

The Academic Synopticon

John R. Shook (c)2024

Part Nine.

Axial World-Systems

Now philosophical systems are absolutely true only to their founders, to all later philosophers they are usually one big mistake, and to feebler minds a sum of mistakes and truths; at any rate if regarded as highest aim they are an error, and in so far reprehensible. ... Whoever on the contrary finds any pleasure at all in great humans finds pleasure also in such systems, be they ever so erroneous, for they all have in them one point which is irrefutable, a personal touch, and color; one can use them in order to form a picture of the philosopher, just as from a plant growing in a certain place one can form conclusions as to the soil. That mode of life, of viewing human affairs at any rate, has existed once and is therefore possible; the "system" is the growth in this soil or at least a part of this system.

F. Nietzsche, "Philosophy During the Tragic Age of the Greeks" (1874)

By the early Iron Age, after the collapse of civilizations and then the reconstruction of civic order, myths from the Stone Age and pantheons from the Bronze Age no longer seemed sufficient. A new type of literature, composed in narratives, histories, discourses, and poetry, asked original questions and proposed radically new answers. This genre is called Sage Literature, and it appeared in each region of Eurasia where intellectuals could write down their answers in literary works for others to read and contemplate. Sage Literature appeared first, circa 1800–500 BCE (first in Egypt and Mesopotamia, and later in India and China). Some of its Sage wisdom inspired a few Axial world-systems too.

Each of the Axial world-systems undertook an intellectual quest for a more powerful and permanent order above and behind the observable world. Going back into the Stone Age and throughout the Bronze Age, mythologies have provided their worldviews able to deal with four fundamental matters of interest to every human being:

What makes us feel a sense of awe and reverence?	A worldview will inspire our Wonder.
What manages the entire cosmos and its proper order?	A worldview will explain a Cosmology.
What maintains our secure and harmonious society?	A worldview will support Social Order.
What motivates the pursuit of excellent human life?	A worldview will guide our Realization.

Eight typical concerns and thought-provoking questions enlivened Sage Literature, and then provoked the Axial phases:

- What must be Supremely Powerful?
- What would be Most Responsible?
- What should be Reliably Valuable?
- What could be Securely Knowable?
- What makes us Piously Reverential?
- What helps us be Socially Conformable?
- What guides our Ethical Character?
- What encourages my Personal Excellence?

Plenty of intellectuals in many civilizations were starting to ponder questions like these during the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age. We can read their poetry and prose as Sage Literature. However, having a few good questions in mind and posing interesting answers was not sufficient to make their viewpoints fully Axial.

The twelve Axial world-systems each provided their own unique answers to these questions. In addition, each Axial system resulted from the additional intellectual effort to *coordinate* their eight answers in order to assemble an overall *coherent* worldview. Only twelve world-systems across Eurasia during 1100-400 BCE managed that great accomplishment.

Axial world-systems can be compared by contrasting their distinctive answers to the provocative questions listed above.

	<u>Judaism</u>	<u>Hinduism</u>	<u>Taoism</u>
Supremely Powerful?	Personal creator deity	Absolute pure consciousness	Cosmic flowing energy
Most Responsible?	Yahweh's providence	Brahman's manifestations	Dao's dynamic turbulence
Reliably Valuable?	Divine benevolence	Blissful (re)union with Brahman	Inherent healthy flourishing
Securely Knowable?	Revelations from Yahweh	Meditational selflessness	Nature's own patterned ways
Piously Reverential?	Submissive faith	Practice detached absorption	Natural habits of simple living
Socially Conformable?	Obedying the Covenant	Deferring to custom and caste	Fitting in without striving
Ethical Character?	Follow the Law	Exemplify one's social role	Follow virtue without disrupting
Personal Excellence	Personify dutiful piety	Diminish any self-interests	Display virtuosity in practices

All of the Axial world-systems are philosophical/ethical, and they can be religious/spiritual as well. A world-system that is philosophical (1) proposes an "ultimate reality" that is working in some way or another; and (2) recommends that humans live better by conforming to the cosmic pattern or course that this reality is taking. A World-System that is more religious includes (1) and (2) while also adding that (3) the supreme reality values human life, and (4) it rewards right conduct beyond this earthly life.

Some Axial phases, for some civilizations, were designed to be more religious than other Axial phases in other civilizations. The religious phases made sure to emphasize the reverential awe owed to a supreme Being, and the devout piety that one should display towards that Being. Some Axial phases were more philosophical in nature. They did speculate about a supreme Reality, and they expected people to feel a sense of awe and wonder about that Reality, but as philosophies they were designed to wisely guide the worthy life, rather than to compel people to live a worshipful obedient life. However, even philosophical world-systems, by explaining how to live the worthiest human life, do offer some spiritual guidance and reassurance, perhaps getting a little theological.

All Axial world-systems can be understood as both philosophical and theological: each system offers a cosmology (what is Real) coordinated with an Axiology (what is Valuable) and an Ethics (the highest Duty). The full list of twelve Axial Phase systems from the oldest (c.1100 BCE) to the youngest (c.400 BCE):

<u>Location</u>	<u>Cosmology</u> (reality)	<u>Axiology</u> (supreme value), <u>Ethics</u> (highest duty)
Egypt	Immanent Cosmotheism	regimentation under sovereignty, respected by living justly
China	Cosmic Daoism	integrity with natural ways, conducted with simplicity
Iran-Persia	Zoroastrian Duotheism	militancy alongside the light, from puritanical righteousness
Central Asia	Divine Despotism	domination over subjects, earned by winning every conflict
Babylon	Nomothetism	alignment with heavenly order, by consigning life to fate
Phoenicia-Greece	Logocosmism	knowledge of the real, by applying conceptual precision
Northern India	Idealistic Hinduism	unity within absolute mind, from sacrificing the ego-self
Canaan	Monotheistic Judaism	solidarity with the creator, by affirming submissive faith
Europe	Romantic Individualism	autonomy among co-equals, by gaining independence

China	Civil Confucianism	harmony with the supreme, enacted with ritual deference
Greece	Natural Cosmology	empowerment in control, gained by experimental learning
Northern India	Buddhist Phenomenalism	liberation from all illusion, through meditative detachment

Many more philosophical, theological, and ethical views originated during this period as well. Innumerable thinkers, sages, and seers populated the landscape during the Axial Phase, offering ideas nearly inconceivable anywhere before 1200 BCE. The twelve Axial world-systems held the greatest importance for the course of civilizations across Eurasia down to the present day. Jaspers rightly estimated that every worldview from theism and idealism to positivism and naturalism, and every religious society on the planet (except for indigenous/native tribes and peoples), descended from these twelve Axial systems, singly or in combination.

Jaspers saw in Axial systems a simultaneous reach for transcendence (cosmic unity behind plurality), universality (humanity ought to conform), individuality (people should all strive), and immortality (all spirits have afterlives). This salvific set of ideas are correlative, not contradictory. The unity of divinity accounts for the correctness of a world system to which many should adhere. If one world system rightly prevails, then one's individual significance increases, and merit brings lasting reward. Being part of the cosmic system arouses a sense of personal worth and entitlement. However, against Jaspers, many kinds of individuality emerged across Eurasia. An honor society depicts individual virtue very differently from a lawful regime or a caste system. Similarly, there are a wide variety of kinds of immortality.

In line with Jaspers, these early Iron Age civilizations maintained an intrinsic bond among rightness, righteousness, and harmony. Ancient Egypt used the all-important word "ma'at" to mean truth and justness, and cosmic harmony. In ancient Sumerian, the word for true, correct, honest, righteous, and justness is the same word, "zid". European languages inherited the word "right" from the Proto-Indo-European word "reg" for putting right, and its Ancient Sanskrit version "ṛta" to mean the truth or the right way. That heritage descended to Old Persian (rasta-), Greek (orektos), Latin (rectus), Old Norse (rettr), and German (recht). In the oldest religious inscriptions of China, zheng (正) means "upright" or "correct." Sage wisdom traditions in ancient China, visible in Daoist, Confucian, and Mohists schools, emphasize rightness or propriety (yi 義) fitting with worldly order (li 理) and that fitness makes something truly genuine (chen).

There is no comparable time of sheer originality in human history, besides the Pastoral Age of c3200-2500 BCE and the Modernity Age of c1600-1900 CE. That's the point of studying the Axial Phase in intellectual history, after setting aside Jaspers's own portrayal of his Axial Age as evolutionary and a fitting destiny for humanity's "progress". Only by studying that era synoptically – historically, anthropologically, archeologically, sociologically, economically, politically, mythologically, and philosophically – would a fair portrait come together about real-world conditions shifting ideas about other-world relations.

At the end of this text, consult more tables and charts comparing the twelve Axial world-systems.

Axial Phase: Egypt, Phoenicia, and Babylon

Immanent Cosmotheism, Logocosmism, Nomotheism

These three Axial worldviews independently developed within the same Middle Eastern region, without directly influencing each other. However, by 600 BCE their ideas were transmitted to ancient Greece by way of Cyprus and southern Anatolia on to the islands of the Aegean. During 800-600 BCE the Phoenician traders and their routes around the eastern Mediterranean served as the main conveyor of Axial views, freshly recordable in their new technology of alphabetic writing.

These three Axial worldviews shared a conviction that ultimate reality is rational and intellectual, permitting the world to be intelligible. Egypt used the sun's light as the metaphor for the illumination giving everything else its form. Phoenicia applied the written word as the schematic form for anything knowably real. Babylon traced the formulaic laws imposed by the rational powers of the shining heavens.

1200-800 BCE Mediterranean:

The Late Bronze Age collapse and Dark Ages. Practically every region of the eastern Mediterranean and southern Europe suffered political, economic, and cultural collapse. Droughts, natural disasters, resource failures, migrations, and wars were rampant. Many cities large and small across Mycenaean Greece, Carpathia, Thrace, the Aegean, Crete, Phoenicia, and lower Egypt were either destroyed, partially abandoned, or impoverished. The long-standing Minoan civilization, only pre-dated by Egypt, had vanished. The Egyptian civilization survived, but the New Kingdom did not; however, its solar *cosmotheism* survived despite the loss of political integrity at the start of the Third Intermediate Period (1070 BCE). The 1100s BCE are also the age of the Trojan Wars recollected by Homer in lore and legend for the Iliad and The Odyssey.

The Phoenician cosmopolitan outlook and its alphabet set the stage for *logocosmism*. The revival of Greece's city-states during the 7th century BCE set the stage for philosophical Sage Literature such as Hesiod's Theogony and the Sophists. Greece's logocentrism led towards rationalist philosophers such as Parmenides and Plato. The other Axial system to emerge in this region was Ionian *natural cosmology*, which led towards the naturalism of Democritus and Aristotle.

1200-800 BCE Levant:

The western chaos spread to Anatolia, Canaan, upper and lower Mesopotamia, Iran, and even Bactria. The Ugarit and Amorite states crumbled, Canaan fragmented into small kingdoms (such as Israel and Judah), and the Hittite Empire in Anatolia collapsed, while the Middle Assyrian Empire was severely weakened and Babylon and Elam fought for local dominance. Farther east, the Iranian Plateau harbored tribal migrations of contesting Medes, Persians, and Parthians, some arriving from Iranian Bactria. By the 800s, the Medes were consolidating Iran, the Neo-Assyrian Empire took control of most of the Middle East and Egypt, and the Phrygian Kingdom occupied Anatolia.

Three novel theologies/cosmologies arose within the Levant during 800-600 BCE. Bactria and northeast Iran was the epicenter for the god Ahura Mazda and the *duotheism* of Zoroastrianism. In Canaan, the Semitic Jews and their priestly class recollected and reconstituted *monotheism* for the god Yahweh during and after their Babylonian captivity. Around this same period, Babylonian astrology fostered mathematical astronomy to predict heavenly motions, eclipses, conjunctions (and the like) and then to formulate *nomotheism*: rational divinity is lawfully maintaining the cosmic order.

Axial Phase: Immanent Cosmotheism

The era: c.1100 BCE

The location: New Kingdom Egypt

The sources: Egyptian hymnal and funerary texts, temple inscriptions

The first monotheist in recorded history was Akhenaten, Pharaoh of Egypt, who ruled c.1353-1335 BCE. He came to the throne as Amenhotep IV, showing no sign of dissatisfaction with Egypt's polytheistic religion that revolved around the supreme deity Amun. Within a few years, he had changed his name, announced that the one real god is Aten, departed from Thebes, and founded a new capitol (now called Amarna). This political challenge to the high priesthood of Thebes also threatened their wealth and influence as an established aristocracy. Worse, Akhenaten's new religion of Aten declared that no other gods are real. After a reign of seventeen years, his death placed his son Tutankhamun on the throne, and the worship of Aten promptly disappeared. However, the unique idea that a single all-powerful deity energizes everything could not be forgotten, and the religion of Amun-Re was soon transformed towards monotheism as well.

The older Amon-Re theology, centered at the city of Heliopolis, was itself a major advance from the ancient polytheism dating back to the Old Kingdom. After the Theban kingdom drove out the foreign Hyksos from lower Egypt and refounded the unification of Egypt with the New Kingdom c.1550 BCE, Amun was fused with the solar deity Ra. A hymn from that earlier era reads as follows:

Adoration of Amon-Re, the Bull Residing in Heliopolis, chief of all gods,
the good god, the beloved, who gives life to all that is warm and to all good cattle.
Hail to thee, Amon-Re, Lord of the Thrones of the Two Lands, Presiding over Karnak,
Bull of His Mother, Presiding over His Fields! Far-reaching of stride, presiding over Upper Egypt,
Lord of the Madjoi and ruler of Punt, Eldest of heaven, first-born of earth, Lord of what is, enduring in
all things, enduring in all things.
Unique in His nature like the fluid of the gods, The goodly bull of the Ennead, chief of all gods,
The lord of truth and father of the gods. Who made mankind and created the beasts, Lord of what is,
who created the fruit tree, Made herbage, and gave life to cattle.
The goodly daemon whom Ptah made, The goodly beloved youth to whom the gods give praise,
Who made what is below and what is above, Who illuminates the Two Lands
And crosses the heavens in peace...
[Papyrus Boulaq 17, in Pritchard ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, p. 365.]

Merging two major deities into just one deity was an immense religious innovation. Just a couple of centuries later, Akhenaten's religious revolution no longer praised the supreme deity as "chief" of all gods – instead, Aten is *the* God alone.

Pharaoh Akhenaten's Hymn to Aten, the One God (c.1340 BCE)

How many are your deeds, Though hidden from sight, O Sole God, beside whom there is none! You
made the earth as you wished, you alone, All peoples, herds, and flocks,
All upon earth that walk on legs, All on high that fly on wings,
The lands of Khor [Syria] and Kush [Nubia], The land of Egypt.
You set every man in his place, You supply their needs,
Everyone has his food, His lifetime is counted.
. . . .
Lord of all lands who shines for them, Aten of daytime, great in glory!

All distant lands, you make them live,

....

Your rays nurse all fields, When you shine they live, they grow for you;

You made the seasons to foster all that you made,

Winter to cool them, heat that they taste you.

You made the far sky to shine therein, To behold all that you made;

You alone, shining in your form of living Aten.

Risen, radiant, distant, near.

You made millions of forms from yourself alone,

Towns, Villages, fields, the river's course;

All eyes observe you upon them, For you are the Aten of daytime on high.

....

You are in my heart, There is no other who knows you,

Only your son, *Neferkheprure, Sole-one-of-Re* [Akhenaten],

Whom you have taught your ways and your might.

[Those on] Earth come from your hand as you made them,

When you have dawned they live, When you set they die;

You yourself are lifetime, one lives by you.

All eyes are on [your] beauty until you set. ...

[*Ancient Egyptian Literature* vol. 2, ed. M. Lichtheim (University of California Press, 1976), pp. 98-99].



Egyptologist Jan Assmann has explained why this theology of Aten is not a cosmogony or a natural cosmogony, and not a pantheism either. The gods are not born from a supreme deity; the cosmos was not gradually generated from primeval powers; and God is more than the just the whole cosmos. Instead, the entire cosmos is perpetually manifested through the energetic divine light of Aten and everything would stop existing without it. Aten is simultaneously greater than the world while sustaining it (cosmotheism), yet Aten's power is within all created things (immanence). This theology is therefore immanent cosmotheism. In Assmann's words,

The truth which Akhenaten sought to establish in the form of a new religion concerned first of all the nature of the universe. His primary insight or discovery or revelation was that everything depended on the sun. The whole of reality was to be reduced to the visible, that is, to the "here-and-now" and everything that was not-here and not-now has to be excluded from the notion of reality. For

reality thus defined there was but one and only source, origin and explanation which was the sun. The initial insight or "revelation", which induced Akhenaten to abolish traditional polytheism and to found a new religion based on the idea of divine unity and uniqueness was the discovery that not only light but also time are to be explained as manifestations of solar energy. Akhenaten understood and praised the sun as the source both of light and of time, generating light by its radiation and time by its motion. With this discovery, absolutely everything could be explained as workings, "emanations", "becomings" of the sun. In this system, the concept of "One" had not a theological, but a physical meaning: the One is the source of cosmic existence. There are no other sources besides this One, and everything can be reduced and related to it.

... There is a strong pantheistic or immanentistic element in Akhenaten's monotheism, to use the language of 17th and 18th c. theology. The same applies to the aspect of cosmotheism. Akhenaten's god is not the cosmos, but a cosmic phenomenon or energy, in fact, the cosmic principle on which the whole cosmos depends.

[Assmann, Jan. "Mono-, pan-, and cosmotheism: thinking the 'one' in Egyptian theology." *Oriens* 33 (1998): 130-149, at 132-133, 135.]

Akhenaten failed to establish his new monotheistic religion. The Egyptian Axial phase could not truly begin. However, the religious idea of monolatry was at least established in the Egyptian mentality. What if people should focus their worship on the one supreme deity?

Cosmotheism

If the supreme deity possessed total divine power, with other gods just participating in that same power (instead of gods having their own separate powers), then devotion to that supreme deity had to be essential to being religious. Other gods could be worshipped as well, but they were only embodiments of supreme divinity, representing particular functions of the One God.

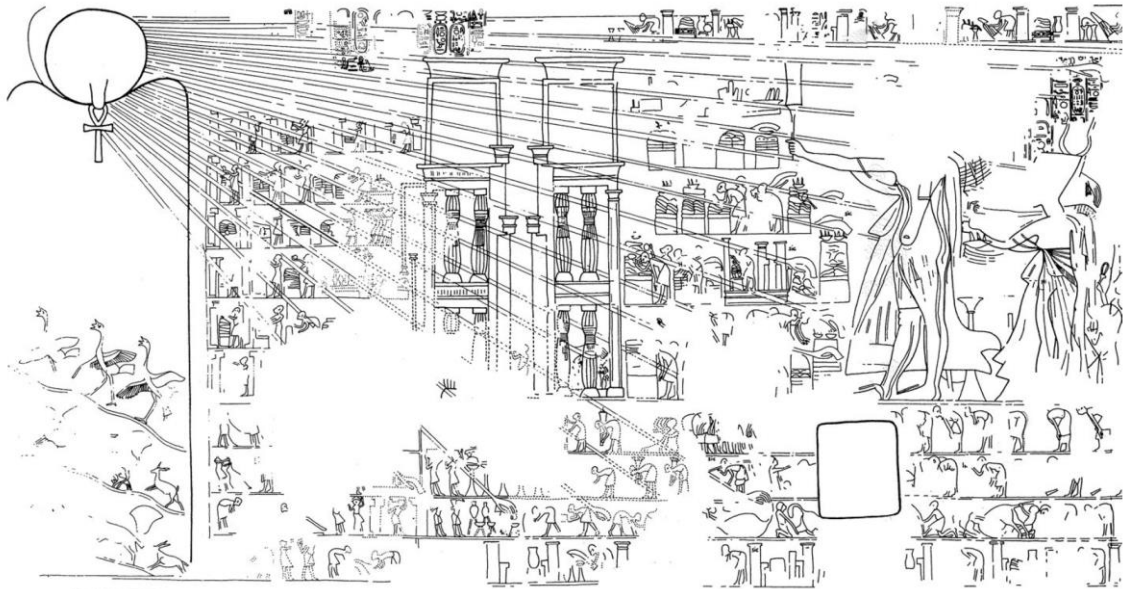
During the period 1300–1100BCE, the Egyptian worldview, including its religion, ethics, and politics, underwent a dramatic transformation. The Bronze Age collapse and the chaos around the Mediterranean reached Egyptian shores. The Iron Age had begun. Egypt's dynastic unity under powerful pharaohs crumbled under external and internal pressures, including invasions and uprisings. In response, Egyptian thinking became much more philosophical and theological; the afterlife world enlarged for more people than just rulers and aristocracy; ethics shifted focus from public performance to private conscience; intellectuals respected their own writings and viewed authorship as a kind of immortality; and the scholarly understanding of history advanced to take sequential eras and individual leaders more seriously.



To counter the brief period of Aten monotheism, the small pantheon of gods was officially restored and the priesthood resumed power alongside the pharaohs. However, the supreme deity Amun-Ra had changed. A solar cosmotheology was developed by the priesthood to credit Amun/Amon-Ra with immanently manifesting the entire heavens and earth in all its particular forms, including the rest of the gods. In other words, immanent cosmotheism was retained and developed into the Egyptian national religion, and so Egypt entered its Axial Phase around 1100 BCE.

Hymn to Amun-Ra at Thebes (c. 1100 BCE)

Secret of transformations and sparkling of appearances, marvellous god, rich in forms
All gods boast of him
to make themselves greater with his beauty to the extent of his divinity
Re himself is united with his body
He is the Great One in Heliopolis
He is called Tatenen
Amun, who comes out of the primeval waters to lead the "faces".
Another of his forms is the Ogdoad
primeval one of the primeval ones, begetter of Re
He completed himself as Atum, being of one body with him
He is Universal Lord, who initiated that which exists.
His ba, it is said, is the one who is in heaven
it is he, the one who is in the underworld, who rules the east
His ba is in heaven, his body in the west
his image is in the southern Heliopolis and wears his diadem.
One is Amun, who keeps himself concealed from them
who hides himself from the gods, no one knowing his nature
He is more remote than heaven
he is deeper than the underworld.
None of the gods knows his true form
his image is not unfolded in books
nothing certain is testified about him.
He is too secretive for his majesty to be revealed
he is too great to be enquired after
too powerful to be known.
[P. Leiden 350 #200, in J. Assman, *Egyptian Solar Religion in the New Kingdom*, pp. 138-9]



Geoffrey T. Martin, *The Royal Tomb at el-Amarna* (London: Egypt Exploration Society), pl. 34.

During the two hundred years between Akhenaten and the last Ramesses pharaoh (Ramesses XI c.1077BCE), Egypt's Axial developments were solidified in mythic ritual and sage literature.

The Book of the Dead, c.1400–1000 BCE

The Book of the Dead was reaching its fullest format during the reigns of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III of the New Kingdom, and remained popular for several centuries thereafter.

The climatic stage during the journey of the dead person's soul was the Tribunal of Judgment by the gods. Standing before Osiris, the soul's heart was weighed against the feather of Ma'at. One's heart, symbolizing the goodness or badness of one's deeds during life, could not be heavier than the feather. A "heavy heart" meant too much evil done, and the soul would not gain immortality.



Spell 125 of the Book of the Dead instructs the soul about what to say while the heart is getting weighed. No boasting or deception is possible, not in front of the gods. The soul recites these lines for Osiris and the gods to hear:

Lo, I come before you,
Bringing Maat to you,
Having repelled evil for you.
I have not done crimes against people,
I have not mistreated cattle,
I have not sinned in the Place of Truth.
I have not known what should not be known,
I have not done any harm.
I did not begin a day by exacting more than my due,
My name did not reach the bark of the mighty ruler.
I have not blasphemed a god,
I have not robbed the poor.
I have not done what the god abhors,
I have not maligned a servant to his master.
I have not caused pain,
have not caused tears.
I have not killed,
I have not ordered to kill,
I have not made anyone suffer.
I have not damaged the offerings in the temples,
I have not depleted the loaves of the gods,
I have not stolen the cakes of the dead.
I have not copulated nor defiled myself.
I have not increased nor reduced the measure,
I have not diminished the arura,
I have not cheated in the fields.
I have not added to the weight of the balance,
I have not falsified the plummet of the scales.
I have not taken milk from the mouth of children,
I have not deprived cattle of their pasture.
I have not snared birds in the reeds of the gods,
I have not caught fish in their ponds.
I have not held back water in its season,
I have not dammed a flowing stream,
I have not quenched a needed fire.
I have not neglected the days of meat offerings,
I have not detained cattle belonging to the god,
I have not stopped a god in his procession.
I am pure, I am pure, I am pure, I am pure!

[*Ancient Egyptian Literature* vol. 2, ed. M. Lichtheim (University of California Press, 1976), pp. 125-6.]

The Turin Papyrus of Kings

Egyptian literature attained an impressive new level of historical scholarship during the 1200s BCE. Under the rule of Pharaoh Ramses II (1279–13 BCE), scholars composed the Papyrus of Kings to list, in chronological order, the pharaohs and their dynasties going back as their temple records could show. Egyptian pharaohs, like most types of kingship, built their legitimacy on their hereditary lineage. However, a typical Pharaoh from the Old or Middle Kingdoms back into the Bronze Age only had to appeal to a grandfather or great-grandfather at the most. No one among the people would recall a pharaoh before that. The monuments bearing names of bygone pharaohs were unintelligible to anyone except scholars.

The Papyrus of Kings was the first scholarly text attempting to list every ruler of Egypt, going back to the old gods. This surviving text clearly displays its reliance on older texts for partial lists of dynasties that the scholars must have consulted (but those earlier texts have not been found).

The first human pharaoh to be listed on Papyrus of Kings was Menes (probably also named Narmer) c. 3100BCE, credited with unifying Egypt's upper and lower kingdoms along the entire Nile River. Interestingly, the pharaohs on this list were not treated as mythic or legendary figures. Besides their acknowledged ability to rule over Egypt, they were not on the list due to due paranormal or supernatural powers, besides the traditional view of Pharaohs as gods. Their humanity was front and center: their individual names, stating and ending dates of rule, and membership in a dynasty was the primary information. Another realistic characteristic of this political history was the way that the list includes temporary, incidental, and peripheral rulers, even during eras of domination by foreigners or divided rule during civil strife. Women and children appear on the list, showing no prejudices there, either.

The Papyrus of Kings is another indication of the Axial transition in place by the 1100s BCE. A pantheon of many gods was consolidated into a lone supreme deity; mythology was getting replaced by cosmology; generic figures were less important than authentic individuals; customary subservience was supplanted by personal ethics; and immortality could be achieved by the many instead of the few.

Individuality

The Egyptian Axial Phase was of course crafted and led by the literate class capable of scholarship. Individuals who trusted their own intellects and respected their own ideas was a key Axial feature. Egyptian sage literature going back to the Middle Kingdom had already expressed a degree of rational skepticism towards traditional beliefs. Do the gods really listen to humans? Do the funerary rituals really work? Does priestly piety really manipulate the gods? With the advent of the Axial Phase in Egypt, the novel idea arose that each individual was actually on their own in their personal quest to survive death in some form or format.

Writing is a kind of authorial immortality, as this Egyptian papyrus from around 1200 BCE attests:

If you but do this, you are versed in writings.
As to those learned scribes,
Of the time that came after the gods,
They who foretold the future,
Their names have become everlasting,
While they departed, having finished their lives,
And all their kin are forgotten.

They did not make for themselves tombs of copper,
With stelae of metal from heaven.

They knew not how to leave heirs,
Children [of theirs] to pronounce their names;
They made heirs for themselves of books,
Of instructions they had composed.

They gave themselves [the scroll as lector]-priest,
The writing-board as loving-son.
Instructions are their tombs,
The reed pen is their child,
The stone-surface their wife.
People great and small
Are given them as children,
For the scribe, he is their leader.

Their portals and mansions have crumbled,
Their ka-servants are [gone];
Their tombstones are covered with soil,
Their graves are forgotten.
Their name is pronounced over their books,
Which they made while they had being;
Good is the memory of their makers,
It is for ever and all time!

Be a scribe, take it to heart,
That your name become as theirs.
Better is a book than a graven stela,
Than a solid tomb-enclosure:
They act as chapels and tombs
In the heart of him who speaks their name;
Surely useful in the graveyard
Is a name in people's mouth!

Man decays, his corpse is dust,
All his kin have perished;
But a book makes him remembered
Through the mouth of its reciter.
Better is a book than a well-built house,
Than tomb-chapels in the west;
Better than a solid mansion,
Than a stela in the temple!

Is there one here like Hardedef?
Is there another like Imhotep?
None of our kin is like Neferti,
Or Khety, the foremost among them.
I give you the name of Ptah-emdjehuty,
Of Khakheperre-sonb.
Is there another like Ptahhotep,
Or the equal of Kaires?

Those sages who foretold the future,
What came from their mouth occurred;
It is found as (their) pronouncement,
It is written in their books.

The children of others are given to them
To be heirs as their own children.

They hid their magic from the masses,
It is read in their Instructions.

Death made their names forgotten
But books made them remembered!

[Papyrus Chester Beatty 4 (portions), in *Ancient Egyptian Literature* vol. 2, ed. M. Lichtheim (University of California Press, 1976), pp. 176-7.]

Miriam Lichtheim prefaces this scribal passage with her observations: "Writings, says the scribe, bestow on their authors an afterlife more real and durable than that provided by the stone-hewn tomb; for men's bodies turn to dust and their tombs. ... Bodies decay but books last, and they alone perpetuate the names of their authors. To make his point, the scribe enumerates the famous authors of the past. Yet the claim that only writers are immortal is astonishing on two counts. First the fact that the vast majority of Egyptian literary works were produced anonymously. Second, the writer's disregard for the belief in a transformed existence after death for which the buried corpse was merely the point of departure. Thus, unless the author was indulging in hyperbole, he is voicing a rationalist skepticism which surpasses that of the Harper' Song in boldness and radicalism." [Lichtheim (1976), pp. 175-6.]

Egypt's Axial Phase

After the Ramesses pharaohs, the country's political order practically collapsed. Around 1180 BCE the "Sea Peoples" invaded from the north by sea and by land. Egypt managed to absorb the terrible impact, but it politically fragmented into the Third Intermediate Period which began around 1070 BCE. The Theban god Amun continued to anchor its cosmology of *imminent cosmotheism*. However, the high priests fixated on its ritualization for holding power. Egypt never developed academic Philosophy to elaborate an intellectual system for this worldview. It nevertheless did reach some degree of philosophical sophistication, to conceive how the solar divinity's hidden energetic spirit invisibly forms and animates all particular beings (including other deities and humans) above and below, thereby manifesting the entire cosmos of time, space, and world. This kind of solution to the unity-transforming-into-plurality problem has parallels with Upanishad and Daoist speculation during that Axial era, yet it advanced no farther in Egypt. Its political upheaval from 1070 until the Persian conquest did not displace priestly scholars from their aristocratic positions and there was no periphery for them to inhabit anyways.

The priestly temple-centered theology clung to conservatism and canonization over any criticism or speculation. Furthermore, writing itself in the sacral language of rigid hieroglyphics (not supplanted until the Demotic script c.650 BCE) was inherently resistant to heresy. Texts composed after 1100 BCE did continue a tradition of both cosmotheology and a body of "sage literature" that philosophically and ethically pondered the individual's place in the cosmos and the afterlife. Atum's cosmotheology was retained for the Memphite Theology of Ptah (c.700 BCE) in which Ptah takes over Atum's transcendent and imminently creative sovereignty. However, no independent scholarly activity had a chance to assemble and nothing like academic philosophy could have enjoyed freedom of thought. Axial originality in Egypt during 1100s-700s BCE was hence limited to its cosmotheology and sagely philosophical literature.

Egypt's Axial phase did not disappear entirely. Its solar cosmotheism shone across the Eastern Mediterranean for centuries. As ancient Greece entered its own Axial phase around 500 BCE, an original sort of intellectual,

many of them calling themselves “philosophers,” pondered the rational illumination of knowable reality. Inquisitive Greek scholars began arriving to study Egyptian thought, including a young student of Socrates who went by the name of Plato. In Plato’s philosophy, the combination of *immanent cosmotheism* with *logocosmism* yielded the synthesis for a worldview still called Platonism. Plato’s Allegory of the Cave in The Republic paired the Sun with “The Good” (God) as the supreme source of illumination. St. Augustine said, “just as there are three different things that one can notice about this sun—that it is, that it shines, and that it illuminates—so too are there three different things about this most hidden God whom you wish to understand—that He is, that He is understood, and that He makes all other things understood.” (Augustine, *Soliloquies*, c.387 CE)

Axial Phase: Zoroastrian Duotheism

The era: c.1000-900 BCE

The religion: Mazdaism of Zarathustra, later called Zoroastrianism

The location: ancient northeast Iran-Bactria-Afghanistan

The source: the Avesta and later sacred books

Four axial world systems arose in the Middle East. *Zoroastrianism* came from Iran and *Judaism* came from Caanan. Judaism's development was impacted by nearby *Egyptian* cosmotheism and Zoroastrianism shared its beginnings with the Indo-Aryan Vedic pantheon. The *Babylonian* view of the mathematical nature of celestial deities originated nomotheism. By 600 BCE all four had developed the farthest of any in the world towards non-anthropomorphic monotheism, although in quite different forms. Zoroastrianism identified two primordial deities, while Judaism settled on a single god.

Cyrus II of Persia (c.600–530 BCE), known as Cyrus the Great, was the founder of the Achaemenid Persian Empire and favorable towards the Iranian religion of Zoroastrianism. He had recently incorporated the homeland of Zoroastrianism in Central Asia into his empire when he also conquered Babylon in 540 BCE. By that time his Persian empire had stretched from the borders with India to the east and Egypt and Greece to the west. His successor Darius (ruled 522–486 BCE) similarly credited his faith for his imperial success. He claimed to rule by the “divine right” and approval of Ahura Mazda (‘Lord Wisdom’), the supreme deity of prophet Zarathustra (in Greek as ‘Zoroaster’).

Zarathustra's inventive religion was not monotheistic, but pan-dualistic: one supremely good deity named Ahura Mazda had to contend with an equally primordial deity opposed to goodness. Both gods were fundamental and uncreated, with neither responsible for the other, and yet in some sense they are cosmologically co-dependent. All of creation including humanity was the result of their struggle. Zoroastrianism treated the “daevas” of other religions as unreal or as agents of the evil deity, named Angra Mainyu (in the Old Avestan script, *aŋra mainiiu*).

Zarathustra, of the clan Spitama, probably lived between 1000 and 800 BCE, around Bactria/Sogdiana or northeast Afghanistan. The cities of Balkh and Samarkand were likely known to him, as Iranian-speaking areas where he could proselytize. The religious ideas that he inherited are older, going back to the Indo-Iranian speaking region of Bactria during 1500-1100 BCE. The oldest Gathas (hymns) from Zarathustra contained in the Avesta display a deep layer of commonality with the language and religion of the earliest Aryan scripture, the Rigveda. Both religions reflect a time when tribes of Iranian-Aryans (‘Ir-an’ and ‘Ar-yan’ have the same root) occupied Bactria, before some tribes migrated into India.

A neo-Assyrian cuneiform tablet (K252, col. 9, line 23; Menzel 1981 II: T122) from the library of Assurbanipal c.700s makes a list of gods for Iran where “as-sa-ra ma-za-aš” first appears anywhere in writing. This Old Iranian deity pre-dated Zarathustra, and probably served as a template for Ahura Mazda. *Ahura* in Avestan corresponds to *Asura* (‘god’) in Vedic, and Zarathustra's religion praises “aša / arta” as names of ‘truth’ and ‘right’. The Indo-Aryan Vedic equivalent is Ṛta and the ‘Asuras’ or high gods such as Varuna populate the Rigveda.

Zarathustra himself says that he was a priest before receiving revelations from this ‘new’ god. His religion centered around the sacrificial fire rites for sacred liquids (the *hoama*), resembling the Vedic fire altars where the liquid *soma* was sacrificed. Zarathustra's own language of his hymns is a close cousin to the language of the Vedas; both languages descended from the Indo-Iranian language spoken before 1500 BCE.

Contemplating an ancient Indo-Bactrian god of “True Wisdom” may have led Zarathustra to the idea of a “Wise Lord” rightly standing for truth. This Ahura Mazda acknowledged no relations with his former divine company. Zarathustra condemns the older gods of that Indo-Iranian pantheon, much the same pantheon worshipped by the Vedic Aryans while they were migrating through Bactria towards the Indus.

The Gathas composed by Zarathustra are numbered 28–34, 43–51, and 53–54 among the oldest chapters of the Yasna. The Yasna is the first book of the collection of religious texts known as the Avesta. Another book of the Avesta, the Vendidad, recites the dualistic cosmological myth and details the Zoroastrian code of morality.

Yasna Gatha 30:3-6

3. Yes, there are two fundamental spirits, twins which are renowned to be in conflict. In thought and in word, in action, they are two: the good and the bad. And between these two, the beneficent have correctly chosen, not the maleficent.

4. Furthermore, when these two spirits first came together, they created life and death, and how, at the end, the worst existence shall be for the deceitful but the best thinking for the truthful person.

5. Of these two spirits, the deceitful one chose to bring to realization the worst things. (But) the very virtuous spirit, who is clothed in the hardest stones chose the truth, and (so shall those) who shall satisfy the Wise Lord continuously with true actions.

6. The gods did not at all choose correctly between these two, since the deceptive one approached them as they were deliberating. Since they chose the worst thought, they then rushed into fury, with which they have afflicted the world and mankind.

[Insler, *The Gathas of Zarathustra* (1975), p. 33.]

Yasna Gatha 32.5 and Yasna Gatha 45.2 repeat the doctrine that the good and evil spirits are forever opposed.

Yasna 45.2

Avestan: 2. at fravaxshyâ anghêush mainyû pouruyê ýayâ spanyâ ûitî mravat ýêm aňgrem, nôit nâ manâ nôit sêňghâ nôit xratavô naêdâ varanâ nôit uxdhâ naêdâ shyaothanâ nôit daênâ nôit urvãô hacaiñtê.

English: 2. Yes, I shall speak of the two fundamental spirits of existence, of which the virtuous one would have thus spoken to the evil one: “Neither our thoughts nor teachings nor intentions, neither our preferences nor words, neither our actions nor conceptions nor our souls are in accord.”

[Insler, *The Gathas of Zarathustra* (1975), p. 75.]

Axial Phase: Monotheistic Judaism

The era: c.500s BCE

The religion: Judaism

The location: the land of Israel/Judea, in the Canaan region.

The source: the Hebrew Bible (the Tanakh), also called the Old Testament by non-Jews.

The Israelites who founded the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (c.1000-586 BCE) were transitioning away from polytheism (worshipping many gods) towards monolatry (worship of one god among many). Later, during the Babylonian exile of the 500s BCE, a devout core of scholarly Jews fixated on monotheism, inaugurating an Axial Phase. The chronicles of that prolonged trajectory are in the Hebrew Bible. Early patriarchs from Abraham down to Moses and on to King David and King Josiah had to contend with gods besides Yahweh worshipped by Hebrews, as much as they condemned alien gods of foreign powers such as Egypt and Assyria.

