

# Preface

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SOMETIME AROUND 1770 BC, Zimri-Lim, king of the walled city of Mari on the banks of the Euphrates, got exasperated with his youngest daughter.

A decade earlier, Zimri-Lim had married his older daughter Shimatum to the king of another walled and sovereign city called Ilansura. It was a good match, celebrated with enormous feasts and heaps of presents (mostly from the bride's family to the groom). Zimri-Lim's grandchildren would eventually be in line for the throne of Ilansura, and in the meantime the king of Ilansura would become an ally, rather than another competitor among the crowd of independent cities fighting for territory along the limited fertile stretches of the Euphrates.

Unfortunately, grandchildren didn't arrive as soon as hoped. Three years later Zimri-Lim, still hoping to make the alliance with Ilansura permanent, sent the king another daughter: Shimatum's younger sister Kirum. Kirum, sharp-tongued and ambitious, was expected to take her lawful place as second wife and servant to her sister. Instead, she decided to lobby for a position as the king's first wife. She involved herself in politics, commandeered servants for her personal use, sneered at her sister, and generally queened it about the palace—until Shimatum gave birth to twins.

Immediately the childless Kirum plummeted in the palace hierarchy. "No one asks my opinion any more," she complained, in letter after letter to her father. "My husband has taken away my very last servants. My sister says that she will do whatever she wants to me!"

Given Kirum's behavior to her sister in the early years of her marriage, it is unlikely that "whatever she wants" involved anything good; and indeed, Kirum's letters soon begged her father for rescue. The plea "Bring me home or I shall surely die!" progressed to "If you do not bring me back home to Mari, I will throw myself from the highest roof in Ilansura!"

Zimri-Lim had hoped to make the king of Ilansura his friend. Unfortunately, leaving Kirum in the the man's household wasn't doing much to increase the goodwill between the two families. Seven years after the wedding, Zimri-Lim gave up, made a royal journey north, and in the words of his own court records, "liberated the palace of Ilansura" by bringing Kirum home.<sup>1</sup>

THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO, groups of hunters and gatherers roamed across Asia and Europe, following mammoth herds that fed on the wild grasses. Slowly the ice began to retreat; the patterns of the grass growth changed; the herds wandered north and diminished. Some hunters followed. Others, deprived of the meat that was central to their diet, harvested those wild grasses and, in time, began to plant some of the grasses for themselves.

Probably.

EVEN THOUGH world histories routinely begin with prehistoric times, I suspect that prehistory is the wrong starting place for the historian. Other specialists are better equipped to dig into the murk of the very distant past. Archaeologists unearth the remnants of villages built from mammoth bones; anthropologists try to reconstruct the lost world of the villagers. Both are searching for a hypothesis that fits the evidence, a lens that will reveal groups of people moving from east to west, abandoning mammoth meat for barley, and digging pits for their extra grain.

But for the historian who hopes not just to explain *what* people do, but in some measure *why* and *how* they do it, prehistory—the time before people began to write and tell stories about their kings, their heroes, and themselves—remains opaque. Whatever the archaeologist concludes about that group called “Neolithic man,” I know nothing about the days and nights of a Neolithic potter, constructing his ring-rimmed pots in a village in the south of France. The tracks of the hunters and gatherers (pots, stone flakes, bones of people and animals, paintings on cliffs and cave walls) reveal a pattern of life, but no story emerges. There are no kings and wives in prehistory. Stripped of personality, prehistoric peoples too often appear as blocks of shifting color on a map: moving north, moving west, generating a field of cultivated grain or corralling a herd of newly domesticated animals. The story of these nameless people must be told in the impersonal voice that mars too many histories: “Civilization arose in the Fertile Crescent, where wheat was planted for the first time on the banks of the Euphrates. The development of writing soon followed, and cities were established.”

Any time the historian is forced to resort to hugely general statements about “human behavior,” she has left her native land and is speaking a foreign language—usually with a total lack of fluency and grace. This kind of impersonal history (heavy on the passive verbs) is stupefyingly dull. Worse, it is inaccurate. The Fertile Crescent had no monopoly on farming; small groups all over Asia and Europe began planting grain as the weather warmed, and in any case the Fertile Crescent was mostly a howling waste.

