When scores of local tribes coalesce into nations, the same elements that made up their primal beliefs and practices reappear in combined and more articulated forms. Developed religions do not withdraw their roots from primal soil. And so we may be sure that there were higher beings not unlike the Mura-muras of the Dieri, Raluvhimba of the BaVenda, and the Corn Mother of the Cherokees among the predecessor primal religions out of which Ishtar, Zeus, and Odin emerged as composite divinities. Though some of the developed religions of the ancient world have disappeared, their heritage, in turn, infuses the religions of today.

I. MESOPOTAMIA

Mesopotamia, lying fertile and flat between the twin rivers that watered it, was open to invasions and attack from every quarter. The temporal and the changeful were always present. Nothing remained stable for long; the pleasures of life had to be quickly snatched.

Or let us state facts in this way: The prehistoric hunters and fishers in the swamps at the conjunction of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers gave place to a culture of villages, each with its temple; then villages, layer on layer, gave place to, or came under the dominance of, cities—Erech, Eridu, Lagash, Ur, Nippur, and others. Cities fought each other until one dominated another, and the Sumerian kingdoms rose, to be followed and absorbed by Semitic empires, and these by the Persian. Also in the same way, the gods of the fields and streams and those of the sky took to the towns, organized themselves into a superstate with governing power lodged in a council of the gods, fought, made love, and merged into a vast pantheon with innumerable names.
The Sumero-Akkadian Pantheon*

It has been said that the pantheon (roster of deities) numbered nearly two thousand. Perhaps, as some have suggested, the vast pantheon resembles the concept of mana (p. 11) “gone wild.” If one were to impose order they might be “refiled” as subsidiaries to major deities, executors of their functions on the local level.

Every part of nature was represented. Six deities eventually became important over wide areas. Each was the deity of a big city. An (Anu), the sky god, was the chief deity of Uruk and nominally still the “pristine king and ruler” of the gods, but he was overshadowed by Enlil (Bel), the god of wind and flood, who became the god of the lands beneath, conferring power upon kings, and a great warrior, the chief deity at Nippur. His son Nanna (Sin), the moon god, reigned at Ur. Utu, who later took the Semitic name Shamash, was the sun god at Larsa, and when Larsa was destroyed, became the sun god at Sippar. Enki (Ea), the water god, who also was the wisdom god, made his home in Eridu. Ninhursag (Aruru), also known as Nintu and Ninmah, the mother goddess, prevailed at Kish.

It was usual for the male deities, major or minor, to have a consort, worshiped in a separate sanctuary built

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*The Sumerian pantheon, the first to be formulated in Mesopotamia, was largely adopted by the Semitic-speaking Akkadians when the latter established themselves in the northern half of the area, hence the title of the present topic. Upon first mention in the following account, the Sumerian names will be given first, with the Akkadian equivalents in parentheses. It will be noted in the parentheses that the Sumerian name is modified in some cases, but in other cases it is replaced by a new name, presumably Semitic. Only a few Sumerian myths survive intact. The rest are in fragments; we shall therefore be considering the Akkadian versions of these myths and the Akkadian names.
temple always belonged to the chief god, other deities might have smaller sanctuaries in other parts of the city. (Thus in the Akkadian period Sin received worship in Harran and Shamash in Uruk, although they were not the reigning deities.) Apparently they deserved a place there, because, as the Semitic terminology had it, each was the bel or “owner” of a large tract of land nearby and should have a proper residence (temple) in the nearest city.

It was natural that the Akkadians should group these deities into triads and divine families. In due course Anu, Bel, and Ea were believed to divide the physical universe among them as the rulers, respectively, of heaven above, earth beneath, and the waters on and under the earth. Another (and later) triad had a more agricultural significance. It was composed of Shamash, the sun god, Sin, the moon god, and Ishtar, the Semitic goddess of fertility, who, with unequaled ability to keep her name and functions dominant, was mentioned separately in the listings and not identified with the mother-goddess Ninhursag and her aliases Ninmah, Nintu, Mami, Aruru, and others. (Just as Inanna of Uruk, the Sumerian queen of the heavens [Venus] and goddess of love and fertility, was mentioned separately and not as a mother goddess.)

Ishtar, A Universal Goddess

Of all the deities who emerged in Sumer and Akkad, Ishtar was to come closest to being universally worshiped. As a virginal love goddess, a queen of fertility, and even a woman warrior, she was the focal female deity adored in cults that spread to all sectors of the fertile crescent and beyond. By her attachment to Tammuz (Sumerian Dumuzi), the god of the spring sun and its awakening in soil and beast, she established herself as a great lover in her own right. As the goddess of fertility, she gave children to women and life to vegetation. As the planet Venus, she was “the queen of heaven and the stars.” Strangely, she also was a cruel warrior goddess, at least among the Akkadians. One Akkadian king explicitly attributed his power to her love and support. Her worship was destined to spread far to the west, to Palestine and to Egypt. Even the Zoroastrians were unable to resist her, and after changing her name to Anahita, “the Spotless One” (and thus purifying her!), they gave to her almost as great a prominence as to Ohrmazd himself. We shall meet her again.

“My mother was a priestess …
She placed me in a basket made of reeds and closed the lid with pitch. She put the basket in the river … [It] brought me to Akki … He adopted me as his child … It was while I was his gardener that the goddess Ishtar loved me. Then I became king.” —Sargon of Agade (Akkad)
(Dhorme’s translation)
Marduk of Babylon

The greatest rival of Ishtar was Marduk. His prominence may be assigned, curiously enough, to sheer political good fortune. It happened that the sixth king of the first dynasty of Babylon, Hammurabi, the same who issued the world-famous law code in the eighteenth century BCE, made this city the capital of a powerful kingdom stretching from the Persian Gulf to the central provinces embraced between the Tigris and Euphrates. It was an achievement of permanent significance, for Babylon thus became and was to remain, through twenty centuries of change, one of the great cities of the world. And with its rise to power, Marduk, its god, rose to greatness too. Not prominent before, he practically absorbed the surrounding gods. He linked to himself Ea of Eridu as his father (whereby he absorbed Ea’s earlier son, Ninurta, a vegetation and war god) and made Nabu of Barsippa, the fire god, his son and the scribe of the gods; he also absorbed from them some of their functions—the wisdom of Ea’s and Nabu’s power over destiny. The chief attributes of Enlil of Nippur also were transferred to him (including the victory over Tiamat, described in the next section), so that he might be acknowledged as the lord of the heavens. Finally, the religious literature of Babylon was extensively revised to give him the prominent role his city demanded for him.

The Babylonian Myths and Epics

Evidence from cuneiform inscriptions shows that the Sumerians and Akkadians had fertile imaginations. They loved to tell stories about their gods and goddesses, shaping their myths to probe profound questions related to their place in the universe. Although it does not serve our purpose to explore the whole of this mythology, the following episodes are of interest, in part because of their intrinsic qualities but especially because of the striking parallel to the flood story of the Hebrew Scriptures.

1. THE CREATION

The Sumerians, we have learned, believed that the first thing that existed was the primordial sea (associated with the goddess Nammu), from which emerged heaven (An) and earth (Ki), united as though they were a large mountain in the midst of the sea. An and Ki produced within or between them Enlil, air, and as the air began to stir in the darkness within the mountain it separated sky and earth. Then, to see better, Enlil begot the moon god Nanna, who in turn begot the sun god Utu, presumably to make the light brighter. By this time the world had come into being, for the sky (An) by expansion of the air below (Enlil) had reached a great height, and the earth (Ki) had made a solid floor below, with sun and moon to bring light. When air moved across earth (or when Enlil united with his mother Ki) and received the aid of water (Enki), plants and animals came into being. Finally, humankind was created by the joint efforts of Nammu, the primeval sea, Ninmah, mother earth, and Enki, the water god.

But according to another legend (Akkadian or Semitic in origin?), the present world order was formed after a primeval struggle for control of the tablets of destiny between the dragons of darkness and chaos, led by the bird god Zu (or in other accounts by Tiamat) and the gods of light and order, headed by Ninurta, the war god. But the Babylonian priests recast whatever materials they inherited, and they made Marduk both the hero of the struggle against chaos and also the creator of the world and of humankind. Their story began with Apsu, the god of fresh water, and Tiamat, the dragon of the unbounded salt water (chaos). By their intermingling, this pair over a period of years produced the gods, but the youthful gods were so lively and eager to be creative that Apsu, who preferred tranquillity, could not rest and resolved to destroy them, against the wish of Tiamat.

Apsu, opening his mouth,
Said unto resplendent Tiamat:
‘Their ways are verily loathsome unto me.
By day I find no relief, nor repose by night.
I will destroy, I will wreck their ways,
That quiet may be restored. Let us have rest!’

As soon as Tiamat heard this,
She was wroth and called out to her husband.
She cried out aggrieved, as she raged all alone,
Injecting woe into her mood:
‘What? Should we destroy that which we have built?
Their ways indeed are most troublesome, but let us attend kindly!’

But before Apsu could execute his plan, he was destroyed by Ea, who got wind of it, whereupon Tiamat resolved on avenging him. She created monsters to be her allies, and both Anu and Ea fled before her. Not until Marduk, who was assured by the gods that he would be their chief, came forth to meet her in combat was she halted.

Then advanced Tiamat and Marduk counselor of the gods;
To the combat they marched, they drew nigh to battle.
The lord spread out his net and caught her,
The storm wind that was behind him, he let loose in her face.
The good god Ea felt kindly toward Utnapishtim and told him about it. The man immediately proceeded to build an ark.

120 cubits high were its sides, 
140 cubits reached the edge of its roof.  

As Utnapishtim later told Gilgamesh (we quote in part),

I brought up into the ship my family and household, 
The cattle of the field, the beasts of the field, craftsmen, all of them I brought in. 

A fixed time had Shamash appointed saying
‘When the ruler of darkness sends a heavy rain, 
Then enter into the ship and close the door.’ 
The appointed time came near, …

There came up from the horizon a black cloud. 
Adad thundered within it …

Adad’s storm reached unto heaven, 
All light was turned into darkness …

The water climbed over the mountains …

The gods feared the deluge, 
They drew back, they climbed up to the heaven of Anu. 
The gods crouched like a dog, they cowered by the wall. 
Ishtar cried like a woman in travail, 
The queen of the gods cried with a loud voice: 'The former race is turned to clay.'

When the seventh day drew nigh, the tempest ceased; the deluge, 
Which had fought like an army, ended. 

All mankind was turned to clay …

I opened the window and the light fell upon my face, 
I bowed, I sat down, I wept, 
And over my face ran my tears, 
I looked upon the world, all was sea. 
After twelve days (?) the land emerged. 

To the land of Nisir the ship made its way, 
The mount of Nisir held it fast, that it moved not …

I sent forth a dove and let her go. 
The dove flew to and fro, 
But there was no resting place and she returned. 
I sent forth a swallow and let her go,
The swallow flew to and fro,  
But there was no resting place and she returned.  
I sent forth a raven and let her go,  
The raven flew away, she saw the abatement of  
the waters,  
She drew near, she waded, she croaked, and came  
not back.  
Then I sent everything forth to the four quarters of  
heaven, I offered sacrifice,  
I made a libation upon the mountain’s peak.  

While the parallels to the Hebrew flood account are ob-
vious, the relationship is probably complex. The Gen-
esis narrative is deeply rooted in Hebrew thought and  
may have been derived from older versions closer to the  
Sumero-Akkadian sources.

3. ISHTAR DESCENDS TO THE LAND OF THE  
DEAD, RETURNS WITH SPRING

If the obscure reference to Tammuz at the end of the story  
of Ishtar’s descent is correctly interpreted, Ishtar went  
down into the netherworld to recover her dead lover, the  
personification of the strong sun of springtime, whose  
vigor fades away in the autumn. When she came to the  
door of the Land of No Return, she called imperiously to  
the porter,

O gatekeeper, open thy gate,  
Open thy gate that I may enter!  
If thou openest not the gate so that I cannot enter,  
I will smash the door, I will shatter the bolt,  
I will smash the doorpost, I will move the doors,  
I will raise up the dead, eating the living.  
So that the dead will outnumber the living.  

Being commanded to do so by the goddess of the  
dead, the porter admits the queen of heaven, but as she  

passes through each of the seven gates, he takes an article  
of clothing or jewelry from her, until she enters the inner  
circle of the lower world stark naked. While held there,  
she goes through much suffering, for the pest god Nam-
tar afflicts her successively with sixty diseases. Meanwhile,  
men and animals in the upper world grow listless and  
dull, unable to reproduce their kind. Love and fertility  
have left the earth. The gods are distressed.

Forth went Papsukkal before Sin his father, weeping,  
His tears flowing before Ea, the king,  
‘Ishtar has gone down to the nether world, she has not  
come up.’

Ea sends a messenger to Hades, and the goddess of  
the dead reluctantly orders Namtar to sprinkle Ishtar  
with “the water of life.” She, restored to bloom and health,  
begins her journey back to the upper world, at each gate  
receiving back the clothing and jewelry of which she had  
been divested.

A more poetically satisfying account of the disap-
pearance of the vegetation goddess at the approach of  
winter and of her return in the spring has never been  
conceived.

4. THE JOURNEY OF GILGAMESH

The most finished and literary of the Babylonian ep-
ics, the story of Gilgamesh’s journey begins with the  
tale of the friendship of Gilgamesh, the ruler of the  
city of Uruk (Erech), with the wild man Enkidu, who  
dies prematurely for offending the goddess Ishtar.  
It then tells of his journey, through many perils, in  
search of immortality, to the realm of the departed  
beyond the western (the Mediterranean?) “waters of  
death,” where his ancestor Utnapishtim dwells, and  
concludes with his disconsolate return to Uruk, after  
being robbed by a serpent of the herb of immortality,  
which Utnapishtim enabled him to find at the bottom  
of the sea. The whole story is full of the pathos of hu-
man disappointment in the face of death. Gilgamesh,  
about to embark on the waters of death in the west,  
addresses a barmaid dwelling by the sea.