Like the neighboring civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, the early Iron Age kingdoms of Israel and Judah regarded mythic history and human history as a single subject. A patron deity of the tribes/nation – whether originally named Elohim (Lord Gods) or Eloah (Lord God), or El Shaddai (God Almighty) as known to Abraham, or later as Yahweh as known to Moses – originated the people and inaugurated their nation. The history of their God was the history of their nation, and vice-versa.

The History of God

The first name for their nation, Isra-‘el, meant ‘struggle with god’ or ‘power with god’ and the -el ending was the name of their god: ‘El (אֱלֹהִים). Jacob, the founder of the nation, was re-named Israel (Genesis 32:28). The compound title “yhwah šeba’ot ‘el yisra’el” that identifies Yahweh with ‘El appears first in Jeremiah (c650-570 BCE). During his time, many Jews leaving the conquered nation of Israel (fell c720 BCE) to the north of Jerusalem (the land of Samaria) were resettling in the surviving southern kingdom of Judah. The problem of reconciling the Israelite worshippers of ‘El with the Judah worshippers of Yahweh was postponed by the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians c.587 BCE. By the time of Jesus, Jews of Jerusalem still regarded Samaritans negatively as false Jews or just foreigners.

Israel’s holy books about ‘El and Judah’s holy books about Yahweh can be read carefully for historical information because they were constantly changing texts that reflected ongoing events as much as legendary myths. History at that time was mostly written by scribes under the direction of the priesthood. It is debatable whether much scribal activity could occur outside the larger cities. Some prophets of the time of Kings, such as Ezekiel, and prophets of the Babylonian captivity, like Isaiah, composed their own texts (or had helping scribes) while roaming beyond urban centers. Whatever their original composition, books survived in libraries located in the temples. Eventually, it had to be the priestly families who were responsible for preserving both history and prophecy. The scribal preservation of oral and written narratives into Old Hebrew script (adapted from the Phoenician script) was fostered by the priestly class of the temples in main cities.

The need for written preservation was already urgent during the political and military chaos and destruction during 1200–1100 BCE around the Mediterranean and the Levant, labeled as the “Late Bronze Age Collapse.” Ramses III (c1186-1155 BCE) was Pharaoh when “Sea Peoples” advanced southwards to throw the region into chaos. Egypt lost control over Canaan and that region descended into petty kingdoms and tribal alliances. New tribes could migrate and settle new lands with greater mobility but city sieges and episodic battles among restless tribes were inevitable. A loosely federated Kingdom of Israel emerged from those disruptions but it soon split into the northern (Israel) and southern (Judah) kingdoms.

The Israelite kingdoms must have rejoiced over their long-awaited independence from Egypt. Since the rise of the New Kingdom c.1550 BCE, the pharaohs had exercised tight control over Canaan as a matter of state policy. Lasting memories of Egyptian domination, conscription, and forced labor was preserved in the semi-mythic legends of Joseph and Moses. Although no evidence points to long-term residency in Egypt itself, Hebrews oppressed by the Egyptian hegemony over Canaan would have remembered their servitude to a foreign power. The southern kingdom of Judah, home of Yahweh and closest to Egypt, would have been particularly resentful.

Who was Yahweh?

An Israelite people in Canaan is mentioned by an Egyptian inscription c.1200 BCE. The Canaanite god 'El was truly ancient. Yahweh was an old god too. An Egyptian inscription c.1380 BCE mentions a nomadic pastoral people, the "Shasu of Yhw," in northern Arabia around Edom and Midian. Passages in the Torah suggest that Yahweh was an inhabitant of Edom, Midian, southern Negev, and Sinai further south. The earliest inscriptions about Yahweh in a Semitic language have been found in Edom.

YHVH has a strongly anthropomorphic character, an argumentative personality, and a bad temper, while lacking an origin story. No theology crediting his origin to more primeval deities has been found. YHVH had no beginning. But then neither did Elohim. Neither god was born from a primordial deity, as was fitting for a supreme patriarch.

Yahweh would have to wait his turn. The first and chief god of Israel was 'El. Genesis is about 'El, at least until Moses. As Genesis opens with "In the beginning Elohim created..." it proceeds directly to a theos-driven cosmology to explain the world. The only comparable theo-cosmology that already existed in the Bronze Age was the older Egyptian theology of Aten (c.1350) and Amun-Ra (c.1100s) about a transcending god of light responsible for all creation.

The ancient Hebrew text of Genesis 1.1-2:

1 bə·rê·šît bā·rā 'ě·lō·hîm; 'êt haš·šā·ma·yim wə'êt hā'ā·reṣ. 2 wə·hā'ā·reṣ, hā·yə·tāh tō·hū wā·bō·hū, wə·hō·šek 'al- pə·nê tə·hō·wm; wə·rū·aḥ 'ě·lō·hîm, mə·ra·ḥe·pēt 'al- pə·nê ham·mā·yim. 3 way·yō·mer 'ě·lō·hîm yə·hî 'ō·wr; way·hî- 'ō·wr.

A translation by the Orthodox Jewish Bible:

1 In the beginning Elohim created hashomayim (the heavens, Himel) and haaretz (the earth).
2 And the earth was tohu vavohu (without form, and void); and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Ruach Elohim was hovering upon the face of the waters.
3 And Elohim said, Let there be light: and there was light.

The Hebrew creation myth starts with two primordial realities, Water and God: a chaotic (tāh tō·hū wā·bō·hū) watery element and a Deity (Ruach= Spirit of Elohim) who divided Water to create the celestial realm, and then separated the lower waters to make land.

The first act of divine creation is the infusion of light into creation, which makes sense for a god of light. Like the Mesopotamian god Marduk's division of the primordial Water god Tiamat, Yahweh also made the lights in the sky along the way. The Hebrew word for the "deeps" or formless abyss is *tehom*, akin to the Babylonian *tiham-at*. The Hindu Rigveda similarly credited Indra/Vishnu with defeating the water deity (Vritra), securing the separation of sky above earth, and making the sun and stars (Rigveda 1.32, 7.99).

<p>In the beginning Yahweh created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day. And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.” So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day. And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” ... And God said, “Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.” And it was so. God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars.</p> <p>[Genesis 1:1-10, 14-16, NIV]</p>	<p>Bēl (Marduk) rested, surveying the corpse, [of Tiāmat=primordial waters] In order to divide the lump by a clever scheme. He split her into two like a dried fish: One half of her he set up and stretched out as the heavens. He stretched the skin and appointed a watch with the instruction not to let her waters escape. He crossed over the heavens, surveyed the celestial parts, and adjusted them to match the Apsû, Nudimmud’s abode. Bēl measured the shape of the Apsû And set up Ešarra, a replica of Ešgalla. In Ešgalla, Ešarra which he had built, and the heavens, He settled in their shrines Anu, Enlil, and Ea. ... He fashioned heavenly stations for the great gods, and set up constellations, the patterns of the stars. He appointed the year, marked off divisions, and set up three stars each for the twelve months. After he had organized the year, he established the heavenly station of Nēberu to fix the stars’ intervals. That none should transgress or be slothful. He fixed the heavenly stations of Enlil and Ea with it. Gates he opened on both sides, and put strong bolts at the left and the right. He placed the heights (of heaven) in her (Tiāmat’s) belly, He created Nannar, entrusting to him the night.</p> <p>[Enūma Eliš, in Lambert, Babylonian Creation Myths, pp. 95, 99.]</p>
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No drawn or figural depictions of Yahweh survive. An anti-iconic and anti-idol taboo about Yahweh had long persisted for Judaism back to the Hebrews. Yahweh, the mountain/volcano, storm, and battle god, was not the top deity then.

Across much of the northwest Arabia and the Levant, the High God ’Ēl or Eloah was supreme among a small pantheon of popular gods that included Ba’al (aka Hadad), Ashtar (aka Ashtoreth or Asherah), and Yahweh. Ba’al was worshipped as “Lord” widely across the Levant and upper Mesopotamia; so too was goddess Ashtar, who the Mesopotamians knew as Ishtar, the name for Venus.

The supreme Canaanite deity during the Bronze age and early Iron Age was El or Eloah/Elohim, who was also called El-Elyon or just Elyon and known that way as God to patriarchs such as Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. The most ancient Semitic-language deity, El worship extended from Sinai and Arabia to the south through Canaan and Phoenecia up to Anatolia and Sumeria in the north. “Eloah” in ancient Hebrew is first god of Genesis for Judaism and the one god in the Quran of Islam.

An explanation of his name comes from ancient Hebrew grammar:

The word *Eloah* is the singular (or dual) of *Elohim* and appears more than 70 times in the Tanakh, primarily in more poetic passages. ... the same divine name is found in Arabic (*Ilah* as singular “a god”, as opposed to *Allah* meaning “the God” or “God”) and in Aramaic (*Elah*).
[\[https://www.hebrew4christians.com/Names_of_G-d/Eloha/eloha.html\]](https://www.hebrew4christians.com/Names_of_G-d/Eloha/eloha.html)

The Dead Sea scrolls preserved a version of Deuteronomy, prior to priestly Masoretic editing, in which Yahweh is one of the sons of El-yon, the “beny elohim”.

4QDeut¹ – When Elyon gave the nations as an inheritance, when he separated the sons of man, he set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God (bny 'l[hym]). For YHWH's portion was his people; Jacob was the lot of his inheritance.

The original mythic story credited El as the chief patriarch of a family of gods including Yahweh. That would have made sense in Canaan c.1200-1000 BCE when Yahweh worship entered Canaan, the territory of El, from the south and southwest. A divine adoption had to be arranged, and the ancient Israelites were comfortable with this henotheism: a tribal worship of one preferred god among a pantheon.

Israel mainly worshipped Yahweh as its tribal and national deity during 1200-800 BCE, and one could speak of an active Yahwist cult centered there. Still, other deities were respected and feared in this religious henotheism. The initial creation tale in Genesis 1.1 starts “In the beginning Elohim created heaven and earth.” “Elohim” is masculine plural in ancient Hebrew, indicating *gods*, not a lone God. Thus Genesis 1.26 reads:

²⁶ Then Elohim said, “Let us make humans in our image, in our likeness.”

The second creation tale in Genesis starts at 2.4 with a different name for God:

⁴ This is the account of heaven and earth when they were created, at the time when Yahweh Elohim made earth and heaven.

Only in Exodus does Yahweh explain to Moses the truth about his real name, and even this information amounts to a conceptual abstraction. Exodus 3:13-14:

Moses said to Elohim, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The Elohim of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” Elohim said to Moses, “I am who I am (éheyeh ‘ashér ‘eheyeh).” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am’ (‘Ehyeh) has sent me to you”.

Exodus 6:2-3 reads

² God also said to Moses, “I am YHVH. ³ I revealed myself to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as Ēl Shaddāi, but was not known to them by my name, YHVH.

Ēl Shaddāi (God Almighty) was ‘majestic’ or ‘of the mountains’ and known to Abram in Genesis 17:1 as well as to Jacob in Genesis 35:11. Abraham did know who El Elyon was: Genesis 14:18–20 says that Abraham accepted the priestly blessing of El Elyon.

The Fate of Israel

After the conquest of Canaan territory for founding the Israelite nation, Joshua died and left the leadership in the hands of the Judges. Although YHVH was acquiring high status as co-equal or equivalent with El and directly competitive with Baal, the new nation c.1100 was not ready for monotheism.

Judges 2.7-13, New International Version

⁷The people served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the Lord had done for Israel. ⁸Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of a hundred and ten. ⁹And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. ¹⁰After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. ¹¹Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. ¹²They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the Lord's anger ¹³because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.

By c.900-800, the two kingdoms after the reign of Solomon could flourish, since they were surrounded by weak tribal territories, and neither Egypt nor Assyria were then well-organized for conquest.



However, around 720 BCE the Assyrians managed to conquer Israel before collapsing entirely. Many refugees fled south to Judah, some bringing their worship of 'El and other gods. The New Babylonian Empire then arose

from Mesopotamia to threaten the region again. Prophets such as Jeremiah warned against worshipping alien gods and their idols, and sternly threatened the impending arrival of God's wrathful retribution.

Confronted simultaneously by political and population upheaval along with religious turmoil, King Josiah of Judah (c.640-609 BCE) inaugurated a nationalistic and religious purge of gods other than Yahweh. In collaboration with the high priesthood of Jerusalem's Temple, this "Deuteronomic reform" assembled the core of the Yahweh scriptures emphasizing the exclusive worship of the God "I am that I am" who was revealed to Moses.

This Yahweh monotheistic religion grew slowly among the people and elites. Josiah's son Zedekiah became king of Judah thanks to Nebuchadnezzar II's interference, but he was no ally of Yahweh. Jerusalem and its Temple was destroyed by the conquering Babylonian army in 587-6 BCE, starting the Babylonian exile.

2 Kings and 2 Chronicles recounts the emergence of "the book of the Law of the Lord given by Moses." This book was probably the law code given in Deuteronomy chaps. 12–26. The explanation for this Mosaic covenant was added (chaps 5-11), perhaps during Josiah's reign. The reappearance of Exodus from obscurity into full view was also a feature of Josiah's Yahweh revival.

2 Kings 22–23, New International Version

2 Kings 22

1 Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem thirty-one years. His mother's name was Jedidah daughter of Adaiah; she was from Bozkath. 2 He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and followed completely the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left.

3 In the eighteenth year of his reign, King Josiah sent the secretary, Shaphan son of Azaliah, the son of Meshullam, to the temple of the Lord. He said: 4 "Go up to Hilkiah the high priest and have him get ready the money that has been brought into the temple of the Lord, which the doorkeepers have collected from the people. 5 Have them entrust it to the men appointed to supervise the work on the temple. And have these men pay the workers who repair the temple of the Lord— 6 the carpenters, the builders and the masons. Also have them purchase timber and dressed stone to repair the temple. 7 But they need not account for the money entrusted to them, because they are honest in their dealings."

8 Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the Lord." He gave it to Shaphan, who read it. 9 Then Shaphan the secretary went to the king and reported to him: "Your officials have paid out the money that was in the temple of the Lord and have entrusted it to the workers and supervisors at the temple." 10 Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a book." And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king.

11 When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes. 12 He gave these orders to Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Akbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary and Asaiah the king's attendant: 13 "Go and inquire of the Lord for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the Lord's anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us."

14 Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam, Akbor, Shaphan and Asaiah went to speak to the prophet Huldah, who was the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem, in the New Quarter.

15 She said to them, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Tell the man who sent you to me, 16 'This is what the Lord says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people, according to everything written in the book the king of Judah has read. 17 Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and aroused my anger by all the idols their hands have made,[a] my anger will burn against this place and will not be quenched.' 18 Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the Lord, 'This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: 19 Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people—that they would become a curse[b] and be laid waste—and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I also have heard you, declares the Lord. 20 Therefore I will gather you to your ancestors, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place.'" So they took her answer back to the king.

2 Kings 23

1 Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. 2 He went up to the temple of the Lord with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord. 3 The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord—to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant.

4 The king ordered Hilkiah the high priest, the priests next in rank and the doorkeepers to remove from the temple of the Lord all the articles made for Baal and Asherah and all the starry hosts. He burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron Valley and took the ashes to Bethel. 5 He did away with the idolatrous priests appointed by the kings of Judah to burn incense on the high places of the towns of Judah and on those around Jerusalem—those who burned incense to Baal, to the sun and moon, to the constellations and to all the starry hosts. 6 He took the Asherah pole from the temple of the Lord to the Kidron Valley outside Jerusalem and burned it there. He ground it to powder and scattered the dust over the graves of the common people. 7 He also tore down the quarters of the male shrine prostitutes that were in the temple of the Lord, the quarters where women did weaving for Asherah.

8 Josiah brought all the priests from the towns of Judah and desecrated the high places, from Geba to Beersheba, where the priests had burned incense. He broke down the gateway at the entrance of the Gate of Joshua, the city governor, which was on the left of the city gate. 9 Although the priests of the high places did not serve at the altar of the Lord in Jerusalem, they ate unleavened bread with their fellow priests.

10 He desecrated Topheth, which was in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, so no one could use it to sacrifice their son or daughter in the fire to Molek. 11 He removed from the entrance to the temple of the Lord the horses that the kings of Judah had dedicated to the sun. They were in the court[a] near the room of an official named Nathan-Melek. Josiah then burned the chariots dedicated to the sun.

12 He pulled down the altars the kings of Judah had erected on the roof near the upper room of Ahaz, and the altars Manasseh had built in the two courts of the temple of the Lord. He removed them from there, smashed them to pieces and threw the rubble into the Kidron Valley. 13 The king also desecrated the high places that were east of Jerusalem on the south of the Hill of Corruption—the ones Solomon king of Israel had built for Ashtoreth the vile goddess of the Sidonians, for Chemosh the vile god of Moab, and for Molek the detestable god of the people of Ammon. 14 Josiah smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles and covered the sites with human bones.

15 Even the altar at Bethel, the high place made by Jeroboam son of Nebat, who had caused Israel to sin—even that altar and high place he demolished. He burned the high place and ground it to powder, and burned the Asherah pole also. 16 Then Josiah looked around, and when he saw the tombs that were there on the hillside, he had the bones removed from them and burned on the altar to defile it, in accordance with the word of the Lord proclaimed by the man of God who foretold these things.

17 The king asked, “What is that tombstone I see?”

The people of the city said, “It marks the tomb of the man of God who came from Judah and pronounced against the altar of Bethel the very things you have done to it.”

18 “Leave it alone,” he said. “Don’t let anyone disturb his bones.” So they spared his bones and those of the prophet who had come from Samaria.

19 Just as he had done at Bethel, Josiah removed all the shrines at the high places that the kings of Israel had built in the towns of Samaria and that had aroused the Lord’s anger. 20 Josiah slaughtered all the priests of those high places on the altars and burned human bones on them. Then he went back to Jerusalem.

21 The king gave this order to all the people: “Celebrate the Passover to the Lord your God, as it is written in this Book of the Covenant.” 22 Neither in the days of the judges who led Israel nor in the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah had any such Passover been observed. 23 But in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, this Passover was celebrated to the Lord in Jerusalem.

24 Furthermore, Josiah got rid of the mediums and spiritists, the household gods, the idols and all the other detestable things seen in Judah and Jerusalem. This he did to fulfill the requirements of the law written in the book that Hilkiah the priest had discovered in the temple of the Lord. 25 Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses.

2 Chronicles 34, New International Version

¹ Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem thirty-one years. ² He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and followed the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left.

³ In the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David. In his twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles and idols. ⁴ Under his direction the altars of the Baals were torn down; he cut to pieces the incense altars that were above them, and smashed the Asherah poles and the idols. These he broke to pieces and scattered over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. ⁵ He burned the bones of the priests on their altars, and so he purged Judah and Jerusalem. ⁶ In the towns of Manasseh, Ephraim and Simeon, as far as Naphtali, and in the ruins around them, ⁷ he tore down the altars and the Asherah poles and crushed the idols to powder and cut to pieces all the incense altars throughout Israel. Then he went back to Jerusalem.

⁸ In the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign, to purify the land and the temple, he sent Shaphan son of Azaliah and Maaseiah the ruler of the city, with Joah son of Joahaz, the recorder, to repair the temple of the Lord his God.

⁹ They went to Hilkiah the high priest and gave him the money that had been brought into the temple of God, which the Levites who were the gatekeepers had collected from the people of Manasseh, Ephraim and the entire remnant of Israel and from all the people of Judah and Benjamin and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. ¹⁰ Then they entrusted it to the men appointed to supervise the work on the Lord's temple. These men paid the workers who repaired and restored the temple. ¹¹ They also gave money to the carpenters and builders to purchase dressed stone, and timber for joists and beams for the buildings that the kings of Judah had allowed to fall into ruin.

¹² The workers labored faithfully. Over them to direct them were Jahath and Obadiah, Levites descended from Merari, and Zechariah and Meshullam, descended from Kohath. The Levites—all who were skilled in playing musical instruments—¹³ had charge of the laborers and supervised all the workers from job to job. Some of the Levites were secretaries, scribes and gatekeepers.

¹⁴ While they were bringing out the money that had been taken into the temple of the Lord, Hilkiah the priest found the Book of the Law of the Lord that had been given through Moses. ¹⁵ Hilkiah said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the Lord." He gave it to Shaphan.

¹⁶ Then Shaphan took the book to the king and reported to him: "Your officials are doing everything that has been committed to them. ¹⁷ They have paid out the money that was in the temple of the Lord and have entrusted it to the supervisors and workers." ¹⁸ Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a book." And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king.

¹⁹ When the king heard the words of the Law, he tore his robes. ²⁰ He gave these orders to Hilkiah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Abdon son of Micah, Shaphan the secretary and Asaiah the king's attendant: ²¹ "Go and inquire of the Lord for me and for the remnant in Israel and Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the Lord's anger that is poured out on us because those who have gone before us have not kept the word of the Lord; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written in this book."

²² Hilkiah and those the king had sent with him went to speak to the prophet Huldah, who was the wife of Shallum son of Tokhath, the son of Hasrah, keeper of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem, in the New Quarter.

²³ She said to them, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Tell the man who sent you to me, ²⁴ 'This is what the Lord says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people—all the curses written in the book that has been read in the presence of the king of Judah. ²⁵ Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and aroused my anger by all that their hands have made, my anger will be poured out on this place and will not be quenched.' ²⁶ Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the Lord, 'This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: ²⁷ Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before God when you heard what he spoke against this place and its people, and because you humbled yourself before me and tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the Lord. ²⁸ Now I will gather you to your ancestors, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place and on those who live here.'" So they took her answer back to the king.

²⁹ Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. ³⁰ He went up to the temple of the Lord with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the Levites—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord. ³¹ The king stood by his pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord—to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, and to obey the words of the covenant written in this book.

³² Then he had everyone in Jerusalem and Benjamin pledge themselves to it; the people of Jerusalem did this in accordance with the covenant of God, the God of their ancestors.

The Book of the Law

What was this “Book of the Law of the Lord that had been given through Moses”? Most of Deuteronomy was this book, with parts of Exodus as well so that the Passover is recalled (Exodus 12). Exodus 19 sets the scene:

¹⁷ Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.

Exodus 20 lays down the Ten Commandments, which are repeated in Deuteronomy 5. Exodus 21–23 enumerates the core laws of the people of Israel. According to David Wright, this “Covenant Code” of Exodus 20:23–23:19 relied on far older Mesopotamian law, the Law of Hammurabi (c.1810–c.1750 BCE) who was King of the Old Babylonian Empire.

“this law collection, the pinnacle of the revelation at Mount Sinai according to the story of Exodus 19–24, is directly, primarily, and throughout dependent upon the Laws of Hammurabi. The biblical text imitated the structure of this Akkadian text and drew upon its content to create the central casuistic laws of Exodus 21:2–22:19, as well as the outer sections of apodictic law in Exodus 20:23–26 (along with the introduction of 21:1) and 22:20–23:19.2 This primary use of the Laws of Hammurabi was supplemented with the occasional use of material from other cuneiform law collections and from native Israelite-Judean sources and traditions. The time for this textual borrowing was most likely during the Neo-Assyrian period, specifically sometime between 740 and 640 BCE.” [Wright, David P. *Inventing God’s Law: How the Covenant Code of the Bible used and revised the Laws of Hammurabi* (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 3.]

The Deuteronomy version of the Covenant Code re-emphasizes how Yahweh’s Israelite people are now bound to submission and obedience exclusively to their god.

Deuteronomy 5, New International Version

1 Moses summoned all Israel and said: Hear, Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them. 2 The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. 3 It was not with our ancestors[a] that the Lord made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today. 4 The Lord spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain. 5 (At that time I stood between the Lord and you to declare to you the word of the Lord, because you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain.) And he said:
6 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.
7 “You shall have no other gods before[b] me.
8 “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 9 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 10 but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.
11 “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.
12 “Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 14 but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. 15 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.
16 “Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the Lord your God is giving you.
17 “You shall not murder.
18 “You shall not commit adultery.
19 “You shall not steal.

20 “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

21 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbor’s house or land, his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

22 These are the commandments the Lord proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud and the deep darkness; and he added nothing more. Then he wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.

23 When you heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was ablaze with fire, all the leaders of your tribes and your elders came to me. 24 And you said, “The Lord our God has shown us his glory and his majesty, and we have heard his voice from the fire. Today we have seen that a person can live even if God speaks with them. 25 But now, why should we die? This great fire will consume us, and we will die if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer. 26 For what mortal has ever heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and survived? 27 Go near and listen to all that the Lord our God says. Then tell us whatever the Lord our God tells you. We will listen and obey.”

28 The Lord heard you when you spoke to me, and the Lord said to me, “I have heard what this people said to you. Everything they said was good. 29 Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!

30 “Go, tell them to return to their tents. 31 But you stay here with me so that I may give you all the commands, decrees and laws you are to teach them to follow in the land I am giving them to possess.”

32 So be careful to do what the Lord your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left. 33 Walk in obedience to all that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess.

Exile and Monotheism

During the Babylonian captivity, the intellectual elites – priestly families and scholarly scribes – maintained this Yahweh monotheism in exile. “El” and “Elohim” were only used as the generic name “god” and not the proper name of another deity, just as “Adonai” simply meant lord and “Melek” meant king. The prophetic theology of Deutero-Isaiah (chapters 40–55) from the duration of this exile praised Yahweh as the lone true god. Even more so than the visionary words of Ezekiel, also writing during the exile, Second Isaiah speaks directly of YHWH’s divine uniqueness. The Hebrew of Isaiah 44:6 reads,

כְּהֵאמֹר יְהוָה מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְגֹאֲלִי יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֲנִי רִאשׁוֹן וְאַחֲרֹן וּמִבְלַעַד אֵין אֱלֹהִים:

⁶Yahweh is Israel’s Melek and Go’el. He is Yahweh Tsebaoth. This is what Yahweh says:

I am the first and the last, and there is no Elohim except me.

Typical translations, such as the Revised Standard Version, substitute names and replaces Yahweh with ‘Lord’.

⁶ Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts:

I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.

The priestly scribes continued to redact the Torah towards its final format of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, while assembling more books: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and Jeremiah. This monotheism was crafted as a covenant (or three particular covenants, with Adam, Noah, and Moses) between the one true God of all creation (no other gods exist) and God’s own chosen people (the Hebrews/Israelites) who pledge perpetual subjection under Yahweh’s divine rule and law.

This complete and final Law simultaneously serves as personal and family morality, public law, and political governance for God’s nation, a nation which will prosper while his People (the Jews) are faithful. No immortality is promised for obedience, but sinning against God amounts to treason, threatening the survival of the nation and the People. Three kinds of righteous and holy men communicate with Yahweh and uphold this covenant on behalf of the People: the ancestral patriarchs, the prophets, and the true kings. Because holy voices speaking on behalf of Yahweh were ignored by the Israelites time and time again over the centuries, periodic disasters befell them, such as the loss of their homeland to Babylon.

From 586 until c.538, Jewish elites and thousands of commoners lived in and around Babylon. The founding of the Achaemenid Persian Empire and the new policies of King Cyrus permitted the return of refugees back to homelands that had to remain loyal client states of the Empire. According to the Book of Ezra the reconstruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem soon began, but it was not completed until 516 BCE. As more refugees continued to resettle over subsequent decades, Jerusalem gradually recovered its prominence as an Israelite city. However, the Judaic Yahweh religion was still unsteady; many Jews were intermarrying with non-Jews and honoring foreign gods. Around 470-460 BCE, Ezra led another group of Jews returning from Babylon and strenuously enforced monotheistic Judaism. Some fifteen years later another Jewish scholar and official, Nehemiah, arrived in Jerusalem to assist reform efforts of Ezra and the Levite priesthood. After rebuilding Jerusalem's walls, Ezra read the Law of Moses (presumably much of the Torah) to the people to firmly establish the Jewish constitution and law.

Nehemiah 8:1-12, NIV

¹ And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. ² So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. ⁴ And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. ⁶ And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. ⁷ Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, ⁹ and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. ⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." ¹¹ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." ¹² And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

The post-exile founding of the Second Temple to govern the Yehud province of the Jews occasioned the necessity for blending older traditions: the Jahwist myths (about Yahweh), the Deuteronomistic collection (about Eloh), and the Priestly annals (about the Laws). The Pentateuch received its finalized construction to center around Yahweh, without erasing Elohim from the mythic record: Elohim would be Yahweh-Elohim, Lord God. This unified monotheism retrospectively exalted the prophets Elijah (800s BCE) and Hosea (700s BCE) for their monolatry, the worship of one God among many. Because Yahweh proved to be more powerful than Persia and its god Ahura Mazda (how else could Yahweh have arranged Cyrus's conquests and favorable policies?), the Second Temple priests elevated Yahweh from a national god to an imperial God of all nations.

Although the Deuteronomistic histories from Joshua to Kings reflect scribal expertise, scholarly Jewish historiography effectively starts with Chronicles and Ezra–Nehemiah. These texts were re-written and redacted along with older oral traditions during the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, as Jerusalem's monotheistic leadership was able to culturally and religiously unify their province. The holy books were grouped into three portions – Torah (the first five), Nevi'im (the Prophets), and Ketuvim (the Writings) – which yielded the acronym TaNaK or *Tanakh* for the name of the entire sacred canon of scripture.

Who is Satan?

That picture of the Devil presiding over Hell's torture of immortal souls doomed to eternal punishment was not invented by Judaism. Christianity popularized Hell and the Devil; they have little basis in Jewish theology. Judaism at the time of Jesus did not even teach any clear doctrine about what happens to souls after death. And, wherever deceased souls find their rest, Satan is nowhere around.

Satan rarely appears in the Tanakh, where this figure is an angelic confederate who serves Yahweh, as a voice of disputation with God and an adversary against humans. The word 'satan' in ancient Hebrew meant 'accuser' or 'adversary' in a legalistic sense, much as a government includes the "loyal opposition party" or a trial requires the accusatory prosecution. This Jewish Satan is not associated with evil, death, judging the dead, or punishment. Satan prejudges humans during their lifetimes, testing them with temptation or suffering to accuse them of sin. The Jewish Satan is loyal to Yahweh and righteousness, and always obeys Yahweh's will.

The Jewish Satan isn't concerned with death, because Judaism only had vague notions about one's fate. Very few ideas about an afterlife, or an immortal soul, are stated in the Tanakh. The Hebrews, like all ancient peoples, distinguished between the body and the spirit. However, during the Bronze Age and early Iron Age, the common religious opinion around the eastern Mediterranean and the Levant expected that both the body and the spirit descend down into the earth for final oblivion. The Greeks called this underground world Hades; the Egyptian underworld of the dead was Duat; the Babylonians called it Aralu. The Hebrew word was 'Sheol' but it wasn't for suffering. This destination is simply subterranean – devoid of light, sensation, feeling, personality, or thought – as anonymous spirits fade completely into nothingness. Sheol represents the tomb-like end of suffering. Although necromancy could "raise" up a spirit, this pale echo would only be a shadow or shade of the original animated soul. The notion of a personal afterlife that retains individuality was not a Jewish religious view. Everyone goes to Sheol, no matter who they were in life, never to live again. Again, this picture coincided with the common view of death across the ancient world of the Levant.

Only with post-exilic literature, after the Second Temple priesthood re-composed the holy books to elevate monotheism, did specific ideas about Satan and death emerge. For example, the wisdom book of Ecclesiastes says, "The dust will return to the ground as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it." (12:17) However, this optimistic vision only appears in one book and plays no role in later Talmudic writings. Nor does early rabbinic literature depict Satan as evil, or as a rebel against God.

The voice of temptation from the serpent in the Garden of Eden came from a fellow animal created by God, as Adam and Eve were. The "serpent" is a truly ancient representation of danger, appearing in myths far older than Judaism, as the primeval element of malevolent chaos (the giant snake and the dragon are counterparts). Identifying this mythic serpent with Satan was never a Jewish view; only Christianity eventually invented that idea. Crediting Satan with turning people towards stubborn evil was not a typical Jewish belief. When Egypt's Pharaoh dismissed Moses and signs of Yahweh's wrath, Yahweh himself dealt with Pharaoh: "But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said to Moses." (Exodus 9:12)

Satan becomes a dynamic character after the Babylonia captivity. Consider an instance of divine intervention that happened to King David. "And again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and He moved David against them, saying: 'Go, number Israel and Judah'." (2 Samuel 24:1) Those events are also recounted in Chronicles, the histories assembled by Second Temple priests in the 500s BCE. That version exempts God and credits Satan: "However, Satan rose up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel." (1 Chronicles 21:1). The two other books where Satan plays a major role are Job (composed 500s BCE) and Zechariah (c.520 BCE). Satan challenges Job's righteousness, but God is proven correct about Job's submissive faith. Similarly, in the

prophetic vision of Zechariah, Satan stands in accusation against Joshua the High Priest and Jerusalem, but God's forgiveness portends the Jewish return to Zion.

The elevation of Satan to a position alongside God but opposed to humanity was a feature of exilic and post-exilic Judaism. Jewish religious elites living in Babylon during the 500s BCE invented this character with inspiration from Zoroastrianism and its evil deity, Angra Mainyu.

Religions far older than Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity recounted myths about gods behaving badly. Gods hate rival gods even within a family pantheon, and most any of them, not excepting minor gods, can be dangerous and sometimes destructive. Angra Mainyu and Satan went to a different theological level. Only the Axial Age looked to transcendent deities constituted by abstract ideals or their opposites, such as total Truth and complete Lie, or pure benevolence and pure malevolence.

Later rabbinic writers preserved in the Talmud (c.200-500 CE) developed the idea of Sheol into 'Gehinnom' or Gehenna where sinners are punished by Yahweh. However, Judaism had no consensus about a heavenly or hellish destination. The priestly class itself was divided due to the lack of scriptural evidence; Pharisees and Essenes taught immortality but Sadducees remained noncommittal. Likewise, the notion of an apocalypse was a post-Axial development among Middle Eastern religions. That eschatological vision of the inevitable end of the world, along with the twinned deities for Good and Evil, was the inheritance that Zoroastrianism bequeathed to Judaism and Manichaeism, and then Christianity and Islam.

The Name of God

Yahweh remained the exclusive god of Judaism, but this god's name practically disappeared by the days of Jesus. Christianity didn't use the name. Islam reverted back to *Eloah* as *Al-Ilāh* in Old Arabic (from the Syriac '*Alāhā*') and contracted as Allah. If Yeshua (the actual name of Jesus) spoke of Yahweh with Pharisees or Sadducees, the New Testament saved no mention of that. The texts of the synoptic Gospels never use YHWH because they were composed in Greek and refer to God with the Greek terms of *kyrios* (Lord) or *theos* (God).

Jesus wouldn't have heard or read 'Yahweh' in the temples and synagogues of Judea in any case. Jewish texts from 400 BCE–70 CE and thereafter avoid using YHWH. Monotheistic Judaism had become thoroughly aniconistic (avoid symbols and statues) and iconoclastic (destroy idols and images) about its deity. Observers on Judaism, such as the Roman historian Tacitus (c.100 CE), noticed how the Jews had an unusually abstract deity that forbade any iconic representation. Tacitus writes,

They believe that the souls of those who are killed in battle or by the executioner are immortal: hence comes their passion for begetting children, and their scorn of death. They bury the body rather than burn it, thus following the Egyptians' custom; they likewise bestow the same care on the dead, and hold the same belief about the world below; but their ideas of heavenly things are quite the opposite. The Egyptians worship many animals and monstrous images; the Jews conceive of one god only, and that with the mind alone: they regard as impious those who make from perishable materials representations of gods in man's image; that supreme and eternal being is to them incapable of representation and without end. Therefore they set up no statues in their cities, still less in their temples; this flattery is not paid their kings, nor this honour given to the Caesars.

[Tacitus, Histories 5.5, in *The Histories of Tacitus* vol. 3 of Loeb Classical Library edition (1931) p. 183.]

That prohibition of representing YHWH eventually included never writing or even speaking the name itself. Aramaic had become the common tongue across Palestine (Jesus spoke Aramaic among the people) so its word 'Ilaya' (Most High) meant God, and the term *elah shemayyd'* (the God of Heaven) was used instead of Yahweh. Wisdom books added to the canonical Tanakh during 400-200 BCE, such as Job (uses *Eloah*), Song of

Songs, Ecclesiastes (uses *Elohim*), and Esther – all omit YHWH. Furthermore, the arrival of Hellenistic culture with Roman domination added a layer of terminology, as the Greek word *hypistos* “Most High” substituted for God as well in Jewish writings.

Jewish writings after 400 BCE predominantly used the Hebrew word Adonai (lord) for YHWH. Where Hebrew texts got translated into Greek after 300 BCE, such as the Septuagint, Adonai was replaced by *kyrios*. When Hebrew ancient books needed to be copied over, YHWH would be recopied as the tetragrammaton (the letters yod, heh, vav, heh) in paleo-Hebrew, but sometimes a substitute symbol would appear instead. The Dead Sea scrolls display both variations, for example.

The only person permitted to speak the true name of YHWH was the high priest of the Jerusalem Temple on sacred occasions. After the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, that line of priests was scattered and terminated. Within another generation, no Jew quite knew how to even pronounce the name of their deity. The tetragrammaton is not recorded anywhere in the Mishnah, or other Jewish religious commentaries from the early centuries CE. It is likely that the full name of the God of Judaism has not been correctly said for 2000 years, and may never be uttered again. The true name of the Jewish deity remains as mysteriously transcendent as that god itself.

Axial Phase: Nomocosmism

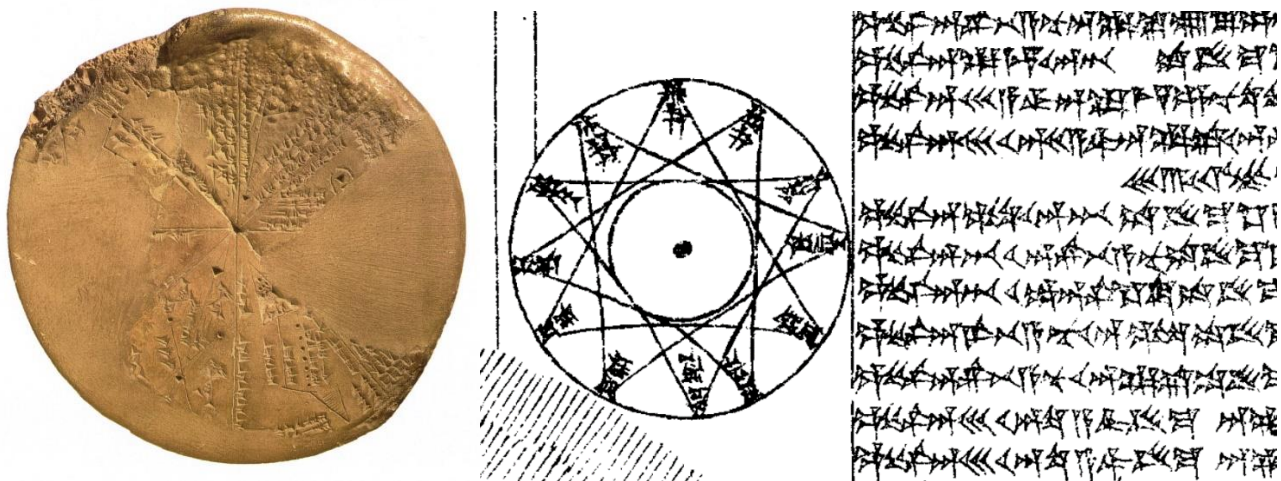
The era: 900-600 BCE

The location: Babylon

The sources: Babylonian astronomy tablets, star catalogs, celestial charts and ephemerides

The Bronze Age was an age of religious conviction that the celestial objects were gods or at least abodes for divine activity, as willful and unpredictable as any fickle personality could be. There was only one birthplace for the contrary idea, that the celestial heavens are actually a stage for regular and determinable events: Babylon.

