




THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION

KAREN ARMSTRONG

A KNOPF  BOOK

THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION

*The Beginning of
Our Religious Traditions*

KAREN ARMSTRONG



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Introduction

Perhaps every generation believes that it has reached a turning point of history, but our problems seem particularly intractable and our future increasingly uncertain. Many of our difficulties mask a deeper spiritual crisis. During the twentieth century, we saw the eruption of violence on an unprecedented scale. Sadly, our ability to harm and mutilate one another has kept pace with our extraordinary economic and scientific progress. We seem to lack the wisdom to hold our aggression in check and keep it within safe and appropriate bounds. The explosion of the first atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki laid bare the nihilistic self-destructiveness at the heart of the brilliant achievements of our modern culture. We risk environmental catastrophe because we no longer see the earth as holy but regard it simply as a “resource.” Unless there is some kind of spiritual revolution that can keep abreast of our technological genius, it is unlikely that we will save our planet. A purely rational education will not suffice. We have found to our cost that a great university can exist in the same vicinity as a concentration camp. Auschwitz, Rwanda, Bosnia, and the destruction of the World Trade Center were all dark epiphanies that revealed what can happen when the sense of the sacred inviolability of every single human being has been lost.

Religion, which is supposed to help us to cultivate this attitude, often seems to reflect the violence and desperation of our time. Almost every day we see examples of religiously motivated terrorism, hatred, and intolerance. An increasing number of people find traditional religious doctrines and practices irrelevant and incredible, and turn to art, music, literature, dance, sport, or drugs to give them the transcendent experience that humans seem to require. We all look for moments of ecstasy and rapture, when we inhabit our humanity more fully than usual and feel deeply touched within and lifted momentarily beyond ourselves. We are meaning-seeking creatures and, unlike other animals, fall very easily into despair if we cannot find significance and value in our lives. Some are looking for new ways of being religious. Since the late 1970s there has been a spiritual revival in many parts of the world, and the militant piety that we often call “fundamentalism” is only one manifestation of our postmodern search for enlightenment.

In our current predicament, I believe that we can find inspiration in the period that the German philosopher Karl Jaspers called the Axial Age because it was pivotal to the spiritual development of humanity.¹ From about 900 to 200 BCE,* ¹ in four distinct regions, the great world traditions that have continued to nourish humanity came into being: Confucianism and Daoism in China; Hinduism and Buddhism in India; monotheism in Israel; and philosophical rationalism in Greece. This was the period of the Buddha, Socrates, Confucius, and Jeremiah, the mystics of the Upanishads, Mencius, and Euripides. During this period of intense creativity, spiritual and philosophical geniuses pioneered an entirely new kind of human experience. Many of them worked anonymously, but others became luminaries who can still fill us with emotion because they show us what a human being should be. The Axial Age was one of the most seminal periods of intellectual, psychological, philosophical, and religious change in recorded history; there would be nothing comparable until the Great Western Transformation, which created our own scientific and technological modernity.

But how can the sages of the Axial Age, who lived in such different circumstances, speak to our current condition? Why should we look to Confucius or the Buddha for help? Surely a study of this distant period can only be an exercise in spiritual archaeology, while what we need is to create a more innovative faith that reflects the realities of our own world. Yet, in fact, we have never surpassed the insights of the Axial Age. In times of spiritual and social crisis, men and women have constantly turned back to this period for guidance. They may have interpreted the Axial discoveries differently, but they have never succeeded in going beyond them. Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, for example, were all latter-day flowerings of the original Axial Age. As we shall see in the last chapter of this book, these three traditions all rediscovered the Axial vision and translated it marvelously into an idiom that spoke directly to the circumstances of their time.

The prophets, mystics, philosophers, and poets of the Axial Age were so advanced and their vision was so radical that later generations tended to dilute it. In the process, they often produced exactly the kind of religiosity that the Axial reformers wanted to get rid of. That, I believe, is what has happened in the modern world. The Axial sages have an important message for our time, but their insights will be surprising—even shocking—to many who consider themselves religious today. It is frequently assumed, for example, that faith is a matter of believing certain credal propositions. Indeed, it is common to call religious people “believers,” although assenting to the articles of faith were their chief activity. But most of the Axial philosophers had no interest whatever in doctrine or metaphysics. A person’s theological beliefs were a matter of total indifference to somebody like the Buddha. Some sages steadfastly refused even to discuss theology, claiming that it was distracting and damaging. Others argued that it was immature.

unrealistic, and perverse to look for the kind of absolute certainty that many people expect religion to provide.

All the traditions that were developed during the Axial Age pushed forward the frontiers of human consciousness and discovered a transcendent dimension in the core of their being, but they did not necessarily regard this as supernatural, and most of them refused to discuss it. Precisely because the experience was ineffable, the only correct attitude was reverent silence. The sages certainly did not seek to impose their own view of this ultimate reality on other people. Quite the contrary: nobody, they believed, should ever take any religious teaching on faith or at second hand. It was essential to question everything and to test any teaching empirically, against your personal experience. In fact, as we shall see, if a prophet or philosopher did start to insist on obligatory doctrines, it was usually a sign that the Axial Age had lost its momentum. If the Buddha or Confucius had been asked whether he believed in God, he would probably have winced slightly and explained—with great courtesy—that this was not an appropriate question. If anybody had asked Amos or Ezekiel if he was a “monotheist,” who believed in only one God, he would have been equally perplexed. Monotheism was not the issue. We find very few unequivocal assertions of monotheism in the Bible, but—interestingly—the stridency of some of these doctrinal statements actually departs from the essential spirit of the Axial Age.

What mattered was not what you believed but how you behaved. Religion was about doing things that changed you at a profound level. Before the Axial Age, ritual and animal sacrifice had been central to the religious quest. You experienced the divine in sacred dramas that, like a great theatrical experience today, introduced you to another level of existence. The Axial sages changed this; they still valued ritual, but gave it a new ethical significance and put morality at the heart of the spiritual life. The only way you could encounter what they called “God,” “Nirvana,” “Brahman,” or the “Way” was to live a compassionate life. Indeed, religion was compassion. Today we often assume that before undertaking a religious lifestyle, we must prove to our own satisfaction that “God” or the “Absolute” exists. This is good scientific practice: first you establish a principle; only then can you apply it. But the Axial sages would say that this was to put the cart before the horse. First you must commit yourself to the ethical life; then disciplined and habitual benevolence, not metaphysical conviction, would give you intimations of the transcendence you sought.

This meant that you had to be ready to change. The Axial sages were not interested in providing their disciples with a little edifying uplift, after which they could return with renewed vigor to their ordinary self-centered lives. Their objective was to create an entirely different kind of human being. All the sages preached a spirituality of empathy and compassion; they insisted that people must abandon their egotism and greed, their violence and unkindness. Not only was it wrong to kill another human being; you must not even speak a hostile word or make an irritable gesture. Further, nearly all the Axial sages realized that you could not confine your benevolence to your own people: your concern must somehow extend to the entire world. In fact, when people started to limit their horizons and sympathies, it was another sign that the Axial Age was coming to a close. Each tradition developed its own formulation of the Golden Rule: do not do to others what you would not have done to you. As far as the Axial sages were concerned, respect for the sacred rights of all beings—not orthodox belief—was religion. If people behaved with kindness and generosity to their fellow humans, they could save the world.

We need to rediscover this Axial ethos. In our global village, we can no longer afford a parochial or exclusive vision. We must learn to live and behave as though people in countries remote from our own are as important as ourselves. The sages of the Axial Age did not create their compassionate ethic in idyllic circumstances. Each tradition developed in societies like our own that were torn apart by violence and warfare as never before; indeed, the first catalyst of religious change was usually a principled rejection of the aggression that the sages witnessed all around them. When they started to look for the causes of violence in the psyche, the Axial philosophers penetrated their interior world and began to explore a hitherto undiscovered realm of human experience.