Anthropologists can speculate about human behavior; archaeologists, about patterns of settlement; philosophers and theologians, about the motivations of “humanity” as an undifferentiated mass. But the historian’s task is different: to look for particular human lives that give flesh and spirit to abstract assertions about human behavior.

It was not easy to be a petty king in the ancient Near East. Zimri-Lim spends half of his time fighting the kings of other cities, and the other half trying to negotiate his complicated personal life. His queen, competent and politically astute Shiptu, runs the city of Mari while her husband goes off to fight yet another war. She writes to him, in the height of a Mediterranean summer, “Be sure to take care of yourself when you are in the full rays of the sun! . . . Wear the robe and cloak that I have made for you! . . . My heart has been greatly alarmed; write me and tell me that you are safe!” And Zimri-Lim writes back: “The enemy has not threatened me with weapons. All is well. Let your heart no longer be afflicted.”<sup>2</sup> In thousands of cuneiform tablets unearthed on the banks of the Euphrates, Zimri-Lim emerges both as a typical Mesopotamian king, and as an individual: a much-married man with little talent for fatherhood.

So rather than beginning with cave paintings, or anonymous groups of nomads wandering across the plains, I have chosen to begin this history at the point where particular human lives and audible human voices emerge from the indistinct crowds of prehistory. You will find some prehistory, borrowed from archaeology and anthropology, in the chapters that follow (and along with it, some inevitable use of the impersonal voice). But where this prehistory appears, it serves only to set the stage for the characters who wait in the wings.

I have made careful use of epic tales and myths to flesh out this prehistory. The first personalities that bob up from the surface of ancient history seem to be part man and part god; the earliest kings rule for thousands of years, and the first heroes ascend to the heavens on eagle’s wings. Since the eighteenth century (at least), western historians have been suspicious of such tales. Trained in a university system where science was revered as practically infallible, historians too often tried to position themselves as scientists: searching for cold hard facts and dismissing any historical material which seemed to depart from the realities of Newton’s universe. After all, any document which begins, as the Sumerian king list does, “Kingship descended from heaven” can’t possibly be trustworthy as history. Much better to rely on the science of archaeology, and to reconstruct the earliest days of Sumer and Egypt and the Indus valley settlements around tangible physical evidence.

But for the historian who concerns herself with the why and how of human

behavior, potsherds and the foundations of houses are of limited use. They give no window into the soul. Epic tales, on the other hand, display the fears and hopes of the people who tell them—and these are central to any explanation of their behavior. Myth, as the historian John Keay says, is the “smoke of history.” You may have to fan at it a good deal before you get a glimpse of the flame beneath; but when you see smoke, it is wisest not to pretend that it isn’t there.

In any case, we should remember that all histories of ancient times involve a great deal of speculation. Speculation anchored by physical evidence isn’t, somehow, more reliable than speculation anchored by the stories that people choose to preserve and tell to their children. Every historian sorts through evidence, discards what seems irrelevant, and arranges the rest into a pattern. The evidence provided by ancient tales is no less important than the evidence left behind by merchants on a trade route. Both need to be collected, sifted, evaluated, and put to use. To concentrate on physical evidence to the exclusion of myth and story is to put all of our faith in the explanations for human behavior in that which can be touched, smelled, seen, and weighed: it shows a mechanical view of human nature, and a blind faith in the methods of science to explain the mysteries of human behavior.

Nevertheless, history constructed around very ancient stories involves just as much theorizing as history constructed around very ancient ruins. So I have tried to indicate the point at which written records begin to multiply, and conjecture becomes a little less conjectural (“Part Two”). Historians don’t always bother to give the reader this kind of heads-up; many leap from “Mesolithic man grew steadily better at making weapons” to “Sargon spread his rule across Mesopotamia” without noting that those two statements are based on very different kinds of evidence, and bear very different degrees of ambiguity.

