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THE BIRTH OF THE MEDITERRANEAN CITY

The city as a lived phenomenon and as concept seems to have been born in the Mediterranean. Like anything that is born it has two parents: a seed needs to be planted in a matrix. That ground, the matrix, was the fertile alluvium both of the Nile valley and of the ground between the Two Rivers which we call Mesopotamia. Migrant populations from the south - from Nubia and the Saharan edges into Egypt, or from the surrounding high grounds of Elam and Iran into Mesopotamia, and almost certainly from the Persian Gulf already organized into food-raising communities - seem to have brought the seed.

Why they migrated is not clear. Climatic changes in the centre of Africa and population movements between the Sahara and the Nile Valley may provide some clues to the creation of the dual Nilotic state. It will not quite help us to understand the Mesopotamian changes - or the rise of the Sumerians - whose part in the process of urbanizing the south of the Tigris/Euphrates delta and the organizing of irrigation was decisive in the formation of settlements.

Many historians favour invasions or migrations as a mechanism to explain cataclysmic social changes. Yet revolutionary developments can occur without any such impact or admixture. We do not know, for instance, how our ancestors spread over the earth; improbable as that may seem, we are homo sapiens sapiens, man doubly wise in all our varieties from Australian Aborigines to Lapland Eskimos. But we have only been doubly wise for a mere fifty thousand years, while for some half a million years before that homo sapiens inhabited the world. Although less wise than us - to go by the label - these ancestors or cousins of ours had brains about 2% more capacious on average than ours - or so we are told by palaeontologists, who called them Neanderthals after one of the first findings of their remains in the valley of the river Neander in the Rhineland. And we, their successors, are identified with a burial cave at Cro-Magnon in the Dordogne, which is still the earliest site in Europe with homo sapiens sapiens remains.

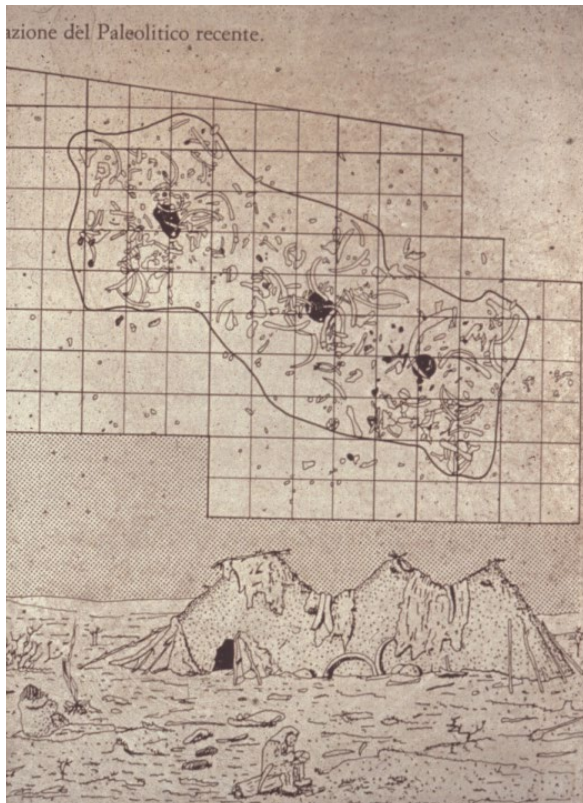
The two species of man seem either to have cohabited for a while, or succeeded each other

quickly in this part of the world, on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. Whether by development, by conquest or by interbreeding, our ancestors were left as the only sub-species of humanity throughout the world. Shortly before this change-over, but apparently independently of any racial change, a remarkable alteration occurred in the makeup of humans. What exactly caused it or how it proceeded is not clear. We have learnt about it from evidence that continues to appear about that remote period, and it is primarily about the burial of the dead. Burials have been found here in Lebanon, and in Southern France and in Northern Iran - and some of the earliest of them retrieved so far are accompanied by grave goods and floral offerings. Such practice seems to have been general before 50 000 BC.

This alteration has been taken to imply that those earliest buriers, Neanderthals most probably, had some notion - call it moral, or intentional - about their own existence. Where burial custom originated and whether it did so in several places at once - or was diffused from one centre - is not clear (and probably never will be). Burials are the most obvious remains from remote antiquity, but they tell us little of those beliefs about death and the dead which prompted them and even less about the context and ritual in which they took place. They are often quite elaborate - evidence that they were the work of people who had ritual practices, and therefore a language of action. Language and ritual presuppose the catastrophic realisation that things have meaning - or rather, that everything has meaning.