The consensus of the Axial Age is an eloquent testimony to the unanimity of the spiritual quest of the human race. The Axial peoples all found that the compassionate ethic worked. All the great traditions that were created at this time are in agreement about the supreme importance of charity and benevolence, and this tells us something important about our humanity. To find that our own faith is so deeply in accord with others is an affirming experience. Without departing from our own tradition, therefore, we can learn from others how to enhance our particular pursuit of the empathic life.

We cannot appreciate the achievements of the Axial Age unless we are familiar with what went before, so we need to understand the pre-Axial religion of early antiquity. This had certain common features that would all be important to the Axial Age. Most societies, for example, had an early belief in a High God, who was often called the Sky God, since he was associated with the heavens.² Because he was rather inaccessible, he tended to fade from the religious consciousness. Some said that he “disappeared” or others that he had been violently displaced by a younger generation of more dynamic deities. People usually experienced the sacred as an immanent presence in the world around them and within themselves. Some believed that gods, men, women, animals, plants, insects, and rocks all shared the same divine life. All were subject to an overarching cosmic order that kept everything in being. Even the gods had to obey this order, and they cooperated with human beings in the preservation of the divine energies of the cosmos. If these were not renewed, the world could lapse into a primal void.

Animal sacrifice was a universal religious practice in the ancient world. This was a way of recycling the depleted forces that kept the world in being. There was a strong conviction that life and death, creativity and destruction were inextricably entwined. People realized that they survived only because other creatures laid down their lives for their sake, so the animal victim was honored for

self-sacrifice.³ Because there could be no life without such death, some imagined that the world had come into being as a result of sacrifice at the beginning of time. Others told stories of a creator god slaying a dragon—a common symbol of the formless and undifferentiated—to bring order out of chaos. When they reenacted these mythical events in their ceremonial liturgy, worshipers felt that they had been projected into sacred time. They would often begin a new project by performing a ritual that re-presented the original cosmogony, to give their fragile mortal activity an infusion of divine strength. Nothing could endure if it were not “animated,” or endowed with a “soul,” in this way.⁴

Ancient religion depended upon what has been called the perennial philosophy, because it was present, in some form, in most premodern cultures. Every single person, object, or experience on earth was a replica—a pale shadow—of a reality in the divine world.⁵ The sacred world was, therefore, the prototype of human existence, and because it was richer, stronger, and more enduring than anything on earth, men and women wanted desperately to participate in it. The perennial philosophy is still a key factor today in the lives of some indigenous tribes. The Australian aborigines, for example, experience the sacred realm of Dreamtime as far more real than the material world. They have brief glimpses of Dreamtime in sleep or in moments of vision; it is timeless and “everywhere.” It forms a stable backdrop to ordinary life, which is constantly enervated by death, flux, and ceaseless change. When an Australian goes hunting, he models his behavior so closely on that of the First Hunter that he feels totally united with him, caught up in his most potent reality. Afterward, when he falls away from that primal richness, he fears that the domain of time will absorb him, and reduce him and everything that he does to nothingness.⁶ This was also the experience of the people of antiquity. It was only when they imitated the gods in ritual and gave up the lonely, frail individuality of their secular lives that they truly existed. They fulfilled their humanity when they ceased to be simply themselves and repeated the gestures of others.⁷

Human beings are profoundly artificial.⁸ We constantly strive to improve on nature and approximate to an ideal. Even at the present time, when we have abandoned the perennial philosophy, people slavishly follow the dictates of fashion and even resort to violence to their faces and figures in order to reproduce the current standard of beauty. The cult of celebrity shows that we still revere models who epitomize “superhumanity.” People sometimes go to great lengths to see their idols, and feel an ecstatic enhancement of being in their presence. They imitate their dress and behavior. It seems that human beings naturally tend toward the archetypal and paradigmatic. The Axial sages developed a more authentic version of this spirituality and taught people to seek the ideal, archetypal self within.

The Axial Age was not perfect. A major failing was its indifference to women. These spiritualities nearly all developed in an urban environment, dominated by military power and aggressive commercial activity, where women tended to lose the status they had enjoyed in a more rural economy. There are no female Axial sages, and even when women were allowed to take an active role in the new faith, they were usually sidelined. It was not that the Axial sages hated women; most of the time, they simply did not notice them. When they spoke about the “great” or “enlightened man,” they did not mean “men and women”—though most, if challenged, would probably have admitted that women were capable of this liberation too.

Precisely because the question of women was so peripheral to the Axial Age, I found that any sustained discussion of this topic was distracting. Whenever I tried to address the issue, it seemed intrusive. I suspect that it deserves a study of its own. It is not enough that the Axial sages were out-and-out misogynists, like some of the fathers of the church, for example. They were men of their time, and so preoccupied with the aggressive behavior of their own sex that they rarely gave women a second thought. We cannot follow the Axial reformers slavishly; indeed, to do so would fundamentally violate the spirit of the Axial Age, which insisted that the kind of conformity trapped people in an inferior and immature version of themselves. What we can do is extend the Axial ideal of universal concern to everybody, including the female sex. When we try to re-create the Axial vision, we must bring the best insights of modernity to the table.

The Axial peoples did not evolve in a uniform way. Each developed at its own pace. Sometimes they achieved an insight that was truly worthy of the Axial Age, but then retreated from it. The people of India were always in the vanguard of Axial progress. In Israel, prophets, priests, and historians approached the ideal sporadically, by fits and starts, until they were exiled to Babylon in the sixth century and experienced a short, intense period of extraordinary creativity. In China there was slow, incremental progress, until Confucius developed the first full Axial spirituality in the late sixth century. From the very start, the Greeks went in an entirely different direction from the other peoples.

Jaspers believed that the Axial Age was more contemporaneous than it actually was. He implied that the Buddha, Laozi, Confucius, Mozi, and Zoroaster, for example, all lived more or less at the same time. Modern scholarship has revised this dating. It is now certain that Zoroaster did not live during the sixth century, but was a much earlier figure. It is very difficult to date some of the movements precisely, especially in India, where there was very little interest in history and no attempt to keep accurate chronological records. Most Indologists now agree, for example, that the Buddha lived a whole century later than was previously thought. As for Laozi, the Daoist sage, did not live during the sixth century, as Jaspers assumed. Instead of being the contemporary of Confucius and Mozi, he almost certainly lived in the third century. I have tried to keep abreast of the most recent scholarly debates, but at present many of these dates can only be speculative, and will probably never be known for certain.

But despite these difficulties, the general development of the Axial Age does give us some insight into the spiritual evolution of this important ideal. We will follow this process chronologically, charting the progress of the four Axial peoples side by side, watching the new vision gradually taking root, rising to a crescendo, and finally fading away at the close of the third century. This was not the end of the story, however. The pioneers of the Axial Age had laid the foundations upon which others could build. Each generation would try to adapt these original insights to their own peculiar circumstances, and that must be our task today.

THE AXIAL PEOPLES

(c. 1600 to 900 BCE)

The first people to attempt an Axial Age spirituality were pastoralists living on the steppes of southern Russia, who called themselves the Aryans. The Aryans were not a distinct ethnic group, so this was not a racial term but an assertion of pride and meant something like “noble” or “honorable.” The Aryans were a loose-knit network of tribes who shared a common culture. Because they spoke a language that would form the basis of several Asiatic and European tongues, they are also called Indo-Europeans. They had lived on the Caucasian steppes since about 4500, but by the middle of the third millennium some tribes began to roam farther and farther afield, until they reached what is now Greece, Italy, Scandinavia, and Germany. At the same time, those Aryans who had remained behind on the steppes gradually drifted apart and became two separate peoples, speaking different forms of the original Indo-European. One used the Avestan dialect, the other an early form of Sanskrit. They were able to maintain contact, however, because at this stage their languages were still very similar, and until about 1500 they continued to live peacefully together, sharing the same cultural and religious traditions.¹

It was a quiet, sedentary existence. The Aryans could not travel far, because the horse had not yet been domesticated, so their horizons were bounded by the steppes. They farmed their land, herded their sheep, goats, and pigs, and valued stability and continuity. They were not a warlike people, since apart from a few skirmishes with one another or with rival groups, they had no enemies and no ambition to conquer new territory. Their religion was simple and peaceful. Like other ancient peoples, the Aryans experienced an invisible force within themselves and in everything that they saw, heard, and touched. Storms, winds, trees, and rivers were not impersonal, mindless phenomena. The Aryans felt an affinity with them, and revered them as divine. Humans, deities, animals, plants, and the forces of nature were all manifestations of the same divine “spirit,” which the Avestans called *mainyu* and the Sanskrit-speakers *manya*. It animated, sustained, and bound them all together.