Conceiving the divinely celestial objects as inherently rational and lawful, only following out repeatable and predictable patterns, shattered the Bronze Age view of what it really meant to be divine. Odd and alarming events, such as the “wanderings” and conjunctions of planets, the sun’s course across the zodiac, the moon’s path and phases, lunar and solar eclipses, and even the paths of comets, appeared to be mathematically lawful and hence calculable and predictable. The supreme powers are surely divine, but the divine was inherently rational so that mathematical law maintains the cosmic order.



The Babylonian mages undertaking their celestial investigations were mainly engaged in the priestly performance of horoscopes, divination, and interpreting heavenly omens. They didn’t call themselves “astronomers” in their own language. They took themselves to be scholarly priests maintaining archives of sky observations and techniques of mathematics. The terms used to name their marvelous abilities – astrology and astronomy – were bestowed by the grateful Greeks. The Greek word for “star” was “astro” and the Greek predilection for rational *Logos* was the origin of the word “astro-logy” or “star reasoning”. The Greeks were also fascinated by mathematics, so the Greeks took their word *Nomos* for “law” to create the term “astro-nomy” or “laws of the stars”.

Until the 200s BCE, Babylon was one of the largest cities in the world with the most expert scholars in the proto-sciences. However, it was never fated to develop its own complete cosmology or philosophy. Persian and Greek conquerors relegated Babylon to an exotic and peripheral sideshow in their vast empires. The fame of the “Chaldeans” and “Magi of the East” was known and respected from Egypt to India, showing up in legends and tales for centuries. Who else but “Magi from the east” (Matthew 2:1-16) could know the true significance of the bright star shining over Bethlehem where baby Jesus was born.

Babylon was destined to pass on its expertise with mathematics, empirical observation, and celestial calculation to the eager tutelage of Greece. Greek thinkers truly recognized the extraordinary cosmological implications to the Babylonian achievement, so the label of Nomocosmism fits that Axial worldview. Ultimate reality consists of forces following mathematically precise regularities to provide predictable order in the world.

Nomocosmism began to impact Greek thought as soon as there were literate and scholarly Greeks to appreciate Babylonian achievements. The “first philosopher” of Greece was also credited with being the “first scientist” too: Thales of Miletus. He resided in a cosmopolitan city at one of the crossroads between Anatolia, Assyria, Egypt, and Greece. His reputation for engineering, mathematics, and astronomy, alongside his philosophical speculations, was legendary even before his death. His younger Milesian associates, Anaximander and Anaximenes, continued those scientific and philosophical pursuits.

The most famous accomplishment attributed to Thales, heard from Herodotus, Xenophanes, and later compilers, is his prediction of a solar eclipse. If his estimated birth around 625 BCE isn't too inaccurate, he would have been in the right place at the right time to anticipate the solar eclipse of 28 May 585 BCE that was seen as a total eclipse across Greece and central Anatolia. Whether Thales truly predicted that eclipse in advance must be conjecture, but Babylonia astronomy was behind the attempt.

“Thales could not have had a theory offering a correct explanation of solar eclipses—such a theory only appeared in the mid-5th century BCE. Since Greek tradition before Thales does not know of any predictions of eclipses, the very idea could only have been of Babylonian origin. In the early 6th century BCE, Babylonian astronomy was the only one capable of making predictions that concerned all potential lunar and solar eclipses for a given year, without trying to explain them.” (“Early Mathematics and Astronomy” 175). See also Couprie, Dirk L., and Dirk L. Couprie. "How Thales Was Able to Predict the Solar Eclipse of 28 May 585 BC." *Heaven and Earth in Ancient Greek Cosmology: From Thales to Heraclides Ponticus* (2011): 51-62.

Thales was also widely reputed to have accurately calculated the duration of the year, and seasonal timings for equinoxes, solstices, and other astronomical events.

What mattered to his fellow Greeks was the way that Thales evidently knew more about the cosmic order than anyone. That perspective of Nomocosmism was definitely not myth or magic, and later philosophers and astronomers put their fullest intellectual efforts into enlarging nomocosmic knowledge. Anaximander (fl.580-550 BCE), a student of Thales, took a close interest in Babylonian theories, and Cleostratus (c.520–430 BCE) is credited with advancing on Babylonian astronomy in Greece.

Axial Phase: Logocosmism

The era: 900–800s BCE

The location: Phoenician territories and colonies of the Eastern Mediterranean coasts and islands

The sources: Fragmentary accounts repeated in later works of Eusebius and Damaskios

Phoenicia exploited its independence from regional powers during the late Bronze Age disruptions. That preoccupation with maritime commerce, along with Tyre's priestly aristocracy, and its eventual annexation by Assyria in the 700s BCE, could not foster much creative scholarly activity. Phoenician religion was not much different from Canaanite or Ugaritic pantheons. Very little philosophical or ethical speculation appears to have been generated.

The only record of cosmogony from the Bronze Age is found in a surviving source, the writer Sanchuniathon (as recorded by Eusebius). That cosmogony may have traveled with Phoenicia's merchants, echoing as far as Hesiod and Thales in Greece. That cosmogony de-personalized and partially rationalized the elemental powers responsible for generating the world and its creatures.

More importantly, the Phoenician alphabet revolutionized not just scholarly composition but intellectual thinking as well. Liberated from ideographic and metaphorical vagueness, terms could be written for precise concepts expressly for logical and theoretic purposes. Empirical classes could proliferate indefinitely; theoretic concepts could be imaginatively defined and refined without end. The transition from dialogue to dialectic to logical inference and argumentation (composable in propositions for textual study) was enormously facilitated by that dramatic expansion of imaginative vocabulary. If the word fully captures reality, then the world's creation was by the word. This "logocosmism" found fertile ground with the Greeks who added vowels for infinite flexibility while dominating Mediterranean trade.

Phoenicia eventually fell under Assyrian control. However, thanks to the contribution of Logocosmism and the written book, the areas of cosmology, ethics, and law took its great leap forward in Greece during 700-400 BCE.

Mind over Matter

Emperor Julian "the Apostate" of the Roman Empire (c.360s CE) was educated in Greek philosophy, and enthusiastically pursued the study of ancient worldview. His *Hymn to King Helios* was largely neoplatonic, and his attention was drawn to parallels in older mythologies. He wrote,

For the opinion of the Phoenicians—(who are) wise and possessed of knowledge in respect of divine matters—stated that the sunlight (which is) sent forth everywhere is the immaculate action of pure mind itself.

[translated in Azize, *The Phoenician Solar Theology*, p. 5]

This Phoenician view of a solar divinity, providing intellectual illumination, was indebted to the Egyptian immanent cosmotheism.

Three more glimpses into Phoenician theology are available from later commentators. Eusebius of Caesarea (c.300CE) recounted passages from a work titled "Phoenician History" described by Philo of Byblos (c.100CE). This history has not survived, so we can only read the version presented by Eusebius.

Philo then begins the translation of Sanchuniathon, setting out the Phoenician theology as follows. He posits at the beginning of all things opaque and breath-like air, or a wind of opaque air, and a turbid

chaos dark as Erebus. These things were boundless, and were without bounds for a long period of time. “When,” he says, “pneuma loved its own principles, a mixture resulted and this combination was called Desire. This is the source of the creation of all things. But it did not know its own creation and, from the self-combination of the pneuma, Mōt was produced. Some say that it is mud; others say the putrefaction of a watery mixture. And from this was born every seed of creation and the creation of all things. And there were some living things that had no sense perception and from which living beings possessing an intellect were born. And they were called Zophasēmin, that is to say, watchers of the sky. And they were formed like the shape of an egg. And Mōt shined forth, as well as the sun and the moon, the stars and the great luminous bodies.

The philosopher Damaskios c.500s CE reports on two cosmogonies attributed to Phoenicia:

The Sidonians, according to the same writer [i.e., Eudemos] set before everything Time, Desire, and Mist, and they say that from the union of Desire and Mist, as dual principles, emerged Air and Breeze, implying that Air is the unmixed part of the intelligible, whereas Breeze, moving out of it [i.e., of Air], is the vital pattern (prototype) of the intelligible. And they say that, in turn, from these two an egg was born, corresponding, I think, to the intelligible intellect.

Outside of Eudemos, I found the mythology of the Phoenicians, according to Mochos, to be as follows: in the beginning there was Aither and Air, two principles themselves, from whom Oulomos was born, the intelligible god, himself, I think, the peak of the intelligible. From him, they say, mating with himself, was born first Chousoron, the opener, then an egg.

[Damaskios, *De principiis* 125c; trans. Carolina López-Ruiz in “Phoenician Literature,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Phoenician and Punic Mediterranean* (2019), p. 259.]

Two dominant features are shared by all four accounts of the cosmos. First, they share in that rationalized cosmogony, found in all Axial worldviews, in which the fundamental beginnings are more like reasonable natural powers than willful godly personalities. Second, inherent to that generative reasonableness, Phoenicians thought that the operations of these powers guaranteed that creation is intelligible to the intellect knowing the cosmos. No mysteries, no revelations, no prophets, no oracles – the inquisitive scholar possesses the terms and the logic needed to assemble an overall working explanation of everything.

All of our sources who provide these reports were intimately familiar with Greek philosophy and its own Axial philosophies. They also knew that Phoenicia was older than the Greek civilization, and helped to awaken the Greek mind. Why would the Phoenicians get any credit for early ideas that the Greeks themselves later perfected in Plato and Aristotle?

Logos over Mind

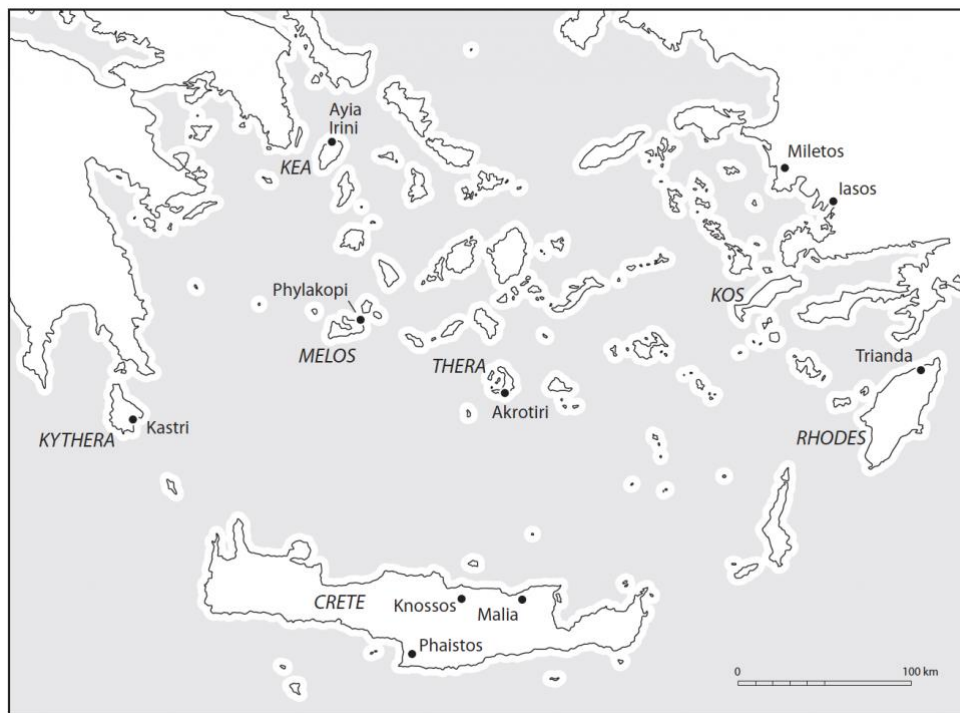
The Phoenicians moved into the sea trading space left open after the collapse of the Minoan-Mycenaean civilization during the Bronze Age catastrophe c.1600 BCE. Indeed, many of the peoples loosely federated for the rise of Phoenicia were descended from that civilization: the “Sea Peoples” who marauded and migrated during 1600–1200BCE. The Phoenicians may have dimly recalled how the Minoans used a writing system for administration and trade. They found a substitute nearby with the proto-Sinaitic script that used single letters for single phonemes, so that most sounds made during speech had a counterpart among the characters of the script. This was the first phonetic and alphabetic writing script in the world, and the Phoenicians adapted it to their own purposes, spreading it wherever they went.

No less an ancient authority than Herodotus, the “father” of academic history, gives credit to the right people at about the right time:

These Phoenicians ... brought with them to Hellas, among many other kinds of learning, the alphabet, which had been unknown before this, I think, to the Greeks. As time went on the sound and the form of the letters were changed. At this time the Greeks who were settled around them were for the most part Ionians, and after being taught the letters by the Phoenicians, they used them with a few changes of form. In so doing, they gave to these characters the name of Phoenician, as was quite fair seeing that the Phoenicians had brought them into Greece. The Ionians have also from ancient times called sheets of papyrus skins, since they formerly used the skins of sheep and goats due to the lack of papyrus. Even to this day there are many foreigners who write on such skins. I have myself seen Cadmean writing in the temple of Ismenian Apollo at Thebes of Boeotia engraved on certain tripods and for the most part looking like Ionian letters.

[Herodotus, *The Histories* 5.58-59, trans. A.D. Godley (Harvard University Press. 1920).]

The Phoenicians were in most of the Greek seaports by 1000-900 BCE. Their matured script, used for writing down their Semitic language, lacked characters for vowels. Greeks mingled with Phoenicians from Crete and Rhodes to the south up to Miletus, Euboea, and the Attic mainland. Somewhere around that Aegean region, that Phoenician script was adapted for writing down Greek, and some letters were added for Greek vowels. That innovation permitted the first fully alphabetic writing c.850 BCE, and then alphabetic writing quickly spread across the Greek-speaking world by 750 BCE.



Besides the merchants, among the first beneficiaries of alphabetic writing were the best intellects of Crete, Ionia, Euboea, and other islands in the region. It cannot be coincidental that the earliest sage thinkers of Greece were from such places. Hesiod (c.700 BCE) composed the first Greek cosmogony. He was born into a merchant family who were probably from Euboea, and he used the script for the Old Ionic dialect. Thales (c.624–548 BCE) of Miletus in Ionia, who was partly descended from a Phoenician family, inaugurated naturalistic philosophy. Another philosophical thinker, Pherecydes of Syros (fl.580-550 BCE), was by tradition said to have written the first prose book in Greece, before even the Ionian Anaximander (fl.560-540 BCE). Like Pherecydes, Xenophanes of Colophon (fl.540-520 BCE) coupled criticisms of traditional myth with rival

cosmogonic speculations. Acusilaus of Argos (fl.540-c.510) was an early mythographer who proposed metaphorical and allegorical meanings to gods and their deeds.

These earliest theogonists and cosmologists did perceive how they stood in sharp contrast to their ancestors relying on oral narrative and legend. Anyone with minimal education could recite long stretches of Homeric verse. In an oral culture such as ancient Greece before writing, Rhapsody (melodic poetry) and Mythos (story telling) were the key modes of artful communication. The *hymn* and the *myth* – Bronze Age cultures were built from these performances for audiences. With the arrival of the Axial Age in Greece c.700 BCE, the new way of thinking about the world and new mode of communication simultaneously transformed the Greek intellectual landscape.

Sixth and Fifth century BCE thinkers, whether more poetic or more scholarly, were broadcasting their theories across a newly literate Hellenic world. Unlike some other Axial regions, where sages were initially reluctant to propagate their teachings in written form (Hindu priests and Daoists, for example), no reticence seems evident among the Greeks. Although ancient doxographers are heard to occasionally complain that this or that early figure “left no book” they also recount many titles of books (now lost to us) by almost all pre-Socratic thinkers. If a sage “wrote nothing” that cannot mean that writing was unfamiliar or unfit for his thought. His many hearers recorded his ideas even if he personally did not; all of Greece could know this thinker’s fame. Even Socrates did not bother to compose his own texts, having several students such as Plato who were recording the substance of his talks and lectures.

As for Thales, he was credited with authoring texts (not preserved) about science. His foremost student Anaximander was said to have written the first prose book on nature. Thales’s few preserved statements have the clarity of Greek syntax even if those speculations have multiple interpretations. There is no prolonged “oral culture” for philosophizing prior to its translation for written prose – after Hesiod, everything is prepared for written composition and transmission. Even the oracular musings of Orphic and Delphic hymns and maxims get promptly recorded for dissemination; every city-state and major road had its monuments and tablets inscribed for the broadcasting of popular wisdom.

The abrupt introduction of written prose, allowing works composed by a single author taking personal responsibility, established a completely new mode of thinking for everyone. By 500 BCE, Greece was populated by numerous authors who spread their writings around and taught their worldview to audiences and students. In the beginning of all this dialogue and disputation, discussing everything above and below, was the written word.

The word, upon its assembly from letters, takes on a life of its own, able to branch or break into new words. It may serve as a “root” or “stem” or it could condense into shortened form to be a prefix or suffix. Two words may be spliced or merged together for making a new word, too. How would such word flexibility be conceivable in the first place? The source for that inspiration is plainly written: a “word” in an alphabetic system is made of individual letters, entirely re-arrangeable and flexible. A single letter retains its minimal unit of significance no matter which word that letter happens to occur in. The precise pronunciation of a letter does vary depending on the word, especially for the vowels. However, that immense linguistic flexibility not only meant that any spoken word could be written down easily, but any freshly written word could pair with a newly conceived idea.

The oft-heard mantra that the limits of one’s language are the limits of one’s ideas is usually, and mistakenly, supposed to mean that language limits thought. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although there is a tight fit between what can be said and what can be thought in ordinary speech for mundane purposes, new words can inspire new ideas, and new ideas can find expression in new words. Playing with word construction is an opportunity for idea creation, and vice-versa. We are already familiar with the way that we can assemble

a unique long sentence to more or less capture a complex idea with a single sentence. Inventive minds do the same with words themselves, as letters and word parts get fresh arrangements. Every word in the English language with more than two syllables (and many two-syllable words too) was once formed for the first time by an artful wordsmith playing with letters and groups of letters. (And older, simpler words are the lingering remnants of long-past inventiveness as well.) The same was the case for Latin long ago, and any other language given an alphabetic system. To read on the page an unusual new arrangement of familiar word-parts has the generative effect of intuiting a new abstract idea never thought quite that way before. For abstract and complex ideas, there no more efficient way to state them and keep their meanings distinguished than through an alphabetic and recombinatory writing system.

Although the West prizes its logocentric approach to knowledge and reality, that alphabetic mentality is neither necessary nor sufficient for intellectual achievement. Only that speculative “word=being” correspondence characterizes Logocosmism, and not dubious speculations about allegedly superior cognition from alphabetic writing. Defending (for example) the dignity of Chinese philosophizing does not require denying a distinctiveness to Phoenician-Greek logo-centric prose. Nor is writing by itself required for intellectual advancement. Literacy surely accelerates the diffusion and blending of creative ideas, but intellectual creativity proceeds within entirely oral cultures regardless. The other Axial worldviews from the Middle East, India, Central Asia, and China made their own distinctive advancements through different modes of linguistic discourse and styles of reasoning. The logographic writing of East Asia (China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam) permits the flourishing of alternative cognitive techniques and discursive methods. For example, Chinese writing, not breaking meanings apart down to sub-word degrees, excels at imagistic, metaphorical, and allusive creativity. Poetical sentences convey abstractions very well, but they cannot easily attain the degree of specificity that theoretical statements attain through an alphabetic system.

In an alphabetic system, after complex viewpoints can be written in sentences, the sentences themselves can be composed in inventive ways to form and re-form innumerable arguments from abstract premises to general conclusions. What would intellectuals wielding this new powerful communication technology do with it? They wrote down in discursive, inferential, and argumentative prose their construction of complicated worldviews not obvious to the ordinary eye. In short, they were able to conduct “theoria” rather than just “sensoria”. What was the fundamental nature of all theoria, these radical abstract theories about the world? Naturally, theory had to be “logos” – communicatively intelligible. The inherent nature of everything should be capturable by the terms of the system describing it: word and being essentially corresponded. This way of thinking about reality is therefore Logocosmism.

Logocosmism lends itself to a molar and modular understanding of reality and the interactions of the world’s entities. The *Logos* (intelligibility, reason) praised by Presocratic philosophers, emerging in the first cosmologists of Ionia and then openly with Heraclitus and Parmenides (c.500s BCE), is the fruit of Logocosmism. Each philosophical worldview varies greatly from the others, but they all agree on the cosmological search for identifying the *Arche* or ultimate principle that simultaneously serves as the ultimate reality and the basis for explaining all else about the world. Anaximander of Ionia re-purposed architectural motifs to assemble his theoretical plan of the cosmos. Material atomism, first conceived in Greece, is another implementation. Even Plato’s theory of the Forms applies that modularity with pure cognitive ideas together responsible for existence.

Greek philosophy, whether more idealistic or more naturalistic, never lost its predisposition for elemental cosmology, external relations, contingent causes, linear thinking, analytic inquiry, and infinitely extendable cognition. Other modes of reasoning – more holistic, integrative, synthetic, sympathetic, imagistic, allegorical, allusive, metaphorical, and so on – were then relegated to poetic, mythic, or magical “thinking.” Only a few conservative voices among poets and tragedians regretted how the Homeric gods were getting criticized by philosophical thinkers for divinely exemplifying what is irrational and immoral about humans. However,

philosophical thinking could not be avoided. Some defenders of the Homeric gods, such as Theagenes of Rhegium (fl. 540-520 BCE), resorted to cosmogonic explanations assigning a worldly power or function to this or that deity, rescuing some gods from a merely mythical status.

Greek philosophers typically presumed without question is that *Arche* and *Logos* are ideal matches for each other, guaranteeing the intelligibility of reality. Even the few skeptics who doubted whether reality could be known relied on logical arguments to support such skepticism. Whether a philosopher's argumentative style mainly deploys allegory, analogy, polarity, or proportionality, the function of rational writing is performing its work in the mind. The notion that the *Arche* is *Logos*, or that *Logos* is *Mind*, or even that *Arche* = *Logos* = *Mind*, would be explored and exploited by later Greek philosophers from Plato (c. 360 BCE) through the Hellenic Age. Logocosmism, along with Axial Nomocosmism, permitted the rise of Greek and Roman science, and hence the post-Axial Islamic and European sciences.

Logocosmism and Rationalism

Logocosmism treated the word as the form of anything real. Philosophically, then, something could be real only by having a specifiable form. Something that lacks specific form lacks reality: it has only lesser reality or no reality at all. A form is precisely what it is and nothing else; only vague and unreal "things" seem to shift form or be formless. Because a form doesn't change (only formless 'things' change), a real thing cannot change its form. What is truly real does not change. Whatever changes cannot be actually real.

Philosophical thinkers who initiated Logocosmism as a philosophical doctrine are known as rationalists. Only rational thinking leads the thinker to knowing truth, and rational thinking must be about forms and proceed using formal arguments. So long as the mind principally attends to rationality, the mind can be acquainted with real truth and reality; this doctrine is labeled as rationalism.

The first rationalist among the Greek philosophical writers was Xenophanes of Colophon. He was the first Greek to write about Hesiod (among surviving texts), but his rival compositions were critical towards any poets still depicting gods as human-like figures doing immoral deeds. As a resident of Ionia for a time, he knew about the nearby Milesians and their cosmological speculations. Xenophanes postulated natural causes for various earthly and atmospheric phenomena, and his proposal for the material *Arche* postulated that everything in the world comes from earth and water. However, his main interest was not natural cosmology, but rationalism. Xenophanes believed that *Mind* is superior to *Matter*, and a single rational god has the most influence in the cosmos. His answer to the rationalist question, what is the ultimate 'one' of reality itself, is that it is a god.

One god is greatest among gods and men, not at all like mortals in body or in thought. [Xenophanes fragment B23]

Xenophanes did not propose monotheism, but a philosophical theism that places one intellectual god as uniquely supreme over all other divine and human powers. This god of pure mind has no physical properties or powers, but it doesn't need any.

Whole he sees, whole he thinks, and whole he hears. [B24]

But completely without toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind. [B25]

Always he abides in the same place, moving not at all, nor is it seemly for him to travel to different places at different times. [B26]

Because Xenophanes applies rationalist criteria for knowledge, he emphasizes why so little can be known with certainty. He was not quite a skeptic, but instead a relativist on knowledge about earthly matters. Our senses and imaginations go little farther than whatever we ourselves have experienced, but experiences differ among

humans. Only careful investigations and inquiries can lead towards better judgments. Even his own philosophical view that one supreme deity is real can be questioned:

...and of course the clear and certain truth no man has seen nor will there be anyone who knows about the gods and what I say about all things. For even if, in the best case, one happened to speak just of what has been brought to pass, still he himself would not know. But opinion is allotted to all.
[Xenophanes fragment B34]

Xenophanes was credited by later Greek philosophers such as Plato for inaugurating the Eleatic school, which took Logocosmism and Rationalism to its greatest extent. Parmenides is closely connected with Xenophanes, perhaps as a student.

Perhaps the greater contribution from Xenophanes was his rationalist conviction that rational Mind controls the cosmos more than any material Arche. Xenophanes' rationalist cosmology advanced towards a cosmological dualism, of Mind and Matter together responsible for everything and everything that happens. Heraclitus agreed that cosmic Logos or 'intelligence' (gnômê) directs everything; Anaxagoras credited mind (nous) with ordering the world; Plato viewed god's nature as essentially intellectual; and Aristotle proposed that a divine mind inspires the world towards higher perfection.

Three schools of philosophy diverged from Logocosmism's impetus. Pure rationalism took little interest in explaining change, generation, and growth because those things involve change, which unreal and unknowable anyways. Rational cosmology posited two principles, Mind and Matter, which together explain the structure and development of the cosmos. Natural Cosmology, which was just as Axial as Logocosmism, did borrow the philosophical style of rational argument and agreed that elemental forms are candidates for the Arche.

Rationalism (Logocosmism). Reality is only pure being as known by the rational intellect that rejects contradiction, and hence demotes instability and impermanence as inferior existence.

The Eleatic school of Parmenides (fl.470-450), Zeno of Elea (fl.460-440), and Melissus (fl.450-420) argued that the only fundamental reality able to be rationally known as true is just pure endless being itself, which never moves, modifies, or develops at all. Any appearance of change must be untrue illusion. As Parmenides claimed, What Is can be thought, but what is not cannot be thought. For one thing to change (on supposition) it must be what is and also be what it not, but that notion cannot be rationally thinkable. A real thing can only remain exactly what it is without alteration in any way, including passing into or out of reality, so what is real has to be eternal. His conclusion gets expressed this way:

As yet a single tale of a way remains, that it is; and along this path markers are there very many, that What Is is ungenerated and deathless, whole and uniform, and still and perfect. (Parmenides fragment 8.1-4).

Parmenides's famous student Zeno put together paradoxes about change and motion, such as "Achilles and the tortoise." His paradoxes about motion that depend on geometry and mathematics work with infinitely small quantities or infinite accumulations of quantities, but modern mathematics finds no paradoxes since infinite amounts of infinitesimals can equal finite quantities.

Axial Phase: Natural Cosmology

The era: 600-400 BCE

The location: Greece and Aegean region

The sources: Presocratics, the Materialists, Aristotle.

Ancient Greece lay at the crossroads of Mediterranean trade, travel, and tourism by 600 BCE. The numerous Greek city-states had inherited the Phoenician trade routes, and all of the economic benefits as well. But the greatest bounty was the way that the known world's best ideas came to Greece, not just from nearby Thrace, Anatolia (Turkey), and Crete, but also Canaan and Egypt, and farther east from the Levant, Mesopotamia, Babylon, and Persia. Greece came to dominate the intellectual world from Italy to India by 300 BCE, by perpetuating and combining five Axial world-systems: Immanent Cosmotheism, Logocosmism, Nomocosmism, Romantic Individualism, and its own native Axial system of *Natural Cosmology*.

Homer and Hesiod were Greece's earliest poets who assembled and narrated the oldest mythical and political traditions of Greece dating back into the Bronze Age. The gods, plots, and characters of Homer's *Iliad* (c.900s-800s BCE) have more in common with the Indo-European worldview than anything Mediterranean, reflecting how the region's heritage owed much to earlier migrations c.2400-1800 BCE from the Eurasian Steppes. Greece's unusual preference for independent city-states and its experiments with democracy share a genealogy with Europe's romantic individualism that also arrived from the Steppes (see the Axial system of *Romantic Individualism*).

Hesiod can be classified with the beginnings of Sage Literature and philosophical thinking in the region. Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days* introduced Greece to naturalistic cosmogony during the 700s BCE. Although his title of "theogony" means the genesis and generation of the gods, his deities were no longer like the Bronze Age gods populating Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Philosophically, his deities only have cosmological forms and functions, serving cosmic functions and purposes. This "cosmogony" treated the divinities that created the world as supreme powers able to conflict yet cooperate while producing the structure of the cosmos and all the diverse kinds of things in the world.

The philosophical aspect to Sage Literature about religion only grew after Hesiod's innovation for Greece. While remaining within the tradition of poets scripting dramas about the gods, an original cadre of composers during the 600s and 500s were sagely inserting their own reasonings and ideals. There was no leap from myth directly to reason; mythic thinking was expected to be more explanatory than exciting, engaging minds as well as emotions. Sage composers can be gathered together as thinkers undertaking 'mutho-logia' – "mythic-reasoning" – to enhance the explanatory plausibility of traditional myth. While philosophical in spirit, these "rhapsodes" were taking the different route of "theo-logia" rather than the "philo-sophia" of natural cosmologists by re-casting myths in more rationalized ways. For their part, the philosophical cosmologists were gradually transforming divine powers into cosmic energies, as the two movements followed and intermingled with each other.

(1) Early poets, led by exemplars in Homer and Hesiod, suggested ways to reconcile Bronze-Age pantheons that the region of Greece inherited from two migratory origins: the older "Titans" and the newer "Olympians". The Titans are primordial, elemental, and disordered, from Uranus (Sky) and Gaia (Earth) to their offspring such as Kronus; their natures reflect Levantine mythology. The Olympians are anthropomorphic and civic-oriented, led by Zeus and Hera; their personalities reflect Indo-Aryan mythology. In order to reconcile these sets of deities and explain why Zeus ended up supreme, their inherent powers are each delineated conceptually and then compared proportionately. Questions such as, "How would this kind of god come from

that sort of god?” and “Why would that conflict occur between those types of gods?” could be asked by these Sage thinkers. Poets competed for audiences who expected comprehensive and coherent narrations.

(2) Subsequent poets, curious about various proposed theogonies, pondered whether this or that arrangement of cosmic powers made good sense, and cohered with nature’s evident ways. Unlike the poetic thinker Xenophanes and his skepticism towards the gods of pantheism, other poets continued to point to multiple supreme powers to account for the cosmos. Perhaps a theogony could be interpreted in terms more credible to reasoning, rather than trying to just seem plausible to illiterate audiences. The beginnings of rhetorical prose are traced to these Sage thinkers, who offered inventive interpretations and re-structurings for archaic myths to permit them to retain some authority while fitting with new cosmological worldviews. Although these thinkers often sound like apologists for traditional mythology, the clever ways that they exposed “the genuine meaning” behind myth meant that they were crafting the basics of logical rationality to prevail. Four prominent figures merit mention here; Pherecydes and Epimenides were sometimes counted among the “Seven Sages of Greece” according to later historical authors.

Pherecydes of Syros (fl.580-550 BCE). Aristotle credited Pherecydes with setting an early example of mutho-logia where the primordial uncreated powers are Zas (‘Zeus’ or life), Cthonie (earth), and Chronos (time).

Theagenes of Rhegium (fl.540-c.510). Porphyry states that Theagenes interpreted Homer’s “battle of the gods” (Iliad 20.23-75) as ‘allegories’ (ἀλληγορίαι) that are actually about natural forces and their inherent conflicts.

Acusilaus of Argos (fl.530-c.500). Plato mentions Acusilaus and his agreement with Hesiod that Chaos was the first deity, followed by Earth and Eros. Acusilaus was said to have written a prose work called Genealogies about the origins of gods and humanity.

Epimenides of Crete (fl.510-480?). Associated with Orphic poetry and cosmogony. Damascius said that Epimenides identified Air and Night as the most elemental, who made Tartarus, where two Titans produced the first Egg that yielded the next generation of gods.

Derveni Papyrus (c.430). The unknown author expounds Orphic cosmogony interpreted through cosmology’s elevation of *nous* (mind) to control primeval fires (assigned to Zeus’s power). Ideas from Anaxagoras and Heraclitus are featured in this scroll’s fragmentary text.

Key methods of critical rhetoric, such as identifying metaphorical and allegorical language, and applying allegoresis for re-interpreting tales into reasonable ideas, can be credited to poets of that era.

(3) Whether a Sage thinker happened to be among the journeying bards, lyric poets, mystery cultists, religious oracles, stage dramatists, renowned politicians, crafty inventors, or proto-naturalists, fame could come from sayings of practical wisdom. Pithy aphorisms and proverbs, akin to those appearing in Homer and Hesiod, reflecting both folksy and educated judgments about prudence, piety, and propriety. Fables with a concluding moral to the story were also popular and oft-repeated. Hesiod’s tale (αἶνος / aînos) of the hawk and the nightingale sounds resigned about the natural right of power to rule, but Hesiod seems to find that goodness prevails. The lyric poet Archilochos (fl.650 BCE) relays a story about the eagle and the fox whose friendship was doomed by their natures. Another notable transmitter of miniature morality plays was Aesop (mid-500s), whose *muthos* tales or “fables” are more about adult wisdom, and often resemble Egyptian or Mesopotamian dialogues or riddles illustrating timely warnings and counsel. Although principled ethics was inaugurated by Plato, pre-Socratic sages offered moralistic maxims that were preserved along with sage counsels.

One such collection of sage advice got labeled as the Delphic sayings, which were prolifically imitated and inscribed everywhere across Greece world. Besides the most famous, first cited in Plato as “Know thyself” and “Nothing to excess,” numerous Delphi-style epigrams, many dating back to the 600s-500s BCE, were well-known to Greeks. The collection assembled by Stobaeus in the 5th century CE has been independently confirmed by other inscriptions “from Delphi” dating before 300 BCE. The more moralistic maims include:

- 5 ἡττῶ ὑπὸ δικαίου – Yield to the just
- 22 δόξαν δίωκε – Pursue honor
- 25 ψέγε μηδένα – Censure no one
- 26 ἐπαίνει ἀρετήν – Approve of virtue
- 27 πράττε δίκαια – Practice what is just
- 30 Εὐγένειαν ἄσκει – Exercise nobility of character
- 31 κακίας ἀπέχου – Avoid wrong-doing
- 32 κοινὸς γίνου – Be impartial
- 34 ἀλλοτρίων ἀπέχου – Don’t take what belongs to others
- 51 φόνου ἀπέχου – Do not murder
- 55 λαβῶν ἀπόδος – Return what you receive
- 64 δικαίως κτῶ – Acquire justly
- 86 ἀδωροδόκητος δικάζε – Make judgments without bribes
- 107 ὁμόνοιαν δίωκε – Pursue harmony
- 112 ἔχθρας διάλυε – Put an end to hatreds

Despite the inventive ideas of the Sage ‘mutho-logia’ or ‘theologies’, which carried on to inspire some Greek tragedians, the philosophers surpassed the mythic-poetic mind with fully rationalistic explanations and speculations of natural cosmology.

Aristotle catalogued the cosmologists before him, treating them as the first philosophers and calling them *physiologoi* (φυσιολόγοι) or *phusikoi* (φυσικοί): the “nature reasoners” or natural philosophers. Thales was the first, postulating water as the most elemental Arche. Anaximander didn’t bother to propose any primordial deity. Zeus and his thunderbolts were fading from view, replaced by his cosmic archic principle of directed mental energy. Xenophanes dismissed everything anthropomorphic, reducing the divine to a single abstract ‘god’ with mental powers only intelligible to the philosophical mind. Philosophers such as Heraclitus and Anaxagoras included ‘logos’ (reasonableness) or ‘nous’ (mentality) as one of the primordial powers so that intellectual control was built into the cosmic system. Greek intellectuals agreed that only conflict and chaos could result if nothing supreme is minding the world.

The ‘mythologians’ and the natural cosmologists were dealing with a central intellectual problem characteristic of the 6th and 5th centuries BCE: what is ultimately responsible for the world? The chaos of the Bronze Age Collapse and the Heroic Age, and the robust new civilization for which the Greeks were so proud, couldn’t be more unlike. And most intellectuals of that dawning Axial phase in Greece agreed that cosmos came from chaos: chaotic forces were originally fundamental and conflict was the rule before anything could rule the world. Rationality was axially destined to prevail. As cosmogony transitioned towards fully philosophical system-building, irrational and unpredictable deities get defeated or simply omitted from the grand narrative of cosmic origins.

Mythic contemplation about two basic ways that the world could be – destructive chaos or orderly cosmos – gave rise to the philosophical question: why is reality more like cosmos than just chaos? Only some sort of supreme power could be ultimately responsible. The philosophical issue of *responsible power* arose for pondering and answering. Put into the terminology that the early Greek philosophers preferred, they asked,

“What is the Arche of the cosmos?” This question sought the fundamental organizing power that is supporting the structure of the world, much like an arch can support more construction above it.

“Blessed is he who has devoted his life to scientific research, for he will neither malign nor harm his fellow citizens, but observing the ageless order of immortal nature, will enquire from what source it was composed and in what way. Such men would never take part in shameful deeds.”
– Euripides, fragment 910=DK 59A30

Natural Cosmology began with Greek-speaking thinkers of the city of Miletus in Ionia: Thales (fl.610 BCE), Anaximander (fl.570 BCE), and Anaximenes (fl.540 BCE). They were immersed in the pursuit of the Arche – Anaximander was the first to use that term – as they speculated about the intrinsic nature of all things, only suggestive for the senses but composing the inner nature of everything. The Greeks, like other civilizations, were curious about the way that things in the world could be classified into a few basic kinds, such as water, air, cloud, light, fire, metal, earth, wood, plant, flesh, bone, stone, crystal, and so on.

Early Greek philosophers were curious about explaining how one physical thing can be a combination of more basic kinds, and about how one kind could transform into another kind. If metal is really just earth with a certain form, then earth is more basic, and more elemental. If steam is just water plus fire, then they are more elemental than steam. Philosophers were hence led to the question of *elemental substance*: if the cosmos is inherently made of just one elemental kind, which one is it? The right answer would accord with reasoning: an archic explanation rationally accounts for the genesis and development of everything else about the cosmos.

Natural Cosmology reached its culmination during the 500s-400s BCE with the effort to construct that complete theory of the cosmos that answered both speculative questions together: What must be the fundamental substance responsible for the orderly cosmos and nature of all things here? Following Thales and his preference for water due to its fluidity, Anaximander gave a more theoretical version: the “apeiron” or “boundless” is the fundamental dynamic thing capable of taking on any specific form, and endlessly re-forming everything over time. This “apeiron” cannot be perceived by the senses: it can only be “viewed” by the intellectual imagination as *theory*, not as an anything observable.