Les choses, says Claude Lévi Strauss, n'ont pas pu se mettre à signifier progressivement...un passage est effectué d'un stade où rien n'avait un sens, à un autre, où tout en possédait...Autrement dit, au moment où l'Univers entier, d'un seul coup est devenu significatif, il n'en a pas été pour autant mieux connu...

Meaning and therefore language: once meaning can be ascribed to anything, it can be ascribed to everything, and there can be no return to beastly unthinking.



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1. Shelter of skins and mammoth tusks near Pushkari in the Ukraine. The darker line circumscribes the outer edge of the shelter, the three dark patches are the 'hearth'. Upper Paleolithic. After A.L. Mongait, *Archeology in the USSR*, London 1961.

All the techniques and endeavours which we share with animals are continuous and tend to be progressive - as are many skills. Meaning, on the other hand, being inevitably metaphoric, must always have a subject (p means q), and will therefore be discontinuous. Skill and knowledge, the two kinds of human activity, develop concurrently but independently. So the first funerals imply the acquisition of certain mental skills and of language - which also involves a symbolic reading of the world and in turn demands the burial of the dead.

Unlike their earliest ancestors, those burying and those buried had bare skins. Homo probably lost his primate hair-cover soon after he learnt the skill of walking upright. It follows that once they were bare-skinned, our ancestors required shelter and controlled fire. Father Vitruvius relates the antique tradition, which he took over from Lucretius, which associates language and the control of fire with the origin of building. The legend that Vitruvius and Lucretius tell probably took form sometime around three thousand years ago; though building is infinitely older than that, of course. For millennia hunter-gatherers sheltered in caves, on rock ledges, or brushwood shelters such as are still to be found

all over the world. These devices used primary techniques, sometimes little different from that of the higher primates who not only take shelter but also socialise their space, their enclosure.

Even in the earliest burials colouring was used: ochre has been taken to signify blood, and therefore life, in many cultures; and putting red ochre powder with the dead is a custom as old, it seems, as is the practice of burial itself. The use of pigment also led some to the colouring of objects, and painted pebbles may be the earliest 'works of art' to have survived. What has not survived, however, though it surely preceded the decorating of inanimate objects - is body-painting and marking. Neanderthals and the first Cro-Magnons certainly went in for body decorations: we know of the shell and bone necklaces, bracelets and rings from various burials. Even if no tattooed or scarified skin fragments older than about 500 BC have survived, it is fair to surmise from the evidence of paintings and decorated statues that the practice was fairly general. What is more, carved bits of bone and wood, statuettes, and what seem to be ceremonial objects (sometimes called bâtons de commandement or sceptres) have been found in connection with painted caves. Many of them are marked, scratched - apparently rhythmically - and for a century since they were first found and recorded, not much sense was made of them. In 1972 Alexander Marshack published his reading of the marks, and following him many of them have been interpreted as readings of astronomical observations. Some of the biggest of the many objects which have been found in burials as well as in dwellings are elephant and mammoth tusks, which were probably treated as semi-precious objects.

At Pushkari, in the Ukraine, there are remains of a communal dwelling sheltering three fireplaces. This presumably means that at some time the hut was occupied - concurrently or successively - by three families or groups, and many huts of this period have a similar layout. Such long-houses, partly hollowed out of the ground and built up often using mammoth and elephant bones, particularly tusks and ribs, as well as wood and probably covered with animal skins, appear in Eastern and Central Europe at the period of the great frost - about 30,000 BC - when most of Europe north of the Carpathians, most of the British Isles, the Alps and the Caucasus was covered with a thick ice sheet which absorbed so much water that the seas had rather smaller areas than they do now. The ice cap withdrew over the next six or seven millennia and produced the climatic changes I mentioned earlier, but in the meanwhile humanity acquired another skill, closely tied to metaphoric

understanding -representational art.

The huts in the Ukraine that I mentioned seem to have been contemporary with the cave and rock paintings of central France and Northern Spain which we still find astonishing and of which more come to light all the time. They were painted by people who were flaking quite fine flints, but otherwise had fairly rudimentary technical equipment, and this labels their time the old stone age, Palaeolithic. The mammoth-tusk huts and the paintings testify to a state of mind and ambitions independent of such elementary technology.

We know of peoples who have survived as hunter-gatherers into our time and who continue to have a very limited technical horizon: the Pitjantjara who live in the foothills of the Barrow Range in Central Australia come to mind. They employ spears and spear-throwers, but do not have bows and arrows, nor do they cultivate their food or bake pots or build permanent shelters - though they do make use of quern-stones and digging sticks. On the other hand, they do have bull-roarers, wooden or stone tablets, pierced at one end, and swung on a stick to make a whirring sound, to accompany their ceremonies. When their rituals require it, they paint rocks as well as their skins, and they practice an elementary division of labour in that they have specialists -medicine men, singers, ceremonial experts- to nurture an intellectual-speculative as well as a ritual life for which they also make elaborate, if temporary, enclosures. Had they died out or vanished, their physical remains would have been even thinner than those of some Neanderthal groups.