Over time the Aryans developed a more formal pantheon. At a very early stage, they had worshipped a Sky God called Dyaus Pitr, creator of the world.² But like other High Gods, Dyaus was so remote that he was eventually replaced by more accessible gods, who were wholly identified with natural and cosmic forces. Varuna preserved the order of the universe; Mithra was the god of storm, thunder, and life-giving rain; Mazda, lord of justice and wisdom, was linked with the sun and stars; and Indra, a divine warrior, had fought a three-headed dragon called Vritra and brought order out of chaos. Fire, which was crucial to civilized society, was also a god, and the Aryans called him Agni. Agni was not simply the divine patron of fire; he was the fire that burned in every single hearth. Even the hallucinogenic plant that inspired the Aryan poets was a god, called Haoma in Avestan and Soma in Sanskrit: he was a divine priest who protected the people from famine and looked after their cattle.

The Avestan Aryans called their gods *daevas* (“the shining ones”) and *amesha* (“the immortals”). Sanskrit these terms became *devas* and *amrita*.³ None of these divine beings, however, were what we usually call “gods” today. They were not omnipotent and had no ultimate control over the cosmos. Like human beings and all the natural forces, they had to submit to the sacred order that held the universe together. Thanks to this order, the seasons succeeded one another in due course, the rain fell at the right times, and the crops grew each year in the appointed month. The Avestan Aryans called this order *asha*, while the Sanskrit-speakers called it *rita*. It made life possible, keeping everything in its proper place and defining what was true and correct.

Human society also depended upon this sacred order. People had to make firm, binding agreements about grazing rights, the herding of cattle, marriage, and the exchange of goods. Translated into social terms, *asha/rita* meant loyalty, truth, and respect, the ideals embodied by Varuna, the guardian of order, and Mithra, his assistant. These gods supervised all covenant agreements that were sealed by solemn oath. The Aryans took the spoken word very seriously. Like all other phenomena, speech was a god, a *deva*. Aryan religion was not very visual. As far as we know, the Aryans did not make effigies of their gods. Instead, they found that the act of listening brought them close to the sacred. Quite apart from its meaning, the very sound of a chant was holy; even a single syllable could encapsulate the divine. Similarly, a vow, once uttered, was eternally binding, and a lie was absolutely evil because it perverted the holy power inherent in the spoken word.⁴ The Aryans would never lose this passion for absolute truthfulness.

Every day, the Aryans offered sacrifices to their gods to replenish the energies they expended in maintaining world order. Some of these rites were very simple. The sacrificer would throw a handful of grain, curds, or fuel into the fire to nourish Agni, or pound the stalks of soma, offer the pulp to the water goddesses, and make a sacred drink. The Aryans also sacrificed cattle. They did not grow enough crops for their needs, so killing was a tragic necessity, but the Aryans ate only meat that had been ritually and humanely slaughtered. When a beast was ceremonially given to the gods, its spirit was not extinguished but returned to Geush Urvan (“Soul of the Bull”), the archetypal domestic animal. The Aryans felt very close to their cattle. It was sinful to eat the flesh of a beast that had not been consecrated in this way, because profane slaughter destroyed it forever, and thus violated the sacred life that made all creatures kin.⁵ Again, the Aryans would never entirely lose this profound respect for the “spirit” that they shared with others, and this would become a crucial principle of the Axial Age.

To take the life of any being was a fearful act, not to be undertaken lightly, and the sacrificial ritual compelled the Aryans to confront this harsh law of existence. The sacrifice became and would remain the organizing symbol of their culture, by which they explained the world and their society. The Aryans believed that the universe itself had originated in a sacrificial offering. In the beginning, it was said, the gods, working in obedience to the divine order, had brought forth the world in seven stages. First they created the *Sky*, which was made of stone like a huge round shell; then the *Earth*, which rested like a flat dish upon the *Water* that had collected in the base of the shell. In the center of the Earth, the gods placed three living creatures: a *Plant*, a *Bull*, and a *Man*. Finally they produced Agni, the *Fire*. But at first everything was static and lifeless. It was not until the gods performed a triple sacrifice—crushing the Plant, and killing the Bull and the Man—that the world became animated. The sun began to move across the sky, seasonal change was established, and the three sacrificial victims brought forth their own kind. Flowers, crops, and trees sprouted from the pulped Plant; animals sprang from the corpse of the Bull; and the carcass of the first Man gave birth to the human race. The Aryans

would always see sacrifice as creative. By reflecting on this ritual, they realized that their lives depended upon the death of other creatures. The three archetypal creatures had laid down their lives so that others might live. There could be no progress, materially or spiritually, without self-sacrifice. This too would become one of the principles of the Axial Age.

The Aryans had no elaborate shrines and temples. Sacrifice was offered in the open air on a small level piece of land, marked off from the rest of the settlement by a furrow. The seven original creations were all symbolically represented in this arena: Earth in the soil, Water in the vessels, Fire in the hearth; the stone Sky was present in the flint knife, the Plant in the crushed soma stalks, the Bull in the victim, and the first Man in the priest. And the gods, it was thought, were also present. The *hotr* priest, expert in the liturgical chant, would sing a hymn to summon *devas* to the feast. When they had entered the sacred arena, the gods sat down on the freshly mown grass strewn around the altar to listen to these hymns of praise. Since the sound of these inspired syllables was itself a god, as the song filled the air and entered their consciousness, the congregation felt surrounded by and infused with divinity. Finally the primordial sacrifice was repeated. The cattle were slain, the soma pressed, and the priest laid the choicest portions of the victims onto the fire, so that Agni could convey them to the land of the gods. The ceremony ended with a holy communion, as priest and participants shared a festal meal with the deities, eating the consecrated meat and drinking the intoxicating soma, which seemed to lift them to another dimension of being.⁷

The sacrifice brought practical benefits too. It was commissioned by a member of the community who hoped that those *devas* who had responded to his invitation and attended the sacrifice would help him in the future. Like any act of hospitality, the ritual placed an obligation on the divinities to respond in kind, and the *hotr* often reminded them to protect the patron's family, crops, and herd. The sacrifice also enhanced the patron's standing in the community. Like the gods, his human guests were now in his debt, and by providing the cattle for the feast and giving the officiating priests a handsome gift, he had demonstrated that he was a man of substance.⁸ The benefits of religion were purely material and this-worldly. People wanted the gods to provide them with cattle, wealth, and security. At first the Aryans had entertained no hope of an afterlife, but by the end of the second millennium, some were beginning to believe that wealthy people who had commissioned a lot of sacrifices would be able to join the gods in paradise after their death.⁹

This slow, uneventful life came to an end when the Aryans discovered modern technology. In about 1500, they had begun to trade with the more advanced societies south of the Caucasus in Mesopotamia and Armenia. They learned about bronze weaponry from the Armenians and also encountered new methods of transport: first they acquired wooden carts pulled by oxen, and then the war chariot. Once they had learned how to tame the wild horses of the steppes and harness them to their chariots, they experienced the joys of mobility. Life would never be the same again. The Aryans had become warriors. They could now travel long distances at high speed. With their superior weapons, they could conduct lightning raids on neighboring settlements and steal cattle and crops. This was far more thrilling and lucrative than stock breeding. Some of the younger men served as mercenaries in the armies of the southern kingdoms, and became expert in chariot warfare. When they returned to the steppes, they put their new skills to use and started to rustle their neighbors' cattle. They killed, plundered, and pillaged, terrorizing the more conservative Aryans, who were bewildered, frightened, and entirely disoriented, feeling that their lives had been turned upside down.