In this volume, we will not spend a great deal of time in Australia, or the Americas, or for that matter Africa, but for a slightly different reason. The oral histories of these cultures, old as they are, don’t stretch back nearly as far as the oldest lists of kings from Mesopotamia, or the first memorial tablets to Egyptian kings. However, the whole idea of linear time that gives us such a neat outline for history—prehistory, ancient history, medieval history, and on towards the future—is not African or Native American; it is a very western creation (which in no way diminishes its usefulness). As archaeologist Chris Gosden points out in his primer on prehistory, native peoples such as the Aborigines of Australia had no native concept of “prehistory.” So far as we can tell, they thought of past and present as one until Westerners arrived, bringing “history” with them—at which point their prehistory came to a sudden end. We will meet them then: an approach which may not be ideal, but at least avoids doing violence to their own sense of time.

One additional note: Dating anything that happened before Hammurabi (c. 1750 BC) is problematic. Even Hammurabi's accession has an error factor of fifty years or so on either side, and by the time we go back to 7000 BC the error factor is closer to five or six hundred years. Before 7000 BC, assigning dates takes place in a polite free-for-all. Writing about anything that happened from the beginning of time through about 4000 BC is further complicated by the fact that there are several different systems in place for labelling the eras of "prehistory," none of which is in total agreement with any other, and at least one of which is just plain wrongheaded.

I have chosen to use the traditional designations BC and AD for dates. I understand why many historians choose to use BCE and CE in an attempt to avoid seeing history entirely from a Judeo-Christian point of view, but using BCE while still reckoning from Christ's birth seems, to me, fairly pointless.



P a r t O n e



THE  
EDGE  
OF  
HISTORY





## Chapter One

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# The Origin of Kingship

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*Just north of the Persian Gulf, in the very distant past,  
the Sumerians discover that cities need rulers*

**M**ANY THOUSANDS of years ago, the Sumerian king Alulim ruled over Eridu: a walled city, a safe space carved out of the unpredictable and harsh river valley that the Romans would later name Mesopotamia. Alulim's rise to power marked the beginning of civilization, and his reign lasted for almost thirty thousand years.

The Sumerians, who lived in a world where the supernatural and the material had not yet been assigned to different sides of the aisle, would not have choked over the last part of that sentence. On the other hand, they would have found Alulim's placement at "the beginning of civilization" extremely hard to swallow. In their own minds, the Sumerians had always been civilized. Alulim's kingship, recorded in the Sumerian king list (perhaps the oldest historical record in the world), "descended from heaven" and was already perfect when it arrived on earth.

But looking back, we see the coming of the first king in different perspective. It is a sea change in the condition of man, the beginning of a whole new relationship between people, their land, and their leaders.

We can't date Alulim's reign, since he is not mentioned in any other records, and since we don't know how old the Sumerian king list itself is. The list was set down on clay tablets sometime after 2100 BC, but it undoubtedly preserves a much older tradition. More than that: the chronology given by the Sumerian king list doesn't exactly match the past as we know it. "After kingship had descended from heaven," the king list tells us, "Alulim reigned 28,000 years as king; [his heir] Alalgar reigned 36,000 years."<sup>1</sup>

The length of these reigns may suggest that both of these kings are actually demigods, drawn from mythology rather than history; or perhaps, simply that Alulim and his heir ruled for a very long time. According to the Sumerians,

eight kings ruled before the enormous catastrophe of Sumerian history occurred and “the Flood swept over” the land. Each reign lasted for a multiple of thirty-six hundred years, which suggests that the king list involves a kind of reckoning we don’t understand.\*