O barmaid, let me not see the death I constantly  
fear.  
The barmaid said to him, to Gilgamesh,  
‘Gilgamesh, where are you wandering to?  
You will not find the life you seek.  
When the gods made mankind,  
They set death as the lot of humans,
The priests were busy men, well organized for their task, and offering many services to their clientele. They had learned during the centuries, from before 3200 BCE (!), to act through what must be called in each case the temple corporation, a legal entity often possessed of large landholdings and run according to strict business methods, with all receipts and expenditures recorded in written signs on clay tablets. The temple structures administered by the corporations were large buildings, constructed of thick courses of sundried brick and occupying spacious temple compounds, in the center of which often stood human-built mountains encased in brick, called *ziggurats,* with a shrine on top. In these compounds the priests performed their lengthy rituals, especially from the second to the fifth days of the twelve-day new year’s festival. Here also they conducted schools for the teaching of reading, writing, and arithmetic, and here, as well, they practiced divination, in the ambitious endeavor to read the signs of the times and to foretell the future.

**Divination and Astrology**

Divination was in fact one of the main functions of the priesthood. One whole order of priests specialized in the interpretation of dreams and of omens perceived in natural events. They devoted much attention to the reading of the omens in the sheep’s liver, for they thought the will and intentions of the gods were revealed in the creases on the surface and the physical peculiarities inside the liver. But the most important of their divining methods, for us if not for them, was their *astrology.* The origins of it go back to Sumerian times. In the attempt to establish what might be called scientific method in reading the will of the gods in the disposition of the heavenly bodies, the diviners kept accurate and detailed records of the movements they observed in the heavens, and thus prepared the way for scientific astronomy in our own day. The astronomical instruments devised for space measurement and time study of the stars were amazingly precise and accurate.

The contemporary revival of astrology as a method of using the movement and position of the stars and planets to predict the course of individual and world events owes much to the study of celestial omens by the Babylonians; however, it was the later Greeks (in the Hellenistic period) who evolved astrology into a detailed theory of the influence of celestial bodies on human affairs. Western astrologists as well as Hindu and Muslim practitioners have depended on Hellenistic rather than Babylonian sources for their theories of the zodiac and horoscopes.

We turn next to Greece.

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*Words in color also appear in the glossary on p. 67 with a brief definition.*
II. GREECE

The last century has seen a thorough revision of earlier ideas of classical Greek religion. Homer is no longer taken at face value. His pantheon, described with his bright and winged words and in conception poetically unsurpassed, was for many centuries accepted in the West as an accurate rendering of early Greek religion. In the light of recent scholarship, it is not that at all. We see now that the scholars who read off the characteristics of the Greek gods from the statues of the classic age and the lines of Homer should have paid more attention to what Gilbert Murray called “the crude and tangled superstitions of the peasantry of the mainland,” half revealed and half concealed in the poetry of Hesiod. It is clear from a study of such folklore that much that was pre-Greek lay at the base of Greek religion. The beauty and balance of the Homeric pantheon was in truth a triumph of unification and sublimation.

In brief, we have here another case of tribal amalgamations accompanied by a mingling and reordering of the gods.

The Gathering of the Gods in Early Hellas

The determinative fact in the formation of early Greek religion is the northern invasions beginning in about the twentieth century BCE. The invaders were formidable horse-borne warriors of Aryan or Indo-European speech, who came down from the northern parts of Greece in their chariots to establish themselves as masters of the earlier, so-called Hellenic peoples. Historians are not certain of the origins of all of the groups involved, but they basically agree that the earliest true civilizations were pre-Greek: those of the Minoans in Crete (who flourished about 2200–1500 BCE) and of the Bronze Age Aegeans of the Greek archipelago and mainland (2500–1100 BCE), known to the later Greeks as “Pelasgians.”

The Minoan civilization, part of what Marija Gimbutas has called Old Europe, was destroyed about 1450 BCE, probably first by the volcanic explosion of the nearby island of Kalliste (modern Thera) and then by invasions (by the Achaeans?) from the mainland. While Crete was by no means defenseless, archaeological traces of structures and implements of warfare are relatively sparse. An agricultural rather than a nomadic herding/hunting way of life furnished complementary gender roles. Images reflecting Minoan religious practices are notable for the preeminence of female roles, depicting priestesses as well as goddesses of fertility and renewal of life. In any case, the Cretan palace of Knossos was destroyed, and subsequent social patterns reflected the pastoral, more patriarchal patterns of the conquerors.

The Cretan culture, however, had earlier spread to the Greek mainland, and produced in the northeastern parts of the Peloponnesus and further...
north the Mycenaean civilization, of which the Homeric (or Achaean) Age was probably a late form. It is likely that the Achaeans—leaders among the long-haired, light-skinned invaders from the north—adopted the Mycenaean culture after mastering its creators, in both Greece and Crete. Finally, during the twelfth century BCE, waves of northerners—the formidable Dorians and their allies—overthrew the Mycenaean civilization. This caused a widespread displacement that resulted in Greek settlements along the coast of Asia Minor, composed of Ionians and Aeolians, and of Dori ans too. When everyone had settled down again, the historic Greek city-states came into being, and the patterns of Greek religion, now so familiar to us, began to form.

The Mingled Pantheon

These new patterns in religion were combinations of many different elements. Gradually, a pantheon of deities was assembled. The Indo-European invaders contributed to the divine sunoikismos, or “mingling together,” at least of these deities: their chief god Zeus, the Pater, sky father and rainmaker (a name that reappears as Dyaus Pitar among the Indo-Aryans and Jupiter among the Romans); Demeter, the earth mother; and Hestia (the Vesta of the Romans), virgin goddess of the hearth, sister of Zeus, and a goddess from the far Indo-European past, honored with libations at the beginning and end of every sacrifice. But many of the gods had no such distant origin. Rhea seems to have been Minoan, Athena Mycenaean (at least when we first glimpse her), and Hermes and Hera Aegean or Helladic. Apollo appears to be from Ionia, Aphrodite from Cyprus or Cythera, and Dionysus and Ares from Thrace. It was as though the gods flocked together to Olympus from all points of the compass.

Interaction with the Gods

It is thus quite evident that the Greeks of classical times felt themselves surrounded by deities whose assistance they needed. They were polytheists for reasons similar to those that made polytheists of the Egyptians and Mesopotamians: the powers and forces dwelling in and under the earth (the chthon) and in the sky and under the sea were immediately known in daily life and were found to be diverse as well as numerous. In describing them, the Greeks were anthropomorphic, for they preferred to take their analogies and symbols from human life and personality. It is important to notice that they did not think that the deities on whom they most depended were transcendent and far removed. Rather, they were close at hand, as close as the hearth (Hestia), the herma or boundary stone in the street (Hermes), the shrine before the house, which was perhaps sacred to Apollo of the Roads, the large jar in the storeroom sacred to Zeus Ktesios (guardian of the family possessions), and the courtyard, watched over by Zeus Herkeios.

Physical injuries and day-to-day health problems brought common people to temple clinics called asklepieia where priest practitioners dispensed remedies, performed surgeries, and presided over offerings to the deities of healing: Asklepios and Hygieia. Physicians of the present day look back to a fourth-century BCE priest of Asklepios, Hippocrates, as a model of dedication to healing. All formal occasions required the invocation of a god or gods—marriage, for instance, or the reception of a newborn baby into the family circle, or at the death and
burial of members of the family. Farming and other occupations could not be successfully pursued, nor could a journey on land or sea be attempted without the approval of the gods. The address to the gods on such occasions was simple and courteous but not servile, a natural, almost unreflective gesture of cooperation and community, not dominated by fear.

If a deity was known to be far removed, its existence might be recognized, but no prayer or sacrifice was offered to it; there was no use in sacrificing to a deity unaware of the act. Thus, Hades, the god of the underworld, and Ouranos, the god of heaven, although readily believed in, were not worshiped in Greek homes. On the other hand, Zeus was often invoked because he was nearby as well as far away, and the same was true of Apollo, who, not identified with the sun until a late date, received daily honors as the patron of many human arts and skills.

**The Complex Functions of the Major Deities**

Geographically, Greece is made up of small valleys and plains, each hedged in by mountains or confined between a semicircle of hills and the sea. Unlike Egypt and Mesopotamia, which threw people together, Greece separated them. Before the northern invasions, the divided inhabitants of Helladic Greece worshiped in their isolated territories many nature spirits, sought the aid of a variety of fertility powers, and engaged in diverse rites connected with magic, taboo, and the cult of the dead. The northerners who came flooding in imposed not only a new language and a certain hearty cheerfulness but also uniformity in the names of the gods, and thenceforth the chief gods and goddesses were identified with the local powers that could in any way be absorbed by them, taking over their functions, rites, and histories, while also adding their own qualities.

**ZEUS**

Zeus is an instructive instance of how an invader’s god takes over the duties of local divinities.

Because he began as the great sky father, ruler of the upper air and the giver of rains, as he made his way through Greece he was identified with many mountain-tops. Not only was he Zeus of Olympus, but Zeus Lykaios in Arcadia, Zeus Laphystios in southern Thessaly, and Zeus Kithairon in Boeotia. But he also assumed other, down-to-earth duties. He was the god of fertility in many districts, and in at least three places a deity of the underworld. As Zeus Polieus he was the guardian of several city-states. As Zeus Aphiktor he was the united cry of the suppliants, itself become deity and forcibly beating its way to heaven. At Athens he was Zeus Phratrios, and received on his altar the votes cast by the members of the clan when a father brought his child for enrollment. At Dodona he spoke oracles through the murmuring leaves of the sanctuary oak. Generally, of course, he was the Cloud Compeller, the Rainmaker, carrying his bright thunderbolt, hurled amid earthshaking tremors, but the thunderbolt sometimes had the judicial use of punishing the wickedness of men. As the source of genius, he fathered a large progeny of heroes, kings, and founders of cities. Nor was Hera his first wife. When he first arrived in the north at Dodona, he brought with him out of the unknown past a consort called Dione, and in other places he had other wives. But Hera was destined to become his permanent spouse.

**HERA**

Hera is an instance from the other side—the side of the conquered. She brought to her union with Zeus a past of her own. It was at least as respectable as his. Her origins are...
obscure and dateless. Because the cow plays an important part in early legends about her, she may originally have been a cow goddess. In Mycenaean times she was the Argive Korê (Maiden), and sported in more than sisterly fashion on the plains of Peloponnesian Argos with Hercules, the strong young hero of that region. But she also was connected, by myth at any rate, with Argos in Thessaly, where as a matronly friend she helped Jason, another strong young hero, to launch the ship Argo, when he set out from Pagasae in search of the Golden Fleece. She seems not to have been at that time the goddess of the earth, but a majestic maiden identified with the passage of the year. For her sake Zeus parted with Dione and became her heavy-browed consort. They had their troubles. Zeus blamed her for the “proud, unbending” personality of their war-god son Aries. In accounting for their early quarrels, Jane Harrison has advanced the following interesting theory:

The marriage of Zeus and Hera reflects the subjugation of the indigenous people by incoming Northerners. Only thus can we account for the fact that the divine husband and wife are in constant unseemly conflict. Of course, a human motive is alleged; Hera is jealous, Zeus in constant exasperation. But the real reason is radical conflict.

Perhaps this explanation will do, or perhaps another: she was the queen of the hinterlands and of backward mountaineers among whom the proto-Greek matrilineal tradition persisted, and Zeus, the lord of the patrilineal northerners, married her to win a footing. However this may be, their marriage was not long unhappy. It was later declared a great success and became in Greek eyes a “holy union,” the very ideal of married existence. Hera became the patroness of married women, their counselor and example.

APOLLO

In the person of Apollo an even greater yoking of diverse functions is seen. He was probably not Hellenic. In the Iliad, at least, he is on the side not of the Greeks but of the Trojans, an implacable and a feared foe of the “bronze-clad” warriors besieging Troy. Perhaps, as the myths suggest, he was originally from the island of Delos, or from the plains of Asia Minor. His origin cannot be surely traced. Very early he stood for pastoral and agricultural interests. Certainly he was not originally a sun god. He was a shepherd for Laomedon near Troy and for Admetos in Thessaly. He may once have been a wolf god, but as shepherd he protected his flocks and herds from the fangs of his lupine brethren. In agricultural areas, groves and trees were under his protection; the laurel was sacred to him. Out of pastoral love of song, he drew devoted youths and maidens to him with his lively playing on the lyre. He heartily believed in youth, and he was the sponsor of athletic contests, drawing a strong bow himself. He was Hekatebolos, “the shooter from afar.”

His arrows not only drew blood but pierced men with deadly sickness. (He also was the god of healing until he was displaced by his son Aesculapius.) He slew on the slopes of Mt. Parnassus in Greece the Python, whom he then displaced at Delphi. (Like Zeus, he supplanted or absorbed many local spirits.) His exploit at Delphi was an important act, with far-reaching results in the development of Greek religion, for as a consequence of it he became the god of revelation. No other god was the source of such direct oracles except Zeus. In the center of his temple at Delphi was the famous vent in the earth, from which issued from time to time an intoxicating vapor, and when the priestess, named Pythia, sat on the tripod amid the fumes, she muttered words that were universally thought to be from Apollo. It was in this belief that for centuries many famous men of Greece journeyed to Delphi, where

Phoebus,* on earth’s mid navel o’er the world
Enthroned, weaveth in eternal song
The sooth of all that is or is to be.

He often was asked for an oracle before a town was founded, and afterward became its patron. Not until very late, and then perhaps as the result of an Egyptian or other foreign influence, was he identified with Helios the sun, who drives his golden car from heaven’s eastern gates to the dim regions of the night.

OTHER DEITIES

The story of the other deities is similar. Artemis, the virginal deity of the wild, ranging through the mountains and forests with her nymphs in maidenly reserve but thoroughly at home with the untamed animals of her domain, was also the gentle lover of children, the protector of men and maidens, and the solicitous friend who sought to ease the pangs of childbirth. Curiously, in Ionia, where she was a favorite, she became the Artemis of Ephesus, a motherly goddess, connected with fertility, her front covered with breasts.

*One of Apollo’s epithets. It means “bright” or “pure.”
Hermes, who came from deep in the pre-Hellenic period, outgrew his earliest symbol, a simple cairn of stones such as peasants in the rock-strewed land raised at the edges and corners of fields and associated with their dead. Cairns served in mountain tracts and elsewhere as way markers, and Hermes was thus thought to guide travelers to their destination. After he became identified with a square stone pillar, called the herma, sometimes surmounted with his head, he was, as it were, pulled up out of the ground, where he had stood immovable, and given winged feet. He led the spirits of the dead down to Hades, and as the swift messenger between Zeus and the earth below he was clothed in a long belted chiton and made to wear a cap or a broad-brimmed hat and wingèd boots.