Violence escalated on the steppes as never before. Even the more traditional tribes, who simply

wanted to be left alone, had to learn the new military techniques in order to defend themselves. ~~heroic age had begun. Might was right; chieftains sought gain and glory; and bards celebrated~~ aggression, reckless courage, and military prowess. The old Aryan religion had preached reciprocity, self-sacrifice, and kindness to animals. This was no longer appealing to the cattle rustlers, whose hero was the dynamic Indra, the dragon slayer, who rode in a chariot upon the clouds of heaven.¹⁰ Indra was now the divine model to whom the raiders aspired. “Heroes with noble horses, fair for battle, selected warriors call on me in combat,” he cried. “I, bountiful Indra, excite the conflict, I stir the dust, Lord of surpassing vigour!”¹¹ When they fought, killed, and robbed, the Aryan cowboys fed themselves one with Indra and the aggressive *daevas* who had established the world order by force of arms.

But the more traditional, Avestan-speaking Aryans were appalled by Indra’s naked aggression, and began to have doubts about the *daevas*. Were they all violent and immoral? Events on earth always reflected cosmic events in heaven, so, they reasoned, these terrifying raids must have a divine prototype. The cattle rustlers, who fought under the banner of Indra, must be his earthly counterpart. But who were the *daevas* attacking in heaven? The most important gods—such as Varuna, Mazda, and Mithra, the guardians of order—were given the honorific title “Lord” (*ahura*). Perhaps the peaceful *ahuras*, who stood for justice, truth, and respect for life and property, were themselves under attack by Indra and the more aggressive *daevas*? This, at any rate, was the view of a visionary priest who in about 1200 claimed that Ahura Mazda had commissioned him to restore order to the steppes. His name was Zoroaster.

When he received his divine vocation, the new prophet was about thirty years old and strongly rooted in the Aryan faith. He had probably studied for the priesthood since he was seven years old, and was so steeped in tradition that he could improvise sacred chants to the gods during the sacrifice. But Zoroaster was deeply disturbed by the cattle raids, and after completing his education, he had spent some time in consultation with other priests, and had meditated on the rituals to find a solution to the problem. One morning, while he was celebrating the spring festival, Zoroaster had risen at dawn and walked down to the river to collect water for the daily sacrifice. Wading in, he immersed himself in the pure element, and when he emerged, saw a shining being standing on the riverbank, who told Zoroaster that his name was Vohu Manah (“Good Purpose”). Once he had been assured of Zoroaster’s own good intentions, he led him into the presence of the greatest of the *ahuras*: Mazda, lord of wisdom and justice, who was surrounded by his retinue of seven radiant gods. He told Zoroaster to mobilize his people in a holy war against terror and violence.¹³ The story is bright with the promise of a new beginning. A fresh era had dawned: everybody had to make a decision, gods and humans alike. Were they on the side of order or evil?

Zoroaster’s vision convinced him that Lord Mazda was not simply one of the great *ahuras*, but that he was the Supreme God. For Zoroaster and his followers, Mazda was no longer immanent in the natural world, but had become transcendent, different in kind from any other divinity.¹⁴ This was not quite monotheism, the belief in a single, unique deity. The seven luminous beings in Mazda’s retinue—the Holy Immortals—were also divine: each expressed one of Mazda’s attributes and was linked, in the traditional way, with one of the seven original creations. There was, however, a monotheistic tendency in Zoroaster’s vision. Lord Mazda had created the Holy Immortals; they were “of one mind, one voice, one act” with him.¹⁵ Mazda was not the only deity, but he was the first to exist. Zoroaster had probably reached this position by meditating on the creation story, which claimed that in the

beginning there had been one plant, one animal, and one human being. It was only logical to assume that originally there had been one god.¹⁶

But Zoroaster was not interested in theological speculation for its own sake. He was wholly preoccupied by the violence that had destroyed the peaceful world of the steppes, and was desperately seeking for a way to bring it to an end. The Gathas, the seventeen inspired hymns attributed to Zoroaster, are pervaded by a distraught vulnerability, impotence, and fear. "I know why I am powerless, Mazda," cried the prophet, "I possess few cattle and few men." His community was terrorized by raiders "yoked with evil acts to destroy life." Cruel warriors, fighting under the orders of the evil Indra, had swept down on the peace-loving, law-abiding communities. They had vandalized and looted one settlement after another, killed the villagers, and carried off their bulls and cows.¹⁷ The raiders believed that they were heroes, fighting alongside Indra, but the Gathas show us how the victims saw the heroic age. Even the cow complained to Lord Mazda: "For whom did you shape me? Who fashioned me? Fury and raiding, cruelty and might hold me captive." When Lord Mazda replied that Zoroaster, the only one of the Aryans who listened to his teachings, would be her protector, the cow was not impressed. What use was Zoroaster? She wanted a more effective helper. The Gathas cried aloud for justice. Where were the Holy Immortals, the guardians of *asha*? When would Lord Mazda bring relief?¹⁸

The suffering and helplessness of his people had shocked Zoroaster into a torn, conflicted vision. The world seemed polarized, split into two irreconcilable camps. Because Indra and the cattle raiders had nothing in common with Lord Mazda, they must have given their allegiance to a different *ahura*. If there was a single divine source for everything that was benign and good, Zoroaster concluded there must also be a wicked deity who had inspired the cruelty of the raiders. This Hostile Spirit (*Angra Mainyu*), he believed, was equal in power to Lord Mazda, but was his opposite. In the beginning, there had been "two primal Spirits, twins destined to be in conflict" with each other. Each had made a choice. The Hostile Spirit had thrown in his lot with *druj*, the lie, and was the epitome of evil. He was the eternal enemy of *asha*, of everything that was right and true. But Lord Mazda had opted for goodness and had created the Holy Immortals and human beings as his allies. Now every single man, woman, and child had to make the same choice between *asha* and *druj*.¹⁹

For generations, the Aryans had worshiped Indra and the other *daevas*, but now Zoroaster concluded that the *daevas* must have decided to fight alongside the Hostile Spirit.²⁰ The cattle raiders were their earthly counterparts. The unprecedented violence in the steppes had caused Zoroaster to divide the ancient Aryan pantheon into two warring groups. Good men and women must no longer offer sacrifices to Indra and the *daevas*; they must not invite them into the sacred precinct. Instead, they must commit themselves entirely to Lord Mazda, his Holy Immortals, and the other *ahuras*, who alone could bring peace, justice, and security. The *daevas* and the cattle raiders, their evil henchmen, must all be defeated and destroyed.²¹

The whole of life had now become a battlefield in which everybody had a role. Even women and servants could make a valuable contribution. The old purity laws, which had regulated the conduct of the ritual, were now given a new significance. Lord Mazda had created a completely clean and perfect world for his followers, but the Hostile Spirit had invaded the earth and filled it with sin, violence, falsehood, dust, dirt, disease, death, and decay. Good men and women must, therefore, keep their immediate environment free from dirt and pollution. By separating the pure from the impure, good

from evil, they would liberate the world for Lord Mazda.²² They must pray five times a day. Winter was the season when the *daevas* were in the ascendant, so during this time all virtuous people must counter their influence by meditating on the menace of *druj*. They must rise up during the night, when wicked spirits prowled the earth, and throw incense into the fire to strengthen Agni in the war against evil.²³

But no battle could last forever. In the old, peaceful world, life had seemed cyclical: the seasons had followed one another, day succeeded night, and harvest followed the planting. But Zoroaster could no longer believe in these natural rhythms. The world was rushing forward toward a cataclysm. He and his followers were living in the “bounded time” of raging cosmic conflict, but soon they would witness the final triumph of good and the annihilation of the forces of darkness. After a terrible battle, Lord Mazda and the Immortals would descend to the world of men and women and offer sacrifice. There would be a great judgment. The wicked would be wiped off the face of the earth, and a blazing river would flow into hell and incinerate the Hostile Spirit. Then the cosmos would be restored to its original perfection. Mountains and valleys would be leveled into a great plain, where gods and humans could live side by side, worshiping Lord Mazda forever. There would be no more death. Human beings would be like deities, free from sickness, old age, and mortality.²⁴

We are now familiar with this kind of apocalyptic vision, but before Zoroaster there had been nothing like it in the ancient world. It sprang from his outrage at the suffering of his people and his yearning for justice. He wanted the wicked to be punished for the pain they had inflicted on good and innocent people. But as time passed, he began to realize that he would not be alive to see the Last Days. Another would come after him, a superhuman being, “who is better than a good man.”²⁵ The Gathas call him the Saoshyant (“One Who Will Bring Benefit”). He, not Zoroaster, would lead Lord Mazda’s troops into the final battle.