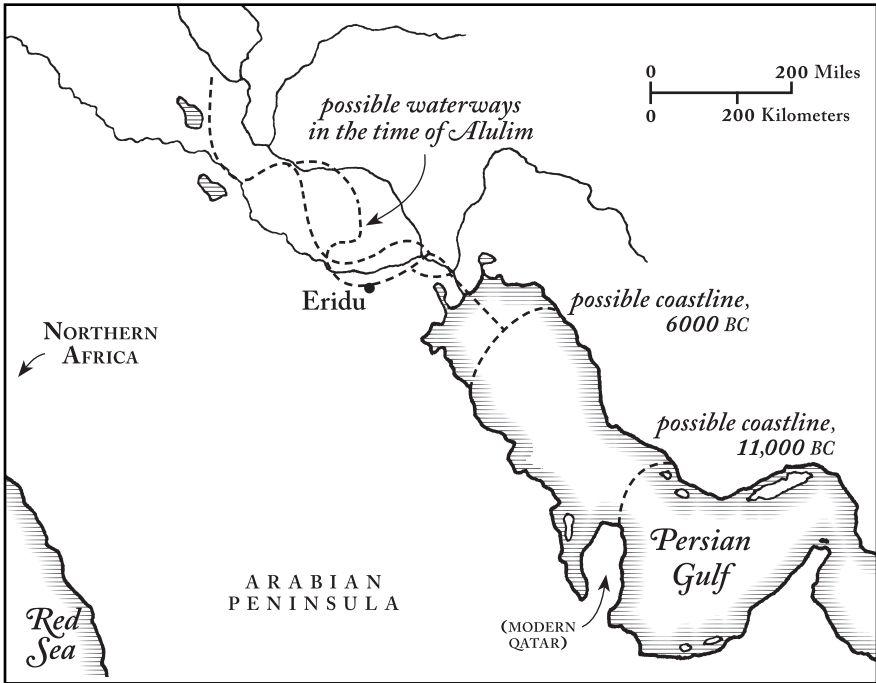
What we *can* do is place the first Sumerian king in the distant past. Whenever he reigned, Alulim lived in a land probably quite different from the Mesopotamia we know today, with its familiar two rivers—the Tigris and the Euphrates—running into the Persian Gulf. Geologists tell us that, just before the beginning of history (the date 11,000 BC, although far from precise, gives us a reference point), ice spread down from the polar caps far to the south, down almost to the Mediterranean Sea. With so much water contained in ice, the oceans and seas were lower; the northern end of the Gulf itself was probably a plain with streams running through it, and the ocean lapped up against a shore that lay roughly level with modern Qatar. Rain fell regularly, so that the land was watered.

As the climate began to warm and the ice caps began to melt—a process that geologists assign to the five thousand years between 11,000 and 6000 BC—the ocean crept up past Qatar, past the modern territory of Bahrain. Settlements retreated before the rising water. By 6000 BC, Britain—previously a peninsula jutting off from Europe—had become an island, and the shore of the Persian Gulf had crept up to the southern border of Kuwait. The plain that lay to its north was watered, not by two rivers, but by a whole complex of powerful streams, their paths still visible in satellite photos; the book of Genesis describes one river with “four heads” running through the plain.<sup>2</sup>

But although the land was watered by this braided riverway, it grew drier. As the ice retreated, the temperature rose. Just north of the Gulf, the rains diminished into infrequent sprinkles that came only during the winter months. In the summer, searing winds blew across the unprotected plain. Each year, the streams swelled up over their banks and washed away fields before receding back into their beds, leaving silt behind. The silt began to build up on the banks of the interweaving streams, pushing them apart. And the Gulf continued to creep northwards.

The people who lived on the southern plain, closest to the Gulf, scratched for survival in a shifting and unpredictable landscape. Once a year, far too much water covered their fields. As soon as the floods subsided, the ground dried hard. They had no stone, no forests to provide timber, no wide grass-

\* There are other problems with the king list, including missing pieces where the tablets are broken, and the apparent elimination of rulers who are attested to by inscriptions and other independent evidence; still, the list is the best guide we have to the distant past of the Sumerians.