Such discontinuity between technique and materiality and speculation was demonstrated neatly by the same Lévi-Strauss in his examination of a Bororo village. I have already quoted this in an old publication, but the example still seems valid to me. These Bororo are a hunting and gathering people of the Upper Amazon basin who wear little more than a belt and a penis wrapper normally, though for ceremonial occasions, such as burials or marriages, they deck themselves out in elaborate feather and fur costumes. Their villages, like the one called Kejara, described by Lévi-Strauss, are shoddily built to last only a few years, and when the ground is exhausted, the village which consists of a rectangular men's house in the centre of a rough circle of huts with a dancing ground before it, moves on. In spite of this messy, almost informal appearance, the Bororo consider their villages to be an image of their social order. Firstly, the village is bisected into two moieties, each one consisting of twenty-four huts, articulated as eight groups of three; the geometry of the plan makes this quite

explicit. The circle of the enclosure, however, contrasts with the rough rectangle of the men's house. Its conceptual division, as of a cross in a square, is instantly recognisable to the inhabitants. The nomadic Indians of the North American Plains were also wedded to the circle as defining the pattern of their camps. At Little Big Rock in Arkansas, where General Custer was killed with his troops in 1876, three nations, the Sioux with their Cheyenne and Omaha allies, camped in a series of similar circles, and these circles were traditionally arranged in moieties, each with its particular lodges. This 'normal' plan could also be modified for special occasions such as the election of new chiefs. The order is not necessarily readable from the actual view of the camp, yet the wigwams which make it up are themselves circular, of course, and the ordering echoes their shape- almost as if these Indian nations were obeying Alberti's injunction to see the house as a small town and the town as a large house. This kind of ordering may be reproduced in an even more complex form among people whose dwellings may look even shabbier and more disorderly than the Bororo village. The 'Gui and 'Gana Kalahari Bushmen - the last human grouping in whose speech the clicking phoneme has remained from what is assumed to be a primitive linguistic substratum- build villages which are roughly enclosed, and outlined with stones, but which consist of wind shelter-screens rather than huts. Yet they also carry out lengthy initiation ceremonies, for which they construct semi-permanent grounds fenced with stones and thorns to the east of the village, and they edge a path for the dance-procession directed in the same way. You see therefore how insistently the geometry of the circle is used to create a ritual environment and how the ceremony is ordered on the east-west axis in different cultures.

The explicit or even implicit division of the circle will not work in the same way when the ground becomes restricted and the density of the population rises. One of the curious characteristics of the circle - I have referred to it in the case of the Bororo and the Plains-Indian camps- is that it is usually divided into symmetrical moieties and often sub-divided into four, eight or even sixteen sectors. The squaring of the circle is an ancient conundrum, which sometimes becomes an instrument that applies the divisions of the horizon into the four directions familiar to many peoples (the Chinese add the fifth one, up and down). It is used by various kinds of diviners as a token of heaven-instituted world-order. Even at the minuscule scale of tea and coffee cup-divination, the cross in the square is a standard device- but it had a long life in the NWT hieroglyph,

signifying 'town' which maintained the sense of that cosmogram in Egypt into Roman Imperial times.

The bilateral division of the settlement circle - and of the horizon - into its moieties corresponds to that of our own bilateral symmetry, as it does to that of the gender division of the family. It is inherent in our own bodies, as it is in those of our surrogates, the bodies of sacrificial animals. The ways in which these divisions operate vary from people to people. Some Hausas of Northern Nigeria, to take one instance, divide the carcass of a sacrificed sheep between a blood and a milk side, that of the mother and of the father, when celebrating a birth; in another region the sheep is divided between parents (mother front, father hind) and 'specialists' (midwife front, mullah back). The binary division and the jointing of a sacrificial carcass provide a consecrating reminder of the way the settlement was organized. It reflected and incarnated the articulation of the space and the kinship structure of that society. The most famous of such instances was the division of the carcass in Greek sacrifice, in which the fat and bones were offered to the gods while the flesh, appropriately jointed, was for human beings. The division of the world as between sacrificers - that is men - and those to whom sacrifice is made - the gods - was instituted, according to legend, by Prometheus. He had brought fire to men and taught them both language and building. His archetypic institution was the sacrifice of an ox, which he divided by wrapping its bones in the fat, and the meat in the entrails. He gave Zeus a choice between the two packets. Zeus chose the bones and fat (which henceforth became the sacrificial portion of the gods) while the meat and entrails went to man. The choice offered to the god was ambiguous, but the division provides an image of the split between the two classes of being - spiritual and fleshly - who populate the world.