Other deities showed a similar complexity of function. Poseidon was god of the sea, but was originally a horse god guarding inland lakes and streams (was he driven into the sea by invaders?). Athena, the wise and virginal warrior maiden, was originally perhaps an owl goddess (for the owl was sacred to her, and she herself turned on occasion into a bird disappearing upward into the sky), but her most ancient image in Athens was of olive wood, and so she was in some way connected with the fertility of the important olive crop. Demeter, goddess of the fertile soil, was, as mother of slender and beauteous Persephone (the Korē, the Maiden), also connected with the underworld. Into all of these deities many local gods and spirits were absorbed and sublimated. Even Aphrodite, the goddess of love, a latecomer, perhaps the Western form of Ishtar of Babylon, was reborn from the foam of the sea, clear-skinned and delicate and beautiful, still a little amoral, yet shorn of the accompaniments of temple prostitution and self-mutilation that attended the worship of her Oriental counterparts. Only Dionysus seemed unassimilable and untamed. (Further on, we shall see why.)

**Homer: The Gods as a Family**

In Homer the gods no longer live in widely separated places. They are a family residing on high Olympus, more a heavenly region now than the actual mountaintop in Thessaly. There Zeus, the Cloud Compeller, is kind, and white-armed Hera is his “golden-throned” queen. The other gods may abscond themselves on occasion from their cloud-girt palaces, but usually Zeus must know where they have gone and what they have done. The gods, not without back talk, submit to his discipline, for he is the father of most of them. His best-beloved daughter is gray-eyed Athena, the maiden goddess of wisdom. A favored son is Apollo, the archer god, he of the flowing golden locks, who both heals and hurts. Artemis, “delighting in wild boars and swift hinds,” is the shy daughter who often absents herself in mountain hideaways. Ares, “piercer of shields,” is the savagely warlike son whom Zeus at times scolds sternly.

**Come no more to me,**
**Thou wav’ring turncoat, with thy whining prayers:**
**Of all the Gods who on Olympus dwell**
**I hate thee most; for thou delight’st in nought**
**But strife and war; thou hast inherited**
**Thy mother, Hera’s, proud, unbending mood,**
**Whom I can scarce control.**

Aphrodite, the enticing goddess of love, is a daughter of Zeus by Dione and is married to her half brother, the lame god of the forge and the fire, Hephaestus, a son of Zeus by Hera, but she is unfaithful to him and has a notorious amour with Ares. Still another son of Zeus, born of his affair with Semele, is Dionysus, but in Homer he puts in an appearance and nothing more. Of greater importance is Hermes, the Heavenly Guide, whose birth was the consequence of the love of Zeus and Maia. He is primarily the herald and messenger of the gods, but he is sharp and cunning and not above consorting with thieves on those occasions when he gets away by himself, as when he departs from Olympus to guide souls to and from Hades. Poseidon, the god of the sea, and Hades (Pluto), the god of the underworld, are full brothers of Zeus, born like him of Kronos and Rhea, and Demeter is his sister by the same parents, but Homer does not have her come to Olympus.

**DIVINE FUNCTIONS RATIONALIZED**

Here then is the tight-knit family group of the gods of Homer. On the whole they form a very aristocratic company. As gods they are in charge of natural forces, but more clearly characterized and set off from those forces than they had been in earlier days. Their functions have been both sublimed and simplified. They are no longer “primitive.” The Minoan fetishes, the deities in animal form, the mother goddesses, are gone. The earlier Bronze Age involvements with animal and human fertility, or with vegetation, death, and the underworld, have been largely refined out of them. Their personalities are no longer portentous with vague, mysterious force; they have come into the light of day and are sharply defined, clear-cut, distinct from one another. No two are alike. Indeed they are all but earthy men and women, with thoughts, desires, moods, and passions all too human. Though immortal, they are no longer incalculable and unknown and terrible. Aesthetically, they are attractive, charming, amusing, civilized, better proportioned and more beautiful than humans—they
were indeed Homer’s priceless gift to the future artists of Greece. In marble and bronze, their stately, poised, and unblemished bodies were in time to rise in marketplaces and on acropolises, their wondrous heads gazing calmly down from the pediments and pedestals of temples, lordly and aloof, as from another and more perfect world. Mortals could look at them only with wonder and envy.

Perhaps the last sentence is a little overstated. The gods in Homer do exert supernatural effects, for when Zeus nods all Olympus shakes, and once when Poseidon hurried to Olympus in three immense strides,

Beneath th’ immortal feet of Ocean’s Lord
Quak’d the huge mountain and the shadowy wood.\(^{14}\)

Poseidon’s cry—and that of every god—is thunderous:

As of nine thousand or ten thousand men,
In deadly combat meeting in the shout.\(^{14}\)

The gods also have great power over human lives, whether for bane or blessing. By their will cities fall, men die, and armies fail. But in this they show little concern for justice in the modern sense; rather they place first the demonstrating of the excellence (areté) befitting their divine status, exercising their powers over lesser beings and evoking honors and sacrifices from humankind.

In Homeric times, justice was central neither to gods nor to humankind. When a deity was described as “good” (agathos), this meant successful in protecting favored persons or causes (as when Zeus succeeded in protecting the Greeks before Troy and Apollo made good in protecting his favored ones, the Trojans). In the same sense, a human father was “good” when he was a good provider. Gods and humans had areté when they had the will to excellence, the virtue of vigor in pursuit of their fundamental interests. In such a scheme of things, justice, while good, was secondary to achieving one’s aims.

THE PRIMACY OF MOIRA (FATE)

But yet, with all of this, the might of the gods is gravely limited. There is something more powerful, to which even Zeus, the Cloud Compeller himself, submits, though he could change it by the power of his will. This is moira or what is allotted (fated) to each person as a share, an appointed portion in life and its happenings. Moira does not stand alone; it operate vague forces—Blind Folly, Terror, Strife, Turmoil, Rumor, Death. Powerful though the gods are, they are contained within the total frame of Nature and History along with humans. Though they are superhuman, their powers are not boundless.

Hesiod’s Theogony

Hesiod (eighth century BCE) did no better. In a characteristic effort of Greek rationalism, he tried to bring the gods into some semblance of order by raising the question of their origin (theogony).

Influenced perhaps by Middle-Eastern attempts in this direction, Hesiod declared in his Theogony that the pristine Chaos had given place by cosmic evolution to Earth (Gaea or Ge), Tartarus (the Pit), and handsome Eros (Love). Chaos itself produced Night and Darkness, and they, in turn, by the power of Eros, mated to bring forth Day and Air. Without mating, Night gave issue to Sleep, Dream, Death, Old Age, Misery, Friendship, and Discord. Similarly, Discord of herself, without husband, gave birth to Hunger, Toil, Murder, Battle, and other forms of human strain and struggle, while Earth brought into being unaided Heaven (Ouranos or Uranus, the starry heavens), the Mountains, and the Ocean. Mating with Ocean, Earth produced creatures of the sea, and then taking Ouranos as husband, conceived the first great gods but was unable to give birth to them because Ouranos prevented his children from emerging from the mother (the depths of the earth). With Earth’s aid, however, Kronos came forth, stole upon his sleeping father, and castrated him with a sickle. The flowing blood impregnated Earth, and she brought forth the Furies (Erinyes), the Titans (Giants), and certain nymphs, while from the sea foam forming around the castrated members sprang Aphrodite, the goddess of love. The triumphant Kronos married his sister Rhea, who had now been born, but fearing overthrow himself, he swallowed his children as they were born. Then Rhea, with the help of grandmother Earth, substituted a stone for Zeus, the last born, and Kronos swallowed it unknowingly. Zeus was hidden by his grandmother in a cave in Crete and finally emerged to subdue his father and force him to disgorge the young gods and goddesses he had swallowed. Thereafter, Zeus began his reign as king of the gods.

This was Hesiod’s attempt to bring rational order out of mythological chaos, but although he satisfied the Greeks theologically, he did not much alter the day-to-day practice of religion, which still defied order.

The Everyday Religion of the Household

The day-to-day observance of religion by the common folk of Greece was mainly a matter of household pieties and attendance at a public ceremony. In the countryside, the
chief concern was with Pan, the pasturer (a frisky male with horns, pointed ears, a tail, and goat’s feet); Demeter, the earth mother; Hermes (“he of the stone heap”); daimons (various kinds of spirits full of mana, some being closer than a brother—Socrates had one, he said); keres, or vague powers, bringing on such harmful states as old age, death, and destructive passions like jealousy and overwhelming pride; erinyes, the “furies,” punishers of lapses from the appointed path (moira), often set upon the living by the disappointed or outraged dead, bent also on correction or revenge; ghosts; “heroes,” that is, the noble dead, half human, half divine, and still powerful and protective; and chthonian deities, dwelling underground, to be appeased in fear for their association with death or to be revered for their fertility and resurrective powers. Besides all of these, country folk concerned themselves with omens, taboos, magic (by which to turn away ghosts and promote the fertility of the fields, the livestock, and womankind), and the longstanding traditional rituals of the household.

Meanwhile, townsfolk, besides adhering to the religion and magic of the household, attended the city festivals that honored the greater gods of the pantheon. To these we turn next.

The Athenian Festivals

By and large the Athenians thought of their deities by seasons of the year. The official year began in summer with a great sacrifice to Apollo, called the Hecatombaia, because one hundred head of cattle were supposed to be offered. Just before summer (May), the Thargelia honored him with a purification rite in which two filthy men, draped with black and yellow dried figs, were chased through the streets and driven as scapegoats from the city. In late summer and early fall, three other festivals celebrated his appearance of every day. The gods were not confined to their temples or to their heaven or nether realm, but were in the streets and houses of the people.” —H. J. Rose

Demeter and her daughter Persephone received honor in late summer and fall at no less than five city festivals. The first was the Eleusinia (not to be confused with the Eleusinian mysteries), held every two years and with great splendor every fourth year. In the course of its games the prize given to the winning athletes was barley from one of Demeter’s holy fields, the Rarian Plain. The other festivals (the Proerosia, Thesmophoria, Haloa, and Skirophoria) included a magic plowing, a seeding of the earth with suckling pigs and sacred cakes (a kind of fertility magic), and a magical ritual during which worthy matrons made broad jokes to encourage the fertility powers.

The greatest of the spring festivals, the Diasia, was in honor of Zeus. It included a holocaust, the Greek word for a whole-burnt offering. Hera was honored along with him in January during the Gamelia, which celebrated their “holy marriage,” and there were two other festivals, one in November and another in July.

Artemis’s connection with animals received notice at three fertility festivals in the spring, but the great god of the season was Dionysus. Held in April or May the Great Dionysia took six days to perform. It had, and still retains, great literary importance, because it was the occasion for the performance, under the supervision of the priest of Dionysus, of the immortal tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides and the comedies of Aristophanes. Religion and art were here memorably combined.

The Mystery Religions

Even while the Homeric pantheon was being established throughout Greece as the group standard for conceiving of the appearance and behavior of the gods, an excitingly satisfying way for the Greeks to feel the gods within them and thus to share in their immortal nature, made its appearance. This was the way of the mysteries—a way that offered to individuals private and personal religious satisfactions and assurances not provided by the official public sacrifices to the gods.

So ardent indeed became the devotees of these cults that they practiced their rites even when great public crises impended and average citizens were thinking only of a common danger. Herodotus, in a famous passage, tells of a rapt group that pursued the Eleusinian rites, even while Attica was being ravaged by the land army of Xerxes and the Greeks hovering off the coast were debating whether to hazard their fleet at Salamis. Witnesses on the Persian side were filled with superstitious dread, Herodotus says, when they saw
the procession of devotees going along the sacred way from Eleusis toward Athens, raising “a cloud of dust such as a host of thirty thousand men might raise,” and singing the mystic hymn to Dionysus. One said to another, Demaretus, it is certain that some great calamity will fall upon the king’s host. For, since Attica is deserted, manifestly it is something more than mortal, coming from Eleusis to avenge the Athenians and their allies. If it descends upon the Peloponnese, there will be peril for the king himself and his land army; but if it turns towards the ships at Salamis, the king will be in danger of losing his fleet. This feast is held by the Athenians every year for the Mother and the Maid, and any Athenian or other Greek who wishes is initiated. The sound you hear is the song of the Iacchos (Dionysus) which they sing at this festival.

And Demaretus answered,

Hold your peace and tell no man of this matter, for if these words should come to the king’s ears, you will lose your head, and neither I nor any man living will be able to save you."^{\textsuperscript{11}}

The mysteries were so called because they were rites that were kept secret from all except the initiates. Under the guidance of a hierophant (“the revealer of holy things”), the candidates underwent (1) a preparatory purification, such as a procession to the sea and washing in it, (2) instruction in mystic knowledge, usually given behind closed doors in a mystic hall, (3) a solemn beholding of sacred objects, followed by (4) the enactment of a divine story, generally in the form of a pageant or play, in which the cult divinities were impersonated, and (5) a crowning or wreathing of each of the candidates as a full-fledged initiate. Accompanying these acts, which might spread over a number of days, were processions and sacred revels, including night-long ceremonies, which simultaneously afforded a release of tension and a deepening of the sense of mystic participation in supernatural realities.

**THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES**

The oldest and most restrained of the mysteries were the Eleusinian. The central figures in the rites were Demeter and her daughter, Persephone, the Korê or Maiden. As everyone knew, the Korê had been snatched away to the underworld by Hades (Pluto) so that she might be his bride, but her mother, through long days of searching and mourning, had refused to make the corn grow, and at last Zeus bade Hades to allow the maiden to return to earth. But the unwary maiden had eaten a pomegranate seed, cunningly given to her by Hades, and when, as the hymn that has come to us from the seventh century BCE relates, her anxious mother asked,

**Child, hast thou eaten of any food in the world below?**

*Tell me; for if not,*

**Then mayest thou dwell beside me and Father Zeus,**

*Honored among all the Immortals;*

**But if thou hast,**

*Thou must go back again into the secret places of the earth*

**And dwell there a third part of every year,**

**And whenssoever the earth blossoms with all sweet flowers of spring,**

**Then from the misty darkness thou shalt rise and come again,**

*A marvel to gods and men."^{\textsuperscript{12}}

Alas, Persephone had to confess she had done that which required her annual return to the underworld. The entire story of Demeter and the Maiden was elaborately reenacted, mostly by women. At some time, Dionysus, as Demeter’s associate (he being the life force in vegetation, the vine, and reproductive animals, including humans), was introduced into the story; it is not clear when. The mystery itself was withheld from the public, but all of Athens could see the parade to the sea to bathe the candidates, and any citizen also could witness the procession along the sacred way from Athens to Eleusis bearing along the image of the young Dionysus (Iacchos). The participants hoped to obtain a “better lot,” a more glorious immortality in the next world, this, apparently, not as a reward of virtue, but rather by assimilation of the resurrective powers of Demeter, the Korê, and Dionysus. According to the hymn quoted earlier,

**Blessed among men upon earth is he who has seen these things;**

*But he that is uninitiate in the rites and thus has no part in them Has never an equal lot in the cold place of darkness."^{\textsuperscript{13}}

It should be added that this nonmoral hope shocked...
even the Greeks. Plutarch preserves a comment attributed to Diogenes the Cynic: "Is Pataikion the thief going to have a 'better lot' after death than Epaminondas, just because he was initiated?"  

THE DIONYSIAC AND ORPHIC CULTS
The decorous Eleusinian mystery cult was far surpassed in violence and excitement by the mythology of the Dionysiac cult. This had a Thraco-Phrygian origin and interpreted the intoxication that followed the ritual use of the wine of Dionysus as possession by the god. Poetry and vase paintings depict a mythical, sacramental communion with the god through eating the flesh and drinking the blood of a kid or bull identified with him and actually torn asunder—a rite called omophagia. The Dionysiac maenads (or Bacchae)—women devotees—were depicted as maddened by divine possession, "rushing" or "raging" in the frenzy of tearing in pieces the sacred animal. Also told about was the sad fate of Orpheus, the inventor of the mysteries of Dionysus, who became himself the victim of the rite of omophagia and was torn to pieces by the maenads in Thrace when, in grief at his second loss of Eurydice, he paid them no heed. Such, at least, is the mythology, if not the actual ritual practice.

The comparatively mild Orphic offshoot of the Dionysiac cult was spread throughout the Mediterranean world—or wherever Greeks were—including southern Italy, Crete, and Cyprus. The initiates of the suffering and dying god sought to strengthen the divine element in themselves by following the Orphic rules of purity, wearing white garments, abstaining from all meat, avoiding the breaking of taboos against sex indulgence and pollution, and being generally ascetic, as Orphism demanded. Thus they might refine the evil out of themselves and avoid going to the place of punishment after death. More positively, by being worthy they might hope to enjoy a better lot in the next world and at the same time increase their sense of spiritual security in this one. Ultimately, they might altogether escape the necessity of rebirth, in which the Orphics believed, and go to the Isles of the Blest.

That these ideas should have had a part in the development of one of the great schools of Greek philosophy may seem at first sight surprising. But it is true that in the philosophic brotherhood that Pythagoras founded, the Orphic coloring was strong. The Pythagorean brothers believed that the major task of one’s life was to purify the soul, and by following Orpheus (or perhaps Apollo) they hoped to bring their souls into a state of serenity, understanding, and godlike poise. Their studies in medicine, music, astronomy, mathematics, and pure philosophy were designed to nourish in their souls the divine elements, so that they would not hereafter have to suffer transmigration from earth body to earth body, but could regain a spiritual state of purity and insight.

This was not the only case of the search in Greek thought for higher ground.

Greek Religion and the Tragic Poets
The tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides revolve around the awful theme that disasters and doom are brought upon men and women by the gods. This is what the myths long had said, but it was not always clear whether the gods were impelled by a just purpose, by sheer willfulness, or by the decrees of an inexorable Fate to which even gods are, willy-nilly, the ministrants. The great dramatists addressed themselves to the human problems that this confusion raises, and in so doing produced passages of moral and religious reflection that have no parallel in ancient literature outside of the powerful utterances of the Hebrew prophets.

In the fifth century, Aeschylus and Sophocles more or less followed the poet Pindar in exalting Zeus to the moral height of being the administrator of a cosmic justice. The other deities continue to exist alongside Zeus, but they yield at once to his will when he overrules them in the name of the justice he is imposing. No longer is Fate blind. Aeschylus, in general, places Zeus in the superior position of either commanding Fate or being served by it. It therefore is really Zeus who dispatches the avenging Furies who punish the sins of mortals ever continuing and multiplying from generation to generation among the wrongdoers. Aeschylus’s great trilogy, the Oresteia, indeed vigorously declares,

Zeus, the high god!—whate’er be dim in doubt,
This can our thought track out—
The blow that fells the sinner is of God,
And as he wills, the rod
Of vengeance smiteth sore....
Though in _Prometheus Bound_ the tortured Titan, who is its central figure, defies Zeus as being unjust, it is evident that Aeschylus thought that Zeus had learned something from this encounter, and was in no doubt that the king of the gods should be approached with the utmost piety as the righteous moral governor of the world.

Sophocles, the wise, tenderhearted, and supremely poised dramatist, gave to the character of Zeus some of his own humanity of feeling. Following some hints supplied by Aeschylus, who, however, in general makes Zeus stern and fearsome in his moral fervor, Sophocles softens the great god’s judgments with mercy. He makes Polynices, for instance, in _Oedipus at Colonus_, begin his final plea to his royal father by reminding him that Clemency sits by the side of Zeus, sharing his throne and entering into all of his decisions, a fact that should influence earthly potentates and make them more merciful. Yet Sophocles also is sure that the favor of Zeus is not easily gained, for one must be pure in word and deed, as Zeus indeed wills from on high, if one is to experience at all the divine clemency.