1.1 Very Ancient Mesopotamia

lands; just reeds, which grew along the streams, and plenty of mud. Mud, molded and dried, mixed with reeds and baked, became the foundations of their houses, the bricks that formed their city walls, their pots and dishes. They were people of the earth.\*

\* In many histories, these villagers are not called "Sumerians." Historians have reserved that name for the culture that occupied the Mesopotamian plain from about 3200 BC onwards, because for many years the evidence seemed to suggest that while early villages did exist from about 4500 BC on, the Sumerians themselves were a distinct group who invaded from the north and took over sometime after 3500 BC. However, more recent excavations and the use of technology to sound the land below the water table shows that Sumer was occupied long before 4500 BC. Closer examination of the remains that are accessible to archaeologists shows that a foreign invasion did *not* impose a new culture over the "native Mesopotamians"; early villages have the same patterns of house building, settlement, decoration, etc., as later "Sumerian" villages. It is much more likely that the earliest villagers were joined by peoples wandering down from the north, up from the south, and over from the east, not in one overwhelming invasion, but in a constant seepage of settlement. Despite this, the old names for the most ancient Sumerian settlements have stuck; the people in the lower Mesopotamian plain are called "Ubaid" for the period 5000–4000 BC, and "Uruk" for the period 4000–3200 BC. Another period, called "Jemdat Nasr," has been suggested for 3200–2900 BC, although these dates seem to be in flux. The settlements before 5000 are referenced, variously, as Samarra, Hassuna, and

The language that these settlers spoke—Sumerian—is apparently unrelated to any other language on earth. But by the time that the Sumerians began to write, their language was peppered with words from another tongue. Sumerian words are built on one-syllable roots, but dozens of words from the oldest inscriptions have unfamiliar two-syllable roots: the names of the two most powerful rivers that ran through the plain, the names for farmer, fisherman, carpenter, weaver, and a dozen other occupations, even the name of the city Eridu itself.

These words are Semitic, and they prove that the Sumerians were not alone on the southern plain. The Semitic words belonged to a people whose homeland was south and west of the Mesopotamian plain. Mountains to the north and east of Mesopotamia discouraged wanderers, but travelling up from the Arabian peninsula, or over from northern Africa, was a much simpler proposition. The Semites did just this, settling in with the Sumerians and lending them words. And more than just words: the Semitic loanwords are almost all names for farming techniques (plow, furrow) and for the peaceful occupations that go along with farming (basketmaker, leatherworker, carpenter). The Semites, not the Sumerians, brought these skills to Mesopotamia.

So how did the Semites learn how to farm?

Probably in gradual stages, like the peoples who lived in Europe and farther north. Perhaps, as the ice sheets retreated and the herds of meat-providing animals moved north and grew thinner, the hunters who followed these herds gave up the full-time pursuit of meat and instead harvested the wild grains that grew in the warmer plains, shifting residence only when the weather changed (as the native North Americans in modern Canada were still doing when Jacques Cartier showed up). Maybe these former nomads progressed from harvesting wild grain to planting and tending it, and finally gave up travelling altogether in favor of full-time village life. Well-fed men and women produced more babies. Sickles and grinding stones, discovered from modern Turkey down to the Nile valley, suggest that as those children grew to adulthood, they left their overpopulated villages and travelled elsewhere, taking their farming skills with them and teaching them to others.

Ancient stories add another wrinkle to the tale: as the Semite-influenced Sumerians planted crops around their villages, life became so complicated that they needed a king to help them sort out their difficulties.

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Halaf. These eras, based partly on innovations in pottery styles, are named after archaeological sites where the most typical remains of the period were first identified. (Linguists use a different set of names, just to confuse the issue; the Ubaid people become “Proto-Euphrateans,” for example.) I find it simpler—and more accurate—to use “Sumerian” throughout.

Enter Alulim, king of Eridu, and the beginning of civilization.

It's easy to wax lyrical over the "beginning of civilization." Civilization, after all, is what divides us from chaos. Civilized cities have walls that separate the orderly streets within from the wild waste outside. Civilization, as archaeologist Stuart Piggott explains in his introduction to Max Mallowan's classic study of ancient Sumer, is the result of a courageous discontent with the status quo: "Sporadically," Piggott writes, "there have appeared peoples to whom innovation and change, rather than adherence to tradition, gave satisfaction and release: these innovating societies are those which we can class as the founders of civilization."<sup>3</sup>