The symmetry of the settlement is not always quite strict of course: the Dogon, who build admirable, complex mud-vaulted and thatch-roofed houses, consider their villages to be beings - or at any rate, bodies - like themselves and so explain their structure as a bisexual one. In the northern part of the village, the men's house (and the smithy associated with it) is read as the head. The main dwelling section is the chest, and the two women's houses are the hands. South of this are oil-crushing stones and the village altar, representing the female and the male genitals. The ancestral altars in the south are the feet. The descriptions of the androgynous house and village of the Battamaliba who live on the borders of Benin and Togo in West Africa are analogous. The complexity of ideas and stories woven around the buildings - where we know

them - and the organization of the building trades - where it has been recognized and, as in the case of the Battamaliba, analysed - introduce the notion that such specialized work was carried out in many hunter-gatherer societies of the remote past.

The imagery and any account of the way in which settlements and structures are understood by their inhabitants and their makers are available only in the case of surviving peoples who have maintained traditions of planning and building (which will rarely be committed to writing, but which some of them are willing to share). In the case of dwelling remains of remote antiquity (never mind prehistory) the underlying notional structures can only be inferred from customs and literary records, and these will not necessarily match surviving ruined or buried settlements.

The complex relation between technical advances and intentional endeavour is worth elaborating as I return to our Mediterranean concerns. During the last centuries of the eleventh millennium, the ice sheets, which had been most extensive from the nineteenth to the sixteenth millennia, receded northward, so Britain became separated from France. The Mediterranean coast also seems to have changed shape radically - perhaps because of some breach of the earth bridge at the Pillars of Hercules, the Straits of Gibraltar. What follows is a long period which is sometimes paradoxically called 'the agricultural revolution', during which many peoples round the Iranian and Elamite highlands, as well as in Upper Egypt, developed techniques of cattle-herding and perhaps, already then, of cattle breeding; horses were harnessed and the cultivation of corn begun.

As the density and the population of settlements rose, they attracted envy and rivalry, so the kind of articulated but apparently rather haphazard grouping had to give way to tighter planning and defence walls. The two geometrical figures that allow close packing are the hexagon and the rectangle, the second being the more elastic and amenable. In any case, the division of the circle into moieties implies an axial, even a quadruple division, so that circle and square, as I have already suggested, are not in conflict. Their interplay is important when a new kind of settlement appears in the south of Anatolia and in the Eastern Mediterranean about the end of the eighth and the beginning of the ninth millennium. Jericho may be the oldest of them to have come to light so far - and it seems to have been quite densely planned and walled for defence or possibly against floods already in the ninth millennium. The earliest Neolithic dwellings were almost all circular, of sun-dried bricks with earthen



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2. Moulded 'portrait' over skull from Jericho. Neolithic. After Kathleen M. Kenyon, *Archaeology in the Holy Land*, London 1970.

floors, but already at the next level, still Neolithic and before the arrival of pottery, the houses are rectangular and some are floored with mats made either of reeds laid parallel and knotted to form a rectangle, or of rushes coiled in a circular pattern. Rebuilt and renewed many times over millennia, the late Bronze Age Canaanite Jericho, destroyed and very effectively cursed by Joshua, is about halfway between our time and the first walled town.

In the first Jericho a new type of burial also appears: skulls are not only separated from the rest of the corpse, but portrait heads are modelled over them in white clay, the eyes inlaid with cowrie shells. Conservation and even worship of the skull separated from the rest of the body is known in many modern hunter-gatherer societies, and seems to have been general in remote antiquity. It was practised widely in Neolithic Canaan but even earlier shells are used to decorate skulls in Mesolithic times, of which one, from Mugharet-el-Wad on Mount Carmel, has a double fan-shaped head-dress made of dentalia.