Euripides, a generation later, filled with doubts that had perhaps been raised in his mind by the Sophists or by such bold minds as Anaxagoras, lifts his voice with less conviction in behalf of obedience to the gods. Although it is a difficult thing for us to decide when Euripides is putting words into the mouths of his characters and when he is speaking his own mind, it seems certain that he had come to question the justice and integrity, if not of Zeus, at least of Apollo, Aphrodite, and others among the gods. Often he pities mortals stricken and hurled to earth by the unpitying gods. For example, Euripides makes the proud and pure-hearted Hippolytus cry,

```
Ah, pain, pain, pain!
O unrighteous curse!...
Thou, Zeus, dost see me? Yea, it is I;
The proud and pure, the server of God,
The white and shining in sanctity!
To a visible death, to an open sod,
I walk my ways;
And all the labor of saintly days
Lost, lost without meaning.\textsuperscript{M1}
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Meanwhile a maiden of the chorus has already uttered the amazing reproof,

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Ye gods that did snare him,
Lo, I cast in your faces
My hate and my scorn.\textsuperscript{M2}
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And the men have chanted in discouragement overwhelming their uncertain faith,

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Surely the thought of the Gods hath balm in it
always, to win me
Far from my griefs; and a thought, deep in the
dark of my mind,
Cling to a great Understanding. Yet all the spirit
within me
Faints when I watch men’s deeds matched with
the guerdon they find.
For Good comes in Evil’s traces;
And the Evil the Good replaces;
And Life, ‘mid the changing faces,
Wandereth weak and blind.\textsuperscript{M3}
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But Euripides was by no means a total disbeliever, it would seem. He was really seeking a notion of God purged of the misconceptions of mythology and tradition. His true voice perhaps comes to us in the groping words:

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Thou deep Base of the world, and thou high Throne
Above the World, whoe’er thou art, unknown
And hard of surmise, chain of Things that be,
Or Reason of our Reason; God, to thee
I lift my praise, seeing the silent road
That bringeth justice ere the end be trod
To all that breathes and dies.\textsuperscript{M4}
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In this “strange prayer,” as the poet himself calls it, the questing spirit of Euripides, like that of his philosophic contemporaries, seems to seek a new theology.

The Philosophers and the Gods

That the philosophers would go far beyond the Homeric point of view was clear from the start. Greek philosophy began as monism: everything in the universe is some form or another of one thing. Thales said this substance was water. Anaximenes that it was air, Heraclitus that it was fire, and Anaximander that it was undifferentiated and infinite. Whatever it was, it was creative or divine, they all
agreed. Xenophanes was sure that the creative power was “one god greatest among gods and men, not like mortals in form, nor yet in mind. He sees all over, thinks all over, and hears all over.”\textsuperscript{K3} But human beings insist on seeing him in their likeness, and so have fallen into the anthropomorphic fallacy (the mistake of ascribing human shape and feelings to nonhumans), as J. M. Cornford put it:

Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all things that among men are a shame and a reproach—thief and adultery and deceiving one another.

Mortals think that the gods are begotten, and wear clothes like their own, and have a voice and a form.

If oxen or horses or lions had hands and could draw with them and make works of art as men do, horses would draw the shapes of gods like horses, oxen like oxen; each kind would represent their bodies just like their own forms.

The Ethiopians say their gods are black and flat-nosed; the Thracians, that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired.\textsuperscript{K6}

**PLATO**

Plato had a different criticism. In the *Republic*, where he considers the education of youth, he fears the moral ill effects of teaching the Homeric myths in unexpurgated form.

The narrative of Hephaestus binding Hera his mother, or how on another occasion Zeus sent him flying for taking her part when she was being beaten, and all the battles of the gods in Homer—these tales must not be admitted into our State, whether they are supposed to have an allegorical meaning or not. For a young person cannot judge what is allegorical and what is literal; anything that he receives into his mind at that age is likely to become indelible and unalterable; and therefore it is most important that the tales which the young hear first should be models of virtuous thoughts.\textsuperscript{N3}

A similar moral criticism is leveled by Plato against the mystery religions. The trouble with the mysteries is that they do not recommend justice for the sake of justice; they practice virtue for the sake of the rewards it brings, the “shower of benefits which the heavens, as they say, rain upon the pious.”

They produce a host of books written by Musaeus and Orpheus, … according to which they perform their ritual, and persuade not only individuals, but whole cities, that expiations and atonements for sin may be made by sacrifices and amusements which fill a vacant hour; … the latter sort they call mysteries, and they redeem us from the pains of hell, but if we neglect them no one knows what awaits us.\textsuperscript{N2}

Plato was far from denying the existence of the gods. But they were, he said, neither as wayward and fallible as Homer pictured them nor as easily swayed from impartial justice as the mysteries implied. They were true to, and dependent in function on, a higher power. There was above them, and behind all other beings and things, an Artisan, a cosmos shaper, committed to the highest of all values, the Good. It was he who in the beginning beheld the realm of ideal forms, which not even he created, and was inspired by them to make a world that participated in their structure and that, in mountains, plains, and seas, gods, humans, and animals, bodied forth the good, the beautiful, and true in various degrees. As for man or woman, each is a soul in a body, and the soul needs to grow toward the highest good, that it may no longer have to suffer imprisonment in a body and bondage to repetitive cycles of material history. Such a soul would be liberated into a state in which it would, like God, behold and enjoy forever the hierarchy of the ideal forms, in all their truth, beauty, and goodness. The gods, on their part, desire none of the superstitious worship and magical rituals that humans have developed in their honor. They desire and expect only that each soul shall achieve the fullest development and seek the supreme good that the high god has set before it. Firm in these beliefs, Plato, in his old age, contended that atheism or any assertion that God is indifferent to humankind or can be bought off by gifts or offerings should be treated as being dangerous to society.

**ARISTOTLE**

Aristotle, at least in his earlier period, found no need in his philosophy for the traditional gods of the Greeks, but yet, in considering the highest kind of being, had to posit God the Prime Mover, that is, a being causing all the movements of celestial and terrestrial bodies by attraction toward himself, while being himself actually without motion. Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Neo-Platonists were as much emancipated as Plato from the confining bonds within which their lesser countrymen were straining toward a fuller, freer life and greater wisdom.

**III. ROME**

What we have found to be true of the religion of Greece is even more true of the religion of Rome: the literature of the classical period is not a good guide to early religious
beliefs. The writings of the Romans whom we know best—those who flourished during the days of the late Republic and the early Empire—must be critically analyzed so that the references to the religion of early Rome may be isolated and given their proper value. For if we wish to form a true picture of early Roman religion, we must first lift off, as it were, the accumulated upper layers, representing the borrowings from Etruscan and Greek religions and the more esoteric importations from Egypt and the Middle East, and then proceed to look at the underlying ancient customs and rituals of the Latins.

Like its Greek counterpart, the Italian peninsula was inhabited at first by a non-Indo-European population. At some time early in the second millennium BCE there occurred invasions from the north by Indo-European (initially Celtic) tribes. Late in this period these tribes crossed the Apennines and settled down along the Tiber and on the hills to the east. They came to be known as the Latins, and their territory as Latium. They were not, however, to be left in undisturbed possession. They were joined in the eighth century BCE by a kindred people called the Sabines, who came down from the mountains to the east. Shortly before this, the territory to the north—historic Etruria—was settled by invaders, perhaps shipborne, from the eastern Mediterranean, the energetic Etruscans, who for so long were the chief enemies of the Romans and for a while dominated them completely. Incursions of foreigners occurred also in the far south, almost too far away at first for the Romans to pay any heed. Greeks began to settle in southern Italy in such numbers that the Romans would come to refer to the area as “Magna Graecia,” Greater Greece. Thus the Latins found themselves in the eighth century BCE between the Etruscans on the north and the Greeks on the south. Soon effects upon the development of their religious ideas and practices began to appear.

At first, Rome was one of the lesser Latin towns. Its rise to importance dates from the complete merging of its several communities on the famous seven hills and their enclosure in the sixth century BCE by a long, stout encircling wall. Gradually the surrounding areas came under its control; at last Rome became the leader of all of Italy. By the close of the third century BCE, Carthaginian resistance to Roman dominance was broken, and the Roman imperium thereafter extended itself over the entire Mediterranean world.

The Religion of Early Rome

The religion of early Rome had, like the city itself, humble beginnings. The chief holy places were at first outside of its territory. Diana was worshiped in the grove of Aricia on Lake Nemi, her temple there being sacred for the whole Latin federation, and on the Alban hill to the east all Latium united in the festival in honor of Jupiter Latialis.

In later times the Romans referred to the earliest strata of their religion as “the religion of Numa,” as though their traditional lawgiver, who could not have invented it, had prescribed it for them. It was a religion very close to magic, precise and scrupulous in its priest-centered functions, with much attention given to charms, taboos, and the reading of omens. Its most general feature was the attention it paid to supernatural forces or potencies called numina (sing. numen). This word, derived from a verb meaning to affirm (nod) or command, came to refer generally to efficacious power, a meaning suggestive to some of a free-floating power such as the mana of primal religions of the South Seas. But the terms are not equivalent: mana imbued persons and objects with power; numen flowed out from individuals exerting their will. The great gods wielded it impressively and conferred it upon mortals and upon the ritual scene, priests, altars, and sacred objects.

Deities dispensing numen were venerated by name in the earliest times, but the assignment of fully personalizing distinguishing traits came slowly. The early gods and spirits were assigned only a vague character. In fact, the spirits and powers of the fields and the farmhouse had so little distinct personality that the early Romans generally regarded them simply as forms or functional expressions of numen; they were assigned descriptive or personal names only to distinguish them from each other. Consequently, the Romans made no anthropomorphic images of them, had no pictures of them in their minds that they cared to draw on a wall or paint on a vase. It was only later that they learned from the Etruscans and Greeks how to visualize and humanize their gods.

The Religion of the Home

The early Romans were mainly engaged in farming, homemaking, child raising, and war. When they desired success in farming, they turned to relevant sources of numen known to and named by them from of old: to Saturnus for sowing, to Ceres for growth of grain, to Consus for harvesting, and to Ops for safe storage of the grain. Tellus made the tilled soil fruitful. Flora brought blossoms to field and bough, Pomona ripening to the fruit on the bough. Faunus presided over the woods, the Lares over the sown fields, the Pales over the open pasture where the livestock fed. Terminus was the numen of the boundary stone, Fons of the springs, and Volturinus of the running river. Even more minute subdivisions of function appear in pontifical litanies invoking twelve minor deities presiding over plowing of the fallow, second plowing, running the furrows, sowing, plowing under, harrowing, hoeing,
weeding, reaping, carting home, storing in the granary, and bringing out for use. Regnant over all, Jupiter as great sky father brought rain and sunshine. P1

In homemaking and child raising there was a similar assignment of deity to locus of numen (the process seems not to have been the reverse). Janus was the numen in the door, defending the threshold, and Vesta was on the hearth—just as Hestia had been in Greece. It was the responsibility of the man of the house, as its priest, to be on good terms with Janus, and of the women to worship Vesta at her place on the hearth and to present her with a portion of each meal before anyone ate. The Penates were the numina who presided over the cupboard, preserving its store of food from harm. At first indefinitely conceived, they were in later days identified with whoever was the patron deity of the home—Ceres, Juno, Jupiter, or someone else. More closely concerned with the history of the family, as a source of numen that exercised watch and ward over the whole household, was the Lar Familias. Originally the Lares were guardians of the sown fields and of the crossroads, then more narrowly of the family estate, and finally of the household in particular, receiving from the family regular worship on the Calends, Nones, and Ides of every month. A potency hard to define exactly was the genius, the energy and vitality of each male, considered the essence of his manhood. It was almost a separate being, a guardian and an exterior power, resident both in the man and in his marriage bed. Each male revered and was expectant toward his genius, as was each female toward her corresponding juno, but special honor was paid to the Genius Paterfamilias, particularly on the birthday of the family’s head. This genius was considered to be somehow symbolized by the house snake, a sort of double of the numen of the head of the house.

It should be emphasized before we go on that all of these sources of numen were honored and propitiated by a variety of ceremonies and festivals, whose essence consisted not so much in words as in acts, for in them religion was inextricably bound up in magic and taboo. Where we can recover enough of it for examination, the symbolism in these worshipful performances is usually transparently clear. The Romans wasted no time with vague sentimentality. A marked feature of all of their rituals was their severely formal character. The rules were precise. Black animals belonged to the gods of the underworld. Otherwise white, unblemished specimens were chosen: an ox for Jupiter, a sheep for Juno, a cock for Aesculapius. Libations were made from a bronze patera of a special shape. Internal organs, often submitted to a specialist for inspection and augury, were burned. The rest of the carcass could be cooked and eaten. We find no suggestion of close person-to-person relationships. Cyril Bailey characterized the typical Roman as being essentially practical.

His natural mental attitude was that of the lawyer. And so in his relation towards the divine beings whom he worshipped, all must be regulated by clearly understood principles and carried out with formal exactness…. Both sides are under obligation to fulfill their part: if the man has fulfilled “his bounden duty and service,” the god must make his return: if he does not, either the cause lies in an unconscious failure on the human side to carry out the exact letter of the law, or else, if the god has really broken his contract, he has, as it were, put himself out of court and the man may seek aid elsewhere. Q

“Ancient Roman religion knew no mythical histories of personal gods, no genealogies, no marriages or children, no heroic legends, no worship of legendary heroes, no cosmogony, no conceptions of life in the underworld—in a word, nothing of that which Homer and Hesiod had so abundantly supplied for the Greeks.” —Carl Clemen O1
The Religion of the State

The religion of the early Roman state was in essential respects the domestic cult nationalized. It was very well organized. The chief deities had priests (flamines) publicly assigned to them. But the state ceremonies were not always in their charge. In the time of the monarchy, the king was the chief priest and performed some important ceremonies. In all later periods magistrates frequently did the same, even though religious affairs were supposedly placed in the hands of the pontifices.

On the publicly prescribed days set down on the state calendar, which totaled 104 days of each year, the priests of the various deities performed a long list of ceremonies and sacrifices. They went about their tasks meticulously and dryly, whether or not anyone but themselves was on hand. They washed their hands, put on immaculate garments, and were in a state of moral as well as physical purity. Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) wrote concerning their prayers,

[The] words differ according to whether one wishes to obtain favorable omens, to ward off ominous auguries, or to present supplications, and we see the highest magistrates using precise formulae in their prayers; to prevent any word from being omitted or inverted, someone first reads out the formula from a written text, another is responsible for careful supervision, a third must give orders for silence, while a flute player is heard to cover all other noises.6

To which gods were all of these state ceremonies dedicated? In some cases no special deities seem to have been involved. We have the list, however, of the state deities who were addressed on the other occasions. This list, nothing is known any longer about Falacer and Furrina, although flamines were appointed to serve them. Others are hardly better known to us. Many dropped from public notice altogether in later days. Why is anybody’s guess. We may note, however, a significant fact: those that survived to enjoy later prominence were as important to the city as they had been to the country.

JUPITER

Jupiter (Diespiter or Diovis Pater = Father Jove) was of dateless origin. He is, of course, the Indo-European Dyaus Pitar, or Zeus Pater, and came over the mountains into Italy in the same manner as he entered Greece. As in Greece, he absorbed the functions of many local Italian gods. His most exalted title was Optimus Maximus. In consequence of being the god of lightning, thunder, and rain, he acquired the epithets Fulminator, Tonans, and Pluvius, and because he was the god of light, he was honored by having the days of the full moon made sacred to him. He predetermined the course of human affairs and fore-shadowed coming events by signs in the heavens and the flight of birds, which the augurs were appointed to read; hence he was called Jove Prodigious, the prodigy sender. His lightning was often a judgment, a catastrophic punishment for evildoing, for he was the guardian of the laws of the state and of the sanctity of oaths. In Rome, his temple was built on the Capitoline hill, whence he was called Jupiter Capitolinus. In later days, as the special protector of Rome, he shared in the imperial glories of that city and acquired such titles as Imperator, Invictus, Victor, and Praedator. He received the worship of the consuls of the Republic when they took up their offices. The celebrated “triumphs” of returning generals were spectacular processions winding through the city to the shouts of the joyous populace, carrying booty and captives to his temple.