Actually, civilization appears to be the result of a more elemental urge: making sure that no one seizes too much food or water. Civilization began in the Fertile Crescent, not because it was an Edenic place overflowing with natural resources, but because it was so hostile to settlement that a village of any size needed careful management to survive. Farmers had to cooperate in order to construct the canals and reservoirs needed to capture floodwaters. Someone needed to enforce that cooperation, and oversee the fair division of the limited water. Someone had to make sure that farmers, who grew more grain than their families needed, would sell food to the nonfarmers (the basketmakers, leatherworkers, and carpenters) who grew no grain themselves. Only in an inhospitable and wild place is this sort of bureaucracy—the true earmark of civilization—needed. In genuinely fertile places, overflowing with water and food and game and minerals and timber, people generally don't bother.\*

In the Fertile Crescent, as villages grew into cities, more people had to sustain themselves on the same amount of dry land. Strong leadership became more necessary than ever. Human nature being what it is, city leaders needed some means of coercion: armed men who policed their decrees.

The leaders had become kings.

For the Sumerians, who struggled to survive in a land where water either washed away their fields in floods, or retreated entirely, leaving the crops to bake in the sun, kingship was a gift from the gods. No primordial gardens for the Sumerians: cities, protected from invading waters and hungry raiders by thick mud-brick walls, were man's first and best home. The city of Eridu,

\* This is not quite the same as explaining the rise of bureaucracy by the need to control large-scale irrigation systems; as Jared Diamond points out in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, the centralized bureaucracies of cities were generally well in place before "complex irrigation systems" formed, and "in the Fertile Crescent food production and village life originated in hills and mountains, not in lowland river valleys" (p. 23). The formation of bureaucracies was necessary before those systems could be properly built and maintained; and the fact that "civilization" had its beginnings in the hills, which were far less hospitable than the river valleys, demonstrates my point.

where kingship first descended from heaven, reappears in the myths of the Babylonians as the Sumerian Eden, created by the king-god Marduk:

All the lands were sea. . . .  
 Then Eridu was made. . . .  
 Marduk constructed a reed frame on the face of the waters.  
 He created dirt and poured it out by the reed frame. . . .  
 He created mankind.<sup>4</sup>

Eridu never disappears, as the Eden of Genesis does. The sacred city stood as the division between the old world of the hunters and gatherers, and the new world of civilization.

But the hunters and gatherers were not entirely gone. From the earliest days of kingship and the first building of cities, settled farmers quarrelled with nomadic herdsman and shepherds.

The fifth king in the Sumerian list is Dumuzi, who is (as the list tells us, with an air of faint surprise) a shepherd. That a shepherd who becomes king is a meeting of opposites becomes clear in “The Wooing of Inanna,” a tale starring Dumuzi and the goddess Inanna.\* In this story, Dumuzi is not only a shepherd and king, but also has the blood of gods in his veins; despite his divinity, Inanna finds Dumuzi unworthy. “The shepherd will go to bed with you!” exclaims the sun-god Utu, but Inanna (who generally bestows her favors without a whole lot of hesitation) objects:

The shepherd! I will not marry the shepherd!  
 His clothes are coarse; his wool is rough.  
 I will marry the farmer.  
 The farmer grows flax for my clothes.  
 The farmer grows barley for my table.<sup>5</sup>

Dumuzi persists with his suit. After a fair amount of arguing about whose family is better, he wins entrance to Inanna’s bed by offering her fresh milk with cream; she promptly suggests that he “plow her damp field.” (He accepts the invitation.)

Inanna’s preference for the farmer echoes a real tension. As the southern plain grew drier, cities clustered along the riverbanks. But beyond the cities, the desert wastes still served as pasture for sheep and goats and as the home of

\* Inanna is known as Ishtar, slightly later, by the Semitic peoples of Mesopotamia; she evolves into the goddess of both love and war, a combination fairly common in ancient times.

nomads who kept the ancient wandering ways alive. Herdsmen and farmers needed each other; herdsmen provided farmers with meat, fresh milk, and wool in exchange for life-sustaining grain. But mutual need didn't produce mutual respect. City dwellers scoffed at the rustic, unwashed herdsmen; herdsmen poked fun at the effete and decadent townspeople.

In this land of cities and kings, farmers and nomadic wanderers, the first eight kings of Sumer ruled until catastrophe struck.