There seems to be a hiatus after the first Neolithic beginnings in the Eastern Mediterranean, and it is not until some time later, after 7,000 BC that a rather different type of settlement appears on the plain of Konya in southern Turkey. We know more about Çatal Hüyük perhaps than about the others, though its deepest levels have not yet been excavated,

nor has the shape of the whole settlement been revealed. The site seems to have been occupied for some fifteen hundred years, the houses built closely round inner courtyards, with access over the roofs by ladders. The interiors were elaborately painted, sometimes in patterns imitating textiles, and many were decorated with clay moulded over animal skulls. For reasons of which nothing is known, Çatal was abandoned about 5,300 BC for settlements elsewhere on the plain, but during its occupation it had been burnt and repopulated, its houses restored and re-plastered many times. Other settlements in Anatolia also assume a definite shape, such as Haçilar, not far from the modern town of Egredir. On the Iranian highlands, the people named after Tepe Sialk, like some other of their neighbours, built rectangular buildings: both the circle and the rectangle were used as models by the farmers. Sialk was also one of the earliest settlements in which underground irrigation ensured crops of barley and emmer wheat, the ancestors of our corn.

Other settlements on a scale that approach urbanity appear on the Anatolian Plateau, in Syria and Mesopotamia before the fifth millennium, in the area which is known as 'the fertile crescent'. The next two millennia would see the growth of many more villages both in the old agricultural heartlands and in the alluvial valleys, and the development, too, of new and unprecedented structures. We still know very little about the peoples who lived there, their languages and loyalties, but it seems that the settlers in the south, in the delta of the Tigris and Euphrates, were always in contact with people who lived over the mountains of Elam, such as those associated with Tepe Sialk, and others higher up the river valleys, whom we associate with the pottery-makers and builders who lived at Hissar.

Pottery was practised on the Iranian plateau before 6000 BC and the work of Sialk potters was traded early. The wheel came into the potter's use before bronze appeared, and completely circular pots appear over the Near East by the end of the sixth millennium. From the beginning, pottery was decorated. One form that appears most persistently in Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley and even in China, inside bowls and cups, is the square inscribed in the circle of the vessel. It may be painted or incised, or sometimes merely geometric or made up of simplified figures - human or animal - which often suggest rotation. This quadripartite division becomes a kind of living swastika. It is well known of course that the quadripartite, the 'squared' circle, was a common world picture (witness the NWT hieroglyph which I mentioned earlier), and that it is often divided between favourable and unfavourable,

upper and lower quarters. Apart from their common household role, such bowls could also be used for divination, of a kind which degenerates in our time into coffee and tea-cup reading.

Orientation seems almost obsessional to early builders - and their ability to calculate celestial phenomena astonishing. From the fifth millennium onwards, alignment on the cardinal points is general in Egypt and in Mesopotamia. Even the much rougher megalith builders of Northern Europe went in for quite sophisticated forms of stellar alignment, and various theories have been developed to account for certain features of ancient Egyptian orientation. Most Egyptian funerary buildings were oriented by their sides, while Mesopotamian temples and cities on their corners, and in fact, from Neolithic Sumer to the Neo-Babylonians, all ziggurats, most temples and many cities were so oriented.

The so-called 'White Temple' Eanna at Uruk/ Erech/ Warka and the 'sea-temple' mound of Enki, the water-god of wisdom and law at Eridu/Abu Shahrain, the southernmost Sumerian harbour-town, were perhaps the two earliest of these 'holy mountains'. At Eridu the first temple is built on virgin soil at the outset of the Ubaid period, a simple buttressed square to which an altar-niche was later added. At its high point, it seems to have had a population of about 10 000 inhabitants, but it was stranded by the changing coastline and abandoned by the change of the river bed so that it eventually reverted to village status. Several more temples, ever larger, are built over the same spot, enclosing the original nucleus. At the beginning of the Dynastic period,

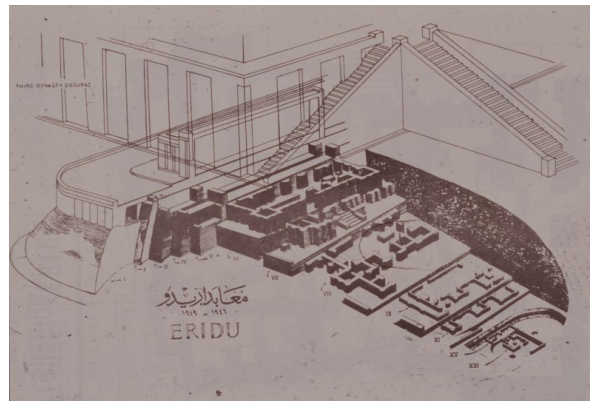
the full panelled construction appears, and at a level above that there is a brick platform over which the subsequent levels finally constitute themselves into a ziggurat- a vast and solid brick mass, ascended by ramps, presumably with a shrine of some kind at the summit.

