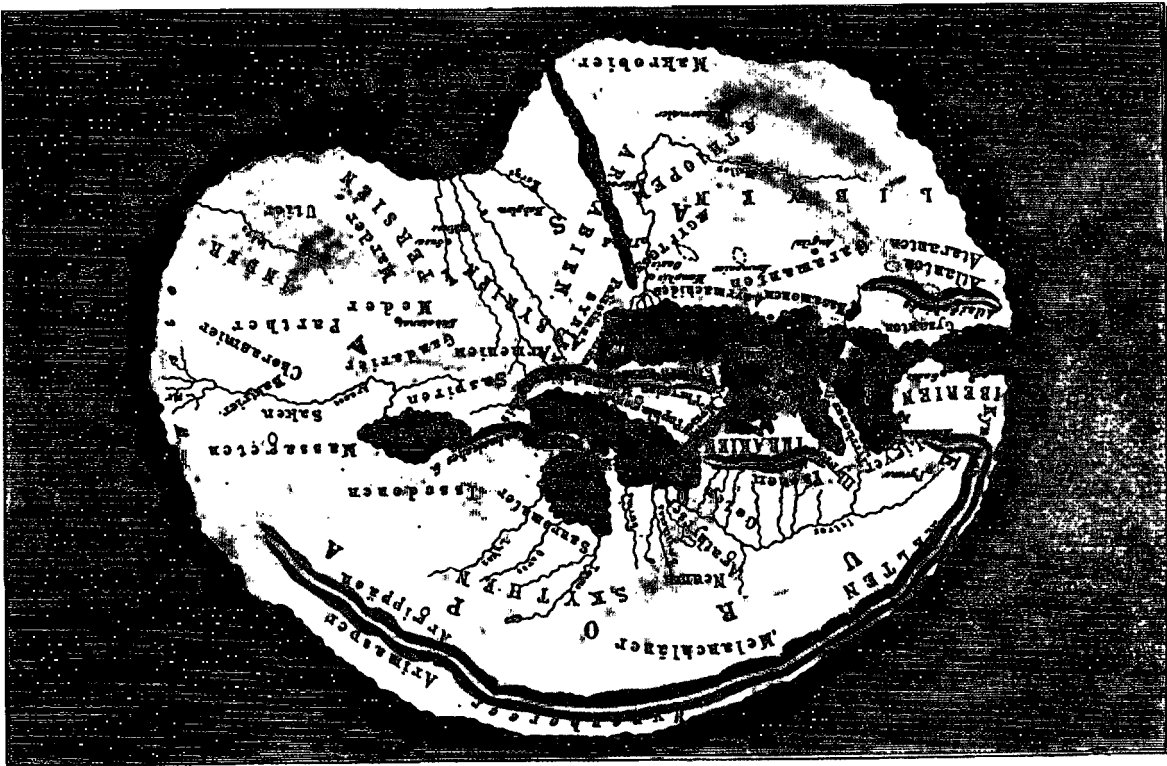


The Longman Anthology of World Literature



VOLUME A.

THE ANCIENT WORLD



The World According to Herodotus, c. 450 B.C.E. A modern reconstruction of early maps based on Herodotus's descriptions in his *Histories* (see page 694). In order to pursue his historical research into the conflict between the Greeks and the Persians, Herodotus traveled extensively through the eastern Mediterranean world. He was so fascinated with the regions he saw and the customs practiced there that his *Histories* became a geographical and cultural study as well as a work of history. His world takes the form of a circular landmass centered on Asia Minor, a crucial meeting-point of cultures and his own birthplace. The world is surrounded by water, with southern Europe looming large but northern Europe almost unknown, and ample space is given to North Africa but almost none for sub-Saharan Africa. Herodotus had a good sense of Mesopotamia and Persia but little knowledge of regions east of Persian influence: Persian-controlled northern India appears, but not China. In all regions, the prominence given to rivers reflects their importance for overland travel and economic life in antiquity. (AKG, London.)

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VOLUME A

THE ANCIENT WORLD

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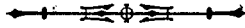
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Early South Asia



WHERE IS "SOUTH ASIA"?