MARS AND QUIRINUS

Mars and Quirinus were the two war gods. Mars, identified by the Greeks with Ares, was perhaps originally the protector of the fields and herds from inimical powers of any kind, animal, human, or superhuman. He became increasingly associated with war as the Roman imperium was extended, and his original character changed. But the homely, protective nature of his early activity is seen in the description Cato has left us of the procession of a farmer and his family along his farm’s boundary line three times around, accompanied by a pig, a sheep, and
an ox, the victims that were afterward solemnly sacrificed. During the sacrifice, the farmer offered libations to Janus and Jupiter, and prayed thus like a lawyer,

Father Mars, I pray and beseech thee that thou mayest be propitious and of good will to me, our house and household, for which cause I have ordered the offering of pig, sheep, and ox to be led round my field, my land, and my farm, that thou wouldest prevent, ward off and avert diseases, visible and invisible, barrenness and waste, accidents and bad weather; that thou wouldest suffer the crops and fruits of the earth, the vines and shrubs to wax great and prosper, that thou wouldest preserve the shepherds and their flocks in safety, and give prosperity and health to me and our house and household; for all these causes, for the lustration and purification of my farm, land, and field, as I have said, be thou enriched by the sacrifice of this offering of suckling pig, lamb, and calf.  

In Rome there was a similar state ceremony on the Campus Martius, the suovetaurilia (literally, boar-ram-bull), sacrifice. The core purpose was purification. Sometimes parts of the sacrificed animals were carried around a martial assembly of troops. 

Of Quirinus we know almost nothing, except that he was the war god of the community on the Quirinal, while Mars was from the Palatine. Quirinus was served by a flamen and had a festival dedicated to him that took place on February 17 (the Quirinalia).

JANUS AND VESTA

Janus and Vesta were ritualistically linked together as the first and last deities invoked in any ceremony. Janus, as the keeper of the door, was invoked at the opening of almost anything. He was the god of beginnings, and thus of the first hour of the day, of the Calends of every month, and, in the calendar of later days, of the first month of the year (January). His original symbol in Rome was simply a gateway standing at the northeast corner of the Forum. It was under the king’s charge, and later was assigned the services of a priest called the Rex Sacrorum, highest in dignity of all the priests. Like Vesta, Janus was not originally personalized; the door, opening and closing, was his only sign, just as the pure flame, guarded by the vestal virgins in the temple of Vesta, sufficed there to show forth the goddess.

Changes Due to Etruscan Influence

Though the facts are not entirely clear, it is certain that Rome came under Etruscan dominance during the whole of the sixth century BCE. This brought about some significant changes. The Etruscans were energetic and commercial minded. Recognizing the strategic position of Rome, they built a wall around it that enclosed enough space for a population of two hundred thousand. They sought to make residence in the city attractive to plebeians, and therefore favored them over patricians. And they introduced some entirely new trends in Roman religion.

The Suovetaurilia. The boar (sus)-ram (ovis)-bull (taurus) public sacrifice offered expiation and cleansing in behalf of citizens and military. Sketch of an altar relief at the Louvre, originally at the Campus Martius, Rome, ca. 14 ce.
New deities were brought in, without seriously disturbing, at first, the old entrenched customs. Diana left her grove at Aricia for a temple erected to her on the Aventine. The triumvirate of Jupiter, Mars, and Quirinus was overshadowed by a well-housed triad composed of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, established on the Capitoline in a bright new temple of Etruscan artistry.

The association of Jupiter and Juno, here begun, later led to their being regarded as husband and wife. This was the first clear instance of marriage among the Roman gods. The earlier Roman religion had furnished some instances of the yoking of male and female names, but this had signified so much less than marriage or family connection that scholars find in it only fresh evidence that the early Romans did not unambiguously know what sex their numina had: sometimes, to be safe, they gave them names signifying both sexes. But Juno became Jupiter’s consort and thus took on much more of the aspects of distinct personality than before. Originally, she had simply imparted numen to women and girls (as men had their genius, so women had their juno), and in the form of Juno Lucina she had been invoked at the moment of childbirth. Now she attained the characteristics that caused visiting Greeks to identify her with Hera.

Minerva may have been Etruscan. Her character paralleled that of Athena. She was the goddess of wisdom and the patroness of arts and trades. In due time her aid was sought in war; hence she was represented as wearing a helmet and a coat of mail, and she carried a spear and a shield in the manner of her Greek counterpart.

This visualizing of Minerva as an anthropomorphic deity points to an innovation of the Etruscans that was of the first importance. They set images of the gods in the temples they built. In the temple on the Capitoline, they erected two rows of columns down the center of the sanctuary, and at the northwestern end they placed three images—a statue of Jupiter flanked by one of Juno and another of Minerva. Here was the initial step that led to the imaging and personalizing of all the deities. Even Janus acquired a head—but with two faces, one looking forward and one backward. But these changes were not purely Etruscan.

**Borrowings from the Greeks**

Just as the political power of Rome under the Etruscans was extending southward through Italy, Greek cultural influence began to penetrate northward. Especially impressive to the Romans was Greek ritual. It provided vital elements of warmth and poetry hitherto lacking in Roman religion. The Romans on their part proved ready to adopt many new conceptions offered by the Greeks, without meaning to abandon any of their old ways.

Of far-reaching moment was the introduction into Rome during the sixth century BCE of a collection of oracles credited to the Cumaean Sibyl—the famous Sibylline Books. These books, stored in the basement of the Capitoline temple, were committed to a newly created order of priestly, two in number, the *duoviri sacris faciundis* (“the two charged with sacred matters”), whose number was later increased to ten and still later to fifteen. These priests were asked on many grave occasions to consult the oracles; in each case they afterward announced, without revealing the verses consulted, the course of procedure that they said was advised. Because the oracles were of Greek origin, the *duoviri sacris faciundis* usually prescribed as remedies for impending or present disaster, or for public perplexity, resort to deities and ceremonies not before known to the Romans, except perhaps by report. As a result, extensive adoptions into Roman religion took place.

It cannot be said that the Sibylline advisors suggested changes without precedent. Castor and Pollux had already been brought to Rome by way of the Latin town of Tusculum, and Hercules had also arrived by way of the town of Tiber. But the Sibylline Books gave impetus to a process that might otherwise have been slow. In 493 BCE their verses were interpreted to advise the erection of a temple to house Ceres, Liber, and Libera (= Demeter, Dionysus, and Persephone). A temple for Apollo, as a healing god, was next prescribed. Similarly, Greek rites in honor of Poseidon were imported by identifying him with the Roman Neptune. Hermes came to Rome also, but under the name of Mercury, for he was to be the god of commerce (*mercatura*). Later, in much the same way, and with an accompanying Greek ritual, Aphrodite made her appearance as Venus (who had been a minor Italian deity, perhaps of the garden). At about the same time, a pestilence led to the advice that Aesculapius, the god of healing, be
and Vergil, the poets of the future, was thus prepared. Remus, Aeneas, Tiberinus, and others. The way for Ovid and elaborated Italian myths about Romulus and imaginative minds fell to work on Roman traditions. 

The Greek myths were adapted to the Italian scene and built up out of the Greek elements into stories ranging over an international scene but with an Italian coloring. At the same time, inventive (if not supremely good fortune appeared also under the name of Fortuna. Each of these was given a separate temple within the city.

Along with all of this came increased interest in the myths and epics of Greece. As a consequence, many of the Greek myths were adapted to the Italian scene and to Roman history and were reissued in new form, although most were simply taken over with slight change, to become part of the Roman heritage. The life histories of Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, and others were built up out of the Greek elements into stories ranging over an international scene but with an Italian coloring. At the same time, inventive (if not supremely imaginative) minds fell to work on Roman traditions and elaborated Italian myths about Romulus and Remus, Aeneas, Tiberinus, and others. The way for Ovid and Vergil, the poets of the future, was thus prepared.

### Cults from Eastern Mediterranean Areas

As the Romans grew away from a completely agricultural economy toward an urban and imperial point of view, increasing numbers of people lost their rootage in the soil, and with it the meaning-filled activities of pursuing their own subsistence. There was room for speculation and skepticism.

Mystic cults, promising richer emotional satisfactions, came from the Orient. The first of these was the Magna Mater, Cybele, introduced from Phrygia on the advice of the Sibylline oracles. An embassy of five prominent Roman citizens went during the protracted crisis of the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE) to fetch a sacred stone, dropped from heaven, in which Cybele was thought to be resident.

But the city fathers took a rather sober view, on closer acquaintance with Cybele, of the wildness and fanaticism of her devotees. They passed a law, which was not abrogated until the Empire, forbidding Romans to enter her priesthood, because it usually meant their castration; she had to be served by priests brought in from Asia Minor. The people, however, were allowed to, and did, go to her temple to seek her aid, for this life and the next.

Upon Cybele’s arrival, the mystery religion of Bacchus (Dionysus), with its secret rites, followed. There was swift response to it, not only in Rome but throughout the Italian peninsula. But the upper classes hated secrecy of any kind and were highly suspicious of it; they came to believe the worst of the Bacchanalian orgies. Accordingly, the cult was suppressed by a decree of the Senate in 186 BCE. But it came to life again and was allowed to continue under the strict supervision of the state.

In the years that ensued, other Eastern cults gained a footing and grew in influence. Ma of Cappadocia, Adonis of Syria, Isis and Osiris (Serapis) of Egypt, and Mithras of Persia were all brought to Rome, and each in some measure supplied the religious experience and hope of immortality that the state religion, which had now fallen into the hands of agnostic politicians and of priests, failed to provide.

The appeal of the cult of Isis, which promised bodily resurrection and immortality, was particularly powerful. Four separate decrees from the Roman Senate and explicit orders from the emperors Augustus and Tiberius failed to suppress it. In the year 38 CE the Emperor Caligula reversed the official policy and gave orders that a temple to Isis be built.

### The Last Phases

The history of Roman religion during the last century of the Republic (150–49 BCE) suggests the operation of forces moving in a direction exactly opposite to those of an earlier time. The movement was no longer centrifugal, but centripetal. The state religion had degenerated into pure formalism—the structure was there, but it was empty and void. For one thing, Rome itself was like a deity (Dea Roma) and no longer needed the help of the old gods in the old way. Religion was something to discuss pleasantly over the dinner table or with friends in a moment of leisure, but apart from its value as a political binding element, it was of no vital concern to thinking persons.
Some Primal and Bygone Religions

by the Roman Senate in 42 BCE. As for himself, he permitted the erection of shrines in which his genius was worshiped (though not himself). These events set the stage for the introduction of an official imperial cult.

The Imperial Cult

In the provinces it became mandatory, as a sign of loyalty to the Roman imperium, to pay reverence to the Emperor’s genius, and sometimes to the Emperor himself. Although throughout life Augustus steadfastly refused honors to himself in person, it was inevitable that after his death his name should be enrolled with those of the gods and that a temple should be erected to him, with priests in attendance. Not all of the emperors immediately after him were accorded this honor, but in due time consecration of the emperor as a god became part of every imperial funeral. At last the aura of divinity came to attach itself to emperors before death. Caligula and Domitian were two who demanded worship while living, and Nero, vain of his musical and poetical attainments, enjoyed being equated with Apollo.

What is significant here is this: When it was apparent that the multiplicity of religions led only to centrifugal scattering, emperor worship was represented as an attempt to reverse the flight from the common center. But it was not enough; it just barely served. It served as a practical tool for controlling foreign areas. But in a fundamental sense, it was not cosmic enough, not able to link together individuals, society, and the universe under one inclusive meaning or purpose.

IV. EUROPE BEYOND THE ALPS

In the early history of Greece and Rome we met with bands of southward-surfing Indo-Europeans; in northern Europe we find them everywhere. (Later in our story we shall meet them also in India, Iran, and Armenia.) One of the puzzles of history is where these people originated and what sent them on their far-flung journeys, radiating outward like the spokes of a wheel, south, west, north, and southeast. But whatever moved them from their prehistoric homeland (in southern Russia and the Ukraine?), they succeeded, thanks to their mastery of the chariot, cavalry attack, and the wielding of long two-handed swords from horseback, not only in subjugating the resident tribes in their path, outnumbered though they were, but also in superimposing their language upon those current among the tribes they conquered, together with many elements of their magic and religion. The ancient Celts and Teutons developed religious practices and beliefs that, in spite of assimilation of many variant
local conceptions and customs, nevertheless illustrate what the original Indo-European worldview could become when not radically altered.

The Celts

We have already met the Celts (p. 50) in northern Italy. As far as we can determine from the uncertain records, the Celts moved originally from their first homeland to northwestern Germany, where they merged with proto-Nordic and Alpine tribes to form a new amalgam of ethnic groups often marked by tall, green-eyed, red-haired people. Then they broke up by migrating westward across the Channel to the British Isles, southwestward into France (Gaul) and thence into Spain, southward into Italy and Greece, and far to the southeast into Asia Minor, where they held on for centuries to the province to which they gave their name (Galatia, the place of the Gauls).

The Celts, according to the Commentaries of Julius Caesar, mostly worshiped a god Caesar identifies as Mercury, but he does not give us the Celtic name. (The god was possibly the Odin we shall meet later, a god of magic and the dead, and the source of the inspiration of orators and poets.) He says they also worshiped Apollo, Mars, Jupiter, and Minerva. To this list he adds Dispater, god of the netherworld, to whom he says the Gauls traced their origin. He is joined by Tacitus, the Elder Pliny, and Lucan in the statement that the Celts were led by their priests (the Druids) in sacrifices and animal and tree worship.

THE DRUIDS

It appears that there were three hereditary orders among the Celts of Gaul and of Ireland: priests (Druides), warrior nobility (equites), and artisans (plebs). The Druids as viewed in Roman sources evoked admiration (for their reputed wisdom, administrative skills, and magical powers) but also horror (for their barbaric sacrificial rites).

Under Druid leadership, ceremonies were conducted in forest sanctuaries, in homes, and in sacred groves. Caesar tells us that the Druids had political as well as religious functions. They played a role in the election of kings, served as ambassadors or legates, and took part in battles. Their teachings were preserved orally only and could not be learned without a long period of training, sometimes lasting up to twenty years. These teachings, according to Caesar, concerned not only religious and magical matters but also the movements of the sun, the earth, the planets, and the stars (as later studies of the precise solstice orientation of the Stonehenge have confirmed).

How truly Caesar understood what he described cannot be known, but it does seem probable that the Druids engaged in speculations that the world would someday come to an end, that there would be a doomsday overwhelming men and gods, when fire and water would swallow up the earth, the sky would fall, and all humankind would perish, to make way for a new heaven and earth and a new race of men. In any event, the Celts laid great stress on Fate as something that could only be delayed, never prevented.

NATURE DIVINITIES AND FERTILITY RITES

The Celts found divinity in nature all around them, for they revered it in the sky, mountains, stones, trees, lakes, rivers, springs, the sea, and every kind of animal—the boar, bear, bull, horse, hare, ram, stag, even the crow, and many female as well as male creatures—the cow, for example. (The snake also received its share of regard, so when St. Patrick came to Ireland, there grew the legend that he not only drove the ancient gods and goddesses into the hills and glens to serve a lower function as fairies, but also rid Ireland of snakes: in short, he could not tolerate veneration of them.) Some Celtic gods and goddesses were part animal and part human in shape. Others resembled Epona, the Gallic fertility goddess, who carried a cornucopia while on horseback or while seated among horses.

Another certain fact is that the Celts were much concerned with fertility in field, flock, and womankind. There were many fertility powers, male and female, and