The point to postulating an Arche, or multiple archic elements, is that this cosmological foundation is both *principal* and *principle*: it is primordial (original, eternal, uncreated) and explanatory (explaining all other things, itself needing no explanation). None of the natural cosmologists were doing theogony anymore, since they did not propose a High God at “the beginning” since that notion was no longer necessary. A natural Arche needs no deity, nor should it be treated as a regular god. Nor were the archic elements mere quantitative “matter” by the Aristotelian or modern science conceptions: an archic element was a dynamic and qualitative material.

As the Principle, the postulated Arche(s) are only “explained” in the sense that the true ultimate reality would best explain all else about the cosmos. One archic principle over others can prove its superiority by its greater explanatory power. The right Arche(s) would have the most *Logos*, the most reason for being real. Some natural cosmologists did retain a god-like mind among the archic powers to account for cosmic organization, but that intellectual influence did not create the other archic elements, and this mind must itself exemplify *Logos*. For the natural cosmologists – and unlike Plato – a cosmic intellect is not responsible for *Logos*, but only conforms to *Logos* and perpetuates *Logos*.

As Aristotle confirms, Thales started this route of cosmological reasoning by asserting that the watery Arche has Ψυχή (psyche or spirit) and its own divine power. This is not mere mythology or theology, as Aristotle was

emphasizing, since there is no dualism (cosmology denies that soul is separate from body) and no supernatural God: the watery element is itself inherently eternal and active. Thales was the first natural philosopher according to Aristotle (who lived 250 years after Thales) because his worldview ensured that the cosmos itself needs no external God to create it. Nor was Thales inventing pantheism, since nowhere did he speak of everything being God: everything is water! The cosmos of Thales has its own inherent activity, as the supreme transformability of water accomplishes everything by itself.

Subsequent philosophers after Thales but before Plato (fl.380-350 BCE), particularly Anaximander, Anaximenes, Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Leucippus, and Democritus, exemplified this Axial world-system of Natural Cosmology.

Anaximander (fl.580-550 BCE). The *apeiron* – the indefinite and unbounded – is the fundamental Arche capable of taking on any specific form while endlessly re-forming everything over time. This “apeiron” is not perceivable, but only imaginable by the intellect. Things beget more things, but each must perish back into its generating origin in a rebalancing of opposites to recompense sources as time passes.

Anaximenes (fl.550-530 BCE). The Arche is the airy element (aither), which is the most changeable of all elements. This upper Air (not the ordinary air below on earth) can rarify or condense to become other materials, such as fire and earth, which then form all kinds of things of the world.

Xenophanes (fl.540-520 BCE). The Arches are water and earth – vapors form the objects in the sky, while “all things which come into being and grow, are earth and water” (B29). One divine Mind has overall influence everywhere in the cosmos.

Heraclitus (fl.520-490 BCE). The Arche is the fiery flux, always changing and making anything change into something else. This elemental fire is responsible for the transformation of all things. Conflict and concord are in perpetual tension; that harmonious balancing yields reasonableness (Logos) for the cosmos akin to a Deity.

According to Nicholas Rescher (*Cosmos and Logos*): “In pre-Socratic philosophy six various forms of thought experiments can be identified and reconstructed: explanatory conjectures (Thales), negatively demonstrative reasoning (Anaximander), reductio ad absurdum (the Pythagoreans), sceptical thought experimentation (Xenophanes), and analogical thought experimentation (Heraclitus).”

Into this line-up we must insert the Eleatic monist Parmenides (fl.470-450). His rationalism directly challenged both Anaximander and Heraclitus: only unchanging Being is truly real. Anaximander proposes a stable Arche but nothing about this “boundless” element explains why it would generate diverse finite things. Heraclitus proposes an instable and unknowable flux without explaining how any truths would arise about stable things. Either way, Being cannot explain Becoming and Becoming cannot explain Being. The resolution according to Parmenides is to deny the reality of change so that nothing is becoming to need any explaining. Natural Cosmology shifted dramatically to avoid this paradoxical problem from Parmenides.

Anaxagoras (fl.460-440 BCE). Many different elements supply the Arche, which endlessly combine and recombine in innumerable mixtures and forms, so that any thing includes all elements within it. A special Arche is ‘nous’ (Mind) that guides cyclical motions through the cosmos that produce many worlds.

Empedocles (fl.440-420 BCE). The Arches are fire, earth, water, and aither (air), which have merged together and separated out in many re-blendings. This vortex cycling is due to basic forces of attraction (‘Love’) and repulsion (‘Strife’) which alternate in dominance. The evolution and extinction of life

forms, including divinities and demons, get produced from this perpetual recycling. The human psyche can transmigrate after death into other animals through metempsychosis.

Leucippus (fl.440-420 BCE). The Arches are Solid and Void: indivisible atoms and empty spaces. Although both are immutable, atoms are in motion, permitting combinations and formations into larger composable and decomposable wholes. Many worlds are thereby created, such as ours, but the entire evolutionary process follows rational necessary law (Logos) rather than willfulness or chance. This cosmology inaugurated *Deterministic Materialism*, which was elaborated by Democritus.

Democritus (fl.450-420). The Arche is the Atom, of innumerable specific sorts, moving through empty spaces to collide, attach, and detach in endless aggregates and recombinations. Some randomness is inherent to atomic motion so that strict necessity doesn't dictate everything and free activity is possible for large entities (like us). Qualities only pertain to our variable interactions with material objects, explaining why the senses convey only relative judgments about what things appear to be like.

After the time of Anaxagoras, who scandalized traditionalists with theories about the sun and moon only being fire-hot metal and cold earth, many rhapsodes applied allegoresis and re-interpretation to Homer's gods in order to reduce them to cosmic powers and natural forces. Examples are Metrodorus of Lampsacus and Diogenes of Apollonia (both c.450-400). Do such re-castings for the gods piously rescue them from oblivion, or hastily push them towards the exits?

Socrates (c.470-399 BCE) and Plato (c.428-347 BCE) openly scorned Homer and Hesiod and ridiculed the traditional gods. However, they pursued ethical projects that could not be satisfied by natural cosmology alone. Socrates knew the views of Parmenides and Anaxagoras well, but he taught the distinctive doctrine that one God was co-primeval with the cosmos to be morally responsible for its nature. Plato mentioned most of these natural cosmologists at various places in his dialogues. Except when citing the idea of a cosmic 'nous', Plato generally disapproved of entirely naturalistic accounts, and he especially disdained atomism.

Other pre-Socratic philosophers sustained Plato's attention more than the naturalists he opposed. They are roughly sorted into Sophists and Rationalists.

Notable Sophists included Protagoras of Abdera (fl.460-420), Gorgias of Leontinoi, Hippias of Elis, and Prodicus of Ceos (these three fl.440-400). They did not forge their own Axial worldview, remaining Sage philosophical thinkers. Because they sided more with subjectivism, relativism, and conventionalism rather than systematic reasoning for sure truth, system-building was not their priority. However, their civic-mindedness and their useful prescriptions for sensible rhetoric, good oratory, and persuasive argumentation influenced Plato's philosophy of education and knowledge.

The Rationalists exemplified Logocosmism and its full development in Greece. Pythagoras exemplified the combination of Logocosmism and Nomocosmism by teaching that "all is number" because the fundamental Arche is just quantity, ratio, and proportion. The Eleatic school of Parmenides, Zeno of Elea, and Melissus argued that the only fundamental reality able to be rationally known as true is just pure being itself, which never moves, modifies, or develops at all, so that any appearance of change must be untrue illusion.

Plato agreed with Rationalism that anything fully real and knowable must have permanence and fixity rather than change or flexibility. After Xenophanes, Plato was the next significant philosopher to feature a singular 'god' forming the cosmos, by borrowing from Immanent Cosmotheism. Reconciling poetic myth with rational philosophy preoccupied many of his dialogues. Plato coined the terms 'mythologia' and 'theologia' – in English, mythology and theology – to cover both the mythic tales and their interpretations, while assigning to theology the important task of making myth acceptable to philosophy's strict standards of rational and ethical fitness.

Plato's philosophy came after Greek's Axial phase, so neither his system nor the system of his student Aristotle are Axial by themselves. Their philosophies are combinations and syntheses of earlier Axial world-systems: Immanent Cosmotheism, Logocosmism, Nomocosmism, and Natural Cosmology. Six major "schools" of philosophy were competing by 320 BCE.

Rationalism (Logocosmism). Reality is only being-in-itself as known by the rational intellect, which classifies instability and impermanence as inferior existence.

Natural Cosmology. Reality is generated and organized by the Arche (or Arches) responsible for the development of the cosmos, life, humans, and our ability to understand the world.

Pythagoreanism. Combines Logocosmism and Nomocosmism. The Arche is rational number permitting regular proportionality, which in turn generates all the harmoniously qualitative features of the world.

Deterministic Materialism. Combines Nomocosmism and Natural Cosmology. The Arche is atoms of matter moving in the void to take innumerable changing shapes over time according to natural laws.

Plato's philosophy. Combines Immanent Cosmotheism and Rationalism. The intellectual power of the Good (eternal God) illumines rational forms that give material objects their formation and purpose.

Aristotle's philosophy. Combines Natural Cosmology with a 'Prime Mover'. Principled knowledge is acquired using Plato's theory of Forms for understanding the world's natural kinds.

We can track how the two Axial syntheses, Deterministic Materialism and Plato's philosophy, achieved their blendings. And we also observe why these philosophies completely opposed each other.

<u>Immanent Cosmology</u>	Plato's Philosophy	<u>Logocosmism</u>	[contra]	<u>Nomocosmism</u>	<u>Deterministic Materialism</u>	<u>Natural Cosmology</u>
One light emanates ...	One Good (God) intellectually emanates	Through the words ...	<i>Is the Arche mind, or just matter?</i>	The supreme powers ...	The element of atomic matter energetically	The elemental Arche ...
to take forms as ...	through terms for the fixed	that shape all real things ...	<i>Do things exist for their value, or instead by blind necessity?</i>	each having lawful courses ...	takes many particular shapes that in turn interact and recombine	naturally takes particular shapes
each type of thing ...	in order to provide the formations of real things, so that specific	there is anything thinkable ...	<i>Does God plan providence, or does nature lawfully go to its fate?</i>	making each thing obey ...	innumerable ways over time is accord with matter's lawful patterns, which directs the evolution of the natural world.	to interact in uncountable ways ...
so they can be knowable.	types of things can become thinkable and knowable here in the material world.	here on earth.		in strict patterns.		for producing the evolution of the world.

Axial Phase: Upanishadic Hinduism

The era: 800-500 BCE

The location: Northern India

The sources: the Upanishads

Although this discussion concerns developments towards Upanishadic Hinduism during the early Iron Age in India, a brief survey of Bronze Age Vedic Aryanism is necessary for historical and religious context. How old is Hinduism? What is its earliest kind of religion like? What were the origins of those earliest religious ideas?

Hinduism does worship one of the oldest gods still worshipped on earth today, Shiva. However, Shiva nowhere appears by name in the Rigveda, and the god Rudra, who later got identified with the non-Vedic Shiva, is only mentioned three times in the Rigveda as a marauding storm god (and shares no features with Shiva anyways). Truly Vedic gods are much older and they didn't come from India. If Shiva represents a native Indian deity older than the Aryan Rigveda, then Shiva is modeled on the Stone Age worship of the goddess moon mother, much like another India deity Kali, who got absorbed into Shiva worship.

The Aryan Vedic pantheon revolves around powerful masculine gods. The current academic consensus proposes that core Hindu scriptures include hymnal passages about myths and gods at least 4,000 years old, dating back to 2000 BCE or before from the steppe cultures in central Asia.

The Vedas

By consensus and tradition in India, the Vedas and especially the Rigveda, supply the original basis to Hinduism. However, the oldest existing texts are scarce, and not very old. At the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune, India, there are 29 manuscripts of the Rigveda written in Devanagari script that record the Sanskrit language, and the oldest manuscript is materially datable to 1464 CE.

Textual interpretation pushes the composition dates farther back than that. The Devanagari script was based on the Brāhmī script, the first complete writing system of India, that developed c.100-300 CE. That Brāhmī script was used around that time to first put the Vedas into writing from oral recitations. Many such recordings in writing survive to this day, some re-copied while others got recorded later, across India. All of the existing manuscripts of the Vedas closely resemble each other, and practically match contemporary recitations still practiced down to the present day. Because of this astounding conformity, astonishing for Vedas requiring many volumes in print, the Vedas must have been preserved with near-perfect fidelity from before 300 CE, back when the Vedas were only transmitted orally within brahman families.

Linguistic examinations indicate that the youngest parts of the Vedas, the late Upanishads such as the Mandukya, were composed before 200 BCE. The 13 Upanishads included with the four Vedas were evidently appended onto the endings of their respective Vedas. For example, the Taittiriya Upanishad of the Black Yajurveda consists of parts seven, eight, and nine of the Taittiriya Aranyaka, and this "Aranyaka" was added on to the end of the original Yajur-veda.

The oldest Upanishads display linguistic features closer to the youngest Vedas without showing any signs of influence or interaction with Buddhism (unlike later Upanishads), so they are older than around 400 BCE. The oldest Upanishad is the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad of the White Yajur-veda. Its religious ideas are simpler than the other Upanishads, and it shows older linguistic and terminological features. It may be as old as 900-800 BCE.

The Rigveda's core hymns – the “Samhita” of ten Mandalas – are evidently the oldest of all Vedic material. The rest of the Vedas refer to it or depend on it; its Sanskrit language appears to be the oldest in its words, spellings, grammar, etc.; and its religious ideas are more primeval. For example, the Rigveda nowhere mentions iron, and its deities are fairly naturalistic or anthropomorphic.

The “Śākala Rigveda” is a reliable recension used for the critical edition today. This Rigveda Samhita was complete and finalized (excepting some later additions) by 1000 BCE. The religious ideas are older than that, because the oral transmission of the Rigveda Mandalas dates before that. 1000 BCE merely marks a convenient time when all 10 Mandalas were organized individually and together in their ordering 1-10. The question remains, when did the separate Mandalas, each memorized within different priestly clans, come together? For example, when did Mandala Five of the Atri family get collected and collated into their internal order, and then placed among the other Mandalas?

In the Rigveda we can hear about the oldest gods: Indra, Agni, Soma, the Ashvin twins, Rudra and his Maruts, Vishnu, Varuna, Mitra, Pushan, Ushas, and many more deities only getting brief mention. Key Rigvedic deities that get only cursory attention there become cosmically important gods in the younger parts of the Vedas, such as the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, and the Upanishads. Rudra later became Shiva, one of the supreme deities with Brahma and Vishnu, after the Vedas were completed. Purusha, the “cosmic” primeval human (Rigveda, Purusha sukta 10.90), becomes the supreme consciousness in post-Vedic Sankhya philosophy.

The youngest books, Mandalas 1 and 10 (c.1000), include verses that veer into theological, cosmological, and philosophical speculations. The older books 2-8 relate tales about the gods and their theogonies (their origins and relationships). Mandalas 2-7, called the “Family Books” of the Rigveda have seniority because the other books either borrow from them or echo their ideas. Although clues to local territory are sparse, they indicate familiarity with Kashmir, Punjab, and the upper Indus. Of the Family Books, the oldest are 2, 4, 5, and 6. Because Mandala 2 was placed first among the Family Books, and treats very traditional topics, it could contain many of the oldest Aryan hymns. Agni and Indra (usually involving Soma) are in a majority of their hymns, where all the hymns to Agni go first, then all the hymns to Indra follow, and so on. Rigveda 2.12:

1. Who, even when just born, was the foremost thinker, the god who by his own will tended to the gods,
before whose explosiveness the world-halves trembled in fear because of the greatness of his manliness – he, o peoples, is Indra.
2. Who made firm the wavering earth, who settled the quaking mountains, who gave the midspace wider measure, who propped up the heaven – he, o peoples, is Indra.
3. Who, having smashed the serpent, let flow the seven rivers, who drove away the cattle by uncovering Vala,
who produced the fire between two stones, gathering the winnings in contests – he, o peoples, is Indra.
4. By whom all these exploits have been done: who has put the Dāsa tribe below and hidden away,
who, has taken the riches of the stranger, as a winning gambling champion does the wager – he, o peoples, is Indra.
5. The terrifying one about whom they always ask, “Where is he?”—and they say of him, “He does not exist!”—
he diminishes the riches of the stranger like the stakes. Put trust in him!
– he, o peoples, is Indra.
6. Who is the invigorator of the enfeebled, who of the starving, who of the formulator of hymns, of the weak one needing help,

who with fair lips is the helper of the one who has yoked the pressing stones, of him with soma pressed – he, o peoples, is Indra.
(Rigveda 2.12 in Jamison and Brereton eds, *The Rigveda* (2014), p. 416)

The Battle of the Ten Kings is mentioned in Book 7 (hymns 18, 33 and 83.4-8). The location would have been near the Ravi River in Punjab, where the Bharatas moved east and defeated an alliance of established tribes led by the Puru tribe. The timing was around 14th BCE. By 1200 BCE, the Kuru Kingdom formed between the Sarasvatī and Gaṅgā rivers. That political unity occasioned the unification of the Ten Mandalas, with the various tribes able to contribute their Family Books and miscellaneous hymn collections to the Rigveda, the 'Brahmanic' priests acquired the top status among the priesthood of ritual experts, and then the supplementary body of Mantras (favorable to the Kuru) got tacked on at the beginning and the end. The other three Vedas were then assembled during the Kuru Kingdom period.

Mandala 8 was added to the Family books as a miscellaneous collection of hymns (the Agni and Indra hymns are mixed in amongst the rest, for example). Twelve hymns are to the Aśvins. This mandala has the closest connections with the high Afghan mountains separating NW India from southern central Asia. It displays similarities to the Iranian Avesta of Zarathustra. It alludes to animals and plants from Afghanistan, it mentions camels, and it refers to a river 'Suvastu' (8.19.37) which is the Swat River in Gandhari.

A good candidate for a truly ancient hymn from Bronze Age times before the Vedas is found in Mandala 8. The twin brothers, the Aśvins, are the deified horse-and-chariot. Their name means 'horse' or 'horsemen' and their chariot brings the Dawn in advance of the rising Sun (their father). Counterpart twin-horse deities are found in most every ancient mythology that similarly descended from the proto-Indo-European culture.



The 'ashvins' sculpture atop a column from Persepolis in ancient Iran, the capital of the Achaemenid Persian empire, dating c.5th–4th BCE.

The Aśvins were so ancient and compelling that they could not disappear from mythic memory. In the Rigveda, their original drink was honey mead (not soma), they reward worshippers with cows, and they are known for being healers and speedy rescuers (as the Nāsatyas). The Aśvins are an echo of that pastoral cow-herding life on the grassland steppe of central Asia c.2500 BCE, where the chariot was invented and used with potent effect, before Aryans migrated through Bactria and Gandhara into India.

1. The milk-cow [=Dawn?] is yielding the desirable milk of the age-old (semen); the son [=Agni] of the priestly gift acts as go-between. She whose course is beautiful carries brightness here; the praise song of Dawn has awakened the Aśvins.

2. In good harness, the ritual offerings—they come to be high above!— carry you two like parents back here by the truth. Awaken because of us! We have put the poetic inspiration of the miser away (from us) and put here the help of you two. Travel here this way.
3. With your well-harnessed horses and smooth-rolling chariot, wondrous ones, hear this signal call of the pressing stone. Is it not true that the inspired poets born long ago have said that you are the first to respond to trouble, Aśvins?
4. Turn your thought here, come here somehow in your usual way—all peoples call upon the Aśvins—for like allies they [=the priests] have given this honey, foaming with cows [=milk], to you at the beginning of the reddening (dawn).
5. Even across many airy spaces, Aśvins, the song (travels) among the peoples, generous ones. Travel here along the paths leading to the gods. Wondrous ones, these stores of honey belong to you two.
6. Your home is old, your companionship benevolent, and yours the wealth at (the house of) the wife of Jahnu, you men. Creating once again your benevolent companionship for ourselves, now united together, we would find exhilaration through the honey.
7. O well-skilled Aśvins, youthful ones, together with the Wind and along with your teams, drink the day-old soma, taking pleasure and never faltering, o Nāsatyas who bring good gifts.
8. O Aśvins, ample refreshments have sped around you two, aligning themselves with the songs and never faltering. Your chariot, born of truth and hastened by pressing stones, travels around heaven and earth in a day.
9. O Aśvins, the soma that is yours, the best of honeyed pressings—drink it and come to our house! (Rigveda 3.58 in Jamison and Brereton eds, *The Rigveda* (2014), p. 548-9.)

The Family Books include truly ancient hymns to naturalistic deities all dating back to Bronze Age central Asia c.2500 BCE:

Dyáuṣ Pitṛ and Pṛthvī Mātṛ (Celestial Father and Earth Mother)
 Surya (Sun)
 Ushas (Dawn)
 Agni (Fire, Sacrifice)
 Indra (Storm, Lightning)
 Vayu (Winds)
 Apas (Waters)
 Parjanya (Rain)
 Ksetrapati (Soil)

Dyáuṣ Pitṛ was the pre-Vedic primeval sky god, the male Heaven paired with Mother Earth, who fathered Surya, Indra (who assumed dominion after his father), and other gods. Only mentioned in six verses of the Rigveda, this proto-Indo-European deity was the original template for Deus, Zeus, Jupiter (dieu-pater) and many other European and Central Asian gods like him.

Surya (Sun): also called Aditya, has a chariot with seven horses. Aditya is associated with Mitra, Varuna, Tvashtha, and similar sky-oriented deities (the 'Adityas') representing social values such as patronage, custom, craft, law, righteousness, truth, justice, and so on. The Proto-Indo-Iranian word for sun is *súhar, and 'zorya' is Slavic for 'light' and 'star'. The word descended from Proto-Indo-European, which also led to Sol and Sun in Europe. Ushas (Dawn) is derived from uṣá, the Sanskrit word for dawn, which has its Indo-Iranian paired word 'uṣā' in Old Avestan, and both words come from the Proto-Indo-Iranian *hušás, which came from the Proto-Indo-European *h₂éusōs for 'dawn' and 'east'. This PIE word shows up in other languages also descended from Proto-Indo-European, such as eṓs in Greek, *aust in Proto-Germanic, and east in English. Ushas the goddess therefore has cognates in the Greek goddess Eos, the Roman goddess Aurora, the Lithuanian goddess Aušrinė, and the Old English goddess Ēostre, which gives us the English word Easter.

After the Rigveda was brought into its canonical organization, the political situation permitting such tribal and religious unity fell apart completely.

Kuru Decline and Era of Janapadas

The Kuru State was the greatest cultural and political center in northern India during c.1200-900 BCE. Its turbulent tribal politics were later depicted in the epic Mahabharata. Under its Aryan authority the assembly of the hymnal chants and recitations of the Rig-veda, the Yajur-veda, and other Vedas was organized and finalized. The kingdom collapsed when it was defeated by neighboring rivals during the early Iron Age around 900 BCE and it remained severely weakened. Numerous small kingdoms, the Janapadas, then carried on episodic wars for centuries during this major dark period of North Indian history. The “second wave of urbanization” and economic revival eventually allowed India’s recovery during the 600s BCE.

The early Upanishads, compositions by many brahmin priests (often anonymously), were added to the end of the ancient Vedas. Their philosophical speculations during 800-500 BCE gradually transformed and displaced the older Vedic Aryan pantheon. Agni and Indra and other gods became manifestations of a supremely transcendent reality. This idealistic absolutism posits an eternal and impersonal ‘Brahman’ manifesting the world of appearance around immortal souls (atman) mired in the karmic cycle of perpetual reincarnation. This Upanishadic Brahmanism soon encountered a challenge in Buddhism’s impermanent phenomenalism: meditatively dissolving the illusory ‘self’ to attain permanent karmic liberation into self-less nirvana.

At that time, “Hinduism” did not yet exist. Vedic Aryanism worshipped and sacrificed to the Vedic pantheon of Agni, Indra, Soma, and many more deities, of whom practically none are still part of Hinduism. Vedic religion was the responsibility of the priests, the brahmins, who knew how to correctly chant the sacred songs and mantras. That sacred power of sacrificial chanting with the correct *brahma* (breath) – to aid the gods with re-creating and maintaining the cosmos – was itself a deific power named Brahmanaspati in the Rigveda. Brahmins pondered this supreme cosmic power which they themselves possessed, and set upon transforming Brahmanism during the early Iron Age tumult. Brahmins composed commentaries upon the Vedic rituals to explain their performance and significance; those newer portions to the Vedas are called Brāhmaṇas (c.1000-700 BCE). All four of the Vedas have their own Brāhmaṇas.

In these Brāhmaṇas the first ideas about the transmigration of souls and the reincarnation of sanctified persons are heard. However, because these ideas are far from Aryan Vedic beliefs (the Vedas having come from the central Asian Bronze Age), credit must be due to religious beliefs of indigenous Indian peoples going back into the Stone Age.

Non-brahmins among Aryans continued their reverence for the Vedic deities and brahmanic rituals, but a new type of sage intellectual was arising among the brahmin priesthood. Philosophical and theological speculations were added onto the ends of the original Vedas. That general disorder of the Janapada era, along with the brahmanic push eastwards into non-Aryan territory along the Ganges, introduced doubts about the religious and political adequacy of the Bronze Age Vedic worldview. Enterprising brahmins got into close contact with indigenous populations in Ganges regions such as Kosala and Videha, whose peoples couldn’t appreciate the power of fiery sacrifices to unfamiliar gods like Agni and Indra.

Atman is Brahman

In those eastward regions, brahmins encountered their native spiritual counterparts, the forest-dwelling shamanic yogis with seated postures and paranormal powers. Brahmins used the Sanskrit word *śramaṇa*, usually translated as 'ascetic', for these strange yet compelling characters. This label appears in the oldest Upanishad, the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (c.800-700 BCE). The sage brahmin Yājñavalkya, who apparently composed much of this Upanishad, lends his instruction to king Janaka of Videha. His fundamental teaching is that the true self (Ātman) is the ultimate reality (Brāhman). Yājñavalkya speaks:

"It is like this ... this person embraced by the self (atman) consisting of knowledge is oblivious to everything within or without. Clearly, this is the aspect of his where all desires are fulfilled, where the self is the only desire, and which is free from desires and far from sorrows. Here a father is not a father, a mother is not a mother, worlds are not worlds, gods are not gods, and Vedas are not Vedas. Here a thief is not a thief, an abortionist is not an abortionist, an outcaste is not an outcaste, a pariah is not a pariah, a recluse is not a recluse, and an ascetic is not an ascetic. Neither the good nor the bad follows him, for he has now passed beyond all sorrows of the heart." ...

"He becomes the one ocean, he becomes the sole seer! This, Your Majesty, is the world of *brahman*." So did Yājñavalkya instruct him. "This is his highest goal! This is his highest attainment! This is his highest world! This is his highest bliss!"

(Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.3.21-22 and 32, in Olivelle ed., *The Early Upanishads* (1998), p. 115, 117)

The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad was added at the ending of the Shatapatha Brahmana, the Brahmana of the White (Sukla) Yajur-veda. Its name reveals its brahmanic function. 'Bṛhad-āraṇyaka' meant "great wilderness" and 'upanishad' meant "to sit attendant near" so that the full name pointed to teachings from a brahmin sage in the wilderness. This Upanishad taught truly radical ideas: the Vedic sacrifices are not enough to guarantee cosmic knowledge of ultimate reality or the spiritual knowledge of attaining blissful immortality. These two quests for enlightenment have the same answer: supreme spirit is inherent to soul itself, so reincarnation for the illuminated is guaranteed. However, the self freed from all desiring goes to a place beyond awareness and non-awareness in union with Brahman. Yājñavalkya explains what happens after death:

2 "... As he is departing, his lifebreath (prāṇa) departs with him. And as his lifebreath departs, all his vital functions (prāṇa) depart with it.

"As a caterpillar, when it comes to the tip of a blade of grass, reaches out to a new foothold and draws itself onto it, so the self (ātman), after it has knocked down this body and rendered it unconscious, reaches out to a new foothold and draws itself onto it.

4 "It is like this. As a weaver, after she has removed the colored yarn, weaves a different design that is newer and more attractive, so the self, after it has knocked down this body and rendered it unconscious, makes for himself a different figure that is newer and more attractive – the figure of a forefather, or of a Gandharva, or of a god, or of Prajapati, or of *brahman*, or else the figure of some other being.

5 "Clearly, this self is brahman – this self that is made of perception, made of mind, made of sight, made of breath, made of hearing, made of earth, made of water, made of wind, made of space, made of light and the lightless, made of desire and the desireless, made of anger and the angerless, made of the righteous and the unrighteous; this self that is made of everything. Hence there is this saying: 'He's made of this. He's made of that.' What a man turns out to be depends on how he acts and on how he conducts himself. If his actions are good, he will turn into something good. If his actions are bad, he will turn into something bad. A man turns into something good by good action and into something bad by bad action. And so people say: 'A person here consists simply of desire.' A man

resolves in accordance with his desire, acts in accordance with his resolve, and turns out to be in accordance with his action. 6 “On this point there is the following verse:

A man who’s attached goes with his action,
to that very place to which
his mind and character cling.
Reaching the end of his action,
of whatever he has done in this world—
From that world he returns
back to this world,
back to action.

“That is the course of a man who desires.

“Now, a man who does not desire – who is without desires, who is freed from desires, whose desires are fulfilled, whose only desire is his self-his vital functions (prāṇa) do not depart. Brahman he is, and to brahman he goes.”

(Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.4.2-6, in Olivelle ed., *The Early Upanishads* (1998), p. 119-121)

Brahman is neither just a kind of spirit nor a state of consciousness. Although it is described mystically as blissful, there is no perceiver or feeler involved. Human spiritedness and awareness persists because of desire, so ātman continues to be reincarnated as an individual self with a living body, body after body after body as desire maintains attachment and drives action. Although everything to this ongoing cosmic wheel has its particular sort of reality because Brahman alone is ultimately real, ātman cannot rest in Brahman to realize that union until all desire ceases, the consequences of action (karma) halt, and rebirth does not occur. This intellectual knowledge frees one from worry and readies one for undertaking ascetic practices to halt desire, attachment, and karmic action. This person is a brahmin seeking Brahman (BU 4.4.23)

Upanishadic Hinduism

These sage brahmins were not like high temple priests ensconced in city centers of administrative power. Such opportunities were scarce during the fragmented Janapada era (like sages of Confucius’s era in fragmented China) even though later propagandist texts depicted powerful brahmins advising great kings. The brahmins who added their Upanishad supplements to the Brahmanas lived in rural or wilderness areas, uninterested in founding a new religion. Their teachings were only for their families, their students, and fellow brahmins available for theological and philosophical debating. That intellectual reclusiveness left Brahmanism with few resources for long-term survival. Indeed, Brahmanism was overwhelmed by contemporaneous strands of Hinduism along with Buddhism, Jainism, and other religious philosophies during 400 BCE to 100 CE until a Vedanta revival, exhibited in the Mahābhārata and other later texts, recovered Upanishadic insights. Indeed, the Bhagavad Gita section about Krishna in the Mahābhārata has been fairly classed as an Upanishad too.

By around 200 BCE, the overall structure of the Vedas and their Upanishads reached a near-final stage of formation. A Veda consisted of four parts: the original Samhita collection of Vedic hymns and chants, one or more Brahmanas, Aranyaka(s) for the Rigveda and Yajurveda, and final chapters called Upanishads. Various Brahmin schools perpetuated their respective Vedas and Brahmanas in rituals, while offering speculative but secretive instruction through their Upanishads.

I. THE RIGVEDA

A. Rigveda Samhita

B. Brahmanas:

(1) Aitareya Brahmana of the Rigveda, from a school of Aitareyins, perhaps named for a founder whose name got associated with this Brahmana and the Aranyaka and Upanishad too.

(2) Sankhayana Brahmana of the Rigveda, also known as Kaushitaki Brahmana.

C. Aranyakas:

(1) Aitareya Aranyaka, which lays great stress upon keeping its doctrines secret and the importance of those familiar with them. It gives the extant arrangement of the Rik-Samhita with the names of its subdivisions ; mentions the other Vedas ; comments on some hymns on the Rigveda in the manner of a Nirukta; contains some grammatical matter; and names many individual teachers among whom are two Sakalyas, a Krishna Harita, and a Pafichalachanda.

(2) Kaushitaki Aranyaka, but parts match the Aitareya Aranyaka.

D. Upanishads:

(1) Aitareya Upanishad

(2) Kaushitaki Upanishad

II. THE SAMAVEDA

A. Samaveda Samhita, mostly repeated from the Rigveda Samhita except for 75 verses

B. Brahmanas:

(1) Tandya Brahmana, also called Pavichavimsa. Tandya is a Brahmin mentioned in the Brahmana of the White Yajurveda.

(2) Shadvirgha Brahmana, supplementing the Tandya.

(3) Adbhuta Brahmana, another supplement.

(4) Chandogya Brahmana, comprised mostly of its concluding Upanishad.

(5) Talavakara Brahmana, in five books. The fourth book is the Jaiminiya Upanishad Brahmana, which contains the Kena Upanishad.

C. The Samaveda has no Aranyaka.

D. Upanishads:

(1) Chandogya Upanishad

(2) Jaiminiya (or Talavakara) Upanishad Brahmana, which contains the Kena Upanishad

(3) Kena Upanishad, the final addition for the Brahmana of the Talavakara school.

III. THE YAJURVEDA – in two similar versions, Kṛṣṇayajurveda and Śuklayajurveda

1. Black (Krishna) Yajurveda:

A. Black Yajurveda Samhita, in two recensions: Taittiriya and Kathaka

B. Brahmana:

(1) Taittiriya Brahmana

C. Aranyaka:

(1) Taittiriya Aranyaka, in ten books.

D. Upanishad:

(1) Taittiriya Upanishad, which are books 7-9 of the Taittiriya Aranyaka.

(2) Mahanarayana Upanishad, also called the Yajnika, is book 10 of the Taittiriya Aranyaka. Its identification of Rudra as Brahman signals a shift towards Vaishnava's exaltation of Rudra/Vishnu.

(3) Maitrayana Upanishad (Taittiriya)

(4) Svetasvatara Upanishad (Taittiriya)

(5) Katha Upanishad, appended to the Kathaka Samhita recension

2. White (Sukla) Yajurveda:

A. White Yajurveda Samhita

B. Brahmana:

(1) Satapatha Brahmana

C. Aranyaka

(1) Satapatha Aranyaka, being the final book of the Satapatha Brahmana.

D. Upanishads:

(1) Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, constituting the last six chapters of the Satapatha Aranyaka.

(2) Isa Upanishad

IV. THE ATHARVAVEDA

A. AtharvavedaSamhita

B. Brahmana:

(1) Gopatha Brahmana, mostly derived from portions of earlier Brahmanas of other Vedas.

C. The Atharvaveda has no Aranyaka.

D. Upanishads:

(1) Mundaka Upanishad

(2) Prashna Upanishad

(3) Mandukya Upanishad, only recorded within Gaudapada's *Karika*, and thus known to Sankara.

ṚGVEDA	YAJURVEDA		SĀMAVEDA	ATHARVAVEDA	
	Black (Kṛṣṇa)	White (Śukla)			
Ṛgveda Saṃhitā	Taittirīya Saṃhitā	Kāthaka Saṃhitā	Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā	Sāmaveda Saṃhitā	Atharvaveda Saṃhitā (Śaunaka)
Aitareya Brāhmaṇa Kauṣītaki/Śāṅkhāyana Brāhmaṇa	Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa		Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa	Talavakāra (Jaiminīya) Brāhmaṇa Chāndogya Brāhmaṇa	Gopatha Brāhmaṇa
Aitareya Āraṇyaka Śāṅkhāyana Āraṇyaka	Taittirīya Āraṇyaka				
Aitareya Upaniṣad Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad	Taittirīya Upaniṣad Śvetāśvatara Up.	Kātha Upaniṣad	Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Īśa Upaniṣad	Chāndogya Upaniṣad Jaiminīya-Upaniṣad-Brāhmaṇa Kena Upaniṣad	Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad Praśna Upaniṣad Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad

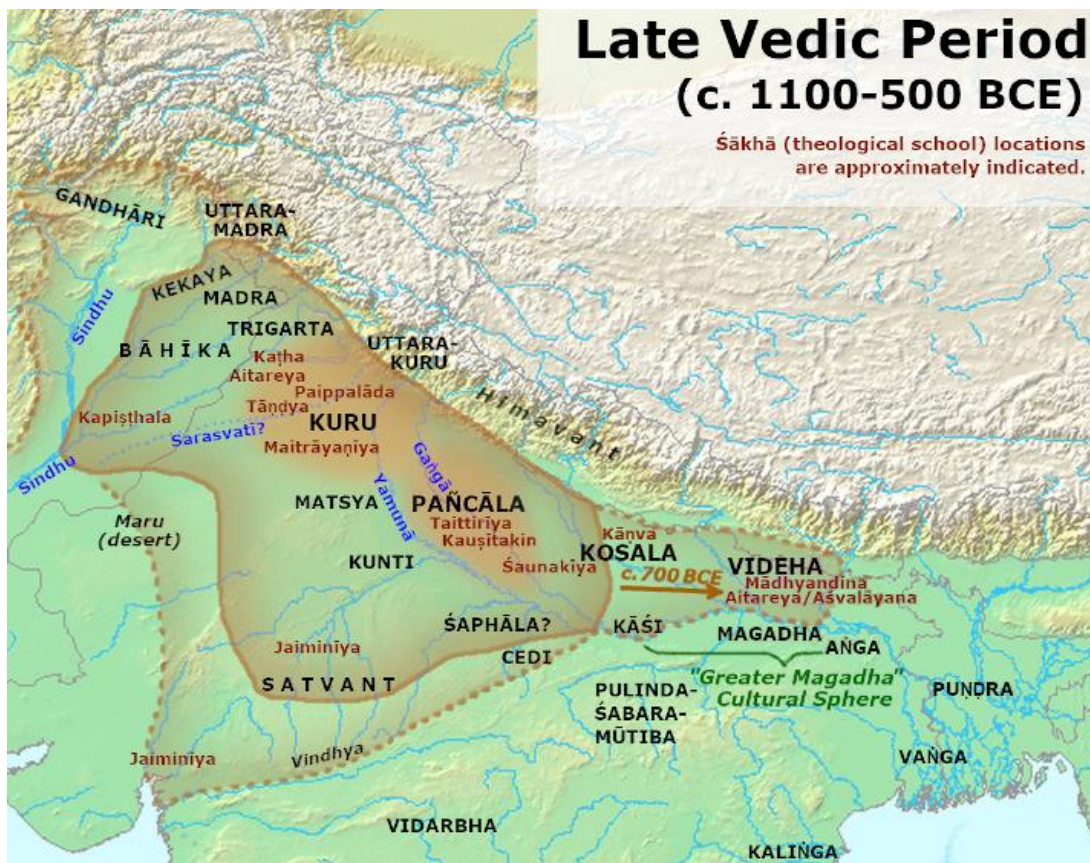
NB This chart is not comprehensive, and there are other vedic branches and texts, which are not included because they do not have extant Upaniṣads. The chart is intended only to indicate the position within the broader vedic corpus of the Upaniṣads translated or referred to in this book.