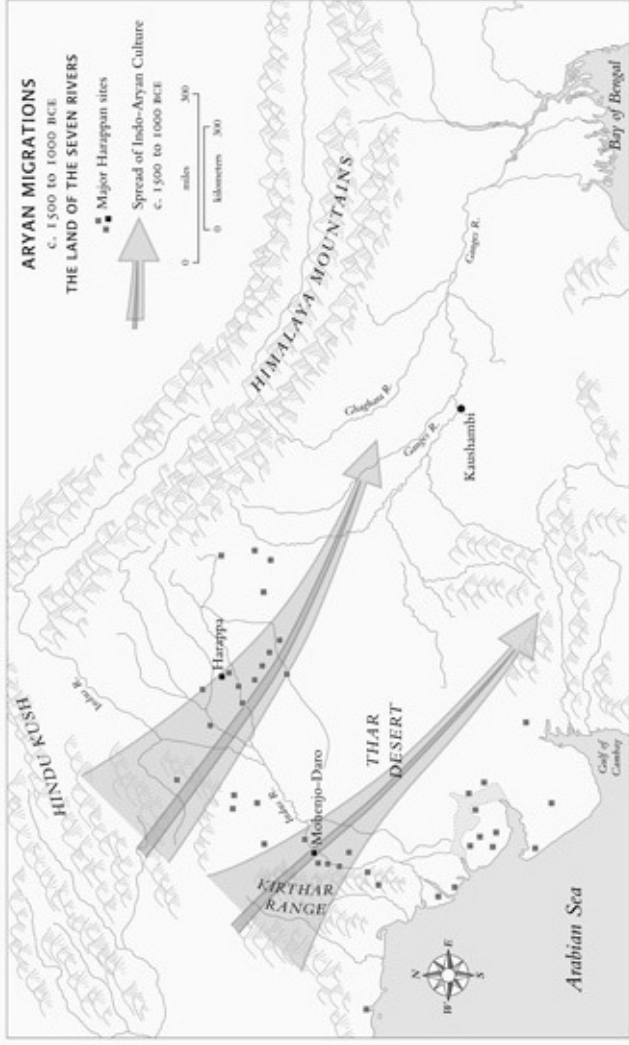
When—centuries later—the Axial Age began, philosophers, prophets, and mystics all tried to counter the cruelty and aggression of their time by promoting a spirituality based on nonviolence. But Zoroaster’s traumatized vision, with its imagery of burning, terror, and extermination, was vengeful. His career reminds us that political turbulence, atrocity, and suffering do not infallibly produce an Axial-style faith, but can inspire a militant piety that polarizes complex reality into oversimplified categories of good and evil. Zoroaster’s vision was deeply agonistic. We shall see that the agon (“contest”) was a common feature of ancient religion. In making a cosmic agon between good and evil central to his message, Zoroaster belonged to the old spiritual world. He had projected the violence of his time onto the divine and made it absolute.

But in his passionately ethical vision, Zoroaster did look forward to the Axial Age. He tried to introduce some morality into the new warrior ethos. True heroes did not terrorize their fellow creatures but tried to counter aggression. The holy warrior was dedicated to peace; those who opted to fight for Lord Mazda were patient, disciplined, courageous, and swift to defend all good creatures from the assaults of the wicked.²⁶ *Ashavans*, the champions of order (*asha*), must imitate the Holy Immortals in their care for the environment. “Good Purpose,” for instance, who had appeared to Zoroaster on the riverbank, was the guardian of the cow, and *ashavans* must follow his example, not that of the raiders, who drove the cattle from their pastures, harnessed them to carts, killed, and ate them without the proper ritual.²⁷ “Good Dominion,” the personification of divine justice, was the protector of the stone Sky, so *ashavans* must use their stone weapons only to defend the poor and the

weak.²⁸ When Zoroastrians protected vulnerable people, looked after their cattle tenderly, and purified their natural environment, they became one with the Immortals and joined their struggle against the Hostile Spirit.

Even though his vision was grounded in ancient Aryan tradition, Zoroaster's message inspired great hostility. People found it too demanding; some were shocked by his preaching to women and peasants and by his belief that everybody—not just the elite—could reach paradise. Many would have been troubled by his rejection of the *daevas*: Might not Indra take revenge?²⁹ After years of preaching to his own tribe, Zoroaster gained only one convert, so he left his village and found a patron in Vishtaspa, the chief of another tribe, who established the Zoroastrian faith in his territory. Zoroaster lived in Vishtaspa's court for many years, fighting a heroic battle against evil to the bitter, violent end. According to one tradition he was killed by rival priests who were enraged by his rejection of the old religion. We know nothing about the history of Zoroastrianism after his death. By the end of the second millennium the Avestan Aryans had migrated south and settled in eastern Iran, where Zoroastrianism became the national faith. It has remained a predominantly Iranian religion. Strange enough, it was the Aryan cattle rustlers, whom Zoroaster had condemned, who would eventually create the first sustained religion of the Axial Age, based upon the principle of *ahimsa*, nonviolence.

While some of the Sanskrit-speaking Aryans were creating havoc on the steppes, others had begun to migrate south, traveling in small bands through Afghanistan and settling finally in the fertile lands of the Punjab, among the tributaries of the river Indus. They called their new home *Sapta-Sindhu*, "Land of the Seven Rivers." There has been much debate about the Aryan settlement of India. Some scholars even deny that it took place, arguing that it was the indigenous people of India who created the civilization that developed in the Punjab at this time. The Aryans have left no archaeological record of this early period in India. Theirs was an itinerant society, and people lived out in the open or in temporary encampments. Our only sources of information are the ritual texts composed in Sanskrit, known collectively as the Vedas ("Knowledge"). The language of the Vedas is so similar to Avestan and its cultural assumptions so close to the Gathas that it is almost certainly an Aryan scripture. Today most historians accept that during the second millennium, Aryan tribes from the steppes did indeed colonize the Indus Valley. But it was neither a mass movement nor a military invasion. There is no evidence of fighting, resistance, or widespread destruction. Instead there was probably continuous infiltration of the region by different Aryan groups over a very long period.



When the first Aryans arrived, they would have seen the remains of a previous civilization in the Indus Valley.³¹ At the height of its power and success (c. 2300–2000), this ancient Indian empire had been larger than either Egypt or Mesopotamia. It had two impressive capital cities: at Mohenjo-Daro in modern Sind, and Harappa, some 250 miles to the east. But hundreds of other, smaller towns have also been excavated, extending 800 miles along the Indus River, and another 800 miles along the Arabian coast, all built on an identical grid pattern. The Indus Valley civilization had been a sophisticated and powerful commercial network, which exported gold, copper, timber, ivory, and cotton to Mesopotamia, and imported bronze, tin, silver, lapis lazuli, and soapstone.