At Warka on the other hand, the White Temple was the highest and the biggest of several shrines at the centre of the city: it was a brick 'mountain', with battered, plastered sides, deeply scored by flutes, while access was by a ramp and by a stairway to the temple of Anu, the sky-god, that crowns a forty-foot high platform. The temple itself is a rectangle of recessed and panelled brick walls with a central hall and 'chapels' on either side, a configuration such as will be found throughout Mesopotamia for the next two millennia. As at Eridu, the White Temple covers the remains of earlier shrines, but they are much more fragmentary. It must have been built in the 'Ubaid or the Protoliterate period. Of other shrines, that of Inana was the most impressive, approached as it was through a portico of nine-foot diameter brick columns, whose mud-plastered exterior was covered with glazed cone facing in a pattern of coloured chevrons- they are the earliest free-standing columns found in Mesopotamia so far. The ziggurats which developed quickly from such tentative beginnings and of which every major city had one were truly known as mountains, condensations of earth and its power, and their ascent was a cultural act. A temple which crowned the summit and was called a 'waiting room' is considered by some to have been the location of a



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3. The step-pyramid of Djoser, seen from the Heb-Sed 'field'. Photo J. Rykwert



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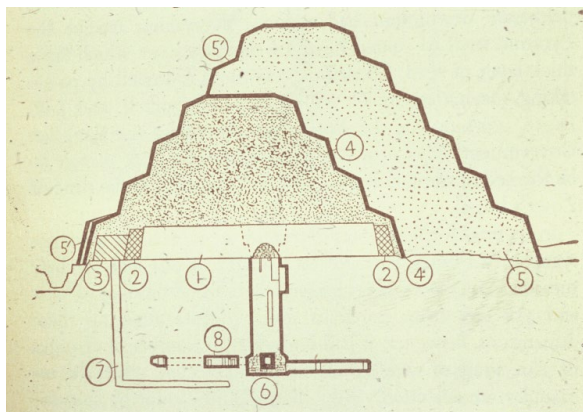
4. The step-pyramid of Djoser, section looking south. 1,2,3 show the original mastaba and its extension. 4 is the first, four-step pyramid; 5, the final six-step one. The tomb chamber, some ninety foot below ground is at 6. Subsidiary burials under the last stage of the mastaba are at 7. 8 is the hypogeum communicating with the burial chamber. 9 (plan only) is the ramp down to the burial, 10 tunnel communicating with the funerary temple, 12 further extension of the hypogeum, 13 & 14 the funerary temple.

After J.-P. Lauer, *La Pyramide à Degrés à Saqqara*, Cairo 1936-39

hierogamy- though the exact nature of the worship offered has never been clear. In fact Herodotus' description of the temple of Bel in Babylon remains the only eyewitness description of such a shrine: 'in it', he says, 'a great and well-covered couch is laid, and a golden table stands nearby. No image has been set up there, nor does anyone sleep there except one of the women of the place, chosen by the god...' . Some Sumerian documents, such as the account of the wedding of Dumuzi and Inana, suggest that the account is accurate enough:

*'In your house on high, in your beloved home
I will come to live
O Nanna up above in your cedar-perfumed mountain...
O Nanna in your mansion of Ur
I will come to live
Lord! In the bed there I also
want to lie down...'*

The Sumerian language of such hymns and of the many other documents that have survived became the diplomatic language of many courts from the Anatolian Hittites to the Egyptians. Why it retained its prestige for a thousand years when it was no longer spoken remains a puzzle to linguists, as is its nature, in that it had no obvious connection to any other known language group. The Sumerians considered themselves, as I suggested, immigrants - though it is not clear from where they might have come. Their city-states co-existed with those of the Semitic-speaking Akkadians until their power was overthrown by the empire-builder, Sargon of Akkad (reigned 2371-2316). Thereafter the Semitic-speaking Akkadians, Babylonians and Assyrians dominated Mesopotamia, though they took over Sumerian religious and civil practice, as well as their system of writing.



5. The step-pyramid of Djoser, plan at ground level, but showing the underground constructions. After J.P. Lauer 1936-3.

Sumerian and later Babylonian and Assyrian towns were built fairly low- there were two and three story houses, so that the ziggurats must have towered above them. Their surface was burnished by the colours of the glazed terracotta such as had been used on that early Inana temple at Warka familiar to us in the reliefs of the Ishtar-gate from Babylon, now in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. The ziggurats were from their beginning shiny and polychrome and highly figured, but they were often attacked. Sargon attacked that of Ur, while the surface of the even bigger ziggurat at Babylon was deliberately wrecked when it was conquered by Sennacherib in 678 BC- after which Nebuchadnezzar renewed the vast areas of glazed tiles on the walls and temples which Herodotus described; but it was all finally destroyed by Darius and Xerxes.