Fig. 1. The Upaniṣads within the Vedic Corpus

Figure 1 source is Olivelle ed, *The Early Upanishads*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1998).

The idea of divine and human reincarnation – all gods undergo birth and rebirth, just as humans – was not a belief of the original Aryan migrants who brought the Rigveda into India from central Asia c.1500–1200 BCE. And the idea of shamanic trancing to dissolve into the divine only partly cohered with the Brahmanic belief that their sacrificial rites made one 'twice-born' and eligible for immortality. The early Upanishads, before Buddhism, blended Aryan and indigenous beliefs. They instructed teachings about the contemplative mentality letting the body and senses fade from thought, so that moksha (liberation) from karma leaves only purified consciousness and illumination in unity with Brahman.

The Kanva Brahmin school in Kosala-Videha, responsible for the Kāṇva Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, was the theological home of the Brahmin priest Yājñavalkya and his Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. Vedic passages state a distaste for this eastern region and the brahmins venturing there, implying that their piety was insecure or heretical. Yājñavalkya defeats rival brahmins representing their western theological schools with superior knowledge of Brahman and Atman, but there is no mention of any reform movement gaining momentum.



Only with the composition of more Upanishads during 600-400 BCE would Brahmanism fully embrace the supremacy of this mystically transcendent Brahman and the kind of reincarnated immortality that Brahman ensures. A few generations after Yājñavalkya another Aryan renunciant from Kosala appeared with practices controlling the self to gain moksha and permanent bliss: Gotama the Buddha.

Axial Phase: Buddhism

Phenomenalism

The era: 400s BCE

The location: Northern India

The sources: the Pali Canon, monumental inscriptions, later chronicles

Brahmins, Śramaṇas, and Buddhists

Gautama the Buddha probably taught during 460-420 BCE, plus or minus a couple of decades. A date for his birth around 500 BCE in the land of Shakya is consistent with its independence before incorporation into the Kosala kingdom when he was older. The early portions of the Pali canon (the oldest collection of Buddha's discourses) were closest to Gautama's era but they mention no cities, urban wealth, or empires, which arose later during the 300s BCE. The Kosalan region is archaeologically placed with the indigenous Black and Red Ware/Ochre Colored Pottery (BRW/OCP) culture. That strata of culture consisted of villages and market places before 400 BCE.

During Gautama's lifetime, the settled life of villages and towns across northern India from the Indus to the Ganges was surrounded by forest and wilderness, inhabited by two sorts of spiritual seekers: brahmanas and śramaṇas. If they resided near settlements or towns to beg with empty bowls for their daily food, they were 'mendicants' or spiritual beggars. Others lived off what little could be scavenged out in the wilderness. Besides ancient Vedic texts, non-Indian histories attest to these two classes. For example, Megasthenes of the Greeks reported on his sojourns in India: "Megasthenes makes a different division of the philosophers, saying that they are of two kinds, one of which he calls the Brachmanes, and the other the Sarmanes" (Strabo XV. 1. 58-60). Whether they wore little clothing or none at all (hence the "gymnophysist" label) they were renowned for their fixation on the spiritual life. They all practiced meditational and trancing techniques for a similar end: dissolution into the divine ultimate where the soul's discontents disappeared.

Brahmins usually were elderly men still keeping their sacrificial fires and a haughty pride in their noble birth. Śramaṇas of any age came from other classes or the non-Aryan indigenous population, perpetuating Stone Age shamanic techniques of yogic meditation. They were known as renouncers and reclusives. They renounced and avoided the human world and lived simple lives in nature in order to transcend nature. The farther away one gets from the human world, the closer one approaches the divine realm. This is the spiritual lesson of all asceticism.

Gautama initially learned ascetic practices from local brahmin recluses, but he and his followers were treated as just more śramaṇas. He taught that genuine brahmins, worthy ascetics approaching illumination, had to abandon Brahmanism and its Vedic-Upanishadic teachings. Right conduct and concentration can indeed minimize the worldly self and deal with karma, but the purpose of meditation cannot be immortality since that destiny only prolongs suffering and death endlessly. The cycle of birth and rebirth can be abandoned through the techniques of the Buddha, the 'Awakened', to permanently extinguish (attain Nirvana) that troublesome desiring self. The absence of all desire and clinging is the termination of that karmic cycle of rebirth: Nirvana (Nibbana in Pali). The movement of the Jains was another contemporaneous development from that śramaṇa way of life, but they taught that excessive ascetic suffering was necessary to erase past karmic debts and liberate the immortal soul. Gautama explicitly rejected both extremes of suffering and soul-seeking. The Middle Path renounced what lay at the heart of it all: the illusion of any permanent self.

Some brahmins and śramaṇas joined Gautama's community, and swelled the Sangha community of bhikkus (monks) for centuries after Buddha's death. Brahmins rejecting Buddhism went on to develop philosophical

Vedanta by 100 CE. The śramaṇas avoiding Buddhism during those centuries either joined the Jain movement or they were eventually absorbed into Hinduism as yogis and rishis, either of the Shiva/Saivite cult or the Visnu/Krishna cult. To this day, Hinduism's three main divisions represent these theological, mystical, and devotional options. Buddhism represented a different option that emphasized the termination of karmic rebirth entirely. Hinduism absorbed Buddhism after a thousand years, when the monastic lifestyle of Buddhism lost support within India. By then, schools of Buddhism that had rooted in Tibet, China, Ceylon, and Indochina were flourishing.

Who was Gautama Buddha?

"Gautama" was his Aryan family surname, which was not uncommon as an Aryan name of prestige. Sanskrit as a written script was not yet used, nor Pali. The name "Gotama" is the same name regardless of a script's spelling, which came into usage after his death. His family held a modest aristocratic status and its name was borrowed from a traditional brahmin priestly name 'Gautama' or 'Gotama'. There are Rigveda hymns by brahmins named Gotama and a priest named Gautama is mentioned in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. "Gotoma" meant "supreme Cow" in the ancient Vedic language, reflecting respect for that herding heritage, although the Sakyas relied on rice farming.

Gautama was his 'last' name, a family name. His 'first' given name remains unrecorded and unknown. He would have abandoned it upon "going forth" into that life of wandering to live anonymously. The name Siddhartha was invented centuries later as an honorific that means 'wish fulfilled'. Another honorific name was "Shakyamuni" which meant "greatest of the Shakyas." Later legend gave him a wife and son, but abandoning a young family while in his 20s is not mentioned in the oldest discourses.

Gautama's heritage was well-born as a member of the Shakya tribe but he was not a prince. Assigning him to the Kshatriya caste is anachronistic and legendary fiction, since that region was not yet dominated by Brahminism or its nascent Āryāvarta class system. Although his own family had taken a brahmin name, the Shakya tribe had generally ignored the Brahmanic cultural authority typical of northwestern India. His homeland of Shakya was partly non-Aryan with families intermarrying with Mundi peoples who already inhabited ancient eastern India. It is possible that Gautama himself had some non-Aryan heritage in his ancestry. Leaders from oligarchic families ruled the Shakyas together in a quasi-republic that had no king.

In the Pabbajjā Sutta (Sn 3.1), Gautama tells Magadhan King Bimbisāra about his homeland: "King, straight ahead is a country, close to the Himālayas, endowed with wealth and vigor, belonging to one native to the Kosalans. They are indeed Ādicca by lineage and Sākiya by birth. From that family I have gone forth, king, not yearning for sense pleasures." The Sākya (Shakya) tribe had several clans (gottā) and his family's clan was the 'Gotamagotta' or 'Gotama clan'. The Pali word ādiccā was āditya in Vedic Sanskrit, which meant the Sun; perhaps his clan claimed descent from the Sun.

The straightforward account of Gautama's "going forth" into the wandering life is stated in the "The Noble Search" or Ariyapariyesanā Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya (Middle Length Discourses), MN 26.

I, too, monks, before my self-awakening, when I was still just an unawakened bodhisatta, being subject myself to birth, sought what was likewise subject to birth. Being subject myself to aging... illness... death... sorrow... defilement, sought (happiness in) what was likewise subject to aging... illness... death... sorrow... defilement. The thought occurred to me, 'Why do I, being subject myself to birth, seek what is likewise subject to birth? Being subject myself to aging... illness... death... sorrow... defilement, why do I seek what is likewise subject to aging... illness... death... sorrow... defilement?'

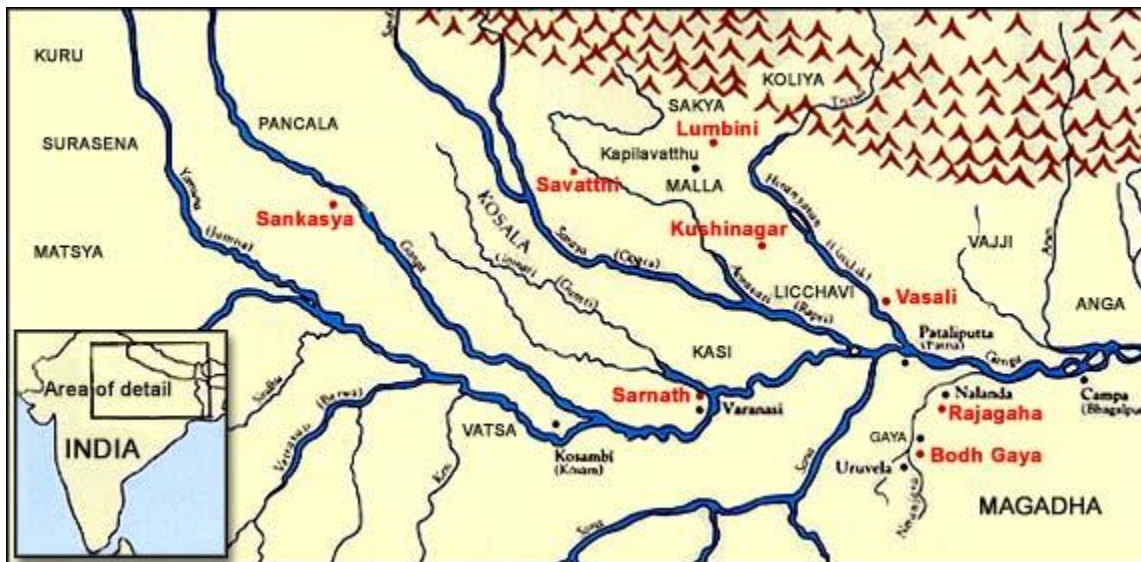
‘What if I, being subject myself to birth, seeing the drawbacks of birth, were to seek the unborn, unexcelled rest from the yoke: unbinding? What if I, being subject myself to aging... illness... death... sorrow... defilement, seeing the drawbacks of aging... illness... death... sorrow... defilement, were to seek the aging-less, illness-less, deathless, sorrow-less, unexcelled rest from the yoke: unbinding?’

So, at a later time, while still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessings of youth in the first stage of life—and while my parents, unwilling, were crying with tears streaming down their faces—I shaved off my hair & beard, put on the ochre robe, and went forth from the home life into homelessness.

Having thus gone forth in search of what might be skillful, seeking the unexcelled state of sublime peace, I went to Ālāra Kālāma and, on arrival, said to him: ‘Friend Kālāma, I want to practice in this Dhamma & discipline.’

Other canonical discourses and Aśoka’s edicts indeed indicate Gautama’s origin in Sakya/Shakya to the north of Kosala. His birthplace is attested on a pillar in Lumbini (now in Nepal) that dates from 200s BCE or later, but this local legend has never been challenged by somewhere else claiming Buddha’s origin, so it may be accurate. Gautama also says that he is Kosalan in some discourses, which cohere with Shakya’s conquest by the Kosala kingdom. Kosala was one of the sixteen Mahajanapadas, the petty kingdoms still contesting for dominance during the 400s BCE. Legends about his parentage, a kingly father and soon-dead mother who unnaturally birthed a baby doing miracles and earning prophecies, display the sort of supernaturalist mythology popular with later Hindu-dominated culture. Early canonical discourses portray Gautama as entirely human, with personal feelings and failings, and going through old age ending in death from an uncomfortable illness.

The towns in red on the next map are some of the locations where Gautama journeyed more frequently.



Gautama would have heard of Magadha’s King Bimbisāra (early 400s BCE) and his reign over the neighboring kingdom of Magadha, where few brahmins had influence. Bimbisāra’s successor, King Ajatasattu (mid-400s BCE) also makes appearances in canonical discourses to converse with the Buddha. No one would have believed that a wandering ascetic could speak with a king, much less a dead king, so these are later inventions. Gautama probably knew about later kings of the Haryanka dynasty such as King Udayin while he was sojourning there. None of those kings appear in the canonical discourses, although one of Buddha’s disciples was also called Udayin. Similarly, King Pasenadi of Kosala is instructed by the Buddha in a few discourses,

including one where the king learns the dire lesson from overeating a tubful of rice. Legends of the Buddha converting kings were invented long after Gautama's death. The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta reports that King Ajātasattu demanded some relics from the deceased Buddha for a Magadha stupa, but this was a smart political move rather than a personal gesture.

Gautama knew no kings, but he became familiar with brahmin ascetics, also called brahmanas. According to his own account, he left his parents in his 20s and followed two brahmanas for a few years until attaining his own enlightenment. Brahmins of that region were likely of the Kanva Brahmin school based in Kosala, which was responsible for the Kāṇva Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa and Upanishadic views of Yājñavalkya in his Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. (Later Upanishads were still being composed during Gautama's lifetime, or even later, as late Upanishads occasionally display the impact of Buddhist ideas.)

Although brahmins did not yet dominate cultural and political life in Kosala or Magadha, some early Pali discourses such as the Suttanipāta recount Gautama's debates with brahmins, and his words display some general familiarity with Vedic and Upanishadic teachings. He apparently converted brahmins, with some becoming close disciples. His movement preserved argumentative discourses with brahmins as persuasive lessons for converting more Aryans, or at least ensuring that followers prefer Buddhism over Brahmanism. Gautama cast doubt and ridicule upon Vedic gods and the notion of a God Brahma, and he discredited the Upanishadic quest for the immortal Self.

Gautama's rural landscape from Kosala to Magadha was replete with non-Aryan śramaṇas who cared nothing for the foreign Aryans or their Vedic gods. Indigenous tribes in northeastern India held their own Stone Age religious myths and practices, notably sacred tree worship, snake veneration, and the tumulus burial mound for bodily remains and relics. As befits his Aryan heritage, Gautama was cremated upon his death at age 80, but ashes and bones were portioned and distributed for installation in massive mounds or constructed stupas in several territories where Buddhism was flourishing. Gautama seemed comfortable residing in non-Brahman and non-Aryan territory, not so different from his original homeland.

Who are Bhikkus and How Did They Join?

Later Buddhist tradition simplified that label of *bhikku* for men and *bhikkhuni* for women. The original Pali word was *bhikkhave*, a word from the Magadha dialect of Middle Indo-Aryan. By Gautama's times, the Aryan language had penetrated across the Ganges region as the vernacular speech of Aryans and educated non-Aryans. As a "Prakrit" language descended from Vedic Sanskrit, Middle Indo-Aryan is not much different from reading the Sanskrit of the Upanishads, but it does reflect small pronunciation, spelling, and grammar variations from Magadha and neighboring regions where Buddhism had spread. The Pali canon preserves many of those variants, and Gautama would have stayed fluent wherever he preached.

To think that Gautama himself spoke "Pali" isn't incorrect, so long as one recalls that Pali strictly speaking names the canonical script used some 400 years after Gautama died. However, the Sangha community formed by the time of Buddha's death c.440 spoke the Middle Indo-Aryan language from northern India and enforced rules for the correct pronunciation of discourses. The Buddha's language was therefore accurately preserved over the centuries until its recording in written script. The alternative notion, that thousands of hours of recalled discourses were somehow entirely translated from the Buddha's language into a "Pali" language invented from nothing solely for its recording, lacks any evidence while defying common sense and reason.

During his lifetime, a new recruit would be recognized by Gautama with the words "Ehi bhikkhu!" – "Come, O Bhikkhu." As the movement grew, thera (elder) bhikkhus were authorized to induct entrants who recited the basic *saranagamana* lines:

Buddham saranam gacchami, “I take the Buddha as my refuge,
Dhammam saranam gacchami. “I take his Dhamma as my refuge.”

Decades after Buddha’s death, the organized Sangha community enforced a large body of rules collected in the Vinaya Pitaka, established permanent monasteries, and added a third line for admission: “Sanghan saranam gacchami” “I take the Sangha as my refuge.”

The Khandhaka book of the Vinyana has two final chapters (Kd 21, Kd 22) about the two great Sangha councils after the Buddha’s death. The first, the Pañcasatikakkhandhaka “Chapter on the Council of Five Hundred,” relates how elders close to Buddha took months to recite as many discourses as they could recall for other to memorize too, thus preserving material going into the Sutta Pitaka. Although elder Bhikkus probably took many years to centralize and collectively memorize many thousands of suttas, the core compendiums of discourses were forming before the surviving generation of Buddha’s followers themselves died. The second, the *Sattasatikakkhandhaka* “Chapter on the Council of Seven Hundred”, recounts major controversies over points of monastic law.

If this Second Council took place roughly a hundred years after Buddha’s death, as the Vinyana claims, there is nothing about its deliberations to point to a major doctrinal schism dividing the Sangha. No schools of Buddhism had yet emerged. By 150 years (roughly) after Buddha, King Aśoka was dealing with Buddhist schools divided over substantial disciplinary, doctrinal, and metaphysical matters. The beginnings of the doctrinal divisions between Vibhajjavāda (pre-Theriyas ‘Elders’ and later Theravadin) and Sarvāstivāda (pro-Abhidharma and proto-Mahayana) go back to the 200s BCE.

Because the very question of the authenticity of early schools of Buddhism plunges scholarship directly into tortuous issues over the legitimacy of so-called “Theravada” and “Mahayana” Buddhisms, a step back into deep academic questions is necessary, before returning to the crucial role of King Aśoka.

Early Buddhism: A Message, or a Mirage?

Many theological and academic attempts have been made to reconstruct the course of Gautama's career and identify his own teachings before his death. No plausible argument has credibly denied that Gautama was an actual historical individual who inaugurated a rival religion to Brahmanism. However, he lived and taught within an oral culture. He composed nothing in writing, and his movement avoided written texts for centuries, in imitation of the Brahmanic reliance on memorizing and reciting vast amounts of verse and narration. All the same, because of that profound effort of oral preservation, we may still be able to read words spoken long ago by Buddha. Which words are they? Both religious curiosity and academic puzzlement would love to figure that out.

The current state of academic knowledge about the historical origins of Buddhism and its literary and religious development can be briefly summarized.

Existing written texts of Buddhism are datable to several centuries after Buddha supposedly lived. The earliest may be datable to 1st century BCE.

Ancient historical works date the Buddha to around 100-200 years before King Aśoka, hence the Buddha lived during the 400s (but his death may be between 480 and 400 BCE).

According to Buddhist tradition and all evidence, only oral transmission and recension codification served as the means of transmission of Buddhism during the Buddha's lifetime and for two or three centuries in north India after Buddha.

According to Buddhist tradition and a consensus among ancient histories, the Sangha (community of Buddhists) accepted its leadership's version of Sutta and Vinaya Pitakas around the time of the Second Council (sometime during the mid-300s BCE).

The Sutta Pitaka (the five Nikayas) and the Vinaya Pitaka may be called the Sangha Canon, and it was probably spoken in eastern Middle Indo-Aryan dialect in the region of Kosala-Videha, a common dialect that lent itself to the early MIA Pali language.

Nowhere is King Aśoka mentioned, so this Sangha Canon was finalized before 260s BCE.

King Aśoka of the Mauryan Empire (asc. 268 BCE) erects his Edicts (c.260-240 BCE) approving of Buddhism across much of India, and recommends seven suttas by name that are identifiable in the Canon.

The Third Council c.250 BCE, at Aśoka's urging, tightened the Sangha order to prevent disorderly divisions and doctrinal disputes among Buddhists in his empire.

During the period of recension transmission of this early Sangha Canon, divergent schools/sects of Buddhism did develop and by the 200s BCE they were introducing their own distinctive doctrinal views into their version of the Canon.

Quite different "Abhidharma" texts were added to the common Canon c.200 BCE – 300 CE in different locations around India and Ceylon before the full Canon (the three "baskets" or Pitakas) was closed to further additions.

The transcription of oral recensions into scriptural literature did not happen in one place at one time, but into multiple languages at various times across Gandhara in western India (now Afghanistan/Pakistan), central India, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Nepal, Tibet, and China.

Ceylon's transcription of the "Pali Canon" probably occurred first, around 25 BCE. Chinese translations of Northern India Buddhism appeared about a century after that.

Questions of Intellectual History

Q1. Can the spread and courses of Buddhist traditions over history and geography be better understood by seeking the early origins of Buddhism?

Q2. Is there an identifiable Canon among all the surviving written Canons from various languages that comprised the central Buddhist religion across south Asia by 300 CE?

Q3. Among early canonical works to this common Canon, which display the least invention and innovation, so that certain texts constituted the common Buddhist Canon by c.100 BCE?

Q4. If there is an identifiable common Buddhist Canon c.100 BCE, can earlier portions get identified and distinguished from later portions of this common Canon?

Q5. If so, can core doctrine(s) of the Buddha exist somewhere within earlier portions of the Canon?

Q6. If there are core doctrine(s) of the Buddha to be heard in earliest suttas/verses, is there a way to reasonably discern those doctrines?

Q7. If core doctrine(s) of the Buddha can be discerned, can any of its messages be attributable directly to talks/messages heard verbatim from the Buddha himself?

Q8. What else might be ascertainable concerning this early figure of the Buddha, providing details about his life, associates, and career, that further illuminates the origins of Buddhism?

Challenging Counter-Questions

Con-Q1. Each tradition of Buddhism already provides its own account of its genesis and history. Religions and denominations typically do this with dogmatic confidence if not faithful certainty. Buddhist traditions have each preserved plenty of texts and commentaries offering historical legend, epic, and lore.

Con-Q2. Each Buddhist tradition claims to represent the authentic Buddhism, in its preferred texts, editions, and translations. Identifying a singular early Canon would unjustly elevate one tradition's legitimacy over the rest. Imagining a "pre-sectarian" Canon is disrespectful to them all, if religious value has to rest more on similarities to early beginnings than to later innovations.

Con-Q3. Canonical texts extant now for viewing were codified and closed at particular times c.100 BCE to 500 CE, leaving plenty of time before codification for adaptations, translations, redactions, and revisions which cannot be viewed. No text could be assigned "priority" or "purity", since each one was the product of editing now inaccessible to observation.

Con-Q4. Firm datings for portions of the Canon were not a feature of the Canon itself. Discerning earlier and later portions of the earliest Canon is obstructed by its assembly according to obscure frameworks and

puzzling patterns. These organizational features of the common Canon were mainly established to serve purposes and goals of the Buddhist groups preserving it through oral transmission.

Con-Q5. Important doctrines of the Buddha could be most anywhere within the common Canon, and most of the Buddha's sayings amount to "key" doctrines as far as the Canon itself declares. None of the disciplines investigating the Canon could separate out earlier "core" portions. Each discipline would have to rely on arbitrary guesses, dubious textual principles, or Western preconceptions that may not apply to early Buddhism.

Con-Q6. Even if disciplines had sufficient reason to think that core views of the Buddha exist at certain layers and places within early Canon, picking them out with specificity cannot be reasonably accomplished. A discipline would have to depend on dubious notions of what the Buddha should have "really" meant in order to stratify the Canon. Such imported notions either reflect subjective preferences of the investigator or prejudiced sectarianism favoring one Buddhist tradition over others.

Con-Q7. Even if a discipline avoided the partisan approach of inventing "the real" Buddhism by this point, selecting out original sayings heard from the Buddha during his lifetime seems impossible. Too much work went into broadcasting his message to suppose that little was modified or manufactured along the way over several decades. The practical methods required for ample memorization, recitation, and transmission must have been efficient and robust to preserve such a large body of oral literature after the Buddha's death.

Con-Q8. If the "original" sayings of the Buddha cannot be reasonably ascertained, there can be little hope for other biographical matters. Understanding his message could be aided by also figuring out where the Buddha lived and preached, how the Buddha grew his community of followers, and why he interacted as he did with other sorts of religious and civic figures of his times. It would also be necessary to understand how early communities of Buddhists interacted with the mundane world of forests, villages, and cities around them.

Responses to the Contra-Qs

Reply to Con-Q1. Because each tradition of Buddhism claims a deep heritage back to the Buddha, that heritage itself must be unifying rather than divisive for them all. Traditions can converge on a portrait of what their shared heritage was like in the past, precisely because so much information has been conserved among the various traditions. It is unreasonable to ignore a realistic convergence that could be academically discerned from analyzing and comparing all that preserved information.

Reply to Con-Q2. A religion basing its legitimacy on closeness to origins does splinter into sectarian disputes, as each tradition accuses the others of adding deviant innovations. Academic inquiry cannot start sectarianism by promulgating an early Canon (traditions have already been doing this), nor does it assign religious value to origins *or* innovations (no academic discipline privileges one sect over others). Ignoring the difference between a pre-sectarian Canon and later innovations would be *more* disrespectful to religion, by diminishing the value of each tradition's unique development and special features. Academics can simultaneously study the originality to a tradition's religiosity while also inquiring into a religion's historical origination.

Reply to Con-Q3. Editing to canonical texts is not invisible, even though earlier versions are not readable now. Precisely because sectarian notions easily influence editing, their traces remain in texts. Composers who contributed text and editing to a work lived in separate eras, wrote in different ways, and held distinctive views. Those differences are visible to academic disciplines able to discriminate out those textual, linguistic, and conceptual variations. No discipline seeks any "purity" texts (that's a religious value) but disciplines can discern prior compositions to a work.

Reply to Con-Q4. The techniques that facilitated high fidelity transmission over time and across many lands are good evidence for the kinds of practices and activities of early Buddhist groups. These activities are datable relative to each other. For example, some kinds of framed and patterned compositions (lengthy narrations, sophisticated enumerations) presume instructional and organizational complexities only forming after Buddha's death. Other sorts of compositions (short dialogues, repetitive segments, rhythmic verses) fit better with teachings offered by Buddha himself to close followers.

Reply to Con-Q5. A single discipline by itself could distort early Buddhism through misguided methods and mistaken assumptions. The academic corrective has to consist of multiple disciplines testing and confirming (or disconfirming) each other's premises and hypotheses. Tentative conclusions arrived at by cooperating disciplines applying many proven methodologies are more reasonable than untested dogmatic certainties. Letting sectarian or doctrinal views "decide" the "original" Buddhism only lead to a dead-end stalemates.

Reply to Con-Q6. Stratifying an early Buddhist canon by identifying later accretions and revisions does not amount to deciding what the Buddha "really" meant. Only Buddhist sects and traditions decide for themselves the religious significance and import to the Buddhist message. Academically, the historical Buddha could not have inaugurated a religious movement without a powerful and effective message for his actual audiences on his journeys across northern India during his lifetime. Discerning that message is therefore not beyond the reasonable methodologies of coordinated disciplines unmoved by sectarian prejudices.

Reply to Con-Q7. Disciplines seeking the Buddha's teachings and tales of his conversations do not have to identify passages registered directly from own voice. That is too high a standard of accuracy for an itinerant teacher more concerned for guiding replicable practices and delivering memorable talks. Since his instructions had to be crafted to get repeated and re-broadcast with accuracy, those efficiencies are evident in early passages. That earliest oral literature surely resounds with the Buddha's own message as he developed and delivered it for several decades before his death.

Reply to Con-Q8. Precisely because the Buddha's own teachings were promulgated to live audiences within the historical situation of his own times, evidence of his cultural, religious, political, economic, and environmental contexts can be discerned within early passages. The joint inquiries of several disciplines have revealed numerous aspects to the Buddha's life and career, and many features to the development of Buddhist communities.

Academic Lessons Learned

Lesson from Q1. Realistic convergence is not impossible while historical information is available. Academic disciplines respect heritage by comprehending it realistically rather than just doctrinally.

Lesson from Q2. Temporal historicity is not confused with doctrinal purity. Academic disciplines display neutrality about sectarian disputes over privilege or purity.

Lesson from Q3. Textual inaccessibility is not the same as complete invisibility. Academic disciplines distinguish editing variabilities done to a work by its composers from different eras and viewpoints.

Lesson from Q4. Composition variation is not an obstacle to ascertaining its gradual formation. Academic disciplines incorporate practicalities when understanding the course of oral transmissions.

Lesson from Q5. Disciplinary methodology is not just distortion if applied collaboratively. Academic disciplines seek overall consistencies among tested hypotheses to maximize theoretical coherence.

Lesson from Q6. Multi-disciplinary coherence is not going to follow individual preference. No investigator is free from biases, but the long-term academic consensus tends toward neutrality.

Lesson from Q7. Conducting chains of oral repetition is not like authoring a literary text. Disciplines perceive how one singular intellect animates many kinds of suttas that were later collected together.

Lesson from Q8. Understanding a historical figure's impact is not just about reading written words. A realistic portrait of the Buddha emerges from many disciplines studying the entire historical context.

Political History: King Aśoka

King Aśoka has always been intertwined with the Buddha and early Buddhism. Taking the throne of the Maurya Empire c.259 BCE, he then converted to Buddhism and energized its expansion within his empire and beyond. The first written evidence for the existence of Buddhism was inscribed on Aśoka's pillars and monuments across India, where his words praised Buddhism while urging respect for dharma and all religions.

Because later chronologies date the Buddha's life to around century or two before Aśoka, initial estimates for the Buddha's death range from 460 to 380 BCE. Refining a more specific date requires a close examination of the Pali Canon, Sangha developments, and other historical sources about the political and religious landscape between Buddha's death and Aśoka's reign. An approximate date of 420 BCE plus or minus a generation has some scholarly consensus.

The first Aśoka inscription was erected c.260 BCE. And many more followed until the later years of his reign. The texts etched into stone and rock vary somewhat in content and purpose.



The Dharma of Ashoka. c.260-240 BCE.

Translated by R. Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* - 3rd edn (2014).

4th Major rock edict

In the past, the killing and injuring of living beings, lack of respect towards relatives, brahmins and śramaṇas had increased. But today, thanks to the practice of Dhamma on the part of the Beloved of the Gods, the king Piyadassi, the sound of the drum has become the sound of Dhamma, showing the people displays of heavenly chariots, elephants, balls of fire, and other divine forms. Through his instruction in Dhamma abstention from killing and non-injury to living beings, deference to relatives, brahmins and śramaṇas, obedience to mother and father, and obedience to elders have all increased as never before for many centuries. These and many other forms of the practice of Dhamma have increased and will increase. The Beloved of the Gods, the king Piyadassi, his sons, his grandsons and his great grandsons will advance the practice of Dhamma, until the end of the world and will instruct in the law, standing firm in Dhamma. For this, the instruction in the law, is the most valuable activity. But there is no practice of Dhamma without goodness, and in these matters it is good to progress and not to fall back. For this purpose, the inscription has been engraved—that men should make progress in this matter, and not be satisfied with their shortcomings. This was engraved here when the Beloved of the Gods, the king Piyadassi, had been consecrated twelve years.

13th Major rock edict

When he had been consecrated eight years the Beloved of the Gods, the king Piyadassi, conquered Kalinga. A hundred and fifty thousand people were deported, a hundred thousand were killed and many times that number perished. Afterwards, now that Kalinga was annexed, the Beloved of the Gods very earnestly practised Dhamma, desired Dhamma, and taught Dhamma. On conquering Kalinga the Beloved of the Gods felt remorse, for, when an independent country is conquered the slaughter, death, and deportation of the people is extremely grievous to the Beloved of the Gods, and weighs heavily on his mind. What is even more deplorable to the Beloved of the Gods, is that those who dwell there, whether brahmins, śramaṇas, or those of other sects, or householders who show obedience to their superiors, obedience to mother and father, obedience to their teachers and behave well and devotedly towards their friends, acquaintances, colleagues, relatives, slaves, and servants—all suffer violence, murder, and separation from their loved ones. Even those who are fortunate to have escaped, and whose love is undiminished [by the brutalizing effect of war], suffer from the misfortunes of their friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and relatives. This participation of all men in suffering, weighs heavily on the mind of the Beloved of the Gods. Except among the Greeks, there is no land where the religious orders of brahmins and śramaṇas are not to be found, and there is no land anywhere where men do not support one sect or another. Today if a hundredth or a thousandth part of those people who were killed or died or were deported when Kalinga was annexed were to suffer similarly, it would weigh heavily on the mind of the Beloved of the Gods. The Beloved of the Gods believes that one who does wrong should be forgiven as far as it is possible to forgive him. And the Beloved of the Gods conciliates the forest tribes of his empire, but he warns them that he has power even in his remorse, and he asks them to repent, lest they be killed. For the Beloved of the Gods wishes that all beings should be unharmed, self-controlled, calm in mind, and gentle. The Beloved of the Gods considers victory by Dhamma to be the foremost victory.

Some edicts are composed for all inhabitants of his empire and beyond to enforce civil order and good ethics. Others are mainly addressed to the Buddhist Sangha. Distilling down these dozens of edicts, they primarily express these propositions:

Aśoka himself became a Buddhist after leading a terrible war during earlier years of his reign.

Aśoka calls himself a Buddhist “upasaka” (lay follower) and a “Shakya” – as Buddha's title was Shakya-Muni.

Aśoka personally associates with a Buddhist order or community, understands key Buddhist precepts, and goes on Buddhist pilgrimages.

Aśoka pilgrimaged to Lumbini (now in Nepal) to worship and commemorate Buddha Shakyamuni's birthplace.

There is general Sangha community of Buddhist practitioners. It includes the Order of monks and the Order of nuns, and many lay people.

Aśoka wants unity among the Order of Buddhists, and wants no dissention or schism to disrupt that unity now or in the future. All laypeople must also know this desire and directive.

The “cause of Dharma” is his governing priority, and also a Buddhist priority.

Aśoka's proclamations about Dharma will instruct the people and educate them, so they will conform willingly, make progress, and become devoted to Dharma.

Aśoka directs certain administration officials, called “dhamma Mahamatras” or dharma officers, to uphold justice and admonish the people about morality.

Obeying Dharma duties improves the happiness of individual lives and the welfare of the world.

Besides Dharma duties among the people and duties for rulers, no one should eat animals or engage in rituals about killing animals.

Rites and ceremonies performed for people merely wanting auspicious births, families, healings, and wealth are “trivial and meaningless.”

The Dharma, its duties, and its benefits is open to the poor and the rich, and to peoples beyond “the borders of my dominions.”

Aśoka exemplifies the spread of the Dharma by going on pilgrimages and tours of the kingdom's lands.

Aśoka recommends seven specific suttas for remembrance so that “the true Dharma will be of long duration” (3rd Minor Rock Edict at Bairat, also called the Bhabru Edict).

Across his lands, there are “Brahmanas and Sramanas” as well as Buddhists. All sects should have equal respect, and there should be harmony among them.

For “many hundreds of years” disrespect towards Brahmanas and Sramanas has been growing.

Obeying Dharma is implicated with results that pertain to the next world. [13th Major Rock edict, 14th Major Rock Edict]

All people have lives with suffering, no matter their merit or luck. [13th Rock Edict]

People can obtain a better rebirth in their next life from meritorious deeds such as their self-control, good conduct, charity, and fasting.

Besides these propositions found among several or many of his edict monuments, three edicts provide specific information about what Buddhism was like during the 200s BCE.

First, a Minor Pillar inscribed with the Nigali Sagar Edict was erected in modern-day Nigalihawa in (now) Nepal, a short distance northwest of Lumbini.

“His Majesty King Priyadarsin in the 14th year of his reign enlarged for the second time the stupa of the Buddha Konākamanasa and in the 20th year of his reign, having come in person, paid reverence and set up a stone pillar.”

This “Buddha Konākamanasa” or Kanakamuni (Koṇāgamana in Pali) is only mentioned in a single inscription in Nepal. That region was not an area where Gautama preached. Aśoka visited there and sent missionaries to Nepal in the mid-200s. Both the Lumbini and Nigali Sagar edicts were probably inscribed after Aśoka’s reign. Neither inscription is worded in the first-person like the rest of the Pillars, and they reflect a later tradition of Buddhism. A late addition to the Khuddaka Nikaya, the Buddhavaṃsa “Chronicle of the Buddhas”, tells the tale of twenty-four Buddhas of previous eras, including Koṇāgamana, and Gautama’s own past lives of devotion to those Buddhas before attaining his own Buddhahood. The Buddhavaṃsa dates from the 2nd or 1st century BCE when themes from Hinduism, such as myths about long lists of previous incarnations of deities, and devotions of many reincarnated lives, were expected of the faithful.

Second, the Minor Pillar Edict at Sanchi commands that the entire Buddhist Sangha should remain unified despite heretical monks and nuns.

“... [cannot] be divided.

The Sangha both of monks and of nuns is made united as long as (my) sons and great-grandsons (shall reign, and) as long as the moon and the sun (shall shine).

The monk or nun who shall break up the Sangha, must be caused to put on white robes and to reside in a non-residence.

For my desire is that the Sangha may be united of long duration.”

... [Sangha cannot] be divided [by any heretical monk.]

Both the Sangha of the monks and the Sangha of the nuns have each been made by me a united whole to last as long as my sons and great-grandsons shall reign and the moon and the sun shall shine.

The monk or nun who shall break up the Sangha should be made to put on white robes and to reside in what is not fit for the residence of a recluse.

For my desire is that the Sangha may remain united and flourish for a long time.

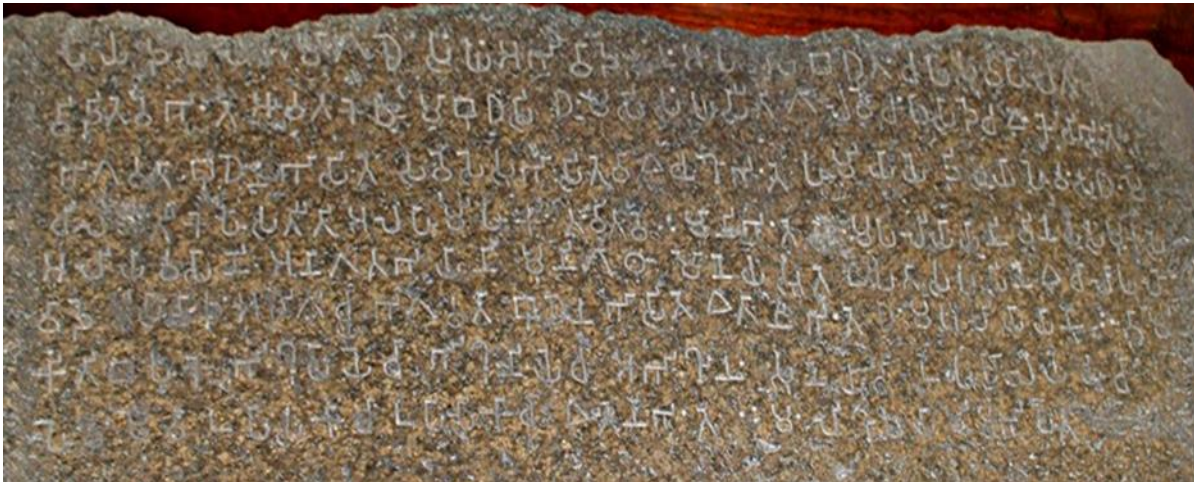
[Trans. Sicar, *Inscriptions of Aśoka*, p. 66-67.]

