed for the office of Great Khan and prized pastoral lands. Descendants of Toluy had come to rule both China and Iran where they had formed the Yuan and Il-Khanid dynasties. Descendants of Jochi formed the Golden Horde and ruled the Russian steppes; Chaghatai's successors ruled the steppes of Transoxiana and the lands called Turkistan today. Noticeably, nomadic traditions persisted longest amongst the steppe dwellers in Central Asia (descendants of Chaghatai) and Russia (the Golden Horde).

The gradual separation of the descendants of Genghis Khan into separate lineage groups implied that their connections with the memory

and traditions of a past family concordance also altered. At an obvious level this was the result of competition amongst the cousin clans and here the Toluyid branch was more adept in presenting their version of the family disagreements in the histories produced under their patronage. To a large extent this was a consequence of their control of China and Iran and the large number of literati that its family members could recruit. At a more sophisticated level, the disengagement with the past also meant underlining the merits of the regnant rulers as a contrast to other past monarchs. This exercise in comparison did not exclude Genghis Khan himself. Persian chronicles produced in Il-Khanid Iran during the late thirteenth century detailed the gory killings of the Great Khan and greatly exaggerated the numbers killed. For example, in contrast to an eyewitness report that 400 soldiers defended the citadel of Bukhara, an Il-Khanid chronicle reported that 30,000 soldiers were killed in the attack on the citadel. Although Il-Khanid reports still eulogised Genghis Khan, they also carried a statement of relief that times had changed and the great killings of the past were over. The Genghis Khanid legacy was important, but for his descendants to appear as convincing heroes to a sedentary audience, they could no longer appear in quite the same way as their ancestor.

Following the research of David Ayalon, recent work on the *yasa*, the code of law that Genghis Khan was supposed to have promulgated at the *quriltai* of 1206, has elaborated on the complex ways in which the memory of the Great Khan was fashioned by his successors. In its earliest formulation the term was written as *yasaq* which meant 'law', 'decree' or 'order'. Indeed, the few details that we possess about the *yasaq* concern administrative regulations: the organisation of the hunt, the army and the postal system. By the middle of the thirteenth century, however, the Mongols had started using the related term *yasa* in a more general sense to mean the 'legal code of Genghis Khan'.

We may be able to understand the changes in the meaning of the term if we take a look at some of the other developments that occurred at the same time. By the middle of the thirteenth century the Mongols had emerged as a unified people and just created the largest empire the world had ever seen. They ruled over very sophisticated urban societies, with their respective histories, cultures and laws. Although the Mongols dominated the region politically, they were a numerical minority. The one way in which they could protect their identity and distinctiveness was through a claim to a sacred law given to them by their ancestor. The *yasa* was in all probability a compilation of the customary traditions of the Mongol tribes but in referring to it as Genghis Khan's code of law, the Mongol people also laid claim to a 'lawgiver' like Moses and Solomon, whose authoritative code could be imposed on their subjects. The *yasa* served to cohere the Mongol people around a body of shared beliefs, it acknowledged their affinity to Genghis Khan and his descendants and, even as they absorbed different aspects of a sedentary lifestyle, gave them the confidence to retain their ethnic

identity and impose their 'law' upon their defeated subjects. It was an extremely empowering ideology and although Genghis Khan may not have planned such a legal code, it was certainly inspired by his vision and was vital in the construction of a Mongol universal dominion.

ACTIVITY 4

Did the meaning of *yasa* alter over the four centuries separating Genghis Khan from 'Abdullah Khan? Why did Hafiz-i Tanish make a reference to Genghis Khan's *yasa* in connection with 'Abdullah Khan's prayer at the Muslim festival ground?

Yasa

In 1221, after the conquest of Bukhara, Genghis Khan had assembled the rich Muslim residents at the festival ground and had admonished them. He called them sinners and warned them to compensate for their sins by parting with their hidden wealth. The episode was dramatic enough to be painted and for a long time afterwards people still remembered the incident. In the late sixteenth century, 'Abdullah Khan, a distant descendant of Jochi, Genghis Khan's eldest son, went to the same festival ground in Bukhara. Unlike Genghis Khan, however, 'Abdullah Khan went to perform his holiday prayers there. His chronicler, Hafiz-i Tanish, reported this performance of Muslim piety by his master and included the surprising comment: 'this was according to the *yasa* of Genghis Khan'.