People who live in "South Asia" today began to think that this is where they live only recently, when new international political relations created a conceptual region with this name, made up of eight nation-states: Afghanistan (though this is sometimes omitted), Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. For most of history no one thought they lived in South Asia. Instead, some lived in *Al-Hind*, as the geographers who wrote in Arabic named it in the later centuries of the first millennium; earlier, others lived in what they called *Bharata Varsha* ("Realm of the Descendants of Bharata"), according to scholars such as the sage Brihaspati who wrote in Sanskrit:

The earth is 5,000,000 leagues in extent. It contains seven continents and is surrounded by seven oceans. In the middle is the Land of Action, and in the middle of this land is the Rose Apple Tree atop golden Mount Meru. To the north is Mount Himalaya, to the south, extending nine thousand leagues, is the area called Bharata, where good and bad action bear their fruit, and political governance is found. It is a thousand leagues from Badarika in the Himalayas, where the holy Ganga river rises, down to the Bridge that Rama built to the island of Lanka. Seven hundred leagues separate Dvaraka on the western coast, where the god Krishna dwells, from Purushottama, Shalagrama, the great city Puri, on the eastern.

Still others believed they lived in far larger and more complex spaces (see Color Plate 6 for an illustration of one such cosmological map). And some people who live outside what is now called "South Asia" conceived of themselves as living inside it. For example, a "Mount Meru" existed in Java, part of what is now Indonesia, while a "Field of the Kurus," site of the *Mahabharata* war (page 829), was to be found in Khmer country, in today's Cambodia.

It is probable, however, that few people in their everyday lives actually thought of themselves as living even in *Bharata Varsha* or *Al-Hind*, and certainly not in *India*, however much the contours of Brihaspati's space may agree with those of the present-day nation-state. "India" was what Greek and Roman geographers called the region, derived like "Hind" from "Indus," the name of a river in the northwest. And it was this name that was bequeathed to European humanist scholars and the colonialists who came a little later—starting with the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century (see Camões's *Lusiads* in Volume C) and ending with the English, who in 1947 abandoned their "Indian Empire," which was subsequently divided into several of the nations listed above. In the earlier period, people in the region probably saw themselves as living in this village or that, sometimes in the realm of one overlord or another, but rarely in larger spheres. Yet sometimes political power, with its dreams of vast empire, and Sanskrit (and, later, Persian) literary culture, which spread across vast spaces, must have made the names of these and other larger regions come alive in the minds of subjects and readers.