The main Sumerian ziggurat-building towns were coastal, Eridu, Erech, even Ur, which built the very biggest ziggurat; to their south lay the moving dunes of desert Arabia, and eastward the estuary marshes where a complex but impermanent form of reed building seems already to have been devised in an even remoter antiquity. It is commemorated in the painted and carved art of the 'Ubaid period, when the whole population of Southern Mesopotamia may not have exceeded 10,000. However that population grew rapidly during the fourth millennium; agricultural and rural settlements coalesced into larger and more complex units by mid-millennium, units we are justified in calling towns. Certainly proto-dynastic Uruk, which at its height had 80 000 inhabitants living at the high density of 200 per acre, would qualify as one nowadays- and that kind of density seems to have been quite usual in Mesopotamia. The first named 'king' of Uruk, Gilgamesh, who is also the hero of the first epic poem ever, is now considered a historical figure who reigned sometime between 2,700 and 2,600 BC, about the time of the third Dynasty in Egypt. Dynastic Ur was probably the biggest city in the world at the time of its third Dynasty, and by then the Sumerians had devised syllabic writing, which was to be the basis of all subsequent record-keeping methods.

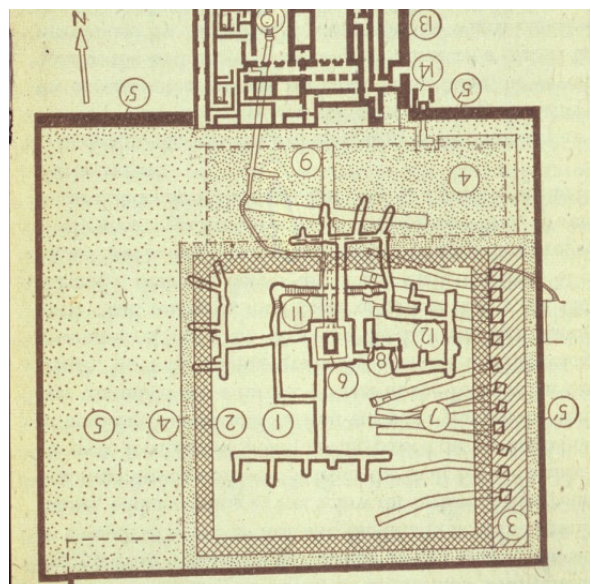
The Tigris-Euphrates changes course much more often and deposits much more silt at its mouth than the Nile, but the two river valleys had no obvious direct connection. Yet the building forms -the panelled and recessed construction of Sumerian temples and ziggurats- also appear on Egyptian pre-Dynastic and Old Kingdom buildings. Whether Egyptian hieroglyphs, which initially appear on first-Dynasty monuments, were an emulation of the Sumerian idea or devised independently is still a

disputed matter. What goes for writing goes also for the sacred mountains. Early trade seems to have gone westward: the lapis lazuli which the Egyptians liked so much probably came from the foothills of the Hindukush, while the cylinder seal is another import. There are no signs either of hostile or of diplomatic dealings. The exception is the victory of Naram-Sin's of Akkad over the shadowy Lord Mannu of Magan which has been read as a victory over the Egyptians. 'Magan' certainly has meant Egypt in later documents, and some of Naram-Sin's (2291-2255) surviving booty, such as alabaster vases, looks credibly Egyptian. He would have reigned towards the end of the sixth Dynasty and the fall of the Old Kingdom, but all such evidence remains circumstantial.

In any case, the dry and relatively stable soil of Egypt, unlike the shifting and muddy Mesopotamian alluvium, conserved corpses without any help from embalmers. While tomb-deposits are infrequent and badly preserved in Mesopotamia, they are common and often very well preserved in Egypt - whenever they escaped the attention of grave robbers. As the settlements grew, these tombs became increasingly ambitious. The heap of sand or stones which marked them was formalised in pre-dynastic days into the mound which would be enclosed in a rectangular flat-topped structure - under which the tomb would often be artfully concealed. These tombs were sometimes surrounded by minor burials, and in one case, that of the First-Dynasty Pharaoh Uadji, by a bench into which three hundred horned bull-skulls are moulded. These mastabas (Arabic word for a bench) were built from pre-dynastic times onwards and ended when the two kingdoms of lower and upper Egypt were united - according to semi-legendary history - by Menes the first Pharaoh, grandfather of Uadji, who is identified with the Horus Narmer of some inscriptions and who probably ruled about 3 200 BC. Unlike the Mesopotamian cities and their successor states, whose rulers were divine bailiffs, the Egyptians developed a theology of divine kinship which they maintained into Roman Imperial times, so that even Hadrian could see himself reflected in it.