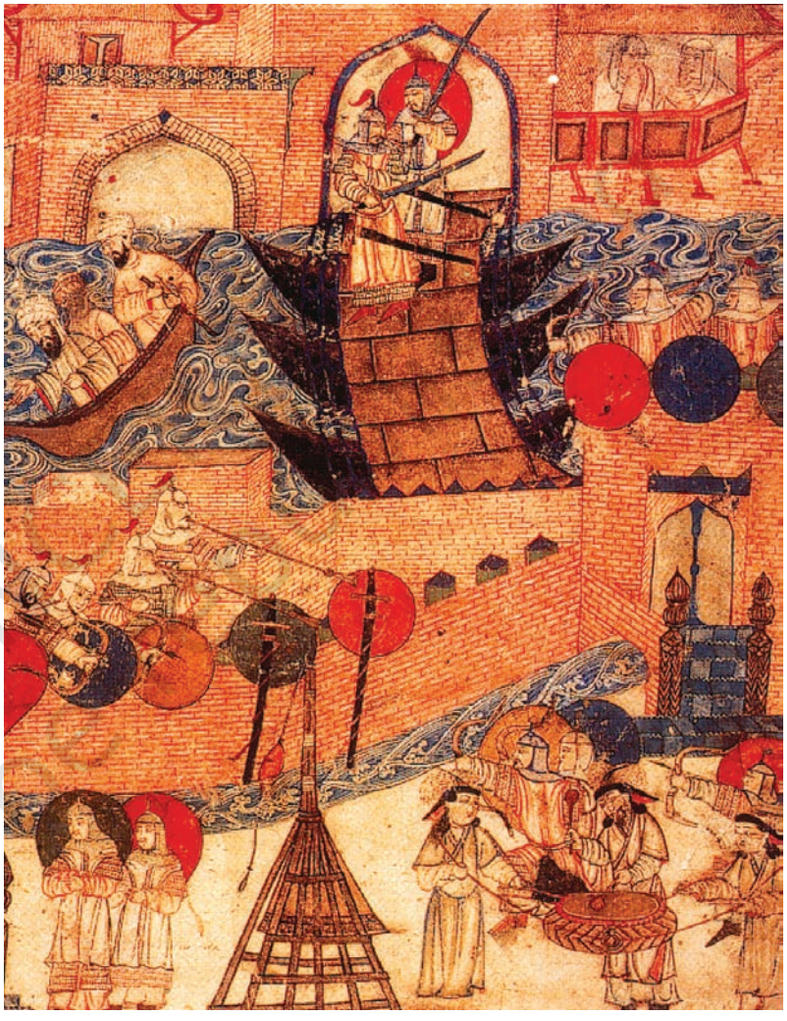
Conclusion: Situating Genghis Khan and the Mongols in World History

When we remember Genghis Khan today the only images that appear in our imagination are those of the conqueror, the destroyer of cities, and an individual who was responsible for the death of thousands of people. Many thirteenth-century residents of towns in China, Iran and eastern Europe looked at the hordes from the steppes with fear and distaste. And yet, for the Mongols, Genghis Khan was the greatest leader of all time: he united the Mongol people, freed them from interminable tribal wars and Chinese exploitation, brought them prosperity, fashioned a grand transcontinental empire and restored trade routes and markets that attracted distant travellers like the Venetian Marco Polo. The contrasting images are not simply a case of dissimilar perspectives; they should make us pause and reflect on how one (dominant) perspective can completely erase all others.

Beyond the opinions of the defeated sedentary people, consider for a moment the sheer size of the Mongol dominion in the thirteenth century and the diverse body of people and faiths that it embraced. Although the Mongol Khans themselves belonged to a variety of

different faiths – Shaman, Buddhist, Christian and eventually Islam – they never let their personal beliefs dictate public policy. The Mongol rulers recruited administrators and armed contingents from people of all ethnic groups and religions. Theirs was a multi-ethnic, multilingual, multi-religious regime that did not feel threatened by its pluralistic constitution. This was utterly unusual for the time, and historians are only now studying the ways in which the Mongols provided ideological models for later regimes (like the Mughals of India) to follow.

The nature of the documentation on the Mongols – and any nomadic regime – makes it virtually impossible to understand the inspiration that led to the confederation of fragmented groups of people in the pursuit of an ambition to create an empire. The Mongol empire eventually altered in its different milieus, but the inspiration of its founder remained a powerful force. At the end of the fourteenth century, Timur, another monarch who aspired to universal dominion, hesitated to declare himself monarch because he was not of Genghis Khanid descent. When he did declare his independent sovereignty it was as the son-in-law (*guregen*) of the Genghis Khanid family.



The Capture of Baghdad by the Mongols, a miniature painting in the Chronicles of Rashid al-Din, Tabriz, fourteenth century.

Today, after decades of Soviet control, the country of Mongolia is recreating its identity as an independent nation. It has seized upon Genghis Khan as a great national hero who is publicly venerated and whose achievements are recounted with pride. At a crucial juncture in the history of Mongolia, Genghis Khan has once again appeared as an iconic figure for the Mongol people, mobilising memories of a great past in the forging of national identity that can carry the nation into the future.