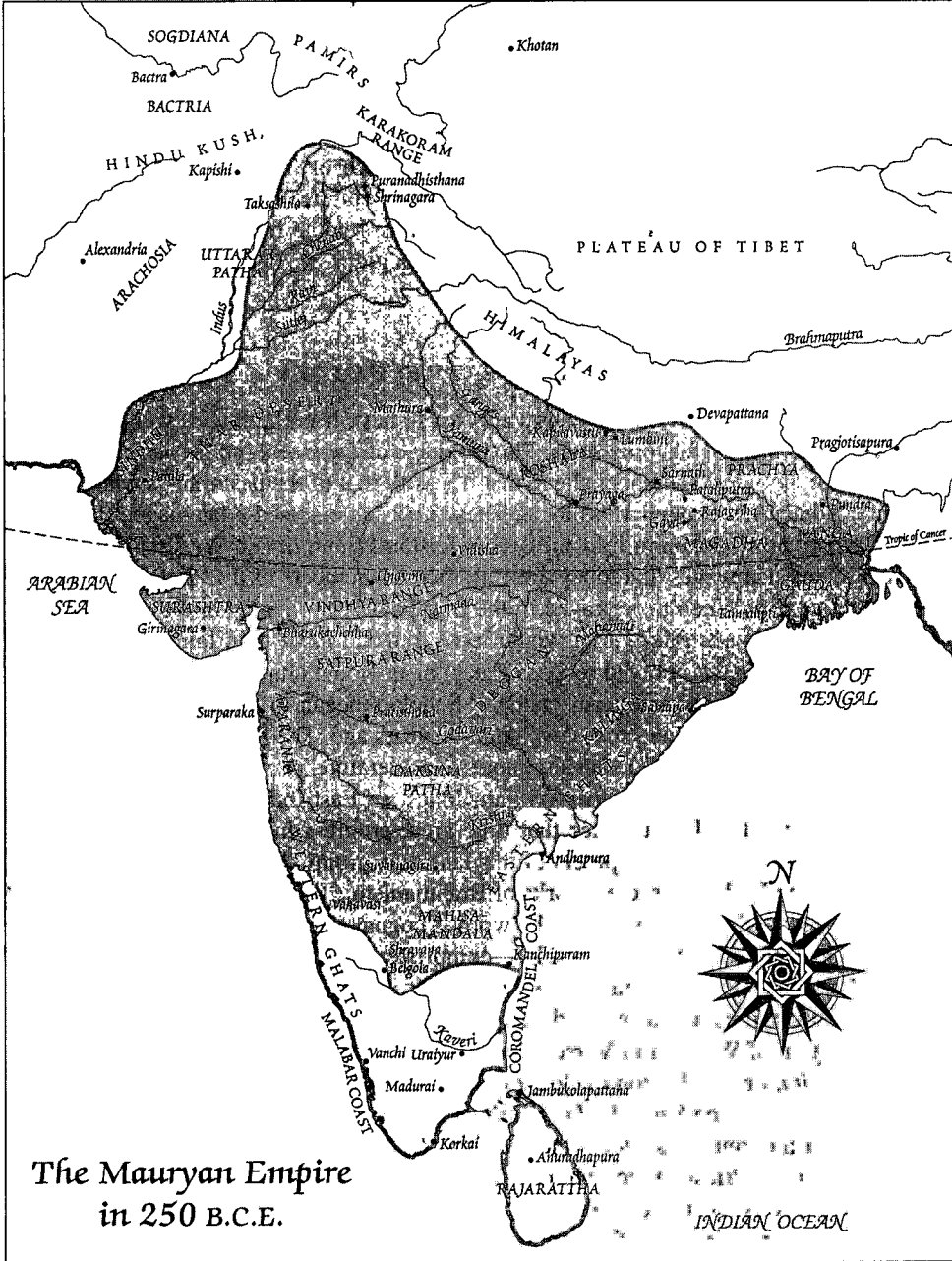
KINGSHIP TO THE HORIZONS

The history of early South Asia until around 500 B.C.E. is obscure and contested. Complex, probably literate urban cultures had existed in the northwest, in the Indus Valley and its environs, from about 2500 to 1500 B.C.E. How these cultures came to an end is not yet fully understood, but when they did end, literacy and urban existence ended with them. The millennium that followed appears to have been dominated by the cultures of shifting cultivators and nomads. Some of these peoples had recently entered the subcontinent from areas to the west, bringing entirely new languages and religious practices that were to be widely assimilated. We don't know much about the history of political power, either, in this period until the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., when city life resumed and when, around the middle of the third century B.C.E., the first written documents in South Asia were produced, at the court of an emperor named Ashoka.

Ashoka was the third king of the Maurya dynasty, the first rulers about whom we possess solid historical information. Greek ambassadors coming in the wake of Alexander the Great's failed invasion (around 320 B.C.E.) visited the Maurya court in Magadha (today's Bihar) and left accounts. More important, a new Indian writing system—based ultimately on Phoenician principles but modified with remarkable skill to suit local language realities—was created at this time, probably by scholars in the chancellery of Ashoka in order to spread the king's moral message (page 874). After this point, documentary evidence becomes much more plentiful. As a result, we know a good deal about Ashoka's vision of power. It was adopted in part from the Achaemenids, the dynasty that ruled in Persia from about 550 to 330 B.C.E., but also much adapted: Ashoka too sought to build an empire, but it was very unlike the Persian model and those that followed it, such as the Roman Empire. The Indian political theory of the day spoke of power radiating outward infinitely—"kingship to the horizons"—but they were not unbounded horizons, as in the Persian case (Xerxes, for example, wanted "to extend the Persian territory as far as God's heaven reaches"). Ashoka sought a limited universality, if we can put it that way: there was a zone beyond which political power was thought not to extend—as Brihaspati makes clear in the excerpt cited earlier—even when cultural and economic power extended much farther, as it most certainly did for all of recorded history in the region.