Sadly, we know next to nothing about either the Harappans or their religion, even though there are tantalizing hints that some religious cults that would become very important after the Axial Age may have derived from the Indus Valley civilization. Archaeologists have found figurines of a Mother Goddess, stone lingams, and three stamp seals depicting a figure sitting, surrounded by animals, what looks like the yogic position. Was this the god Shiva? In classical Hinduism, Shiva is lord of animals and a great yogin, but he is not an Aryan deity and is never mentioned in the Sanskrit Vedas. In the absence of any hard evidence, we cannot prove continuity. By the time the first Aryans arrived in the region, the Harappan empire had practically disappeared, but there may have been squatters in the ruined cities. There could have been overlap and interchange, and some of the Aryans may have adopted elements of the local faith and merged it with their own.

The Aryan immigrants had no desire to rebuild the ancient cities and revivify the empire. Always on the move themselves, they looked down on the security of settled life and opted for *yoga*, the “yoking” of their horses to the chariots at the beginning of a raid. Unlike the Zoroastrians, they had no interest in a quiet, peaceful existence. They loved their war chariots and powerful bronze swords; they were cowboys, who earned their living by stealing their neighbors’ livestock. Because their lives depended on cattle rustling, it was more than a sport; it was also a sacred activity with rituals that gave it an infusion of divine power. The Indian Aryans wanted a dynamic religion; their heroes were the trekking warrior and the chariot fighter. Increasingly, they found the *asuras** ² worshiped by the Zoroaster boring and passive. How could anybody be inspired by an *asura* like Varuna, who simply sat around in his celestial palace, ordering the world from a safe distance? They much preferred the adventurous *devas*, “who drove on wheels, while the *asuras* sat at home in their halls.”³²

By the time they had established themselves in the Punjab, the cult of Varuna, the chief *asura*, was already in decline and Indra was becoming the Supreme God in his place.³³ With his wild, flowing beard, his belly full of soma, and his passion for battle, Indra was the archetypal Aryan to whom all warriors aspired. At the beginning of time, he had hurled his glittering, deadly thunderbolt at Vritra, the three-headed dragon who had blocked the flow of the life-giving waters, so that the earth was parched with drought. Indra had thus made the world habitable by fighting terrifying battles against overwhelming odds, not by feebly sitting at home like Varuna. In the Vedic texts, all the attributes of Varuna—the administration of law, the guardianship of the truth, and the punishment of falsehood—pass to Indra. But the uncomfortable fact remained that for all his glamour, Indra was a killer, who had only managed to defeat Vritra by lying and cheating. This was the violent and troubled vision of a society constantly involved in desperate warfare. The Vedic hymns saw the entire cosmos convulsed by terrifying conflict and passionate rivalries. *Devas* and *asuras* fought each other in heaven, while the Aryans struggled for survival on earth.³⁴ This was an age of scarcity; the only way that the Aryans could establish themselves in the Indus Valley was by stealing the cattle of the indigenous settled communities—the earthly counterparts of the stay-at-home *asuras*.³⁵

The Aryans were hard-living, hard-drinking people who loved music, gambling, and wine. But even at this very early stage they showed spiritual genius. Shortly after they arrived in the Punjab, a learned elite began to compile the earliest hymns of the Rig Veda (“Knowledge in Verse”), the most prestigious portion of the Vedic scriptures. When completed, it would consist of 1,028 hymns, divided into ten books. This was just one part of a vast corpus of literature, which included anthologies of songs, mantras (short prose formulae used in ritual), and instructions for their recitation. These texts and poems had all been inspired; they were *shruti*, “that which is heard.” Revealed to the great seers (*rishis*) of antiquity, they were absolutely authoritative, unmarked by human redaction, divine, and eternal.

Some hymns of the Rig Veda could be very old indeed, because by the time the Aryan tribes arrived in India, its language was already archaic. The poems were the property of a small group of seven priestly families, each with its own “copyrighted” collection, which they chanted during the sacrificial rituals. Family members learned the hymns by heart and transmitted them orally to the next generation; the Rig Veda was not committed to writing until the second millennium of the common era. Since the advent of literacy, our powers of memory have declined, and we find it hard to believe that people were able to learn such lengthy texts. But the Vedic scriptures were transmitted with impeccable accuracy, even after the archaic Sanskrit had become almost incomprehensible, and still today, the exact tonal accents and inflections of the original, long-lost language have been preserved.

together with the ritually prescribed gestures of the arms and fingers. Sound had always been sacred to the Aryans, and when they listened to these holy texts, people felt invaded by the divine. As they committed them to memory, their minds were filled by a sacred presence. Vedic “knowledge” was not the acquisition of factual information but was experienced as divine possession.

The poems of the Rig Veda did not tell coherent stories about the gods or give clear descriptions of the sacrificial rituals but alluded in a veiled, riddling fashion to myths and legends that were already familiar to the community. The truth that they were trying to express could not be conveyed in neutral logical discourse. The poet was a *rishi*, a seer. He had not invented these hymns. They had declared themselves to him in visions that seemed to come from another world.³⁶ The *rishi* could see truths and make connections that were not apparent to ordinary people, but he had the divinely bestowed talent to impart them to anybody who knew how to listen. The beauty of this inspired poetry shocked his audience into a state of such awe, wonder, fear, and delight that they felt directly touched by divine power. The sacred knowledge of the Veda did not simply come from the semantic meaning of the words but from their sound, which was itself a *deva*.

The visionary truth of the Rig Veda stole up on the audience, who listened carefully to the hidden significance of the paradoxes and the strange, riddling allusions of the hymns, which yoked together things that seemed to be entirely unrelated. As they listened, they felt in touch with the mysterious potency that held the world together. This power was *rita*, divine order translated into human speech.³⁷ As the *rishi* physically enunciated the sacred syllables, *rita* was made flesh and became an active, living reality in the torn, conflicted world of the Punjab. The listeners felt that they were in touch with the power that made the seasons follow one another regularly, the stars remain in their courses, the crops grow, and enabled the disparate elements of human society to cohere. Scripture, therefore, did not impart information that could be grasped notionally but gave people a more intuitive insight that was a bridge, linking the visible with the invisible dimension of life.

The *rishis* learned to hold themselves in a state of constant readiness to receive inspired words that seemed to come from outside but were also experienced as an inner voice. They may already have begun to develop techniques of concentration that enabled them to penetrate the subconscious. They discovered that if they got rid of their usual distracting preoccupations, “the doors of the mind may be opened,”³⁸ and that Agni, the inventor of brilliant speech, the light of the world, enabled them to see in the same way as a god. The *rishis* had laid the foundations for the Indian Axial Age. At this very early date, they had made a deliberate effort to go beyond empirical knowledge and intuit a deeper, more fundamental truth.

Yet the *rishis* represented only a tiny minority of the Aryan community. The warriors and raiders lived in an entirely different spiritual world. Their lives alternated between the village (*grama*) and the jungle (*aranya*). During the monsoon rains, they had to live an *asura*-like existence in temporary makeshift encampments. But after the winter solstice they yoked their horses and oxen and set off into the wilderness on a new cycle of raids, to replenish the wealth of the community. The opposition of the village and the forest became a social and spiritual paradigm in India.³⁹ Each complemented the other. The inhabitants of the settled community provided crops and bred the cattle that the warriors needed; yet they constantly feared attack from the bands of cattle rustlers, who roamed on the outskirts of society. The tropical forest was the place where the warrior proved his valor and explored the unknown. Later, during the Axial Age, hermits would retire to the forest to pioneer the spiritual realm. In the *aranya*, therefore, the Aryans experienced violence as well as religious enlightenment.

and from this very early stage, the two were inextricably entwined. Instead of waiting patiently and emptying his mind and heart, like a *rishi*, a warrior knew that he would have to fight his way to vision and insight.

Ever since they had taken up raiding on the steppes, the Aryans had altered the patterns of the rituals, to reflect the agonistic tenor of their daily existence. Zoroaster had been very disturbed by the new sacrificial rites of the cattle rustlers, though he did not describe them in any detail. “We must do what the gods did in the beginning,” an Indian ritual text of a later period explained.⁴⁰ “Thus the gods did, thus men do,” said another.⁴¹ In their raids and battles, the Aryan warriors reenacted the heavenly wars between *devas* and *asuras*. When they fought, they became more than themselves and felt united with Indra; these rituals gave their warfare a “soul,” and by linking their earthly battles with the divine archetype, they made them holy.