The pyramids are the monuments of this theology - smooth and completely inaccessible tombs in which the mummified body of the divinized king was sealed. Their casing was probably polychrome and the capstone which was itself a pyramid was inscribed with invocations to Re and gilded - at least in some cases. The very first one, of Djoser/Netjeri-Khet, the second Pharaoh of the third Dynasty (who ruled 2667-2648 BC) was designed by Imhotep - "Chancellor of Lower Egypt, Second to the King in Upper Egypt" according to legend. Imhotep -

administrator, healer, sculptor, painter and architect - is also known as 'the Egyptian Asklepios': he was divinized by the Ptolemaic Pharaohs who considered him a son of the wise craftsman-god, Ptah. I say 'according to legend' but the base of a statue (most of the statue vanished) found just outside the complex, and almost certainly contemporary with Djoser, labels him also as the designer of that pyramid - which had no precedent. Nothing is known about how the decision to build it was taken. Imhotep first built a large but conventional mastaba for his king, but then it was enclosed - like the Mesopotamian temples at Eridu and Warka - in a four-step structure which could be interpreted as a formalised version of the heap inside the mastaba, taken out and piled over it. In a second stage the number of steps was increased to six and the new pyramid enclosed in a vast monumental court, a limestone construction decorated with coloured ceramic which represented an organisational triumph.



6. Eridu. The 'White Temple' is shown as level I, under the outline of the Third-Dynasty ziggurat which engulfed it. Level XIV was built on virgin soil. After Safar, F., Mustafa, M.A. and Lloyd, S., Eridu. Baghdad, 1981.

After that the major pyramids were all built in lower Egypt during a relatively brief period ending with that of Mycerinus, the penultimate pharaoh of the Fourth Dynasty, who died about 2 500 BC - and who built the smallest of the three great pyramids at Gizeh. Practically all of them were sited on the western bank of the Nile, between Cairo and Dashur, so that the funerary temples could all face eastward, much as the Middle Kingdom Pharaohs had built their eastward tombs on the west bank of the Nile at Thebes - now Karnak/Luxor.

The great pyramid age lasted less than a century and a half, but smaller and rougher pyramids went on being built, such as those of the Nubian kings in the south, or more outlying ones - in Rome itself, where Caius Cestius Epulo built himself a small pyramid by the Ostian gate in the first years of Augustus' reign. The sacred mountains had been great feats of organization and financing, and ostentatious markers, asserting a collective identity by giant construction. In that sense they are paralleled by the megaliths of Northern Europe. At the protodynastic and Old Kingdom time in Egypt, the earliest Neolithic settlers on Maltese islands asserted their possession of them by building 'temples' as anthropomorphic artificial caves of huge stones covered by earthwork mounds: Gigantija on the smaller of the two islands, Gozo, the biggest and one of the earliest ones. The cultural affinities of the Maltese are with Sicily and Sardinia, and perhaps further afield, with the builders of European megaliths, not with the Eastern Mediterranean. They therefore represent a frontier-post of European megalith-building, much as Egypt can be related to an African horizon and Mesopotamia to a Syro-Persian one. They all show how a population with a relatively low technical horizon can organize itself - or be organized - into large and very effective building teams to carry out works of great formal complexity and equally vast expense.

I therefore end my account not with the celebration of a birth, but by presenting you with an equation which seems insoluble because it has too many unknowns. The story I have been telling is of two peoples, both of whom occupy alluvial valleys. They seem to have created analogous devices and forms. Yet, while the idea of pictorial syllabary writing may have originated in Mesopotamia, there is no evidence that any particular sign migrated from Sumerian to Egyptian hieroglyphics. In the same way - while the idea of a sacred mountain may have been first considered by the Sumerians on the Persian Gulf as a way of asserting their newly formulated statehood and the collective world-hypothesis which it enshrined, and been adapted by the Egyptians for a similar purpose, their world hypotheses were quite differently conceived. The Sumerian weather and sky god mated with a motherly but turbulent earth; for the Egyptians, a female sky over-arched her male earth-consort. Inevitably the smooth pyramidal royal tomb which guaranteed the dead king his place between the rays of the sun-god had a different metaphoric context than the Sumerian she-mountain at whose summit the great mother would consummate her marriage with the god of the sky, the wind and the storms.

The further diffusion of the sacred mountain figure - to the Indian sub-continent and over the Silk Route to South-East Asia and to China, and perhaps even to the New World by routes as yet unknown - has provided much material for speculation, some of it more fabulous than historical. Yet the insoluble problem remains: the figure, the archetype I have been considering, however transmitted or mediated, can only become a seed in an intellectual and spiritual soil which can be its matrix.