Similar pillar edicts direct his officials to enforce Sangha unity. What a king expects will last, is something that this king has accomplished. What sort of “unification” of the Sangha did Aśoka undertake, and what kind of Buddhist disorder required the intervention of the monarch of an empire?

Aśoka’s rule is connected with his missionary agenda, expelling unworthy monks, and his sponsorship of the Third Buddhist Council. That Council was led by Moggaliputta Tissa, who is named as the author of the Kathavatthu, a sizable catalogue of heretical views and their refutations, which was added to the Abhidhamma Pitaka sometime during the 200s BCE. If the problem was just newly arriving and ignorant fake monks, Aśoka

wouldn't have targeted Sangha monks and nuns with his warnings, and a top Buddhist master handling complex doctrines would not have been necessary. Tissa and Aśoka were evidently dealing with severe divisions within the Sangha itself. Those heresies weren't just thought up at the Council; they must have been brewing among sects long enough to eventually require a great assembly of hundreds of elders. Tissa's Kathavatthu displays the sort of gradual piece-by-piece assembly expected from a prolonged effort, no doubt extending long after that council, to keep track of so many deviant notions about the dharma and the suttas.

One of the Minor Rock Edicts (#3) records a list of seven discourses from the Vinaya and Sutta Pitakas, recommended as core doctrinal passages by Aśoka himself.



"His Gracious Majesty, King of Magadha, bows down to the Sangha and — hoping that they are free from disease and living in peace — addresses them as follows: You know well the extent of my reverence and faith in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. Whatever has been said by the Buddha has of course been well-said. But may I be permitted to point out the passages of scripture I have selected that the True Dhamma might last a long time: Vinaya-samukasa, Aliya-vasani, Anagata-bhayani, Muni-gatha, Mauneya-sute, Upatisa-pasine, and the Instructions to Rahula beginning with (the topic of) falsehood, as taught by the Blessed One.

"Reverend Sirs, I would like the reverend bhikkhus and bhikkhunis — as well as the laymen and laywomen — to listen to these passages frequently and to ponder on them.

"For this reason, Reverend Sirs, I am having this encribed so that they may know of my intention."

[<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/asoka.html>]

Thanissaro Bhikkhu identifies those seven named passages with the following texts:

1. Vinaya-samukasa is the Vinaya-samukkamsa, The Innate Principles of the Vinaya, in the Vinaya Mahavagga (Mv 6.40.1).
2. Aliya-vasani is the Ariya-vamsa Sutta, Discourse on the Traditions of the Noble Ones, in the Anguttara Nikaya (AN IV.28).
3. Anagata-bhayani are the four Discourses on Future Dangers in the Anguttara Nikaya (AN V.77-80).
4. Muni-gatha is the Muni Sutta, Discourse on the Sage, in the Sutta Nipata (Sn.I.12).
5. Mauneya-sute is the Moneyya (Sagacity) Sutta in the Anguttara Nikaya (AN III.122).

6. Upatissa-sāmaṇi is the Sariputta's Question, in Vinaya Mahavagga (Mv 1.23.1-10)

7. Instructions to Rahula is the Cūḷa-Rahulovāda Sutta, in the Majjhima Nikāya (MN 61).

These passages condense Buddha's teachings down to essential advice about discipline, conduct, and doctrine. For example, AN IV.28 concludes with this verse:

Discontent does not vanquish the steadfast one,
for the steadfast one is not vanquished by discontent.
The steadfast one vanquishes discontent,
for the steadfast one is a vanquisher of discontent.
Who can obstruct the dispeller
who has discarded all kamma?
Who is fit to blame one who is like
a coin of refined gold?
Even the devas praise such a one;
by Brahmā too he is praised.

<https://suttacentral.net/an4.28/en/bodhi?reference=none&highlight=false>

The Muni Sutta (abridged here) reads:

Peril stems from intimacy, dust comes from a home.
Freedom from home and intimacy: that is the sage's vision.

Having cut down what's grown, they wouldn't replant, nor would they nurture what's growing.
That's who they call a sage wandering alone, the great hermit has seen the state of peace.

Having assessed the fields and measured the seeds, they wouldn't nurture them with moisture.
Truly that sage who sees the ending of rebirth has left logic behind and is beyond reckoning.

Understanding all the planes of rebirth, not wanting a single one of them,
Truly that sage freed of greed need not strive, for they have reached the far shore.

The champion, all-knower, so very intelligent, unsullied in the midst of all things,
has given up all, freed in the ending of craving: that's who the wise know as a sage.

Strong in wisdom, with precepts and observances intact, serene, loving absorption, mindful,
released from chains, kind, undefiled: that's who the wise know as a sage.

...

Understanding the world, the seer of the ultimate goal, the poised one who has crossed the flood and
the ocean,
has cut the ties, unattached and undefiled: that's who the wise know as a sage.

The two are not the same, far apart in lifestyle and conduct— the householder providing for a wife,
and the selfless one true to their vows.

The unrestrained householder kills other creatures, while the restrained sage always protects living
creatures.

As the crested blue-necked peacock flying through the sky never approaches the speed of the swan,

so the householder cannot compete with the mendicant, the sage meditating secluded in the woods.
<https://suttacentral.net/snp1.12/en/sujato?>

Moneyya (Sagacity) Sutta, AN III.122:

“Mendicants, there are these three kinds of sagacity. What three? Sagacity of body, speech, and mind. And what is sagacity of body? It’s when a mendicant doesn’t kill living creatures, steal, or have sex. This is called ‘sagacity of body’.
And what is sagacity of speech? It’s when a mendicant doesn’t use speech that’s false, divisive, harsh, or nonsensical. This is called ‘sagacity of speech’.
And what is sagacity of mind? It’s when a mendicant realizes the undefiled freedom of heart and freedom by wisdom in this very life. And they live having realized it with their own insight due to the ending of defilements. This is called ‘sagacity of mind’. These are the three kinds of sagacity.

A sage in body, a sage in speech,
a sage undefiled in heart;
a sage, blessed with sagacity,
has given up everything, they say.”

<https://suttacentral.net/an3.122/en/sujato?>

Sariputta’s Question (Mv 1.23.1-10) reads:

Then Sariputta the wanderer spoke thus to the Ven. Assaji:
Speak a little or a lot, but tell me just the gist.
The gist is what I want. What use is a lot of verbosity?
Then Ven. Assaji gave this Dhamma exposition to Sariputta the Wanderer:

Whatever phenomena arise from cause:
their cause
& their cessation.

Such is the teaching of the Tathagata,
the Great Contemplative.

Then to Sariputta the wanderer, as he heard this Dhamma exposition, there arose the dustless, stainless Dhamma eye: “Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation.”

Even if just this is the Dhamma,
you have penetrated
to the Sorrowless (asoka) State
unseen, overlooked (by us)
for many myriads of aeons.

<https://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/vin/mv/mv.01.23.01-10.than.html>

One of the recommended passages is AN 5.79, where this warning is given:

“... in a future time there will be mendicants who have not developed their physical endurance, ethics, mind, and wisdom. When discourses spoken by the Realized One—deep, profound, transcendent, dealing with emptiness—are being recited they won’t want to listen. They won’t pay attention or apply their minds to understand them, nor will they think those teachings are worth learning and memorizing. But when discourses composed by poets—poetry, with fancy words and phrases, composed by outsiders or spoken by disciples—are being recited they will want to listen. They’ll pay attention and apply their minds to understand them, and they’ll think those teachings are worth learning and memorizing. And that is how corrupt training comes from corrupt teachings, and corrupt

teachings come from corrupt training. This is the fourth future peril that has not currently arisen, but will arise in the future.”

<https://suttacentral.net/an5.79/en/sujato?>

The Development of Buddhism into Philosophical-Theological Schools

Despite the Buddha’s own warnings, Buddhism was separating apart over doctrinal tenets and principles within a couple centuries after his death. Later, by around 100BCE–100CE, distinctive branches of Buddhism had divided, the northern Mahayana and the Southern Theravada.

This division is evident in the Buddhism canon itself. Compare (a) an early Buddhist discourse, with (b)

A. An early Discourse (perhaps from Buddha’s lifetime). Note the realist setting, the realistic sort of characters, and the sensible discourse.

Middle Discourses 38. The Longer Discourse on the Ending of Craving.

So I have heard. At one time the Buddha was staying near Sāvattthī in Jeta’s Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s monastery. Now at that time a mendicant called Sāti, the fisherman’s son, had the following harmful misconception: “As I understand the Buddha’s teachings, it is this very same consciousness that roams and transmigrates, not another.” Several mendicants heard about this. They went up to Sāti and said to him, “Is it really true, Reverend Sāti, that you have such a harmful misconception: ‘As I understand the Buddha’s teachings, it is this very same consciousness that roams and transmigrates, not another?’” “Absolutely, reverends. As I understand the Buddha’s teachings, it is this very same consciousness that roams and transmigrates, not another.”

Then, wishing to dissuade Sāti from his view, the mendicants pursued, pressed, and grilled him, “Don’t say that, Sāti! Don’t misrepresent the Buddha, for misrepresentation of the Buddha is not good. And the Buddha would not say that. In many ways the Buddha has said that consciousness is dependently originated, since without a cause, consciousness does not come to be.” But even though the mendicants pressed him in this way, Sāti obstinately stuck to his misconception and insisted on stating it. When they weren’t able to dissuade Sāti from his view, the mendicants went to the Buddha, bowed, sat down to one side, and told him what had happened.

So the Buddha addressed a certain monk, “Please, monk, in my name tell the mendicant Sāti that the teacher summons him.” “Yes, sir,” that monk replied. He went to Sāti and said to him, “Reverend Sāti, the teacher summons you.” “Yes, reverend,” Sāti replied. He went to the Buddha, bowed, and sat down to one side.

The Buddha said to him, “Is it really true, Sāti, that you have such a harmful misconception: ‘As I understand the Buddha’s teachings, it is this very same consciousness that roams and transmigrates, not another?’” “Absolutely, sir. As I understand the Buddha’s teachings, it is this very same consciousness that roams and transmigrates, not another.”

“Sāti, what is that consciousness?”

“Sir, he is the speaker and feeler who experiences the results of good and bad deeds in all the different realms.”

“Silly man, who on earth have you ever known me to teach in that way? Haven’t I said in many ways that consciousness is dependently originated, since consciousness does not arise without a cause? But still you misrepresent me by your wrong grasp, harm yourself, and make much bad karma. This will be for your lasting harm and suffering.”

Then the Buddha said to the mendicants, “What do you think, mendicants? Has this mendicant Sāti kindled even a spark of wisdom in this teaching and training?”

“How could that be, sir? No, sir.” When this was said, Sāti sat silent, dismayed, shoulders drooping, downcast, depressed, with nothing to say.

Knowing this, the Buddha said, “Silly man, you will be known by your own harmful misconception. I’ll question the mendicants about this.” Then the Buddha said to the mendicants, “Mendicants, do you understand my teachings as Sāti does, when he misrepresents me by his wrong grasp, harms himself, and makes much bad karma?”

“No, sir. For in many ways the Buddha has told us that consciousness is dependently originated, since without a cause, consciousness does not come to be.”

“Good, good, mendicants! It’s good that you understand my teaching like this. For in many ways I have told you that consciousness is dependently originated, since without a cause, consciousness does not come to be. But still this Sāti misrepresents me by his wrong grasp, harms himself, and makes much bad karma. This will be for his lasting harm and suffering...”

<https://suttacentral.net/mn38/en/sujato?>

B. The Abhidharma. This compilation of scholastic treatises was assembled by scholarly Buddhist writers in northwest India during 300-100 BCE. One version of the Abhidharma, known as “Abhidhamma” in the Pali of Ceylon, was accepted as canonical by Theravada Buddhists there, before 100 BCE. The striking feature of the Abhidharma (“after-Dharma”) is not only its highly formal, schematic, and scholastic structure, but also the way that it seeks to enumerate and exhaustively survey the essence of everything that could be said to have any sort of existence or phenomenal nature (including deceptions, illusions, pure phenomena, and so on). The only location in India where that sort of philosophical and metaphysical quest for the ultimate nature of reality was occurring during 300-100 BCE was northwestern India, where the Greek empire had ruled and Greek philosophy was taught and debated. That Greek philosophy was a natural cosmology, partly Aristotelian and partly atomistic materialism.

Theravāda Abhidhamma: II. Vibhaṅga: The Book of Analysis. Vb 3: Dhātuvibhaṅga, Analysis of the Elements.

The Vibhaṅga (Book of Analysis) consists of 18 chapters arranged by topic. The list of topics is closely related to the Saṃyutta Nikāya—aggregates, senses, dependent origination, etc.

Section 1. Analysis According to the Discourses.

...

These are Six Elements.

Another six elements are: The element of pleasure (bodily), element of pain (bodily), element of mental pleasure, element of mental pain, element of indifference, element of ignorance.

Therein what is the element of pleasure? That which is bodily ease; bodily pleasure; easeful pleasant experience born of bodily contact; easeful pleasant feeling born of bodily contact. This is called the element of pleasure. (1)

Therein what is the element of pain? That which is bodily uneasiness; bodily pain; uneasy painful experience born of bodily contact; uneasy painful feeling born of bodily contact. This is called the element of pain. (2)

Therein what is the element of mental pleasure? That which is mental ease; mental pleasure; easeful pleasant experience born of mental contact; easeful pleasant feeling born of mental contact. This is called the element of mental pleasure. (3)

Therein what is the element of mental pain? That which is mental uneasiness; mental pain; uneasy painful experience born of mental contact; uneasy painful feeling born of mental contact. This is called the element of mental pain. (4)

Therein what is the element of indifference? That which is neither mental ease nor uneasiness; neither painful nor pleasant experience born of mental contact; neither painful nor pleasant feeling born of mental contact. This is called the element of indifference. (5)

Therein what is the element of ignorance? That which is absence of knowledge, absence of vision, absence of understanding, absence of wakefulness, absence of enlightenment, absence of penetration, absence of comprehension, absence of scrutiny, absence of discrimination, absence of reflection, absence of perspicacity, stupidity, foolishness, absence of awareness, dullness, denseness, insensibility, ignorance, flood of ignorance, bond of ignorance, | latent ignorance, uprising ignorance; the barrier of ignorance, the bad root of dullness. This is called the element of ignorance. (6)
<https://suttacentral.net/vb3/en/thittila?>

C. The Early Mahayana Texts: The Lotus Sutra c.100-200 CE (?)

Thus I have heard, at one time the Buddha dwelt on Mount Grdhrakuta, near the City of the House of the Kings, together with a gathering of Great Bhikshus, twelve thousand in all. All were Arhats who had exhausted all outflows and had no further afflictions. Having attained self-benefit, they had exhausted the bonds of all existence and their hearts had attained self-mastery. Their names were: Ajnatakaundinya, Mahakashyapa, Uruvilvakashyapa, Gayakashyapa, Nadikashyapa, Shariputra, Great Maudgalyayana, Mahakatyayana, Aniruddha, Kapphina, Gavampati, Revata, Pilindavatsa, Vakkula, Mahakaushthila, Nanda, Sundarananda, Purnamaitreyaniputra, Subhuti, Ananda, and Rahula--and other Great Arhats such as these, whom the assembly knew and recognized. Moreover, there were those with further study and those beyond study, two thousand in all. There was the Bhikshuni Mahaprajapati with her retinue of six thousand, and Rahula's mother, Bhikshuni Yashodhara, also with her retinue.

There were eighty thousand Bodhisattvas, Mahasattvas all irreversibly established in anuttarasamyaksambodhi. All had obtained dharani and the eloquence of delight in speech and turned the irreversible wheel of the Dharma. They had made offerings to limitless hundreds of thousands of Buddhas and in the presence of those Buddhas had planted the roots of myriad virtues. They were constantly receiving those Buddhas' praise. They cultivated themselves in compassion and were well able to enter the wisdom of the Buddhas. They had penetrated the great wisdom and arrived at the other shore. Their reputations extended throughout limitless world realms, and they were able to cross over countless hundreds of thousands of living beings. Their names were: the Bodhisattva Manjushri, the Bodhisattva Who Contemplates the World's Sounds, the Bodhisattva Who Has Attained Great Might, the Bodhisattva Constant Vigor, the Bodhisattva Unresting, the Bodhisattva Jeweled Palm, the Bodhisattva Medicine King, the Bodhisattva Courageous Giving, the Bodhisattva Jeweled Moon, the Bodhisattva Moonlight, the Bodhisattva Full Moon, the Bodhisattva Great Strength, the Bodhisattva Unlimited Strength, the Bodhisattva Who Has Transcended the Three Realms, the Bodhisattva Bhadrपाला, the Bodhisattva Maitreya, the Bodhisattva Jewel Accumulation, the Bodhisattva Guiding Master--and other Bodhisattvas, Mahasattvas such as these, eighty thousand in all.

At that time, Shakra Devanam Indrah was present with his retinue of twenty thousand gods. Among them were the God Moon, the God Universal Fragrance, the God Jeweled Light, and the Four Great Heavenly Kings with their retinues, ten thousand gods in all. There was the God Comfort, and the God Great Comfort, with their retinues, thirty thousand gods in all. There was the God King Brahma, ruler of the Saha world, as well as the Great Brahma Shikhin and the Great Brahma Brilliance, and others, with their retinues, twelve thousand gods in all.

There were eight Dragon Kings: The Dragon King Nanda, the Dragon King Upananda, the Dragon King Sagara, the Dragon King Vasuki, the Dragon King Takshaka, the Dragon King Anavatapta, the Dragon King Manasvin, and the Dragon King Utpalaka, and others, each with his retinue of several hundreds of thousand followers. There were four kinnara kings: the Kinnara King Dharma, the Kinnara King Fine Dharma, the Kinnara King Great Dharma, and the Kinnara King Upholder of Dharma, each with his retinue of several hundreds of thousands of followers. There were four gandharva kings: the

Gandharva King Music, the Gandharva King Musical Sound, the Gandharva King Beautiful, and the Gandharva King Beautiful Sound, each with his following of several hundreds of thousands of followers. There were four asura kings: the Asura King Balin, the Asura King Kharaskandha, the Asura King Vemachitrin, and the Asura King Rahu, each with his retinue of several hundreds of thousands of followers. There were four garuda kings: the Garuda King Great Majesty, the Garuda King Great Body, the Garuda King Great Fullness, and the Garuda King As You Will, each with his own retinue of several hundreds of thousands of followers. There was Vaidehi's son, the King Ajatashatru, with his retinue of several hundreds of thousands of followers. Each made obeisance to the Buddha's feet, withdrew to one side and sat down.

At that time, the World Honored One, having been circumambulated by the fourfold assembly, presented with offerings, honored, venerated, and praised, for the sake of the Bodhisattvas, spoke a Great Vehicle Sutra named The Limitless Principles, a Dharma for instructing Bodhisattvas of which the Buddha is protective and mindful. After the Buddha had spoken this Sutra, he sat in full lotus and entered the samadhi of the station of limitless principles, body and mind unmoving.

At that time there fell from the heavens a rain of mandarava flowers, mahamandarava flowers, manjushaka flowers, and mahamanjushaka flowers, which were scattered upon the Buddha and the entire great assembly. All the Buddhas universes quaked in six ways.

At that time the entire great assembly of Bhikshus, Bhikshunis, Upasakas, Upasikas, gods, dragons, yakshas, gandharvas, asuras, garudas, kinnaras, mahoragas, beings human and non-human, as well as the minor kings, the wheel-turning sage kings, all attained what they had never had before. They rejoiced and joined their palms and, with one heart, gazed upon the Buddha.

Then the Buddha emitted from between his brows a white hair-mark light which illumined eighteen thousand worlds to the east, omitting none of them, reaching below to the Avichi hells and above to the Akanishtha Heaven. From this world were seen all the living beings in the six destinies in those lands. ...

<http://cttbusa.org/lotus/lotus1.asp>

Daoism and Confucianism in the Axial Age

So much about ancient Chinese philosophical thought revolves around Confucius (c.6th cent. BCE) and the literary treasures he preserved, edited, or commented on: The Five Classics and the Four Books.

The Five Classics consists of: the Book of Odes (aka Classic of Poetry/Music, *Shi Jing*); the Book of Documents (*Shūjīng* or *Shang Shu*); the Book of Changes (*I Ching* or *Yijing*/*Jijing*); the Book of Rites (*Liji*) plus Rites of Zhou (*Zhōulǐ*) and Book of Etiquette and Rites (*Yǐlǐ*); and the Spring and Autumn Annals (*Chunqiu*). The Four Books are comprised of the *Analects* (of Confucius), *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong*), *Great Learning* (*Daxue*), and *Mengzi* (by Mencius). Other texts of historical and political importance are the *Guoyu* (Discourses of the States), the *Zuo Zhuan* (Commentaries of Zuo), the *Guanzi*, and the *Huangdi sijing*.

A historical timeline (dates approximate) of important works and thinkers:

900	800	700	600	500	400	300	200
			<i>Zhōulǐ</i>		<i>Guoyu</i>		
	<i>Shang Shu</i>	<i>Liji</i>	<i>Yǐlǐ</i>		<i>Guanzi</i>		<i>Huangdi sijing</i>
		<i>Spring/Autumn Annals</i>			<i>Zuo Zhuan</i>		
<i>Shi Jing</i>			Confucius	<i>Analects</i>		<i>Zhongyong</i>	Xunxi
				<i>Daxue</i>		Mencius	
				Mozi			
<i>Zhōuyì</i> (I Ching core)			<i>I Ching</i>		<i>Dazhuan</i> (Xici wing)		
						<i>Liezi</i>	
			Laozi (?)		<i>Daodejing</i>	Zhuangzi	
						<i>Hengxian</i>	
						<i>Guodian</i>	

However, an older movement of philosophical thinking ran parallel with Confucian learning, and often intersected with it. That movement later came to be known as Daoism. The key texts and thinkers are the *I Ching* (*Jijing*) whose authors are unknown; Laozi and the *Daodejing*; the *Liezi*, and *Zhuangzi* (aka Chuang Tzu, his book bears his name). Other texts in this tradition include the *Heng Xian* 恆先 (In the Primordial State of Constancy), the unique writings with the *Guodian* collection, and portions of the *Guanzi*.

Moss Roberts, introducing his translation of the Dao De Jing, describes its contrast with the Analects of Confucius:

The Dao De Jing emphasizes the forces of nature and human interaction with them; the Analects emphasizes the social realm alone—human relationships, ethics, and political organization. The former stresses the relation of a transcendent Dao with the totality of its creation; the latter stresses hierarchical relations centering on the parent-child model and the particular obligations within clan and kingdom that are required of each person. For the former the highest authority is a maternal force that creates a gamut of ten thousand phenomena, humans but one among them; the latter honors an ancestral heaven that sanctions patriarchal dominion and elite lineage. The former idealizes the self-effacing leadership of the wise man or sage (*shengren*), who governs himself and others by keeping to the Way; the latter idealizes the superior man (*junzi*), a public role model who may advise the patriarch or even serve as a potential ruler in place of an unfit heir. As for religion in the sense of a deity interactive with humans, Laozi ascribes no consciousness to the Way, while Confucius,

committed to an exclusive focus on human relations, cautiously advises a follower to respect the gods but keep them at a distance (Analects 6.20), a judicious compromise that the Chinese have by and large adhered to over the millennia. [M. Roberts, "Introduction" to Dao De Jing (2001), p. 8-9.]

Spelling and pronunciation

Transliterating Classical Chinese (文言 wényán) has been an evolving scholarly enterprise. A typical name of an author or a book will have up to six different spellings, due to following the ancient script or its modernized Chinese script, and applying different systems for Latinizing (alphabetizing) Chinese pictographs. For example, the old Wade-Giles system has "I Ching" like 'Eye Ching' in English, but the Mandarin is Yijing with the pronunciation of 'Ee Jing' instead. The Dao De Ching has similarly distinctive spellings. The term 'dao' is the pinyin while the Wade-Giles has 'tao', so the Daodejing is the same book as the Tao Te Ching. For the names of authors, names have varied too. "Loazi" is currently preferred, but you will see Lau Tzu, Lau-tzu, and so on. When in doubt, compare the original classical Chinese characters, and a Wikipedia article for a book or author gives that— for example, 道德經 is the Tao Te Ching.

Recommended reference articles:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/chinese-change/>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/daoism/>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/laozi/>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/zhuangzi/>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/confucius/>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mencius/>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-chinese/>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/chinese-social-political/>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/comparphil-chiwes/>

Axial Phase: Daoism

The era: 800-500 BCE

The location: Central China

The sources: *I Ching, Daodejing, Zhuangzi*

The Axial innovation was the introduction of the cosmological Dao as the supreme reality and energizer of all reality.

The Dao – the Way – hardly resembles a Bronze Age deity. Daoist accounts of Dao are more like post-Axial gods as abstract conceptions lacking anthropomorphic features. The Dao is not above or beyond reality – the Dao simply is reality, but it is unrecognizable as the “ten thousand” things generated perpetually from its boundless and endless plenitude. “Beyond name and form” lies the Dao, but it is as close to you as your own body and mind, which the Dao is manifesting now along with the mountains around us and the stars above us. To think of the Dao as the primeval energy for all other particular powers and entities is a fair start, so long as the Dao is not set in the deep past – the Dao remains all that ultimately is and ever will be.

The Dao does nothing (it does not choose or strive) and yet nothing can do anything without the Dao. Aristotle’s metaphysical Prime Mover, only knowable through philosophy, has a comparable role. Yet the Dao also plays an orthological role to guide life’s purposes and ends. The Dao is the pure undivided One, from which the Two – Yin and Yang – emerge in form, and from the Two arise all else nameable in time. No gods are needed in Axial Daoism: nature’s forces and life’s energies are simply expressions of that Dao through which everything gets recycled and recast forever. To live as naturally as possible is to live wisely and healthily. Proceed against the irresistible flow of the Dao is to take an unnatural and abnormal course doomed to foolish and fruitless results. If living a religious life revolves around conformity with supreme powers providing one’s vital energies, then Daoism is religious as well as philosophical.

After 200 BCE, Daoist thought divided into various mutations, first towards organized religion (elevating Laozi to a salvific god) and then another strand went into esoteric mysticism. By 300 CE Daoism was contributing to a blend (called Ch’an) with the Mahayana Buddhism arriving from India. Folk Daoism, interested in divinations and healings, also continued on to be a feature of Chinese culture to this day.

Axial Phase Daoism pre-dated all those later developments; labelling it either as a “religion” or as a “philosophy” is anachronistic and misleading. Its early writings can be rightly classified as Sage Literature, examining cosmological principles (what is most real) and orthological tenets (what is most valuable) as guides to living the worthy life.

Daoism and Confucianism were indebted to the Book of Changes, the I Ching. Indeed, the I Ching and its cosmology infuse both philosophical traditions and most of the rest of Chinese intellectual thought besides. The core of the I Ching, dating back to the Western Zhou empire of the 800s, is called the Changes of Zhou (周易 Zhōuyì) and it served as a shamanistic divination manual. Cracks appearing in a heated turtle shell, or thrown milfoil (yarrow) stalks, make arbitrary patterns that are interpretable through the Change’s hexagram schema and each hexagram’s corresponding message.

By the 400s BCE, the Changes of Zhou was conveyed along with “wings” of commentary. Versions differ somewhat, but Confucius apparently knew of the Zhōuyì and approved its usage in judicious conformity with tradition. Many of the commentaries are attributed to Confucius, but those passages are probably not from his own hand but rather from his subsequent school. Nevertheless, Confucian approvals and reservations were serious, and reflect an abiding continuity with the general worldview that the I Ching reflects.

The fifth and sixth of the “wings” are parts one and two of the “Great Commentary” (the Xici zhuan / Dazhuan or Appended Statements). The voicing of Confucius brings up the Changes of Zhou:

Confucius said: "As for the Changes, what is it that it does? The Changes strengthens beings and fixes fate, taking pleasure in the way of all under heaven. It is like this and nothing more. This is why the sage uses it to penetrate the will of all under heaven, and uses it to penetrate [the enterprise of all under heaven, in order] to cut off the doubts of all under heaven. This is why the milfoil's virtue is round and spiritual, and the hexagrams' virtue is square and thereby knowing; the six lines' propriety is changeable and thereby accomplished. The sage uses these in order to ease his heart. Internally storing them within his enclosure, auspiciousness and inauspiciousness partake of the same wishes as the people. Being spiritual in order to know what is to come, and knowledgeable in order to lead what has gone, who would be able to act in this? Is it that of antiquity which is perceptive and illumined, keen and knowledgeable, spiritual and martial and does not worry? This is that in which it illuminates the way of heaven and examines into the reasons of the people; this is the closing of the spiritual being in order to advance the uses of the people, and the people use it.

[Shaughnessy ed, *I Ching, the Classic of Changes* (1996), p. 199.]

In another appended section of the I Ching, “The Essentials”, Confucius states his philosophical alliance with the cosmic orderliness to the Changes, while emphasizing objections against relying too much on divination and magic.

Zi Gong said: “Does the Master also believe in milfoil divination?” The Master said: “I am right in (only) seventy out of one hundred prognostications. . . . As for the *Changes*, I do indeed put its prayers and divinations last, only observing its virtue and propriety. Intuiting the commendations to reach the number, and understanding the number to reach virtue, is to have humaneness (?) and to put it into motion properly. If the commendations do not lead to the number, then one merely acts as a magician; if the number does not lead to virtue, then one merely acts as a scribe. The divinations of scribes and magicians tend toward it but are not yet there, delight in it but are not correct. Perhaps it will be because of the *Changes* that sires of later generations will doubt me. I seek its virtue and nothing more. I am on the same road as the scribes and magicians but end up differently. The conduct of the gentleman's virtue is to seek blessings; that is why he sacrifices, but little; the righteousness of his humaneness is to seek auspiciousness; that is why he divines, but rarely. Do not the divinations of priests and magicians come last!”

[Shaughnessy ed, *I Ching, the Classic of Changes* (1996), p. 240]

The Great Commentary begins without an identified author (like most of the text besides Confucian passages) but with an evident Daoist message. A few paragraphs into this section, we read:

The Changes is compliant with heaven and earth. Therefore, it is able completely to assay the way of all under heaven. Looking up to observe the heavenly markings, and looking down to observe the patterns of the earth, this is why it knows the reasons for dark and light. Observing the beginning and reverting to the end, therefore it knows the explanations of death and life. Seminal fluids and vapor make up beings and wandering souls make up alternations; therefore it knows the seminal shape of ghosts and spirits. Compared together with heaven and earth, therefore it is not deflected. Knowing universally among the ten-thousand beings, the Way is equal with all under heaven; therefore, it does not go too far. Walking squarely without leaving anything out, delighting in heaven and knowing fate, therefore it is not worried. Being content with the earth and sincere in humaneness, therefore it is able to love. [p. 191]

The Dao itself makes an appearance in the I Ching, endorsed by Confucius (or his later school).

Confucius said: "How perfect the Changes is! The Changes is the virtue that the sage esteems and the enterprise he broadens. Knowing the esteemed and embodying the base, the esteemed emulates heaven and the base imitates earth. Heaven and earth construct positions, and the Changes moves in their midst. Completing the inborn nature and maintaining it so, is the gate of the Way's (dao) propriety."

[p. 193]

The text condensing speculations about the cosmological Dao is the *Dao De Jing*. Although its putative author Laozi may have never existed, or only composed a portion of the full text, its growing impact could not have been ignored by Confucius during his lifetime. The *Dao De Jing* makes no mention of Confucius or Confucian ideas, although some passages can be interpreted as offering a contrary position to Confucian principles. The author Zhuangzi and his text (only the "Inner Chapters" 1–7 might be from him directly) examine and argue about Confucian ideas, and even put words into the mouth of the figures of Confucius and Laozi (aka Lao Dan) centuries after their demises. Conversations between Confucius and Laozi in the *Zhuangzi* are imaginary, but tradition held that they at least knew each other.

During 500-200 BCE Daoists accumulated their philosophical wisdom under the cover of their founding book, the *Dao De Jing*, attributed to their "Old Master", the philosophical sage Laozi. This finalized work looked like a philosophical treatise by around 300 BCE, but Laozi himself was no academic philosopher.

Laozi: the *Dao De Jing*

There was something undifferentiated and yet complete,
Born before Heaven and Earth, Soundless and formless,
Independent and unchanging. Revolving endlessly,
It may be thought of as the Mother of all under Heaven.
I do not know its name; So I just call it Dao, And arbitrarily name it Great.
To be Great means to move on and on;
To move on and on means to go far and wide;
To go far and wide means to return.
Thus, Dao is great; Heaven is great; Earth is great; Man is also great.
The universe has four great ones, And Man is one of them.
Man follows the ways of Earth; Earth follows the ways of Heaven;
Heaven follows the ways of Dao; Dao follows its own ways.
[Daodejing 24 in *Thus Spoke Laozi*, trans. C.Q. Wu (Hawaii, 2016), pp. 57-8.]

Another translation of the same stanza serves to illustrate the elusiveness of the Dao.

Manifesting material in form unshaped, Born before heaven and earth themselves,
Unseen, unheard, above, apart, Standing alone ever true to itself,
Swinging in cycles that never fail, Mother of heaven and earth, it seems,
But I know not how to give it names. Pressed, I shall dub it the moving Way,
Or call it by name the all-supreme, All-supreme and passing-beyond,
Passing-beyond and reaching-far, Reaching-far and reverting-back.
Indeed the Way is all-supreme, And heaven too, and earth, and man—
The four things in this world supreme, And among them one is man,
Who is bound to follow the rule of earth, As earth must follow heaven's rule,
And heaven the rule of the Way itself; And the moving Way is following

The self-momentum of all becoming.

[Dao De Jing, trans. M. Roberts (UC Press, 2001), stanza 25, p. 72.]

The Daoist Zhuangzi (fl. 320 BCE) and his students compiled teachings collected under his name, during the same era as Lao Tzu. Zhuangzi is surely philosophical, and one section of cosmogony approaches the philosophical cosmology of the Dao De Ching, but through a more mystical route.

The Master said: The Way covers and bears up the ten thousand things—vast, vast is its greatness! The gentleman must pluck out his mind! To act through inaction is called Heaven. To speak through inaction is called Virtue. To love men and bring profit to things is called benevolence. ...

In the Great Beginning, there was nonbeing; there was no being, no name. Out of it arose One; there was One, but it had no form. Things got hold of it and it came to life, and it was called Virtue. Before things had forms, they had their allotments; these were of many kinds but not cut off from one another, and they were called fates. Out of the flow and flux, things were born, and as they grew, they developed distinctive shapes; these were called forms. The forms and bodies held within them spirits, each with its own characteristics and limitations, and this was called the inborn nature. If the nature is trained, you may return to Virtue, and Virtue at its highest peak is identical with the Beginning. Being identical, you will be empty; being empty, you will be great.

[*The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, trans. B. Watson, pp. 88-89.]

The Hengxian 恆先 (Primordial State of Constancy) is a bamboo-strip text dating from around 300 BCE. Its Daoist views are expressed in this manner:

In the primordial state of Constancy, there is no material existence. There is simplicity, stillness, and emptiness. Simplicity is Great Simplicity; stillness is Great Stillness; emptiness is Great Emptiness. It fulfills itself without repressing itself. Space arises. Once there is space, there is qi; once there is qi, there is material existence; once there is material existence, there is a beginning; once there is a beginning, there is the passage of time. There is not yet Heaven and Earth; there is not yet arising, progression, emergence, or engendering. Empty, still, and as though one. Muddled and murky! All is still and homogeneous. There is not yet light, not yet teeming life.

Qi is self-generating; Constancy categorically does not engender qi. Qi is self-generating and self-arising. The engendering of Constant Qi does not happen in isolation; there is something that takes part [in the process]. Space and Constancy are present. The same can be said of the process during which space is engendered. Dusky and disquiet, seeking that which engenders them: difference engenders difference, returning engenders returning, divergence engenders opposition, opposition engenders divergence, and dependence engenders dependence. [Things] seek, desiring to reproduce of their own accord. Reproduction is the process of engendering life. Turbid qi engenders Earth; clear qi engenders Heaven. Qi is truly numinous! [Things] proliferate and engender each other, stretching to fill Heaven and Earth.

[E. Brindley et al, "A Philosophical Translation of the Heng Xian" *Dao* 12 (2013), pp. 146-7.]

The Guanzi has a "Neiye" chapter that is among the earliest writing that describes meditation techniques from the Daoist tradition. Verse 24:

When you enlarge your mind and let go of it,
When you relax your [qi 氣] vital breath and expand it,
When your body is calm and unmoving:
And you can maintain the One and discard the myriad disturbances.
You will see profit and not be enticed by it,
You will see harm and not be frightened by it.

Relaxed and unwound, yet acutely sensitive,
In solitude you delight in your own person.
This is called "revolving the vital breath":
Your thoughts and deeds seem heavenly.

[trans. Harold Roth, *Original Tao: Inward Training (nei-yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism* (Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 92.]

Axial Phase: Confucianism

The era: 500-300 BCE

The location: Northern China

The sources: Confucius's *Analects*, *Zhongyong* (Doctrine of the Mean), *Daxue* (Great Learning), Mencius, Xunxi

The Axial innovation was the introduction of the orthological ideal of Ren (benevolence, humaneness) as the supreme standard of conduct and culture.

The Chinese term Ru (儒 'ritual expertise') predates Confucius (c.551-479 BCE), who recommended a strict way of life replete with ritualistic propriety conducted with reverence (*jing* 敬). For Confucius and his legacy school of adepts in the Five Classics, known as "Ru-ists" rather than Confucians (a later label), Ru maintains the basic interpersonal relationships that in turn make all social institutions possible and beneficial. Virtuous conduct accordingly fulfils benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), ritual propriety (*li* 禮), wisdom (*zhi* 智), and trustworthiness (*xin* 信). The wisest and most social kind of life imitates the exemplary figures of China's past golden age, when all was in discipline and orderliness. If living a religious life revolves around conformity with sacred values ensuring one's genuine humanity, then Confucianism is *religious* as well as philosophical, without instituting an organized *religion*.

Although that ideal "Confucian Sage" has been revered like figures of China's mythic past, Confucius himself was never divinized and worshipped. Unearthly destinations or rewards were never among Confucius's promises: to live out a righteously fulfilled life should be reward enough for anyone.

Myth was never just mythology for the Chinese mind. The molded memory of the early kingdoms in China have resounded down the millennia for all Chinese thinkers and leaders.

c2100–1600 BCE	c1600–1046 BCE	1046	————— —————	256 BCE	221–206 BCE	206 BCE–220CE
Xia (Hsia) Dynasty	Shang Dynasty	Zhou ('joe') Dynasty Western & Eastern Western Zhou (1046-771 BCE) Eastern Zhou (771-256 BCE) Spring-Autumn era (770-475 BCE) Warring States era (475-221 BCE)			Qin ('chin')	Han Dynasty

The Xia period and earlier times are almost entirely legendary. The Emperors and Kings of that prehistoric era who appear in later Shang and Zhou literature were at best dimly-recalled heroic figures shrouded in myth. Archaeology in China has constructed its own timeline of Stone Age and Bronze age developments on and around the Yellow and Yangzi river systems.

Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors are attributed to pre-Xia and Xia eras. Some are credited with inventing culture and technology; they all exemplify extraordinary to supernatural abilities. Lists vary, but The Yellow Emperor appears on all of them, and this legendary figure enjoyed reverential and authoritative status for exemplary wisdom and leadership. What they have in common is their role as founding ancestors of major clans and peoples of China's regions, who were elevated to an immortal celestial rank. The Celestial Ancestral Emperors are the central cast of characters constituting "Tiān" 天 or Heaven.

Translating Tian as 'Heaven' is quite misleading, but that nineteenth century European convention has stuck. The ancient Chinese Tian never was the destination for departed souls of ordinary people, and it was not

located outside the cosmos. It was the celestial (literally in the skies with the stars) realm of the world above the earthly realm. Only revered ancestors maintained their spiritual abode there, to statically exemplify moral and political ideals. The notion that ancestors of Tian maintain their own minds and thoughts, or lived spiritually blissful lives, could not have entered the ancient Chinese imagination. They are not anything like souls or ghosts. The Chinese peoples have always harbored beliefs about ghosts, but ghosts are down here on earth, and no ghost could get to heaven.

The earliest recorded name for a God was 'Di' 帝 who had that vaguely primordial responsibility for the world which was typical for a Neolithic deity around the world. During the Shang dynasty, this deity was called "Shang-Di" in order to elevate the Shang clan over all of China with divine approval – labeled as ruling with "The Mandate of Heaven."

The supreme ancestral deities remained the heads of their clans and states, and their approval or disapproval could not be disregarded by wise rulers. Scholar Li Zehou recounts the late Bronze Age religion of China:

From the earliest times to the Shang (ca. 1600 BCE–ca. 1046 BCE) and Zhou (ca. 1046 BCE–256 BCE) dynasties, ancestor worship was integrated with worship of Shangdi 上帝 (High God). Although the accounts given by historians regarding the relationship between a supreme spirit and ancestral spirits vary, and despite the variety of forms which such integration took, the close relation of the two is accepted by almost all scholars. For example, Wang Guowei sees Di Ku 帝嚳 as the progenitor of the Shang dynasty, who was "the Di 帝 (High God) from which the Shang people arose, so the Shang people made the di 禘 sacrifice to him." Guo Moruo states, "The 'Di' 帝 in [Shang] oracle inscriptions was the great ancestor Nao 夔"; "The supreme god 'Di' was also their progenitor at the same time." ... Xu Fuguan tells us, "The religiousness of the Shang people was dominated principally by ancestor spirits. The people's relationship with the High God was mediated by these ancestors. This was also the situation of the people of the Zhou dynasty." Zhang Guangzhi believes the character shang 商 itself connotes ancestor worship, because "in the worldview of the Shang people, the distinction between the world of divine spirits and that of their ancestors was so minimal as to be inconsequential." Many other scholars hold similar views. When alive, ancestors were people, and once dead they became spirits, or half divine and still living in a sense. Alive or dead, these ancestors (primarily the ancestors of clan leaders) protected the clan-state and helped safeguard the survival of the clan, tribe, or state. Here we find a direct link between human and deity, our world and the divine world, human achievement and the work of the spirits, which were mutually affective and unified into a single body. The Record of Rites (Liji 禮記) tells us, "When King Wen made sacrifices, his serving the dead was equivalent to serving the living." [Li Zehou, *The Origins of Chinese Thought*, pp. 13-14.]

What was the relationship between Tian and Shang-Di? Equating the two was the smart political tactic, which pragmatically satisfied that Zhou era. The theological question – whether the celestial realm harbors a Supreme God in addition to the Celestial Ancestry – was never intellectually settled in Chinese thought. The entire issue was always political – whoever is credited with ruling in Tian bestows political legitimacy on that figure's descendent clan trying to rule a kingdom or whole empire of China.

Peimin Ni explains:

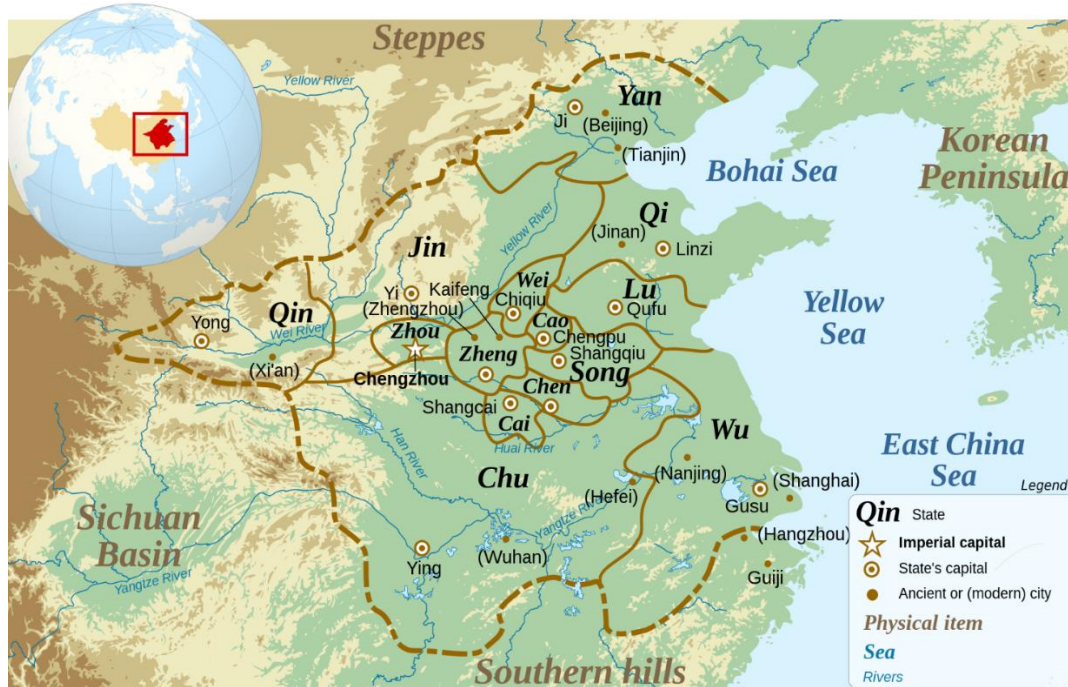
"Tian is a notion that Confucius' early Zhou predecessors used to replace and to depersonalize the Shang dynasty notion of Shang Di 上帝, "Lord-on-High." There are important differences between the Judeo-Christian notion of God and the Shang notion of Shang Di. While God is the creator of the universe, Shang Di is not. God is a transcendental deity, but Shang Di is an anthropomorphic extension

of ancestral veneration, which should be more appropriately rendered as “supreme ancestral emperor.”

[P. Ni, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius* (2017), p. 41.]

Early Daoism mostly stayed out of that political debate and taught that the supreme Dao impersonally ordered everything with impartiality. Any authority had better focus on ruling in accord with natural Dao. Confucianism generally agreed, allowing that Tian was more like a ideal model than a divine dictator. By the Han era, syncretic convergences among cosmological schemes was the vogue among literati, as the “Heavenly Ruling Highest Deity” 皇天上帝 (Huángtiān Shàngdì) was merged with the Jade Emperor of Taoism.

China during the times of Confucius



Key passages of the Analects

4.2. The Master said, “Those who are not human-hearted (*ren*) can neither stay long in privation nor stay long in enjoyment. Those who are human-hearted are at ease in human-heartedness, and those who are wise profit from human-heartedness.”

4.3. The Master said, “It is only the human-hearted who are capable of loving people and capable of loathing people.”

4.4. The Master said, “Once aspired after human-heartedness (*ren*), you will be free from mean conduct.”

4.5. The Master said, “Wealth and prestige are what people desire. If they are not obtained in the proper way, they should not be held. Poverty and low status are what people dislike. If they are not avoided in the proper way, they should not be avoided. If exemplary persons abandon human-heartedness, how can they deserve that name? Exemplary persons do not, even for the space of a single meal, go against human-heartedness. In moments of haste, they are with it. In times of distress, they are with it.”

4.8. The Master said, “Having heard of the Way (*dao*) in the morning, I can die in the evening.”

4.11. The Master said, “Exemplary persons cherish virtue; petty persons cherish land. Exemplary persons cherish a role model; petty persons cherish favor.”

4.12. The Master said, “Acting solely in pursuit of profit will incur loads of misgivings.”

4.16. The Master said, “Exemplary persons are persuaded by what is right; petty persons are persuaded by what is profitable.”

6.19. The Master said, “Humans will live when they are upright (*zhi*). Surviving without uprightness is sheer luck.”

6.22. Fan Chi asked about being wise. The Master said, “To devote oneself to what is right for the people, and to respect ghosts (*gui*, *ancestors*) and spirits (*shen*) while keeping a distance from them. This may be called wise.” He asked about human-heartedness. The Master said, “The human-hearted person reaps success only after overcoming difficulties. This may be called human-hearted.”

7.6. The Master said, “To aspire after the Way (*dao*), hold firm to virtue (*de*), lean upon human-heartedness (*ren*), and wander in the arts (*yi*).”

7.25. The Master taught with four things: culture (*wen* 文), conduct (*xing* 行), wholehearted devotion, and trustworthiness.

9.4. The Master stayed clear from four things: No conjecture (*yi*), no demand for absoluteness, no inflexibility, and no self-absorption.

11.12. Jilu asked about serving spirits. The Master said, “Without being able to serve people, how can you serve supernatural beings?” “I venture to ask about death?” The Master said, “Without understanding (*zhi*) life, how can you understand death?”

12.1. Yan Yuan asked about human-heartedness. The Master said, “To restrain oneself and return to ritual propriety is to be human-hearted. A day when restraining oneself and returning to ritual propriety is practiced, all under heaven will bend toward human-heartedness. To be human-hearted is dependent on oneself. How can it be dependent on others?”

12.2. Zhonggong asked about human-heartedness. The Master said, “When you go out, behave as if you were going to greet a great guest; when you employ people, do it as if you were conducting a great sacrifice; do not impose on others what you would not wish for yourself. You will have no resentment either in the state or in the family.”

12.4. Sima Niu asked about being an exemplary person. The Master said, “An exemplary person is free from anxiety and fear.” Sima Niu said, “Being free from anxiety and fear—does this constitute an exemplary person?” The Master said, “If upon internal reflection you find nothing to regret, what is there to be anxious about or to be afraid of?”

12.19. Ji Kangzi asked Confucius about governing, saying, “How about I kill those who disregard the Way so as to get close to those who are with the Way?” Confucius replied, “Sir, in governing, what is the need for killing? If you aspire to what is good, the common people will be good. The virtue of those in high stations (*junzi*) is like the wind, and the virtue of the common people (*xiaoren*) is like the grass. The grass will surely bend when the wind blows across it.”

12.22. Fan Chi asked about human-heartedness. The Master said, “It is to love people.” He asked about being wise. The Master said, “It is to know people.” Fan Chi did not immediately understand. The Master said, “Hold the upright against the crooked, one can make the crooked upright.”

13.11. The Master said, “‘If excellent persons (*shanren*) were to govern a country in succession for a hundred years, they would be able to overcome brutality and dispense with capital punishments.’ True indeed is this saying!”

15.6. Zizhang asked about effective conduct, the Master said, “If your words are wholehearted and trustworthy and your actions earnest and respectful, even in the barbarian states of Man and Mo your conduct will be effective. If your words are not wholehearted and trustworthy, and your actions are not earnest and respectful, even in your native place can your conduct be effective? When standing, visualize those two things as if they were in front of you; when riding, visualize them as if they were attached to the yoke. Then your conduct will be effective.”

15.24. Zigong asked, “Is there a single word that may serve as guidance for practice during one’s entire life?” The Master said, “Is not reciprocity (*shu*) such a word? Do not impose on others what you would not wish for yourself.”

17.8. The Master said, “You have you heard the six terms and their six latent flaws?” Zilu replied, “I have not yet.” “Sit down, and let me tell you. The latent flaw in being fond of human-heartedness without being fond of learning is that it leads to foolishness. The latent flaw in being fond of wisdom (*zhi*) without being fond of learning is that it leads to dissipation. The latent flaw in being fond of trustworthiness (*xin*) without being fond of learning is that it leads to harm’s way. The latent flaw in being fond of uprightness without being fond of learning is that it leads to bluntness. The latent flaw in being fond of courage (*yong*) without being fond of learning is that it leads to disruptiveness. The latent flaw in being fond of steadfastness (*gang*) without being fond of learning is that it leads to recklessness.”

17.19. The Master said, “I wish to say nothing.” Zigong said, “If you, Master, do not speak, what shall we disciples have to implement?” The Master said, “Does heaven (*tian*) say anything? Yet the four seasons rotate, and hundreds of things grow. Does heaven say anything?”

[P. Ni, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius* (2017).]

China scholar Tao Jiang recounts the abiding impact of Confucian philosophy:

“The clearest expression of the partialist humaneness in the classical context was the famous Confucian moral-political paradigm, known as the cultivation-regulation-governance-pacification (*xiu qi zhi ping* 修齊治平, hereafter *XQZP*) model, most succinctly articulated in the *Great Learning* (*daxue* 大學). The *XQZP* model integrates the personal, the familial, and the political domains through cultivating one’s personal virtues (*xiushen* 修身), regulating the family/ kin (*qijia* 齊家), governing a (feudal) state (*zhiguo* 治國), and bringing peace to all under the Heaven (*ping tianxia* 平天下). In fact, the classical moral-political debate can well be seen as a series of efforts to defend, modify, critique, or repudiate this *XQZP* ideal, even among the Confucians themselves, with thinkers lining up differently in their efforts to engage various aspects of this moral-political model. The *XQZP* ideal is based on two premises, both of which were challenged during the classical period. First, politics is grounded in or derived from moral virtues of political actors. Second, *XQZP* is extensionist in nature, operating on the assumption of a seamless continuum between the personal, the familial, and the political domains. ... [Hence] the classical moral-political debate wherein ancient Chinese philosophers examined all of the constitutive parts and their relationships in the *XQZP* ideal. ... the operating moral principle in this Confucian moral-political model, in its attempts to accommodate the familial/private and the political/ public domains, is humaneness that is partialist in its orientation.”

[Jiang, *Origins of Moral-Political Philosophy in Early China* (2021), p. 37.]

As the Warring States period worsened during the 300s BCE with widespread disorder and war, the Ru school of Confucian scholars and officials openly expressed suspicion towards traditional superstition and religion.

The Confucian philosopher Xunzi (fl.300 BCE) expressed that empowered philosophical sensibility:

Rescuing the sun or moon from eclipse, praying [for rain] in time of drought, deciding great affairs only after reading cracks and casting stalks are not because one expects to get what he asks, but to manifest refined culture (*wen*). Hence, superior men consider these as refined culture, while the people consider these as dealing with deities. To consider them refined culture is auspicious, to consider them as dealing with deities is baleful.

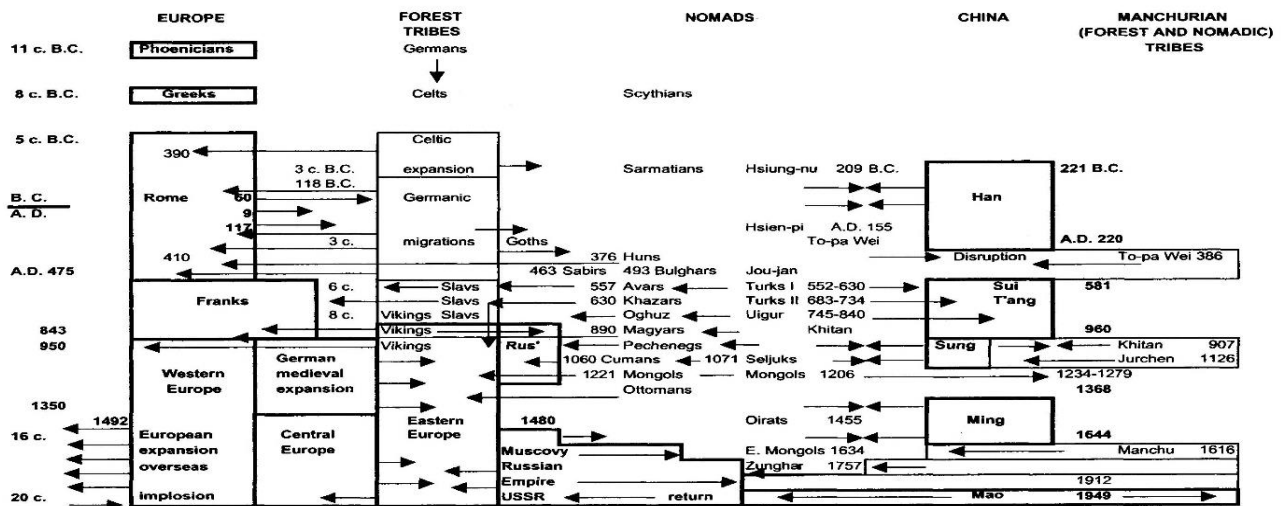
[Xunzi quoted in Pines, *Foundations of Confucian Thought*, p. 55.]

Axial Phase: Divine Despotism and Romantic Individualism

During 1100-600 BCE, as the Iron Age was revolutionizing culture and politics everywhere it spread, the vast Euro-Asia Steppe was undergoing deep cultural changes. From the Rhine River in Central Europe to the Argun River north of China, a five thousand mile span from Hungary to Manchuria, the Bronze Age life of pastoral herding and small-scale farming underwent dramatic shocks and transformations. Instabilities opened up opportunities. As the Mycenaean, Anatolian, Iranian, Transoxanian, and Chinese civilizations splintered from successive Bronze Age collapses, their cultural and political influence diminished. Fresh cultural energies were also being released in Western and northern Europe. From 800 to 400 BCE, migrating tribes across Europe to the west and throughout Central Asia to the east were enriching their cultures and expanding their territories. Their Axial Phases were as completely contrary as two worldviews could be. To the west, the world-system of *Romantic Individualism* took root. To the east, the world-system of *Divine Despotism* raised empires.

Greek, Thracian, Celtic, Scandinavian, Germanic, Caucasian, Pontic, Kazakh, and Mongolian peoples sustained myths dating back to this turbulent Iron Age period. The bard retelling the shining tales of legendary heroism displaced and eventually replaced the shaman's murky incantations. Bronze Age pantheons based on genealogies of the gods went out of fashion, reduced down to theatrical roles or figures cut for ribald ridicule. Humans were taking lead roles in both of these Axial phases. Great kings and mighty heroes were lifted up to demi-god status, displaying supra-human wisdom and heaven-sent authority. Their divergent directions, geographically and ideologically, West and East, are an essential part of the Axial story.

Table 1.1 Migrations and Conquests in Eurasia



Key to Table 1.1

- Bold lines indicate areas of high civilization (e.g., Greeks)
- Thin lines indicate forest tribes (e.g., Celts)
- The names of nomadic tribes are not boxed (e.g., Scythians)
- Tribes that have been nomadic and forest appear in both categories (e.g., To-pa Wei)

Source: Bell-Fialkoff ed, *The Role of Migration in the History of the Eurasian Steppe* (2000), p. 5.

The Romans would come to know better about both of these cultural worldviews by 300s–400s CE. Germanic tribes of the Goths and Vandals migrating down from the north, and the invasions of the Huns from the East, fractured the Roman Empire towards its collapse. These two regions continued to exert profound impacts upon Europe. During its Dark Ages and Medieval Era, the Vikings of the Scandinavian north, and the Nomads from the Steppe east, almost overwhelmed Latin Christendom of Western Europe.

Axial Phase: Divine Despotism

The era: 800-500 BCE

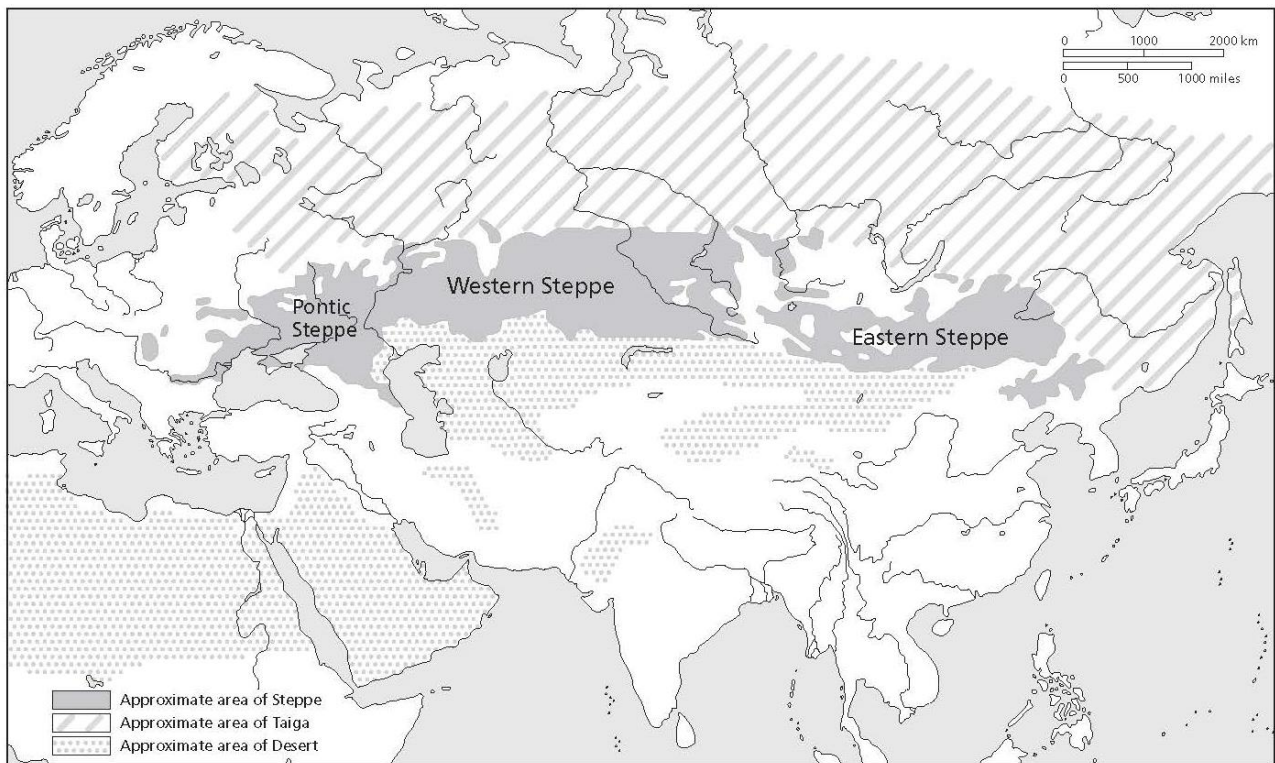
The location: Central Asia

The sources: Scythian, Khorāsān, Xiongnu, Hun, Avar, and Mongolian mythology.

The Bronze Age Collapse c.1200 BCE had spread northward from Aegean Greece, depopulating villages and dispersing trade networks across Thrace and Carpathia. These regions rebounded quickly as the early Iron Age rapidly gained momentum on the Central Asia steppe. The transition to ironworking and iron implements accelerated after 800 BCE, radiating from the Ural Mountains. Innovations allowing horse-mounted archery also changed the military field, outpacing and out-performing the Bronze Age chariot. The Cimmerian culture to the north and east of the Black Sea was on the move by 700 BCE. Migratory and military pressures from the eastern steppe were arriving from migrating Scythian tribes. Although these cultures were ethnically related, this Scythian disruption and domination over Black Sea and Caspian Sea regions had a quite different character. Cimmerians had to move south, disrupting Anatolian and Mesopotamian kingdoms, and eventually absorbing into those populations. The Scythians retained their pastoral nomadic ways for many centuries to roam the great grassland steppes and occasionally invade neighboring lands for plunder and profit. The neighboring tribes of the Sarmatians were moving to the west within a couple of centuries, crowding the Pontic steppe. Within a few centuries they too would be displaced by newly arriving nomads from the east who were known to terrified European nations as the Huns.



That Scythian capacity for tightly organized militarism, able to quickly assemble empires spanning a thousand miles or an entire continent, indicates that a civilizational and Axial innovation had emerged. They intensified their avaricious nomadism and aristocratic militarism with a mythic structure featuring *divine despotism*. Rightful domination over dutiful subjects, earned through victories in rampaging battle, maintains strict order here on earth in the name of heaven. The heritage of divine despotism survived the longest with the “hordes” of the Huns, the Avars, and then the Mongolian empire that lasted until the 1300s CE.



Source: Neumann and Wigen, *The Steppe Tradition in International Relations: Russians, Turks and European State Building 4000 BCE–2017CE* (2018), p. xv.

Across thousands of miles of Steppe they were given various names by incredulous ancient historians who tried to chronicle their rapid and repeated incursions into sedentary civilizations. A generic label of the “Scythians” (in the Greek language) or the “Sakas” (the name by the ancient Iranian language) for these Central Asians explains little about them, as does the names of “Sarmatians” or “Massagetae”, but these are western labels for little-understood nomadic peoples. In eastern Asia, Chinese chroniclers variously labeled nomadic tribes on their northern borders as the “Hu”, the “Rong”, the “Dong hu,” the “Yuezhi,” and then the “Xiongnu” (Hsiung-nu), in trepidation over their predatory invasions into China.

Ancient Greek, Roman, and Chinese historians during 400-100 BCE included accounts of notable nomadic tribes that began to appear on the fringes of civilization several centuries before their own times. Today’s historians of Central Asia similarly point to the 800s–600s BCE as the pivot period towards militaristic marauding.

The brief period of two centuries, from the mid ninth to the mid seventh century, saw a dramatic transformation in steppe society. At the beginning of the period a patchwork of different communities, culturally rooted in their traditional territories, characterized the vast steppe corridor. ... All these communities are historically anonymous, known only by the names ascribed to them by archaeologists. By the end of the period the archaeological evidence suggests that bands of predatory horsemen were ranging widely over considerable areas. Historical texts speak of Kimmerians on the Pontic steppe with Scythians thundering in from Central Asia to oust the Kimmerians from their homeland and to rampage through Asia Minor. [Barry Cunliffe, *The Scythians* (2019), p. 85]

Another historian of the Steppe notes this same critical time period:

Many areas of the Central Eurasian steppes – with the notable exception of the Mongolian plateau – saw between the turn of the 9th to the 8th and the 7th to the 6th century BCE (at the very latest) the emergence of powerful elites, cultivating a military lifestyle materialized in a distinctive repertoire of horse gear and weapons, and expressing their worldview in a distinctive artistic language (the so-called Scytho-Siberian animal style). ...

Paleoclimatic and archaeological materials show signs of crisis for many Scythoid cultures in Eastern Eurasia during the 3rd century BCE. Finally, in the last decades of this century, socio-political processes took place in the Mongolian steppes that had fundamental repercussions for the further course of history in Central Asia and far beyond: the formation of the first 'steppe empire' centred around a group of tribes referred to by Chinese court historians as Xiongnu.

[Stark, "Central Asia and the Steppe" (2020), p. 81, 85.]

By the 500s BCE, every steppe and arid region across Central and Inner Eurasia, including Mongolia and Manchuria, had developed towards that nomadic culture and warrior organization.

The first historical steppe nomads, the Scythians, inhabited the steppe north of the Black Sea from about the eighth century B.C. Pastoral nomadism was their main economic activity, and their society was ruled by a class of mounted warriors, who in Herodotus's *Histories* are called Royal Scythians. Below this aristocracy were other groups, such as the "agricultural," "nomadic," and "free" Scythians. Archaeologically, early nomadic cultures close to the Scythian, characterized by "specific equestrian armaments, horse trappings and the Animal Style," became dominant throughout the steppe region of Central Asia in the first half of the first millennium B.C. In the northern area of the eastern steppe, which includes South Siberia, the Altai region, Mongolia, and Transbaikalia, evidence suggests that the early nomadic phase may have started as early as the eighth century B.C.

[N. Di Cosmo, "The Northern Frontier in Pre-Imperial China" (1999), p. 924-5.]

Herodotus (c.400s BCE) in his *History of the Persian Wars* relayed what he could gather about these swiftly mobile warrior tribes causing havoc on the borderlands. The Chinese historian Sima Qian (c.100 BCE) and his *Shi ji* (Records of the Grand Historian) included a chapter about the Xiongnu nomads capable of building an empire on the edge of China.

As children they are able to ride sheep, and can shoot birds and mice with bow and arrow. As they grow a little older, they can shoot foxes and hares, which they use for food. Thus as adults they are strong enough to bend a bow, and all can serve as cavalry soldiers. It is their custom to make their living in times of peace by herding the domestic animals and hunting the wild ones, but in critical situations everyone practices military skills in order to set off on raids. This is their inborn nature. ...

During a battle, if this is going well for them, they will advance, otherwise they will retreat. They do not regard running away as something shameful; they only care about li (profit) and do not know of li (propriety) and yi (righteousness) ... When they fight in battle, those who have cut [enemy] heads or captured prisoners are presented with a cup of wine, and all the booty they have taken is also given to them; the people they capture are made into slaves. Therefore, in battle each man pursues his own gain.

(Sima Qian, quoted in N. Di Cosmo, "Ethnography of the Nomads and Barbarian History in Han China" (2010), p. 311, 312.)

Journeying across hundreds or thousands of miles for these horse-mounted and wagoned peoples was a way of life. Inter-tribal relations, intermarriages, and militaristic alliances kept these Central Asian peoples related genetically, integrated culturally, and federated politically.

It is unnecessary, for example, to try to identify the Huns on the Danube River in Europe with the Xiongnu (Hsiung-nu) of Mongolia. They both descended and diverged from the same Central Asian population stretching from Ukraine to Manchuria. After the collapse of the Xiongnu empire in the 200s CE, scattering tribes shifted westward, displacing and intermingling with western steppe tribes whose momentum then brought them to the Pontic region. Not coincidentally, that Pontic area between the Urals and the Black Sea had been the homeland of the Huns, who then smashed westwards during the 400s into Thrace, Hungary, Austria, and Poland.

Scythians in the Western Steppe

The early historians in the West, such as Herodotus, relate few details about the Scythian culture and religion, but their general accounts are roughly similar. They claim descent from a watery goddess and a paternal sky god, much like a Zeus or an Indra, as would be expected from earlier peoples living on the steppe during the Bronze Age. They perform sacrifices to their god of War with the fires of a great hearth, and accordingly also have a Fire god or goddess (akin to Agni of the Vedic Aryans). Shamanistic priests performed divinations for royalty who claimed to rule rightly by divine guidance.

The Scythians also share a specific mythic trope, about the right of the third son to inherit a kingship instead of his older brothers, who instead had to battle their way to enlarging tribal territory. [See Barry Cunliffe, *The Scythians: Nomad Warriors of the Steppe* (2019), chap. 10.] Another Scythian people, the Samartians (or 'Sauromatians' in Greek spelling) who arrive on the stage around 600 BCE had similar religious myths. That same preference for a younger brother (instead of primogeniture) characterized the eastern nomadic tribes as well, such as the Xiongnu.

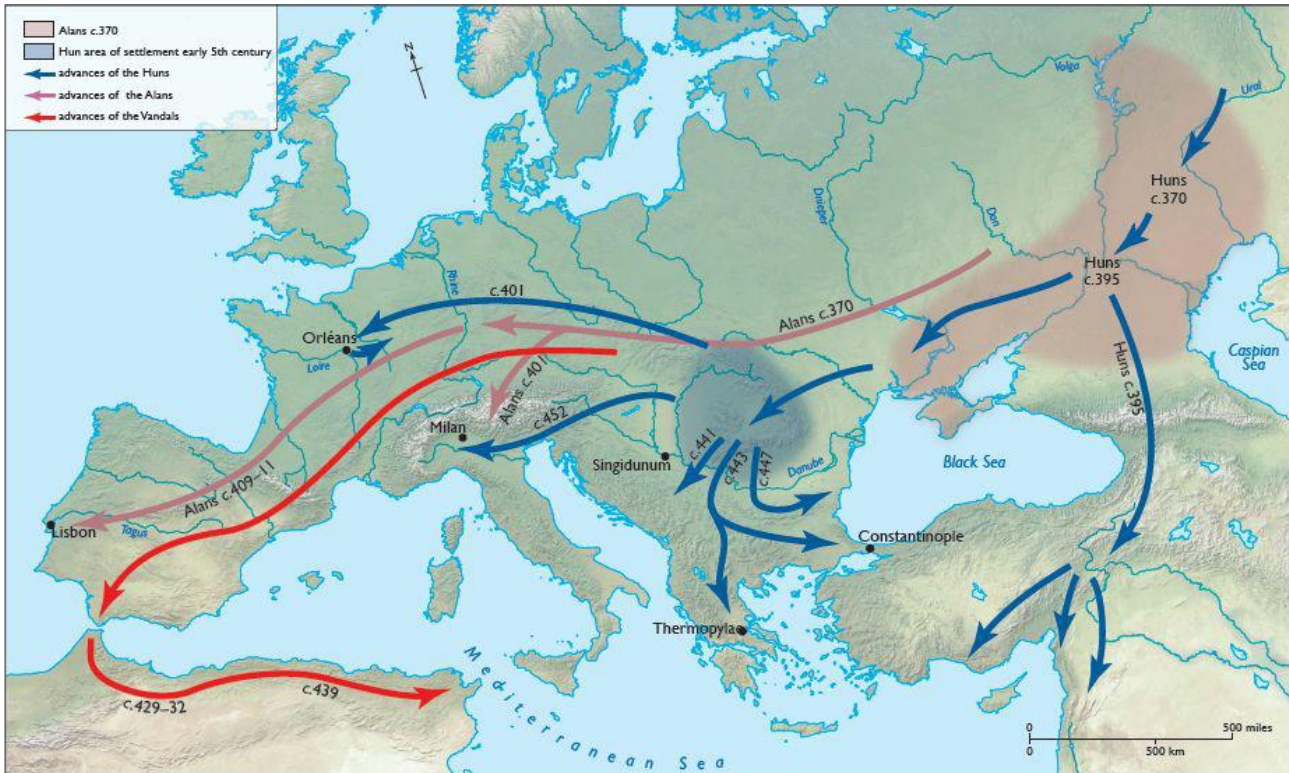
The resulting political structure for these Steppe nomads was highly stratified, with a divinely-approved ruler holding total power and undiluted authority. A single clan with its male head, having proven its wartime valor, wielded militaristic command over any other populations that it could conquer. This type of command went far beyond any tribalistic chieftdom typical for the Stone and Bronze Ages. The early Iron Age bestowed upon the Steppe nomads a prime opportunity for Axial innovation, for both militaristic and religio-political organization. The dominance of the chariot in battle was coming to an end, overpowered by mounted hordes with the fastest horses and the deadliest spears and arrows. The Scythians had invented the saddle, and then Sarmatians added stirrups. The extraordinary ability of a mounted horseman with an improved strong bow to shoot iron-tipped arrows accurately in most any direction was no myth.

The western Scythians-Sarmatians spoke an Indo-Iranian language, but that name of its Sky God is unknown; only the Greek label of Papaïos (something like 'Lord Father') was recorded. Later nomadic empires were led by militaristic despots who claimed descent from god. The upstart Parthians who conquered Iran in the 200s BCE used coins minted with their king's head and the words "of divine descent, whose father is a god".

The Inner Asian nature of the Parthian state becomes even clearer when we examine the ways in which the empire was governed. First of all, as among other steppe peoples, we find among the Parthians the notion of the divine charisma of the ruling dynasty, which endows it with the unique right to allocate power to subordinate rulers. The Arsacid 'Great King' is represented in Parthian iconography as the mediator between the gods and his vassal kings. [Kim, *The Huns, Rome and the Birth of Europe* (2013), p. 13.]

When the eastern steppe nomads moved into the western steppe during 200-400 CE, their Turkic language included a name for this sky deity: Gök (kök) Tanrı or Gok-Tengri, which meant "Blue Sky God". This Tengri was the eternal father of the tribal ruler and his clan.

One branch of this steppe people who moved towards Europe were known as the Huns, and their fearsome leader Attila was regarded by fervent Hun troops as the son of the heavens.



The Hun cavalry retreated with Attila's death, but many Huns settled in and around the territories of what became Hungary. By the 500s to 700s, Central Europe was home to a variety of former steppe peoples along with Goth and Germanic tribes who had arrived from northern Europe. They gradually converted to Christianity, but they preferred one version of Christianity, the theological version then known as Arianism. According to Arianism, there has only been one eternal God in heaven, who later produced a Divine Son to rule the earth. That strict patriarchy of rulership made the best match with the nomadic religion of the Steppe.

Mongolians in the Eastern Steppe

During China's Warring States period c.480-221 BCE, the small states contesting for supremacy were vulnerable to invasions from the north and northwest. The Mongolian Xiongnu were able to strengthen during that period by defeating or absorbing lesser tribes to confederate them into its own empire. Historians of that ancient Mongolia era take note of its novel "critical transformation" at the socio-political level. Nicola Di Cosmo outlines that transformation:

What is remarkable about changes in the "Xiongnu" period is the spatial reconfiguration of the distribution of sites, indicating, possibly, a more cohesive polity that unified the entire valley's population. If that is the case, and if the Xiongnu period is characterized by basic continuity in terms of material culture and genetic heritage, then the Xiongnu impact on the area is probably to be investigated at the level of a new socio-political articulation. The changes in the ability of elites to control larger swaths of land and to re-territorialize their population according to their needs, which may include economic production, mobilization for communal labor or defense, or control of trade routes, may be regarded as a more critical transformation than demographic replacements, changes in the material culture, or the acquisition of luxury objects from far-flung regions.

Historians find that this nomadic political structure is difficult to classify by the standards of other Axial civilizations. It lacked the bureaucracy of a typical State or the ethnic solidarity of a Nation, yet it clearly surpassed the scope of a mere tribal chiefdom, without simply replicating the model of an ancient hereditary kingdom. Something genuinely different had emerged on that great Steppe.

Even if the Xiongnu as a polity do not satisfy the requirements for being regarded as an “early state”, they still had the political ability and military power to create a “steppe empire”. In other words, there would be no contradiction between being at the same time a “chiefdom” – in terms of the level of evolution of the administrative machinery, the specific quality of the sovereign’s power, and the forms in which different duties (military, fiscal, or other) were allocated to the population – and an empire. [N. Di Cosmo, “Ethnogenesis, coevolution and political morphology of the earliest steppe empire, the Xiongnu question revisited” (2011), pp. 39-40.]

The grand title of an imperial Xiongnu (Hsiung-nu) ruler was *Chēnglí Gūtu Chányú* (or *Shan-yü*) for “Son of Heaven Supreme”, where “Chengli” was a variant of “Tengri” – the name for the Turku-Mongol High God.

The propensity to attribute semi-divine or divine status to a supreme warlord is recounted in Chinese histories. The Records of the Grand Historian narrates the fast ascendancy of one of these warlords, K’un-mo (c.100 BCE), to divine status.