Sacrifice was therefore at the spiritual heart of Aryan society in India, but it was also central to the economy. The old peaceful rites of the steppes had become far more aggressive and competitive, and reflected the dangerous lives of the cattle rustlers. Aryan sacrifice was now similar to the potlatch celebrated by the Native American tribes of the northwest, who proudly displayed the booty they had won and slaughtered large numbers of beasts for lavish sacrificial banquets. If a community accumulated more animals and crops than it needed, this surplus had to be “burned up.” It was impossible for a nomadic group that was perpetually on the move to store these goods, and the potlatch was a rough-and-ready way of redistributing the wealth of society. The ritual also showed how successful the chief had been and enhanced his prestige.

In India the *raja* (“chief”) commissioned a sacrifice in a similar spirit.⁴² He invited the elders of his own tribe and some of the neighboring chieftains to a special sacrificial arena, where he exhibited his surplus of booty—cattle, horses, soma, and crops. Some of these goods were sacrificed to the gods and eaten in a riotous, sumptuous banquet; anything left over was distributed to the other *raj*as as gifts. This placed an obligation on the patron’s guests to return these favors, and *raj*as vied with one another in putting on ever more spectacular sacrifices. The *hotr* priest, who chanted hymns to the gods, also sang the praises of the patron, promising that his munificence would bring even greater riches his way. Thus while the patron sought to curry favor with the gods and identify with Indra, who was himself an extravagant host and sacrificer, he also wanted to win praise and respect. At a time when he was supposed to leave his mundane self behind and become one with his heavenly counterpart, he was also engaged in aggressive self-assertion. This paradox in the ancient ritual would be a matter of concern to many of the reformers of the Axial Age.

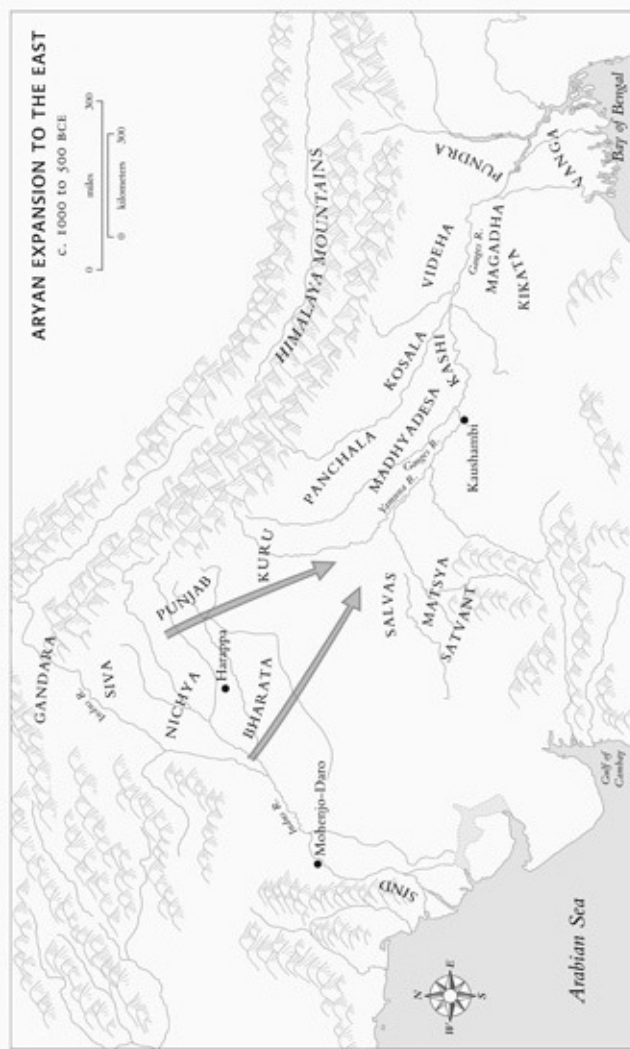
Sacrifice also increased the violence that was already endemic in the region. After it was over, the patron had no cattle left and would have to inaugurate a new series of raids to replenish his wealth. We have no contemporary descriptions of these sacrifices, but later texts contain fragmentary references that give us some idea of what went on. The sacrifice was a solemn occasion, but it was also a large, rowdy carnival. Vast amounts of wine and soma were consumed, so people were either drunk or pleasantly mellow. There was casual sex with slave girls laid on by the officiating *raja*, and lively, aggressive ritual contests: chariot races, shooting matches, and tugs of war. Teams of dancers, singers, and lute players competed against one another. There were dice games for high stakes. Groups of warriors conducted mock battles. It was enjoyable, but also dangerous. In this highly competitive atmosphere, mock battles between professional warriors, all hungry for fame and prestige, could easily segue into serious fighting. A *raja* might wager a cow in a game of dice, and lose his entire

herd. Carried away by the excitement of the occasion, he could also decide to lead an attack against his “enemy,” ~~a neighboring raja who was on bad terms with him or who was holding a rival sacrifice~~ of his own. The texts indicate that *devas* and *asuras* often interrupted each other’s sacrifices and carried off plunder and hostages, which suggests that this kind of violent intrusion was also common on earth.⁴³ A raja who had not received an invitation to a ritual was insulted; he felt honor-bound to fight his way into the enemy camp and carry off booty. In these liturgically inspired raids, people could and did get killed.

The sacrifice reenacted, in a heightened, ceremonial setting, the glory and terror of the Aryan heroic code.⁴⁴ A warrior’s entire life was an agon, a deadly, dangerous contest for food and wealth, which could end in his death. Ever since they had lived on the steppes, the Aryans had believed that the best and wealthiest among them would join the gods in heaven. Now they were convinced that a warrior who died nobly in battle went immediately to the world of the gods. In the heroic code, therefore, enlightenment was inseparable from violent death. An ancient story made this clear. A group of warriors had gathered to perform a long, elaborate sacrifice. But as so often happened, they were surrounded by a rival tribe, and there was a fierce battle. Tragically Sthura, their leader, was killed. When it was all over, his clansmen sat in a circle, mourning his loss, but one of them had a vision. He saw Sthura walking through the sacrificial ground to the sacred fire, and then beginning his ascent to heaven. “Do not lament,” he cried to his companions, “for he whom you are mourning has gone upward from the hearth of the offering fire and entered heaven.”⁴⁵ Sthura joined the gods simply because he had been slain in the course of a dangerous ritual. His companion had this glorious vision only because his leader had been prematurely and pointlessly slain.

Some of the warriors recognized the futility of their heroic ethos. A few of the later poems of the Rig Veda express a new weariness and pessimism. People felt worn out. “Indigence, nakedness and exhaustion press me sore,” the *rishi* complained; “my mind is fluttering like a bird’s. As rats eat the weaver’s threads, cares are consuming me.”⁴⁶ This vulnerability marked the beginning of the late Vedic period, a time of disturbing social change.⁴⁷ During the tenth century, the old egalitarian tribal structures had begun to crumble, and an aristocracy of warrior families, known as the *kshatriyas* (“the empowered ones”), became dominant. Those of less noble lineage, the *vaishyas*, the clansmen, started to give up raiding and become farmers. When the *kshatriyas* yoked their horses to their chariots at the beginning of the new raiding season, the *vaishyas* stayed behind in the village. Like the *shudras*, the non-Aryan population, they now resembled the *asuras*, who stayed at home in their halls, and were a fair game for plunder.⁴⁸

A few chiefs began to create embryonic kingdoms. A king was never elected for life. Every year, he had to submit to the ordeal of the *rajasuya*, the ritual of consecration, in order to prove that he was worthy of office. Somebody was always ready to challenge him, and the old raja had to win power back by leading a successful raid in the course of the rite and beating his opponent at dice. If he lost, he would go into exile in the forest, but would usually return and challenge his rival to another *rajasuya*. The instability of the Indian kingdom was so ingrained that an early manual of statecraft actually made the king’s enemy a constituent part of the state.⁴⁹