The Maurya Empire vanished in the second century B.C.E., and about the events of the period that follow we have only a shadowy idea. In southern India, kingdoms now came into being that we can name and place: Chera, Pandya, Chola, ruling from west to east, respectively, in peninsular India, and the Satavahanas, ruling to their north. These polities seem to have been among the first to support the production of written expressive texts, or "literature" (the Mauryas, by contrast, like the Achaemenids they imitated made no literary history at all). In the north of the subcontinent, new claimants for power, the Shakas (Scythians) and Kushanas, entered from central and western Asia. They, too, had notions of rule borrowed from Persian models, but in accordance with the new South Asian paradigm, the empire they sought was a limited one. They also patronized literature, but in ways that were to change the rules of the game of literary culture in the region.

When the Guptas established their polity around 320 C.E. and extended it far outward from the core area around today's Patna (in southern Bihar), many of these tendencies of power and culture found their most coherent expression yet:



Om. Hail! The prosperous Samudragupta, the great overlord of lords, exterminator of all kings, without adversary equal to him on earth, whose fame is tasted by the waters of the four oceans. . . .

So begins an inscription of an early Gupta king, but what it goes on to describe is a sphere of governance remarkably similar to Brihaspati's and, indeed, to today's South Asia. This spatial vision of power would mark much of the subsequent history of early South Asia, as would the practices of literary culture, building on the achievements of the Shakas and Kushanas, that were indissociable from this power. To understand that culture and the literature that was its glory, we need to understand their historical development.

POETRY FOR THE POLITY

Although the Indus Valley civilization appears to have been literate as well as urban, it bequeathed us no texts, only seals. The language of these seals so far has eluded decipherment, but most scholars believe that it wasn't that of the pastoralists who began to enter South Asia around 1500 B.C.E. These new settlers used a language related to many others now spoken in Iran and across Eastern, Central, and Western Europe as far as Ireland, languages that today are classified as members of the "Indo-European" language family. When they prayed to the Sky Father, for example, the new settlers used words—"Dyaus Pitā"—that would have sounded more than faintly familiar to people in Greece (who prayed to Zeus Patēr) or in Rome (Jup-piter), and the phrase even resembles our cognate term "father." Scholars began to note such similarities, with growing astonishment, some two hundred years ago. The first was Sirajuddin Ali Khan Arzu, a writer on Persian grammar and literature in mid-eighteenth-century Delhi, and, a generation later, Sir William Jones, an East India Company judge and pioneer English Indologist. Since that time great progress has been made in understanding the historical development of this language group. Among its oldest remaining texts is the Veda, the sacred works of Brahmanism.

The Veda—that is, "wisdom" (the word is cognate with German *wissen*, English "wit," and, indeed, "wisdom" itself)—comprises materials used in the complex liturgy of domestic and communal sacrifices. It is divided into three major collections: one of hymns to various gods and natural phenomena (the *Rig-Veda Samhita*, or "Collection of Wisdom in Verse"); another of sacred mantras in prose (the *Yajur-Veda Samhita*, or "Collection of Wisdom in Formulas"); and a compilation of chants addressed to gods (the *Sama-Veda Samhita*, or "Collection of Wisdom in Melodies"). Later a fourth corpus was added, the *Atharva-Veda Samhita* ("Collection of Wisdom of the Atharvan Priests"), containing disparate materials such as prayers for safety and imprecations for the destruction of enemies. The *Brahmanas*, a large body of prose texts comprising directions for performing the sacred rites, are also considered to be Veda. All these texts were composed and transmitted orally, almost unchanged over the course of some three millennia, thanks to rigorous training in the arts of memory, largely on the part of men of the social order known as Brahmans. It is unsurprising that the language used in these texts would come to be called *sanskrita*, "made fit" or "kept pure" for the ritual. In everyday life people almost certainly did not use Sanskrit but other, grammatically less complex dialects related to Sanskrit. Later, some of these were formalized as literary languages with regional variations