a number of mother goddesses. It was common to revere the last in groups of three and to portray them holding in their laps children or baskets of fruit in evidence of their influence on fruitfulness. Among the recurrent ceremonies of the Celts was the May Day festival. The ancient Celtic festivals bore all of the marks of fertility magic. It was a widespread practice to light bonfires on the hills about May 1 and then do the following things: drive cattle through or between them, have the people dance a sun dance around them, bring new fires from them to the home hearths, and then carry some of the burning brands around the fields like shining suns. There also was a May king and a May queen who symbolized, or were thought of as incarnations of, the vegetation spirits in and below the ground. It is likely that they were given in marriage to each other to stimulate fertility in soil and flock.

**SACRIFICIAL PRACTICES**

Roman sources report incidences of human sacrifice (forbidden under Roman law) and their own steps taken to suppress the practice. They write that sacrifices were made not only to promote fertility but more generally to appease, thank, or gain the help of the gods. Though victims from the tribe were sometimes chosen—wives or children, at times—it was more common to offer up prisoners of war or thieves and other criminals. Murderers, for example, were turned over to the Druids for sacrifice to the gods. The Roman authors tell us that the victims were sometimes slain beforehand by arrows or by stakes driven through their temples, but it also was a practice of the Druids to build a large effigy of wicker or wood and straw, then to fill it with human and animal victims and to set it on fire. It may be assumed that such sacrifices were very special occasions, for example, in celebration of victory, or at the funeral of an important person, and that ordinarily only animal sacrifices were offered. Men and dogs joined in the feast after the sacrifice, the dogs, as Arrian tells us of the Galatian Celts, being decked with garlands of flowers.

In modified form, some of these rites have come down to our own day. Carl Clemen offers us the following instances from France:

> In the district round Grenoble to this day a goat is slaughtered at harvest-time … In Pouilly an ox is killed, its skin being kept till the next seed-time. Undoubtedly these animals represent the spirit of vegetation. In former days in Brie on the 23rd of June, and down to the year 1743 in a certain street in Paris on the 3rd of July, a human effigy was burnt, the people fighting for the debris…. Finally, there are certain phrases still current in many districts of France which contain an allusion to the killing of a human being or an animal at harvest-time. When the last sheaf is being garnered or threshed the people say, “We are killing the old woman,” or “the hare,” “the dog,” “the cat,” or “the ox.”

**The Teutons**

Appearing in history later than the Celts, the Teutons began to press westward from the southern shores of the Baltic as Anglo-Saxons and Jutes, southward as Saxons, Alamanni, Lombards, Frisians, and Franks, northward as Scandinavians, and southeastward as Goths and Vandals.

Teutonic tradition comes to us chiefly through two Icelandic works, the *Poetic Edda*, an anthology of hymns to the gods and heroic poems, said to have been assembled by Saemundr the Wise (1056–1133 bce), and the *Prose Edda*, the work of Snorri Sturluson, a thirteenth-century Christian, scholar, and skeptic, who tried to provide a practical manual for young poets who would wish to draw upon the traditional myths of Iceland for their material. Also important as authentic sources are the Norse sagas.
and scalds (poems), of which eight or ten are especially significant.

From these sources we get a rather crowded picture of a score of gods and goddesses, some ancient, some late, whom we must suppose to have come forward or receded in importance with passing time. One of the oldest was the sky god Tiw or Tiwaz (Ziu, Tiu, or Tyr), whose name has possibly the same root as Zeus and the Dyaus Pitar of the Indo-Aryans. (The name appears again in the word of Anglo-Saxon descent Tuesday.) He was originally the shining sky but relinquished his high place and predominance to become a god of law, fertility, and war. In contrast to him, Donar (Thumor or Thor), the red-bearded god of thunder (donner) and rain, and therefore of agriculture and the oak, grew in importance with the years, becoming the center of a cult that spread throughout the Teutonic world. Carrying his famous thunder hammer, Miollnir, in iron-gloved hands, as Thor he rode in a sky chariot drawn by two he-goats. He became the chief god in Norway and Iceland. (We now have his name in Thursday.) If Thor was popular with the common folk, one-eyed Wodan or Odin (also Othin), the cunning, if not tricky, god of earth, magic, and the dead, was exalted by the ruling princes and war chiefs, because he was, for them, a god of war who protected heroes and caused his two Valkyries or war maidens to carry warriors fallen in battle to his great hall in the sky, Valhalla. When traveling through the heavens, or visiting the underworld, he galloped upon the eight-legged horse Sleipnir, accompanied by his wolves, Geri and Freki. In heaven, he surveyed the world from the windows of Valaskialf, his home, supporting on either shoulder two ravens, Huggin (Thought) and Munin (Memory), who whispered in his ear their reports of all that they had seen while in flight. His dreaded spear, Gungnir, made by dwarfs, never missed. Knowing and seeing all, he was the source of the wisdom of seers and poets. (We still honor him in our Wednesday.) Snorri of Iceland calls him the chief of the Aesir, the gods in heaven, who dominate the Vanir, the fertility gods beneath. He is called All-Father, and he, as we shall see, assisted at the creation.

FERTILITY, DEATH, AND DOOM

Three things seem to have concerned the Teutonic peoples greatly—fertility, death, and the end of the world. As to the first, they did not put all of their reliance on the life-quickening rain of Thor. They turned also to Freyr (Frey, Fricco), symbolized by the stallion and the boar, “lord” of fertility in humans, animals, and vegetation, and lord, too, of summer; they turned as well to his twin sister and wife Freyja (the “Lady”). Freyr and Freyja were quite possibly son and daughter of the god of fruitfulness and wealth, Njörd, or Njörth, symbolized by the prosperity-bringing ship coming to shore after a voyage, and the goddess Nerthus, of whom Tacitus had so much to say. Freyr and Freyja were the divine May king and May queen whose magical embrace brought the revival of life in spring. But the cycle of spring, summer, and autumn was symbolized by other gods and goddesses, the most notable of whom is Balder, whose tragic death (autumn?) is recorded in the well-known myth. Balder (the blessed Light) was the kindest, most noble, and most gentle of the gods. His mother Frigg, consort of Odin and queen of the gods (for whom Friday is named), took oaths from all things not to hurt him, but she neglected to pledge the mistletoe. Thinking Balder invulnerable, the gods had great sport throwing every kind of object at him, always without harming him, but Loki, the malicious one and trickster among the gods, learned that the mistletoe had not been sworn and persuaded the blind but powerful Hödr (Höther) to hurl a sprig of mistletoe at Balder, and he was slain. Balder then descended to Hel, the world of the dead, there to await liberation at the end of the world. Sometimes in the Eddas, the
underworld Hel is personified by Loki’s daughter, Hel, a repulsive and dreadful creature who assigns to all who are sent to her their places in the underworld.

Death was a disturbing thought to the Teutons, for it was too often only the beginning of troubles. Until the corpse of a man decayed, it could do harm as a specter or vampire (a belief the Norse shared with the Chinese on the other side of the world), and the corpse itself was in danger of being torn to pieces by wolves out of hell, by horse-shaped demons, or by swooping eagles, such as the giant wind demon Hrafnsvigl. On the other hand, the spirits of the dead, if they had been good in life and were faithfully revered after death, could bring good fortune to their descendants.

The convictions concerning the afterlife seem confused. In later times the Teutons believed both that the dead lived on in their burial harrows and yet that they traveled nine days and nights by the Hel-way to the underworld, where they sat in the great hall of Hel on benches and drank beer (mead). But the warriors went to Valhalla—at least those whom Thor favored—and there they feasted on boar’s flesh behind the 540 great doors of the shield-thatched hall, and then rose to fight each other in the courtyard for self-conditioning and sport.

The reason the warriors of Valhalla adopted a regimen of self-conditioning lay in their knowledge that Wodan would need their services in the cosmic conflict that would take place at the time of the Doom of the Gods (the Götterdämmerung). At this point, Teutonic thought reached a certain profundity—or was it no more than a dramatic view of time and history?

SNORRI’S PROSE EPIC

According to Snorri (in the Prose Edda, reflecting the myths not only of the Viking Age but probably of earlier Germanic peoples as well), the first state of things, the Ginnunga Gap—a yawning gulf or opening suspended between a region of mist and cold, Niflheim, and a region of glowing heat, Muspelheim—generated from its rime and slush a cosmic giant, Ymir. In a similar way, according to a parallel tradition, there also emerged a cosmic cow, Audumla, whose milk-filled ud- ders fed Ymir and made it possible for him to generate other beings. Presently from under the hands and feet of Ymir came the frost giants; the cow Audumla also, while licking the salty ice to the north, de-iced and freed Buri, a giant who became the grandsire, through his son Bor and daughter-in-law Bestla, of Wodan, Vili, and Ve. Rising against Ymir, Wodan and his brothers slew and dismembered the primal giant, making the earth from his flesh, trees from his hair, mountains from his bones, the earth-encompassing sea from his blood, clouds from his brain, and the bowl of heaven from his hollow skull. (The Hindus and the Chinese have similar stories of the earth’s origin to tell.) From the sparks out of Muspelheim, the sun, moon, and stars were formed. The three brothers then took the eyebrows of Ymir to make a raised plain, called Midgard, to be the abode of men, and from two trees by the sea they formed the first man and woman, Ask and Embla, the parents of the human race. The three brothers also created dwarfs to live in dens under the earth and in stones and hills. In the region above the earth, they made Askgard, the abode of the gods, with its great halls and palaces, and between heaven and earth they put a rainbow bridge, guarded against the giants by the god Heimdall. So runs the story of creation in the Prose Edda, although other sources, such as the poem Voluspá in the Poetic Edda, tell the story somewhat differently, but it is not to our purpose to inquire further.

An uneasy world order was now established. The frost giants were exiled to the shores of Utgard, the earth-encompassing sea; the gods dwelt in Askgard and men in Midgard; the dead gathered in Hel, its gate in Niflheim guarded by the watchdog Garm. Off in the sea, all around the flat earth lay the huge submerged coil of the evil Midgard serpent. Outside the world in Muspelheim, the region of heat, were the ferocious Fenriswolf, bound by a magic chain of the gods, and the giant Sutr, the bold leader of the fire giants. The gods of Askgard, the rulers of this uneasy world, passed down Bifrost, the rainbow bridge, to stand under the world tree to pass judgment.

How exactly the world tree, Yggdrasil, fits into this picture is difficult to say, but the old tree was “the pillar” between the nine regions of the world. Under its three roots were the three regions where dwelt the dead, live human beings, and the exiled frost giants. The regions of the sky were sustained by its branches. (This is a conception the Teutons shared with the Celts, Slavs, Mesopotamians, Hindus, and numerous groups in central Asia.)
But the Teutonic peoples knew that this world order would not last forever. In a hall under the world tree dwelt the three Norns or Fates, representing the past, the present, and the future, who fixed the lot or destiny of each individual at birth. This was an important conception, for the fixed destiny or wyrd—from which the English word weird is derived—was a fate determined beyond appeal for gods and humans alike, and could not be stayed. The Norns would someday make known the hour of doomsday. That hour would come when the old tree would groan and tremble; the Fenriswolf would break his chain and come raging to earth; the giant Sutr would lead the fire giants in an assault upon the gods; the frost giants would storm in from the edges of the world; the Midgard serpent, thrashing heavily in the sea, would toss great tidal waves across the earth. The watchdog of Hel would set up a howl and let Loki lead his allies past him up to earth to join in the overthrow of the world order. The invaders would storm Bifrost, only to have that frail bridge break under them. Then the final battle of the world would take place on the plains of earth, with the gods and the heroes of Valhalla going down in defeat; humankind would suffer apparent extinction, and the earth would be burned up by the victorious forces of fire and chaos.

After a while, a new earth would emerge from the sea, and the sons of Wodan and Thor, together with Balder and Hödr released from Hel, would establish a new and more promising world order. Human life would begin again from two survivors of the Götterdämmerung and its accompanying world conflagration.

This remarkable conception of time and history links the Teutonic peoples with those of India, who also believed, and still do, in world cycles. It is obvious also that Christianity, when it came, could and did profit by the expectation of the death of the old gods and the return of gentle, cruelly slain Balder from Hel. The Viking resistance to Christianity delayed the conversion of Scandinavia until the tenth century. The kings of Denmark and Norway were baptized in that century, and Iceland adopted Christianity shortly afterward, about the year 1000.

The youngest of the Scandinavian epics, the Finnish Kalevala, reflects and transmutes the theme of the twilight of the old gods. A treasury of folk poetry first compiled in 1835 (but incorporating strands from at least three hundred years earlier), it accepts the inevitability of change with mingled sadness and appreciation. The hero Väinämöinen departs for lofty regions singing for the last time to the strains of his marvelous kantele (harp). He gives way to a virgin and her child, but he leaves behind the kantele, the heritage in song of the old ways.

V. MESOAMERICA: THE MAYA*

Six centuries (300–900 CE) spanned the classic flowering of Maya civilization, the most impressive of a constellation of Mesoamerican cultures. Scores of archaeological sites in the Yucatán peninsula and along the present borders of Guatemala and Honduras have revealed spectacular architectural achievements: lofty pyramid temples, ceremonial courts, and magnificent elevated highways. Most significant of all are the hundreds of monoliths (stelae) bearing hieroglyphs, many of them with specific calendric information. For reasons that may never be clear (climate change? soil exhaustion? social disintegration?), the great ceremonial complexes fell rather abruptly into disuse well before military incursions from the north brought infusions from other cultures, particularly the Aztec. Tropical vegetation and erosion relentlessly dismantled the material structures, while other Mesoamerican groups, and ultimately the Spanish invasions, imposed whole new structures of thought. Yet some distinctive Mayan conceptual frames and values endured to leave their marks on the culture of Central America today.

In religious terms, the significant Mayan marks are not so much in the aspects of Mayan culture that fascinate scholars and impress tourists: the architecture, the art, the glyphs, and intricate calendric system. Rather, they are the fundamental attitudes of devotion and the feelings for the sacred, which are almost universal among campesino peasants today. The Maya retain a devout attitude toward the sources of sustenance: soil is sacred, especially the milpa maize plot; and the maize itself is so treasured that it is spoken of with a reverential prefix, much like “Your Honor.” The ancient Mayans focused so sharply on the sacred significance of time that they assigned separate divine sponsorship to each day in the seasonal round. They found it natural that the fruits of the earth should be

*This account is based largely on works by David Friedel, S. G. Morley, Linda Schele, J. Eric S. Thompson, and A. M. Tozzer.
offered to the divine providers and shared with all of their human children. These views seem to foreshadow elements of liberation theology in Central America today.

The Shape of the World

For a detailed impression of Mayan cosmology (and many other elements of Mayan religion in the classic period) one must supplement meager hieroglyphic clues with accounts first written in the sixteenth century: the Popol Vuh (ca. 1530), Bishop Diego Landa’s Relación de la cosas de Yucatán (ca. 1560), and the Books of Chilam Balam. While it is hazardous to infer too much about earlier times from these records, occasional convergence of details with hieroglyphic information in codices and stelae suggests that major concepts in the mythology were preserved.

The Maya saw the dome of the sky as seven layered: six ascending steps in the east, a cap, and six descending steps in the west—thirteen compartments in all. The sky was supported by four gods, the Bacabs. Bishop Landa’s account says they were children of Hunab Ku, “single existing god,” a remote creator deity. The Bacabs were correlated with compass directions and colors: the red Bacab at the east, the white at the north, the black at the west, and the yellow at the south. Apparently the world rested upon a huge crocodile-like dragon, or perhaps on four of them—many deities appearing in four aspects, a configuration also found in the Cherokee vision of the shape of the world. In fact, J. Eric S. Thompson suggests a theory of common origin from ancient Asian migrations. The association of colors and celestial dragons with four world quarters he finds to be ideas “too complex and unnaturalistic to have been evolved independently in both Asia and America.”

According to the Popol Vuh of the Quiche Maya, the creation required three attempts. There was only water at the beginning. The creator gods spoke the word earth and land appeared. Then they produced vegetation and animals of the sort who could not speak to offer praise and also produced higher creatures made of mud. The mud creatures could speak, but they were unintelligent and they dissolved in water. There was a second creation using wood, but these puppets still were unintelligent and showed no gratitude. The other animals turned against them: “Why did you give us nothing to eat?” A few of the wood puppets escaped and became the ancestors of the monkeys.

In the third attempt, the ancestors of the Quiche Maya were made from the quintessential provender, a gruel of yellow and white maize. This time, the original four were too gifted; so the gods, not wishing humans to be so nearly their equal, dulled their vision with a bit of mist. Wives were created for them. Then the morning star appeared, the sun arose, and the humans worshiped their makers.

Thompson points out in his account that the culminating event was not the creation of humankind, but the dawn of time and the beginning of worship.

The Shape and Feel of Time

Both the hieroglyphic and the calendric systems probably originated with the preclassic Olmec culture but were vastly extended. There was a sacred year (tzolkin) of 260 days and a seasonal maize-crop year (haab) of 365 days. In the sacred year, a cycle of twenty named days (each with its glyph) was rotated, each having a number prefix from one to thirteen (see p. 63). The numbers were repeated so that at 260 days each number had been combined with each named day. The civil year was composed of nineteen months (eighteen months of twenty days and a closing month of five days). The interfacing of the calendars can be imagined as the meshing of cog wheels as illustrated. The tzolkin wheel will make seventy-three revolutions and the haab wheel fifty-two before they return to their original positions. Once every fifty-two civil years the glyph of any given “day bearer” will fall on the first day of the year and become the “year bearer.”