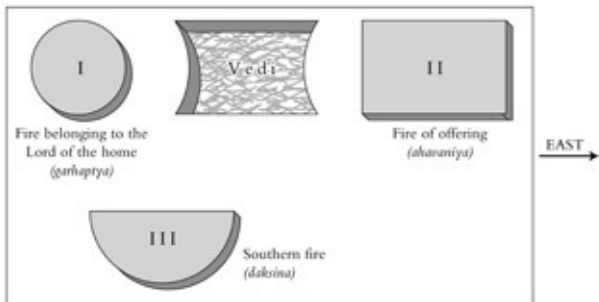
During the late Vedic period, there was a new wave of migration. In the tenth century, some of the Aryans began to push steadily eastward, settling in the Doab, between the Yamuna and Ganges rivers. This region became the *arya varta*, the “Land of the Arya.” Here too small kingdoms developed. The kings of Kuru-Panchala settled on the northwest fringe of the Ganges plain, with their capital at Hastinapura, while the Yadava clan settled in the area of Mathura, to the south. The terrain here was very different from the Punjab. The lush forests of exotic trees were a green paradise, but to build their little towns and encampments, the pioneers had to set fire to the trees in order to clear the land. Agni, god of fire, therefore became integral to this new phase of colonization. Settlement was slow and steplike. Each year, during the cool season, the Kuru-Panchala dispatched teams of warriors who penetrated deeper into the dense forest, subjugated the local population, and made a new outpost a little farther to the east than the previous year.⁵⁰ They raided the farms of the *shudras*, seized the crops and cattle, and returned home before the monsoon to cultivate their own fields.⁵¹ Slowly the Aryan frontier crept forward—a disciplined, persevering process that foreshadowed the Aryan systematic conquest of inner space during the Axial Age.

New rituals were devised that sanctified this gradual, incremental drive toward the east. Mobility was still a sacred value: the sacrificial ground was used once only, and was always abandoned after the completion of the rite. At the western end of the sacrificial area, a thatched hut represented the hall of the settled householder. During the rite, the warriors solemnly carried the fire from the hut to the eastern end of the enclosure, where a fresh hearth was built in the open air. The next day, a new

sacrificial ground was established, a little farther to the east, and the rite was re-peated. The ceremony reenacted Agni's victorious progress into the new territory, as a ritualist of a later period explained: "This Fire should create room for us; this Fire should go in front, conquering our enemies; impetuously this Fire should conquer the enemies; this Fire should win the prizes in the contest."⁵²

Agni was the patron of the settlers. Their colony was a new beginning and, like the first creation, had wrested order from chaos. Fire symbolized the warriors' ability to control their environment. They identified deeply with their fire. If he could steal fire from the hearth of a *vaishya* farmer, a warrior could also lure his cattle away, because they would always follow the flames. "He should take brightly burning fire from the home of his rival," says one of the later texts; "he thereby takes his wealth, his property."⁵³ Fire symbolized a warrior's power and success; it was—an important point—his alter ego. He could create new fire, control and domesticate it. Fire was like his son; when he died and was cremated, he became a sacrificial victim and Agni would carry him to the land of the gods. The fire represented his best and deepest self (*atman*),⁵⁴ and because the fire was Agni, this self was sacred and divine.

THE VEDIC SACRIFICIAL ARENA
SHOWING THE THREE SACRED FIRES



- I) The "fire belonging to the Lord of the home" (*garhaptya*), used to prepare food for the sacrifice. It had a round altar, representing the earth.
- II) The "fire of offering" (*ahavaniya*), where the prepared offerings were placed. A square altar, representing the four-directional sky. The offerings from earth (I) to heaven (II) by Agni.
- III) The "southern fire" (*dakshina*)—less used in major rituals—to ward off evil spirits and receive offerings to special ancestors. A semicircular altar representing the atmosphere between the earth and overarching heavens.

The *Vedi* was a grass-lined pit in which oblations and utensils were placed when not in use to preserve their powers.

The altars were usually made of sand, earth, pebbles, and pieces of wood.

Agni was present everywhere, but he was hidden. He was in the sun, the thunder, the stormy rain, and the lightning that brought fire to the earth. He was present in ponds and streams, in the clay of the riverbank, and the plants from which fire could be kindled.⁵⁵ Agni had to be reverently retrieved from these hiding places, and pressed into the service of humanity. After establishing a new settlement, the warriors would celebrate the Agnicayana ritual, when they would ceremonially build a new brick altar for Agni. First they processed to the riverbank to collect the clay, where Agni was hidden, ritually taking possession of their new territory. They might have to fight and kill local residents who resisted

this act of occupation. On their return to the sacrificial ground, the victorious warriors built their altars in the shape of a bird, one of Agni's emblems, and Agni revealed himself when the new fire blazed forth.⁵⁶ Only then did the new colony become a reality: "One becomes a settler when he builds the fire altar," said one of the later texts, "and whoever are builders of fire altars are settled."⁵⁷

Raiding was built into the Aryan rituals. In the soma ritual, the sacred drink seemed to lift warriors up to the world of the gods. Once filled with the divine power of the god, they felt that they "had surpassed the heavens and all this spacious earth." But this hymn began: "This, even this was my resolve, to win a cow, to win a steed: have I not drunk of Soma juice?"⁵⁸ During the soma ritual, the patron and his guests had to leave the sacrificial ground and raid a nearby settlement to procure cattle and soma for the sacrifice. In the *rajasuya*, after the new king had drunk the soma juice, he was dispatched on a raid. If he returned with plunder, the officiating priests acknowledged his kingship: "Thou, O King, art *brahman!*"⁵⁹

During the late Vedic period, the Aryans developed the idea of *brahman*, the supreme reality. Brahman was not a *deva*, but a power that was higher, deeper, and more basic than the gods, a force that held all the disparate elements of the universe together, and stopped them from fragmenting. Brahman was the fundamental principle that enabled all things to become strong and to expand. It was life itself.⁶¹ Brahman could never be defined or described, because it was all-encompassing: human beings could not get outside it and see it objectively. But it could be experienced in ritual. When the king arrived back safely from his raid, with the spoils of battle, he had become one with the brahman. He was now the axis, the hub of the wheel that would pull his kingdom together, and enable it to prosper and expand. Brahman was also experienced in silence. A ritual often ended with the *brahmodya* competition to find a verbal formula that expressed the mystery of the brahman. The challenger asked a difficult and enigmatic question, and his opponent answered in an equally elusive manner. The match continued until one of the contestants was unable to respond: reduced to silence, he was forced to withdraw.⁶² The transcendence of the brahman was sensed in the mysterious clash of unanswerable questions that led to a stunning realization of the impotence of speech. For a few sacred moments, the competitors felt one with the mysterious force that held the whole of life together, and the winner could say that he *was* the brahman.

By the tenth century some *rishis* started to create a new theological discourse. The traditional *devas* were beginning to seem crude and unsatisfactory; they must point to something beyond themselves. Some of the late hymns of the Rig Veda sought a god who was more worthy of worship. "What god shall we adore with our offering?" asked one of the *rishis* in Hymn 121 of the tenth book of the Rig Veda. Who was the true lord of men and cattle? Who owned the snowcapped mountains and the mighty ocean? Which of the gods was capable of supporting the heavens? In this hymn, the poet found an answer that would become one of the seminal myths of the Indian Axial Age. He had a vision of a creator god emerging from primal chaos, a personalized version of the brahman. His name was Prajapati: "the All." Prajapati was identical with the universe; he was the life force that sustained it, the seed of consciousness, and the light that emerged from the waters of unconscious matter. Beyond Prajapati was also a spirit outside the universe, who could order the laws of nature. Immanent and transcendent, he alone was "God of gods and none beside him."

But this seemed far too explicit to another *rishi*.⁶³ In the beginning, he maintained, there was nothing. There was neither existence nor nonexistence, neither death nor immortality, but only

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