“When K’un-mo had grown to manhood, the *Shan-yü* put him in command of a band of troops and he several times won merit in battle. The *Shan-yü* then made him leader of the people whom his father had ruled in former times and ordered him to guard the western forts. K’un-mo gathered together his people, looked after them and led them in attacks on small settlements in the neighborhood. Soon he had twenty or thirty thousand skilled archers who were trained in aggressive warfare. When the *Shan-yü* died, K’un-mo led his people far away, declared himself an independent ruler, and refused to journey to the meetings of the Hsiung-nu court. The Hsiung-nu sent surprise parties of troops to attack him but they were unable to win a victory. In the end the Hsiung-nu decided he must be a god and left him alone, still claiming he was a subject of theirs but no longer making large-scale attacks on him.” [quoted in Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China, 221 BC to CE 1757* (1992), p. 39.]

The authority of a supreme nomadic ruler was not quite like the power of a Bronze Age monarch, and only superficially like an early Iron Age emperor of China. An original Axial development had occurred on the vast Steppes. A nomadic “Son of Heaven” despot did not merely hold kingly sovereignty over his own ethnic nation, but rather despotic power over all peoples everywhere. Legitimacy rested principally upon militaristic success maintaining a multi-ethnic empire over as much territory as possible. Ineptitude and weakness was perceived as a loss of legitimacy. That diminishment or loss of godhood leaves a ruler vulnerable to challenges from royally-related clan leaders – this way of succession is ‘tanistry’ – who promise greater success and deliver it by assassination or civil war if necessary. The new despot claimed legitimate rule simply by right of victory. Longer-lasting regimes tried to avoid bloody conflict with the clan.

The pinnacle of the Xiongnu political order was the supreme ruler, who was addressed as Chengli Gutu Chanyu, meaning “Heaven’s Son, the Magnificent [One].” The Chanyu repeatedly addressed himself as being “established by Heaven” and even expanded this notion to claim that he was the “born of Heaven and Earth and established by the Sun and Moon.” The position of Chanyu, ordained by Heaven, was thus limited to a single lineage of the surname Luanti. When “the Xiongnu established the Chanyu” a supreme leader was selected from among the immediate male relatives of the previous Chanyu via the collective approval of the establishment of tribal leaders. If a leader “established himself as Chanyu”, he could theoretically be in conflict with the combined approvals of the majority

of the tribal leaders. However, such occurrences were rare and met with eventual consent ... instead of spurring widespread conflict. [Miller, "Xiongnu 'Kings' and the Political Order of the Steppe Empire" (2014), pp. 5-6.]

This despotic authority was commanding but conditional, and displaceable through contested election or violent conflict. This Axial innovation did not merely imitate kingships from older civilizations to the south, as ancient and contemporary historians agree. Both sorts of rulers, kingly rulers and despotic rulers, are autocratic at a minimum, but even pro-monarchists can tell when a imperious king becomes a despotic tyrant.

Despotism was not unknown to other civilizations, obviously. Aristotle disapproved of despotism and tyranny as the worst kinds of governing. However, only one civilization of the Axial era exalted despotism, backed by supreme divinity for the greatest militaristic ruler. Chinese historians did not classify supreme nomadic despots as lords or kings like their own Zhou or Han dynastic kings. Only lesser-ranking and regional lords under the Chanyu ruler would be labeled as kings by Chinese historians. Unwilling to label the nomadic ruler as an Emperor (for only China had genuine emperors in their eyes), that honorific "Son of Heaven" had to serve.

The "Chengli" of the Xiongnu was of course the Sky God, as pronounced by the Chinese, for the nomadic name "Tengri" worshipped across the Steppe.

The sky god appears already before the common era among the Xiongnu, then later, continually, in all the great political formations up to the fourteenth century. Under the Türk (sixth to eighth century) and under the Mongols (thirteenth to fourteenth century), he is particularly visible. The former call him "blue," "elevated" or "above," and "endowed with power"; the latter add to these qualities that he is "eternal," a characteristic supposedly long implied. It is not an exaggeration to say that no other deity has responded so much to the needs of his loyal followers. The Turco-Mongol emperor first wanted to gather all those of his race, then the entire world. His god was national (the Tengri of the Türks and Mongols), then universal and unique. There is but one god in the sky and one sole sovereign on earth: such is the ideology. It represents a desperate but unsuccessful effort to promote monotheism; the other deities remained alive in the minds of the people and were more or less associated with the sky god. [Roux 2005 "Tengi" p. 9081.]

The first instance of sky worship to appear among the Chinese was introduced with the Zhou dynasty c.1050 BCE.

Textual studies comparing late Shang and initial Zhou period inscriptions demonstrate a new interest in sky deities with the inception of the Western Zhou state. Sky worship is a very old tradition among steppe peoples, and some historians view this as a transfer of Inner Asian religious ideas via the Zhou court into China—beliefs that enabled the Zhou kings to proclaim themselves the chosen sons of heaven and thereby legitimize and strengthen their rule. Later in time, the political concept of a mandate from heaven became part of the institution of rulership in China. [Honeychurch (2015), p. 212.]

The Chinese were compelled by diplomacy to address nomad rulers as "Son of Heaven," just as their own Zhou dynasty emperors had also labeled themselves as "Tian-zi" which also meant "Son of Heaven." The early Zhou kings, who replaced China's Shang dynasty c.1050 BCE, began labeling themselves in that manner, introducing a new deity to China: this "Tian" or celestial heaven. The Shang had worshipped their royal family deity Shang-Di, which simply meant the deceased lordly ancestors of the Shang who responded to sacrifice and petition and lent advice through oracular divination. That thoroughly Chinese convention was disrupted and overlaid by the new deity of the Zhou, who (naturally) approved of Zhou rule. If the Xiongnu simply imitated and borrowed that Zhou god and royal title, would this be a case of nomads borrowing from China?

However, the Zhou were not originally Chinese – before coming down from the northwest to conquer the Shang, the Zhou had resided among the northwestern “barbarian” Rong-Di lands for centuries. (The Rong and Di tribes later formed the core of the upstart Xiongnu empire.) As the ruling dynasty of China, the Zhou maintained their western base of power alongside the neighboring nomadic tribes for several centuries.



The Zhou evidently knew about that “Son of Heaven” concept from that familiar nomadic culture and then brought it into China, where the Chinese could easily observe how this foreign god Tian was so different from their ancestral Shang-Di. Only later, by the time of Confucius and later nostalgic apologists for the Zhou regime, did the “official” ideology strenuously proclaim that *Shang-Di* and *Tian* were the same all along. That alleged identification, so convenient politically, was difficult to understand historically or religiously. The first, “Shang-Di”, consisted of ancestral kings who only attended to their living noble heirs in China; while the second, “Tian”, consisted of the universal celestial sky over all peoples everywhere. By that later era of 500-300 BCE, political theology and philosophy was well underway, so that two incompatible gods, one nobly personal and the other elementarily impersonal, could be syncretically merged, with the ancestral Chinese Lords residing in the heavens above to guide Chinese rulers below. Scholarship on ancient Chinese religion too often automatically agrees with that invented political theology from the later Warring States period. Historically, a quite different account of the earlier intersection of two different religions must be recognized.

Chinese scholar Sanping Chen recounts the introduction of the nomadic religion into China through the Zhou conquest.

... the Zhou was clearly the first example of conquest by “Barbarians” of a more advanced civilization in East Asia. Even after three millennia, traces of the Zhou’s “Barbarism” still remain. It is well-known that Mencius referred to King Wen of the Zhou as a *xiyi zhiren*, “Western Barbarian.” Edwin Pulleyblank also noted the many “Barbarian” tribes with which the Zhou had allied itself. ... the Zhou’s heaven worship and the related “mandate of heaven” and “son of heaven” notions had striking parallels in ancient Inner Asia. Traditional Sinocentric views in historiography would naturally ascribe this similarity to Chinese cultural influence. However, given the “conquest” nature of the Zhou dynasty and the aforementioned sharp contrast between Shang and Zhou religious beliefs, in my view it is no less plausible that the so-called Chinese influences may well share a common origin with that of the later

Steppe civilizations.

[Sanping Chen, *Multicultural China in the Early Middle Ages* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), p. 122.]

As Chen goes on to note, the Zhou high god lines up neatly with the Steppe high god. The name of the Zhou deity of "Tian" has no Chinese linguistic root, but its phonetic and semantic meaning most closely resembles the Turkic-Mongol word "Tängri" or "Tengri" for the universal Sky God. On the Steppe, practically devoid of significant geographical features other than the lands stretching to all horizons and the vastness of the endless skies, nothing naturally divides peoples, or religions. One land, one sky, One High God, One Supreme Ruler. This was the theological-political conclusion to the Axial Phase of that early Iron Age on the Steppe.

The Steppe's deity was not borrowed from an older civilization, and its ideal model of rulership was not just an adaptation from Bronze Age kingships either. Nomadic empire builders were no mere kings, nor did they view themselves as just kings. Mesopotamian kings resorted to war to hold together empires, but war was more of a last resort than a step towards the throne, and the typical Bronze Age king of Sumer or Babylon was not beheld as a deity. Even Egypt's Bronze Age pharaoh, who held great monarchical power, was regarded as just one human god among many cosmic gods and just one religious figure among a priesthood on earth. After the Zhou were well-established as China's dynastic rulers, they were content to claim rule only over China's people, and their Tian deity was just a Chinese god for the Chinese. Not until the Caesars of the late Roman Empire would another civilization lend more than a hint of direct divinity to a ruler. The Axial Phase in Central Asia had already established an original category for political authority: the direct heir to the Sky God above despotically holds absolute command over all peoples (in theory) down on earth. The despot and his close kin hold a monopoly of religious authority as well as political authority, as the exclusive cult of worship. That exclusivity explains why only that lineage of rulers possess legitimate (divinely approved) power.

Some empires, such as the Xiongnu, lasted for centuries by devolving to hereditary monarchies, but these kingdoms were often absorbed in a neighboring civilization (such as Rome, Persian, or China) or conquered by the next surge of despotic empire-building from a rival nomadic tribe. The Scythian-Saka-Xiongnu legacy was notorious for forging new nomadic empires as quickly as they can fall.

Political flexibility on the steppe was matched well with religious flexibility. On the eastern steppe to Mongolia and Manchuria, early nomadic empires upheld a monolatrous version of shamanistic Tengrism (worship focused a one universal God among several deities). The Yuezhi tribes, who migrated from Mongolia to Bactria by 100 CE and then founded the Kushan Empire, brought this sky-deity worship with them. After 500 CE, some Steppe empires were hospitable to other religions, such as Manichaeism and Islam, as long as those religions helped to sustain its adherence to divine despotism.

The Mongol Empire of the 1200s-1300s was open to several religions including Islam, Christianity, Taoism, and Buddhism, although Khan rulers like Ghengis Khan typically clung to Tengrist monolatry to justify their regimes.

The sky god appears already before the common era among the Xiongnu, then later, continually, in all the great political formations up to the fourteenth century. Under the Türk (sixth to eighth century) and under the Mongols (thirteenth to fourteenth century), he is particularly visible. The former call him "blue," "elevated" or "above," and "endowed with power"; the latter add to these qualities that he is "eternal," a characteristic supposedly long implied. It is not an exaggeration to say that no other deity has responded so much to the needs of his loyal followers. The Turco-Mongol emperor first wanted to gather all those of his race, then the entire world. His god was national (the Tengri of the Türks and Mongols), then universal and unique. There is but one god in the sky and one sole sovereign on earth: such is the ideology. It represents a desperate but unsuccessful effort to promote monotheism; the other deities remained alive in the minds of the people and were more or less

associated with the sky god. Even so, the sky god is as predominant as the emperor himself, who “comes from him,” “resembles him” (and is sometimes his son), conducts privileged conversations with him, receives and transmits his orders, conquers in his name, names dignitaries in his name, rewards and punishes with death (the only punishment of Tengri, used often against those who revolt), distributes to everyone, man or beast, kut, a vitality that brings happiness, and ülüg, luck. Nevertheless, the sky god can do without the emperor when he is weakening or has lost his divine mandate. In such a case he “applies pressure,” or sends his messengers: an eagle, an enigmatic angel, some rays of light often accompanied by “dazzling daughters,” or the animal guides, particularly the wolf, who are none other than the imperial ancestors. Anyone can talk to the sky god, but shamans are forbidden to have closer relationships with him than the prince does: any pretension of having such a relationship will lead to the shaman’s destruction.

[Roux, “Tengri” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed, vol 13, p. 9081.]

This divine despotism was not circumscribed by cultural origins: a ruling clan of a steppe empire could be Iranian-speaking, Turkic, Mongolian, and so on. This Axial monolatry of divine despotism transcended the importance of ethnic heritage and popular shamanistic practices from the Bronze Age.

Axial Phase: Romantic Individualism

The era: 600-400 BCE

The location: Northern Europe

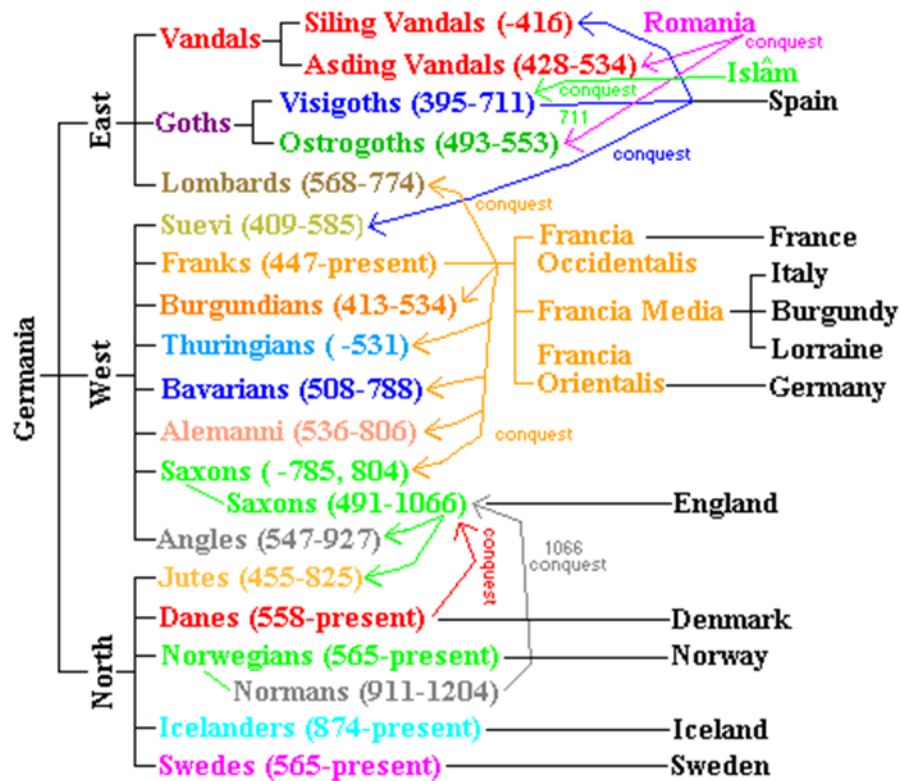
The sources: Celtic, Germanic, Norse, Danish-Viking, Irish, British mythology in poetic sagas and songs.

Southern Europe harbored one analog to Northern Europe's praise of individualism: early Iron Age Greece. The Greek heroism of Achilles and Odysseus was preserved in Homer's epic poems, and the character of Prometheus from Greek myth stands for defiant human progress despite the gods. Celtic-Germanic-Norse mythology similarly echoed a dimly-recalled Heroic Age, when great individuals took charge of shaping human destinies. Their poetic sagas and songs praised migratory folkways and ethnic independence in its idealization of *Romantic Individualism*. Danish-Viking, Irish, and British myths carried on these traditions. The Arthurian legends trace all the way back this romantic Axial Phase. Ideally, the finest way of life was based upon autonomy among co-equals, achieved by independence. Ideas of free will, ample liberty, voluntary compact, and personal rights were birthed from this Axial Phase. The momentum of Romantic Individualism lasted in northern Europe to infuse its later democratic tendencies.

Large waves of migrations in and across Europe during the Bronze Age produced the two major ethnic and language families: the Celtic and the Germanic. (The Slavic language family developed much later.) The Celtic branch was in Central Europe, the Hallstatt region, by the start of the Iron Age c.1200 BCE, but many of them they kept moving west towards the Atlantic due to fresh migrations arriving to push them westwards. They became the majority of the populations of Gaul (as named by Rome, now France mostly) and also of Iberia (Spain mostly), and then they entered the islands of Britain and Ireland. The 'Britons' and 'Scots-Irish' tribes were Celtic. During the Bronze Age and into the Iron Age, the Celtic shamanistic religion was led by the Druids.



The Celts themselves appear for the light of recorded history in the 500s BCE, as Greek and then Roman writers noted their existence north of the Alps. Julius Caesar, engaging them in Gaul, agreed that they called themselves Celts. By then they were concentrated in Western Europe. Their territories were then further reduced. The Gauls were Romanized by the Empire, Germanic-Nordic tribes occupied most of northern Europe, and then Anglo-Saxons and Danes (Vikings) came to occupy much of Britain. The ethnic group that pushed the Celts so far westwards were primarily the Germanic peoples. Four prominent sub-groups of that Germanic-language grouping become known as the Norse, the Saxons, the Franks, and the Goths.



The remnants of Celtic heritage were eventually isolated mainly to Cornwall, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. That heritage's contribution to Northern Europe's Axial phase of Romantic Individualism was preserved in ancient British, Welsh, Scottish, and Irish legends and sagas.



Some Goths moved southwards to occupy many conquered regions from the Roman Empire, to blend its culture with that southern European civilization. The Goths who remained in the northlands shared much with cultural cousins there. The Axial world-system combining the Celtic and Germanic contributions was in place by around 400 BCE to dominate northern Europe until this day.

Although “Individualism” as a political creed and “Romanticism” as a cultural category were not formulated with academic precision until the Renaissance was giving way to Modernism, that core to romantic individualism was hardly the sheer invention of 1700s and 1800s literary figures harboring political agendas. It has been a recent habit of literary history to deny that anything ‘Celtic’ or ‘Gothic’ existed before the 1700s, and indeed modernist styles of aesthetic, poetic, rhetoric, and politics took up those labels for modernist purposes. [Nick Groom, “‘The Celtic Century’ and the Genesis of Scottish Gothic.” In *Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (2017), pp. 14-37.] All the same, such “invention” evidently had plenty of congenial cultural material already in place to work with.

As history about Europe knows well – the history of migrations, the archaeology of settlements, the history of oral literature, the history of religions, the history of socio-cultural change, and so on – the peoples of north Europe by whatever labels were more similar to each other in romantic and individualistic ways, and obviously quite different from neighboring civilizations. To be able to closely compare, for example, Scottish and Gothic heritages, an ample commonality must have long been there to perceive. Nothing about this Axial phase rests on knowing all about the ‘Celts’ or ‘Saxons’ and so forth; not by denying names nor even denying their existence would be able to erase pre-Roman tribes or their legacies from Europe’s history.

Mythological, social, and political folkways over such a large continental territory, from Iceland, Ireland, and Scotland over east to Sweden and south to Brittany, Bourgogne, and Bavaria display many commonalities. How deep back into Iron Age history do those commonalities go? Myth and legend was getting recorded into written literature by the 600s-1000s CE, from oral traditions going back a thousand years or more before that time. It could not be a massive coincidence that what was preserved and transmitted over that wide territory reveals so many shared features. Nor can it be just chance that their preferred kinds of polities – smaller, heterogenous, independent, confederate – have always been predominant throughout that territory. Only deeper roots, much older than the Dark Ages, could explain similar branches of thought and culture. Because the Celtic and Germanic peoples were firmly rooted in Northern Europe by 400 BCE and before, the simplest and straightforward account finds that the core of Romantic Individualism must date back to 600-400 BCE.

The expansion of the Roman Empire to 117 CE



As for the two tribal families of Celtic and Germanic peoples, that line of demarcation at the Rhine, where the Roman Empire was compelled to halt, set the boundary between the Franks and the Germans which lasts to this day.

Their shared Romantic Individualism hardly faded as the centuries passed. As much of northern Europe was becoming Christianized, its inherent mythic values were barely overwritten and overridden by Catholic theological dogmas. A great heresy confronting the Church during the 300s-600s CE was "Pelagianism" which was formulated by the priest Pelagius from the north, probably Britain. His kind of religion saw nature as inherently good, viewed human nature as more good than evil, and emphasized the capacity of personal free will. This rival theology, which remained popular in the north for centuries, was grounded by the earlier Axial innovation of Northern Europe, Romantic Individualism. The nearly-heretical assertion of nominalism, individuality, and freedom by John Duns Scotus (fl.1300) similarly rocked the Catholic realm. Protestantism in Scotland was distinctive for its presbyterian "structure" leaving churches and ministers practically autonomous. Having been Christianized last, Scandinavia was more Catholic in spirit than practicality, and Protestantism seemed inevitable. As for Germanic lands, the superstructures of Catholic Church and then the Holy Roman Empire was more fiction than fact on the ground. Germany was notorious for harboring its own heretical cults, communes, and schisms, and the proto-Protestant movements later flowered with Luther's own Reformation.

From southern France to Poland, from Switzerland to Sweden, and all around the North Sea, the most notorious political headache was holding anything like a kingdom or nation together for very long. Thousands of clannish domains, feudal realms, lordly manors, cities, and principalities could not be easily merged or even coerced into concord. True empires were rare and fragile. The Carolingian Empire's two-century solidarity until the late 800s was so memorable for Europe because it was so remarkable, and so easily re-divided again. Nothing like it could reappear until Napoleon's crowning in 1804, but his empire could not endure either.

Germany could not become a unified nation until the mid-1800s. Germany's neighbor, Poland, had required aristocratic elections for their weak kings for a millennia. Even a powerful kingdom or empire was vulnerable to prompt revolt from within, or a sub-division into petty kingdoms for each male heir. Other Iron Age civilizations bequeathed the throne to a single heir while throttling aristocratic pretensions, ensuring stable monarchical authority. Not Northern Europe; noble families of any royal lineage could dream and scheme to overthrow even a mighty king or queen. No other civilization was ever witness to perpetual and interminable dynastic battles and civil wars for every kingdom, for century after century after century.

While irreducibly clannish and tribal, that localism and communalism only heightened the opportunity for individuality and distinction. This feature of society was noted among the Celts:

The basis of their society was tribal. By the time the Celtic law systems were codified, with the Irish Brehon Law system being written down in the early Christian era, the Celtic tribal system was a highly sophisticated one. Comparing the Irish system with that enshrined in the Welsh Laws of Hywel Dda one can observe a common Celtic attitude to law. The good of the community was the basis of the law – in other words, a primitive yet sophisticated communism was practised. Chieftains were elected, as were all officers of the tribe. Women emerge in Celtic society with equality of rights. They could inherit, own property and be elected to office, even to the position of leader in times of war. [Peter Ellis, *The Celtic Empire* (1990), p. 16.]

The same manner of leadership organization characterized the Norse/Germans:

The charismatic war chiefs held the tribal confederacies of the migration era together. However, it must be understood that the Norse tribes had no "kings." As with many tribes, there was a military aristocracy, and the war chiefs emerged from the aristocratic clans. And, the aristocratic chieftains could, and did, elect a single war leader to lead them in battle. But, the authority of that leader existed only during war. After battle, the aristocracy did not recognize the war leader as having authority over them in peacetime matters. Thus, kings did not dominate the tribal society of the early Norse. Their war leaders were chosen from those who had demonstrated their martial prowess. The war chief—whom the Romans referred to as the "dux," hence the later Germanic word "Duke"—owed his position to his ability as a leader of warriors, and, he could only maintain it by a record of success.

As the tribes migrated, and as warfare necessitated amalgamation, not only did heroic war-chiefs draw pan-tribal warrior retinues, but also various tribes came together and formed formalized confederations. These tribal confederations elected representatives to confederated tribal assemblies ... the German confederacies did not necessarily last long. This depended upon their battle success. [Ronald Glassman, *The Origins of Democracy in Tribes, City-States and Nation-States* (Springer, 2017), pp. 1251, 1252.]

The ancient Germanic customs required recurrent assemblies of men (and sometime women too) who headed households and participated in legalistic and militaristic councils. Its name in proto-Germanic was *þingą, with cognates in Old Norse and Old English as "þing" and in Old German as "thing" (modernized as ding). For those times during the early Iron Age, only ancient Greece shared such esteem for local autonomy and personal liberties. Just the beginnings of anything democratic, more in spirit than in law code, could be discerned in this Romantic Individualism worldview, but no Axial world-system went farther in that direction.

In the European North, only a singular world-system could be responsible for that heritage of voluntary association and venturesome individualism. The Celtic-Germanic worldview since the Bronze Age was strongly clannish, tribalistic, and polytheistic. It recognized warrior heroes, families of high status, wartime chiefs, and confederations of tribal councils. No hereditary lords; no kings; and no empires. The Celts did have their Druid priests, but Germanic and Norse peoples lacked a priesthood. Very little within the Celtic-Germanic-Norse

social structure could support large unified states or empires. Even the Vikings, who did manage to rule over many regions of Europe at their height, were only regarded as an empire by submissive peoples conquered for plunder.

That Bronze Age legacy congealed into an Axial system during the early Iron Age to emphasize multiplicity, multi-polarity, and polyarchy. Those social and spiritual priorities are reflected in the surviving literature of the Celts, Irish, Norse, Danes, Saxons, and Germans. Their preserved legends and sagas can involve more characters, diverse roles, and plot twists than a full-scale opera or modern novel. Very early epics and sagas, containing mythic legend from before 500 CE, are often the most complicated, such as the Danish poem *Beowulf*, the *Ulster Cycle* of ancient Ireland, the *Poetic Edda* of the Norse, and the Germanic *Song of the Nibelungs*. Noble heroes flourish and sometimes prevail, to be sure, but their epic courses and careers navigate plenty of other persons and personages – human, para-human, magical, and godly – who pursue their particular agendas on behalf of their own cadre or coterie. In some Germanic-Norse myths, even gods themselves may become old, or die in battle, and so they too can undergo sacral death and rebirth.

The “Romance” of this Axial individualism is about viewing one’s life as a developing narrative, in which one’s own choices and conduct play the largest part. Why can’t life be like a journey, or even an adventure? Personal experience, rather than dead custom or social convention, could form the substance of how one lives. A person can and should be in love with life, but with the life that one has chosen to lead. One’s own course of life is one’s “life story” or personal narrative, interwoven with the roles of others, yet remaining uniquely one’s own life to “compose” along the way. This experiential attitude towards life emphasizes its aesthetic, poetic, playful, and erotic opportunities presenting themselves, if one is bold enough to choose them. The “Romans” or “novel” that grew popular in the Romance vernacular languages in the late Medieval era supplies an exemplar. The Grail and Arthurian legends supply an exemplar, popularized later in France and then England. The individual – their desires, hopes, and choices – are ultimately the most important and truly decisive for one’s fate.

Another prominent aspect to this respect for individuality is a religious doctrine about immortality. The Germanic-Norse religious perspective could grant “imperishable fame” to their heroes. The Celts believed in the ability to return to this world from the afterworld.

The Celtic religion was one of the first to evolve a doctrine of immortality. It taught that death was but a changing of place and that life went on with all its forms and goods in another world, a world of the dead – the fabulous Otherworld. But when people died in that world, the souls were reborn in this world. Thus a constant exchange of souls took place between the two worlds: death in this world took a soul to the Otherworld; death in that world brought a soul to this world. Thus did Philostratus of Tyana (ad c. 170-249) observe that the Celts celebrated birth with mourning and death with joy. Caesar, the cynical general, remarked that this teaching of immortality doubtless accounted for the reckless bravery of the Celts in battle.

[P. Ellis, *The Celtic Empire* (1990), p. 17.]

The religious idea that the soul was not doomed to disappear into a shadowy underworld (common around the Mediterranean), but an afterlife could be followed by one’s reincarnation back into this world, was a highly unusual notion for Greeks and Romans who encountered this faith. In Greece, the cult of Pythagoras (fl.500 BCE) notoriously taught this belief in personal immortality, making other Greeks wonder where this very un-Greek idea could have come from. Aristotle is reported to have proposed that Pythagoras accepted the idea of immortality from Celts residing north of Greece in Thrace. Other ancient authors have linked a belief in personal immortality with Celts.

Most any religion promises an afterlife. Only Romantic Individualism portrays afterlives as grand adventures, awaiting persons bold enough to pursue their heart’s desires and take control their own destinies.

Axial Worldviews Compared





As Sage mythology from the Late Bronze Age gradually transitioned into theological mythology during the Iron Age, each sophisticated mythology remained inherently connected to a far older revelatory ritual and practice.

In Mediterranean (Egypt, Crete, Greece, Rome) mythology, the fundamental engagement between humanity and divinity is The Command. Legitimate authority is founded upon the *kingly divine* that installs earthly representatives. Europe and the Steppes agreed— authority lies in the supreme will of the masses (democracy) or the conqueror (despotism). For the West, the essential task for human beings is justice: to respect lawful orders from the Ultimate sovereignty.

In Levantine (Middle East) mythology, the fundamental engagement between humanity and divinity is The Covenant. Judgments upon humanity from the *truly divine* are conveyed through a demi-god or holy prophet who can mediate with the divine on behalf of humanity. The essential task for human beings is fidelity: to follow the mediator’s example of affirmation to the Ultimate providence.

In Indian mythology, the fundamental engagement between humanity and divinity is The Sacrifice. Even the gods originate from sacrifice to the *insightful divine*, and they sustain their powers by performing sacrifices, as humans do. The essential task for human beings is self-sacrifice: to shed one’s selfish persona for perpetually regenerating with the Ultimate consciousness.

In Chinese mythology, the fundamental relationship between humanity and divinity is The Divination. The rituals of divination reveal how to coordinate the structure of worldly affairs with the *orderly divine* as directed by the high ancestors or the wise Way (Dao) of all things. The essential task for human beings is conformity: to continually manage life in order to harmonize with the Ultimate community.

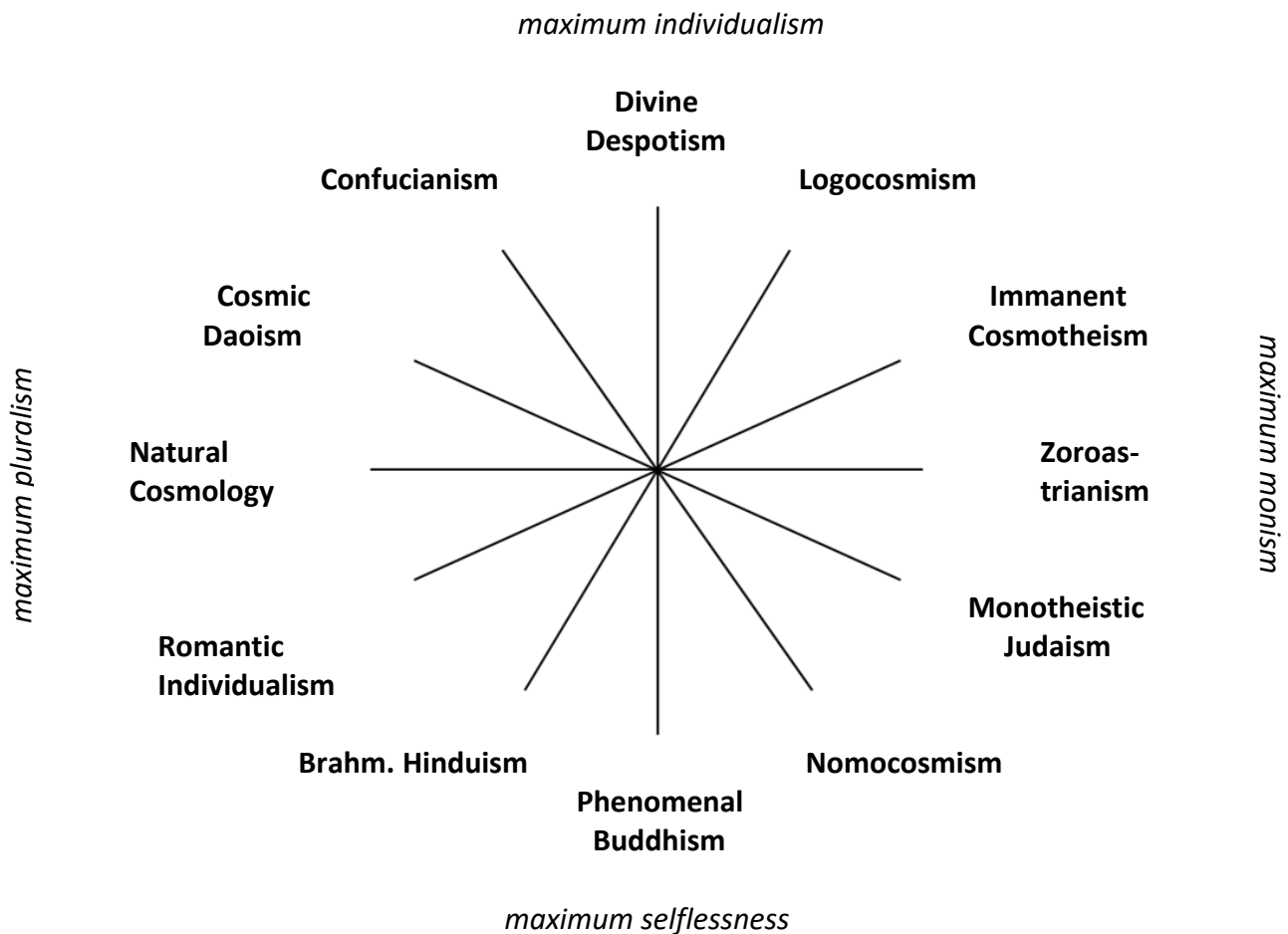
	WESTERN (Egypt, Greco-Roman, Europe)	LEVANTINE (Jewish, Middle East, Persian)	INDIAN (South Asia)	CHINESE (East Asia)
The Cosmos’s ways are ...	Agonistic	Formulaic	Confluent	Recurrent
Time is ...	Mostly discontinuous	Mostly continuous	Mostly continuous	Mostly discontinuous
Temporality is ...	Oscillatory	Linear	Cyclical	Episodic
If cosmic powers are pictured ...				
Successive eras are ...	Usually contentious	Always providential	Always duplicative	Usually degenerative
Transitions between eras are like ...	Displacements	Interruptions	Repetitions	Regenerations
A new era is humanly experienced as ...	A revolution	A revival	A reverie	A restaging
Engaging divinity is like ...	Forming compacts	Making covenants	Offerings sacrifices	Performing divinations
Receiving divine approval is like a ...	Judicious god granting earned favors	Jealous god protecting the faithful	Generous god sharing in ecstasy	Mentoring god with wise counsel
The signal of devotion is...	An oath of fealty	A vow of submission	A gift of selflessness	A display of deference

The Divine-Human relation is akin to ...	Patron/Client	Lord/Subject	Yogi/Devotee	Elder/Junior
Deities besides the supreme god are ..	Real, as personal confederates	Unreal, as idolized temptations	Unreal, as personified manifestations	Real, as impersonal sacralities
Humans are born as ...	Natural individuals	Chosen by a god	Selves on karmic chains	Members of society
Humans born guilty?	No – individuals are presumed innocent	Yes – born into a fallen condition	Yes – due to deeds of past lives	No – communities are presumed good
The body is ...	Like a craft	Like a corpse	Like clothes	Like currents
Free will is ...	Essential, and creative	Essential, and deviant	Inessential, and illusory	Inessential, and risky
Humans are connected by ...	Voluntary commitments	Conjoint service	Essential oneness	Communal relationships
One's key duty is ...	Justice	Fidelity	Self-sacrifice	Conformity
A fine destiny would be ...	Remarkable leader	Rewarded afterlife	Reincarnated higher	Respected ancestor
The saintly hero is like a ...	Vigilante	Prophet	Guru	Sage
Rightful rulership ...	Ascends toward divinity	Descends from divinity	Sacrifices to divinity	Negotiates with divinity
Religiosity is more ...	Public	Public	Private	Private
Divinity is like a ...	Administrator for the world	Spectator upon the world	Enjoyer within the world	Participant with the world
Divinity is representable through ...	Humanity	Language	Art	Nature
Spirituality proves ...	personal worth	divine approval	godly unity	civic harmony
Is there an afterlife?	Only a literary afterlife	One afterlife	Many afterlives	Only a ritualist afterlife
An afterlife is for ...	All posterity	Divine judgment	Self liberation	One's descendants
When encountering another religion...	Expect social integration	Compel conversion	Expect spiritual integration	Compel expulsion

Location	Cosmology	Ultimate Reality must Reliably be:	Axiology and Ethics
Egypt	Immanent Cosmotheism	Pervasive: not dependent but all things depends on it.	regimentation under sovereignty, respected by living justly
China	Cosmic Daoism	Inexhaustible: nothing else generates the unlimited plenitude of things.	integrity with natural ways, conducted with simplicity
Northern India	Idealistic Hinduism	Preeminent: not lacking by comparison with anything else.	unity within absolute mind, from sacrificing the ego-self
Central Asia	Divine Despotism	Powerful: nothing else can withstand its force in a contest.	domination over subjects, earned by winning every conflict
Northern India	Buddhist Phenomenalism	Purity: anything else is insubstantial and unsatisfactory.	liberation from all illusion, through meditative detachment
Phoenicia-Greece	Logocosmism	Permanent: the most changeless for rationing each thing.	knowledge of the real, by applying conceptual precision
Greece	Natural Cosmology	Priority: everything else comes into existence after it.	empowerment in control, gained by experimental learning
Canaan	Monotheistic Judaism	Posterity: everything leads towards its planned end.	solidarity with the creator, by affirming submissive faith

Iran-Persia	Zoroastrian Dualism	Incorruptible: the most truthful for rectifying everything else.	militancy alongside the light, from puritanical righteousness
Babylon	Nomothetism	Patterned: the most lawful for regulating everything else.	alignment with heavenly order, by consigning life to fate
China	Civil Confucianism	Prototypical: the most ideal for all things to imitate.	harmony with the supreme, enacted with ritual deference
Europe	Romantic Individualism	Independent: the most self-determined and liberated of all things	autonomy among co-equals, by gaining independence

THE AXIAL WHEEL



THE MODERNITY WHEEL

The Western Modernity matrix totals up to twelve cosmologies/axiologies. Let's first list the six worldviews that have dominated Western thought.

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| Ecumenical Mysticism | Faith for encountering god without any reason involved |
| Nihilistic Rationalism | Reason for knowing reality without any faith involved |

Evangelical Fundamentalism	Faith about god and ethics by true revelation unchallengeable by reason
Liberal Modernism	Faith in god's transformations through symbolism adaptable with reason
Religious Humanism	Reason about nature and ethics with assistance from transformative faith
Stoic Materialism	Reason for understanding nature and ethics unchallengeable by faith

These six worldviews do not exhaust the religious and nonreligious options. Six additional worldviews fit in between the primary worldviews:

- ascetic transcendentalism between Ecumenical Mysticism and Nihilistic Rationalism;
- theocratic covenantalism between Nihilistic Rationalism and Evangelical Fundamentalism;
- conservative catholicism between Evangelical Fundamentalism and Liberal Modernism;
- organic personalism between Liberal Modernism and Religious Humanism;
- secular humanism between Religious Humanism and Stoic Materialism;
- radical romanticism between Stoic Materialism and Ecumenical Mysticism.