The foregoing suggests the mechanics of measurement, but it is the “feel” or the weight of time that is religiously significant. As Thompson puts it,

The Maya conceived of the divisions of time as burdens carried through all eternity by relays of divine bearers. These bearers were the numbers by which the different periods were distinguished. The burdens were carried on the back, the weight supported by tumplines across the forehead…. [In a hieroglyph] the night god, who takes over when the day is done, is in the act of rising with his load. With his left hand he eases the weight on the tumpline; with his right hand on the ground he steadies himself as he starts to rise. The artist conveys in the strain reflected in the god’s features the physical effort of rising from the ground with his heavy load.

Such imagery suggests the sharing of the good or evil fortune according to the aspect of the bearer god with whom the year began. Actually, only four day names could fall at the beginning of a year.

Thus if the year began with the day Kan, one could look forward to a good crop because Kan was merely an aspect of the maize god; if the day Muluc was the year-bearer, good crops would also be expected since Muluc was the rain god. On the
contrary, the influences of the day gods Ix and Cauac were malevolent, so years which started with them would be disastrous.

Lest the year-bearer omens seem to make for a rigidly fated future, it should be emphasized that there were many means of modification claimed by priests so that rites of expiation and hedging could be employed.

Finally, the Mayans’ obsession with time took them deep into the past and far into the future in their calculations: one inscription sweeps back 400 million years. Coupled with this was a conviction that history repeats itself, so that one can prepare for repetitions of good or evil eras if the calculations are accurate enough.

**Maya Calendric Cycles** The Maya identified each day in a 260-day Sacred Round by a combination of a number and a name. Represented on the left as cog wheels, the wheel of 13-day numbers turns inside the wheel of 20-day names, producing the $20 \times 13$ possible combinations. The cog wheel on the right represents eighteen 20-day “months” (plus a 5-day interval, “UAYEB”) making up a 365-day Seasonal Round to mesh with the Sacred Round. The central meshing shows how each day has two titles: a numbered name from the Sacred Round and a numbered month-name from the Seasonal Round. Only once every 52 Seasonal Years does any given year-bearer (like 13 Ahau shown center left) coincide with the beginning of a year. Such 52-year cycles constituted a Calendar Round. (Adapted from J. Eric S. Thompson, *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization*, 2nd ed., University of Oklahoma Press, 1966, p. 176. © 1954, 1966 by the University of Oklahoma Press.)

**Priests, Royalty, and Peasant**

The disparity between the grandeur of ceremonial complexes and the lifestyle of peasants dwelling in thatched huts by their slash-and-burn milpa raises many questions. Clearly there were hierarchies of a hereditary priest royalty that researched calendric detail and presided at the high temple complexes. In the classic period, these may not have been residential palaces but sites visited only for ceremonies. The stupendous expenditure of effort to build these complexes testifies to firm organization and centralized power. But how wide was the gap between priests and peasantry, and how much did relationships change over time? Thompson suggests that abuse of power may have
led to a breakdown of the compact between the elite and the peasantry and contributed to the rapid decline at the end of the classic period. On the other hand, the relatively infrequent appearance of military or coercive enforcement figures in hieroglyphs and art suggests that for most of the period peasants donated labor willingly and did not feel totally excluded from the cult system. Morley estimated that a Maya peasant or milpero could produce enough maize for his family in forty-eight workdays. "Here," he wrote, "is the surplus time—roughly nine to ten months—during which the ancient Maya ceremonial centers were built."\(^{[1]}\)

The highest office among the elite was the halach uinic or "true man," essentially a civil head chief but also ex officio a religious authority. Next there were high priestly ranks, the ahau can mai or "rattlesnake-tobacco" and ah kin mai or "priest-powdered-tobacco." Their main duties were the education and ordination of regular priests, ah kin "day prognosticators," who dispensed divinatory advice and presided at all but the most important ceremonies. There were also specialists, chilam, for trance prophesy and other functionaries for sacrifice. An order of virgins tended sacred fires in the temples.

### The Deities

Mayan deities appear in four modes. Following the pattern of Ake Hultkrantz, we will group the deities as (1) celestial and remote, (2) fertility and domestic, (3) death and war, and (4) calendric and ceremonial.

#### 1. CELESTIAL

Among the celestial deities the name Itzamna is prominent but the reference is complex. Often he is identified as son to Hunab Ku, the dimly apprehended “single existing god.” He is a creator, lord of day and night, the one who infuses the breath of life into humankind. But again he is a calendric deity, the patron of the day Ahau, the last and most important of the twenty Maya days. On the other hand, his name may derive from itzam (“lizard”), and he may be a deified culture hero from the city of Itzmal in northern Yucatán, portrayed as a bearded old man with a Roman nose. As a ceremonial deity Itzamna makes frequent appearances in the yearly calendar: at the New Year as an averter of calamities; in the month of Uo as a source of auguries; in the month of Zip as a god of medicine (along with his wife Ixchel); and in the month of Mac as a guarantor with Chac of a good crop. Itzamna in his special manifestation as Kinich Ahau, the sun god, is a spouse to the moon goddess Ixchel. Clearly a process of assimilation has interlaced deities known by a variety of names in local areas. A further process tended to favor an oversimplified dualism, assigning deities to either benevolent or malevolent groups. Itzamna was clearly in the benevolent camp.

#### 2. FERTILITY

Fertility and domestic deities were intimately related to everyday life, for the divine origins of human beings, the nourishment of their bodies, and the maintenance of their communal life were intertwined. According to Schele’s decipherment of seventh-century Chan-Bahlum texts from Palenque, there was a first Mother who shed blood causing maize—the raw material of humanity—to sprout from the waters of the Otherworld. By this act she taught people how to offer their blood to nourish life, maintain the social order, and commune with ancestors in the Otherworld.\(^{[1]}\) In later times the functions, related to fertility and domestic life, were assigned to several different deities.

Chac, the rain god, is the most prominent fertility deity. Ah Mun, the god of corn, and Ixchel, patroness of pregnancy, childbirth, medicine, and weaving, are also prominent. In the ancient codices the glyph of Chac, the rain god, appears more frequently than those of any other deity. He is honored also in four-color and directional forms along with the four sky-supporting Bacabs. His symbols are a “T” shape, suggesting that rain consists of his tears, and the snake, a water emblem. Associated with Chac is Kukulcan, “Wind,” sometimes as an alternate manifestation, and sometimes as a separate god. Chac is usually a benevolent deity, but occasionally, when his glyph is accompanied by the death symbol, he is connected with cloudburst damage, floods, or rotting harvests.

Ah Mun is the god of all crops, but maize, of course, is preeminent. He is universally depicted as a youth with a corn cob as a headress. He is not powerful in himself. Sometimes he is pictured as under the protection of the rain god, and sometimes he is in combat with the death god. In the myths of the origin of corn it is not this stripling but one of the four great Chacs whose thunderbolt finally (after the three other Chacs have failed) splits open the mountain rock and releases the maize. Occasionally he is associated with Yum Kaax, “the lord of the forest.”

Ixchel, the patroness of human fertility, childbirth, medicine, and weaving, must have inherited these functions from a major preclassical mother goddess. She holds them apart from the mythic tales that first cast her as wanton wife to the Sun, and then elevated the couple to Sun God and Moon Goddess. In the

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"The Maya did not set the human race so far apart from the rest of created life as we do, but then the Maya had and still has a deeper sense of his unimportance in creation." —J. Eric S. Thompson\(^{[2]}\)
myths her light as the moon is dim because the sun did not want her to match his brilliance and tore out one of her eyes. Perhaps because her sun husband was associated with the benevolent Itzamna, the dualistic sorting process saw her, on balance, as malevolent. Snake symbolism associates her with water. Perhaps she was once Mistress of the Waters, but the beneficent aspects of this role are assigned to Chac. An illustration in the Dresden codex associates her with the old woman who destroys the world in a flood. Yet Ixchel’s nurturant roles as mother and midwife, weaver and healer through medicine, magic, and divination are not extinguished. For centuries her image was placed underneath the marriage bed in the hope of promoting conception. As for confusion in later days, the title of “Our Mother,” together with the fact that Spanish paintings sometimes showed the Virgin Mary standing on a crescent, could not fail to reinforce identifications with this moon goddess/mother goddess. Does not the cycle of time bring round the same deities in alternate forms?

3. DEATH AND WAR

The gods personifying death and war probably gained most prominence near the end of the classical period. Their realm was beneath the earth. Ah Puch, the god of death, has a skull for a head, bare ribs, and spiny vertebral projections. If he is shown with flesh, it is bloated and covered with black circles signifying putrefaction. As chief demon Hunhau, he presided over the lowest of the nine Maya underworlds. His companions included the dog and the owl. Ixtab, the goddess of suicide, deserves mention chiefly because the Maya believed that suicides went directly to heaven. She is shown hanging from the sky by a loop of rope. The god of war, depicted with black around his eye and down his cheek, ruled over violent deaths and sacrifices. At such ceremonies he is pictured with black around his eye and down his cheek, ruled over violent deaths and sacrifices. At such ceremonies he is often paired with the god of death. The sacrificial flint knife is one of his emblems. An ambivalent black deity Ek Chuah was in one role a war captain and a merchant of death, but in another as a benevolent sponsor of traveling merchants and patron of the crop cacao.

4. CALENDRIC AND CEREMONIAL

The calendric and ceremonial deities sponsored the thirteen segments of the upper world and the nine levels of the lower world. There was a single god for each world level, but each segment also could be conceived as having a separate sponsoring deity. There were nine glyphs for the deities of the lower world, and it may be that the glyphs for the first thirteen numerals applied also to the deities of the upper world, but they have other identifications with more prominent deities. The thirteen different katuns or twenty-year periods each had a patron as did the nineteen months of the Maya year and the twenty day names. Certainly there was plenty of material for the curriculum of the priestly seminaries!

Rites of Passage

Each stage of a person’s life was dominated by calendric horoscopes interpreted by priests. Among the highland Cakchiquel Maya even the name of a child was fixed automatically as the day name of the date of his or her birth. If this was the practice in northern Yucatán during the classical age, it had been abandoned before the Spanish arrived. More commonly, children were carried to a priest for a horoscope and for the conferring of four individual names: the given name, the father’s family name, the combined family names of both parents, and a nickname. As was the practice of the Cherokee in later times, the classical Maya used boards and bindings to flatten the foreheads of infants.

At the age of three or four, boys had a white bead tied in their hair and girls began to wear a red shell (symbolic of virginity) tied to a waistband. When children reached puberty, these emblems would be removed at a family ceremony. Bishop Landa described the rite, saying that the Maya name for it was “the descent of the gods.” After purificatory bathing and questioning about their habits in regard to personal purity, candidates had a white cotton cloth put over their heads. After the cloth had been tapped nine times with a sacred bone, there would be further anointing with “virgin” water (collected in caves and presumably not contaminated by seeping through soil), sharing wine, tobacco, and a neighborhood feast. Guests would be sent away with pieces of the white head cloths as talismanic gifts. Soon after puberty, boys would move into the unmarried men’s house but would continue to spend their days working for their fathers. Girls remained at home and were considered marriageable after puberty.

Marriages, usually arranged by a professional matchmaker, always involved a bride price. Even the “dowry” of household necessities was furnished by the groom’s family, and the groom pledged himself to work for the bride’s father for a period of six or seven years. These customs have survived among the Maya of the present day.

In funerary rites and burials the contrast between peasants and the elite was extreme. At the peasant level the body of the deceased would be wrapped in cloth after putting some maize and a jade bead or two (money) in the mouth. The body was buried along

“As maize cannot seed itself without the intervention of human beings, so the cosmos required sacrificial blood to maintain life.” —Linda Schele

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with a few images and some work tools behind the hut or under its floor. Commenting on Christian burial crypts, a modern Mam Maya in Guatemala remarked that bodies should be right by the maize plot. “The earth gives us food; we should feed it.”

**Individual Offerings and Prayers**

Maize was absolutely the essence of the milpero’s working life and sustenance. Even in present times with other grains available, it is 80 percent of his diet. Treasuring maize and showing honor by addressing it as “Your Grace” and making offerings to it came naturally. As Thompson writes, “The maize seems to be fighting beside him in an unending defense against every kind of enemy.” With such a vivid sense of alliance it is no wonder that the Maya personified maize and placated it with offerings.

Before clearing land or sowing, the Maya fasted, practiced continence, and made offerings. Sometimes the offering was his own blood drawn by piercing the ear, the tongue, or the foreskin and drawing a straw through it. The offered blood could be smeared on the mouth of an idol or allowed to drop on the milpa. Alternatively the supplicant might make an offering of copal (an aromatic resin burned as an incense) or pour out a libation of balche, a fermented corn beer. The principle “Do ut des” (I give so that you will give) does not seem at all crass to the Maya, nor does it diminish his devout expressions of gratitude. Prayer is a sensible way of making a contract explicit. Thompson writes,

> Maya prayer is directed to material ends; I cannot imagine a Maya praying for ability to resist temptation, to love his neighbors better, or for deeper insight into the ways of God or his gods. There is no concept of goodness in his religion, which demanded a bloody, not a contrite heart.

There are reinforcing tales of retribution visited upon those who failed to make a milpa offering. One such milpero saw a tall man—Chacs were reputed to be tall—stripping ripening ears from his crop. “I am here gathering that which I sent.” The tall one lights a cigar with a lightning bolt, disappears in a thunderclap, and promptly a hailstorm destroys the remaining crop of the peasant who did not pay up.

**Public Ceremonial Sacrifices**

At the ceremonial centers the priests presided over sacrifices of animals and human beings. The crucial act was cutting out the heart and thrusting it into the mouth of a hungry idol. Human sacrifice was in no way as frequent among the Maya as it was to become among the warlike Aztecs of later times. Among the Maya it was clearly viewed not so much as a punishment as a test of devotion and the offering of a costly gift. To be sure, most victims were not volunteers but slaves, malefactors, war captives, or persons who had made an error in carving a sacred image or a monolith. It appears that courage and decorum on the part of the victim were expected and usually obtained on the basis of trust in the afterlife.

Offerings of all kinds to the rain gods and the water spirits took place at cenotes (natural deep cisterns) and wells. Young girls were preferred because of their purity. Each was instructed to take questions to the water deities. At midday, if they were still alive, they would be pulled out to report the answers. The chances of surviving were slim. Thompson writes that the victims may have been bound: “A victim paddling around in the water for several hours in no way enhanced the dignity of the rite.” He adds that most victims were devout and cooperative but that there was a tale of “one pert hussy who roundly declared that if she were thrown in, she’d be damned if she would ask the gods for a good maize crop or anything else.” Another victim was sought, presumably a more pious girl.

The fact that we are startled by the spunk of the aforementioned “pert hussy” suggests that Mayan civilization was thoroughly unlike her in spirit. Perhaps no religion in the world was ever so obsessed as the Mayans were with calendric and horoscopic clues to fate and how to escape it. And perhaps none were so devoutly committed to the acceptance of fate.
astrology a method of predicting the course of individual lives and world events by relating them to the movements and positions of stars and planets

chthonian (tho’njān) forces, powers, or deities dwelling in or under the earth

daimon a spirit full of mana, often an inward mentor, a source of inspiration and a moral guardian to an individual

Druid a member of a Celtic order of priest magicians or wizards whose rituals, centering on animal and tree worship, were said to include human sacrifice

genius a male guiding (tutelary) spirit or daimon, originally specific to the head of the clan, but later applied to an individual or a place

juno a female tutelary spirit, counterpart to a genius

moira what is allotted, fate in Greek thought

numen divine potency emanating from a deity, person, or thing; sometimes the divine part of a deified person

oracle a divine or an especially authoritative revelation (or the person who delivers it), often an ambiguous or enigmatic utterance spoken through a medium in a trance state

pantheon a set of deities, usually all of the divine beings venerated in a culture or region

theogony an account of the origin of the gods

wyrd a Teutonic term for “what happens,” chance, fate, or destiny, sometimes generically personified, sometimes conceived as operating through three personifications called Norns

ziggurat a type of pyramidal structure erected by ancient Mesopotamians, a human-made mountain with stepped-back terracing encased in brick and topped by a shrine

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GLOSSARY

SUGGESTED READINGS
