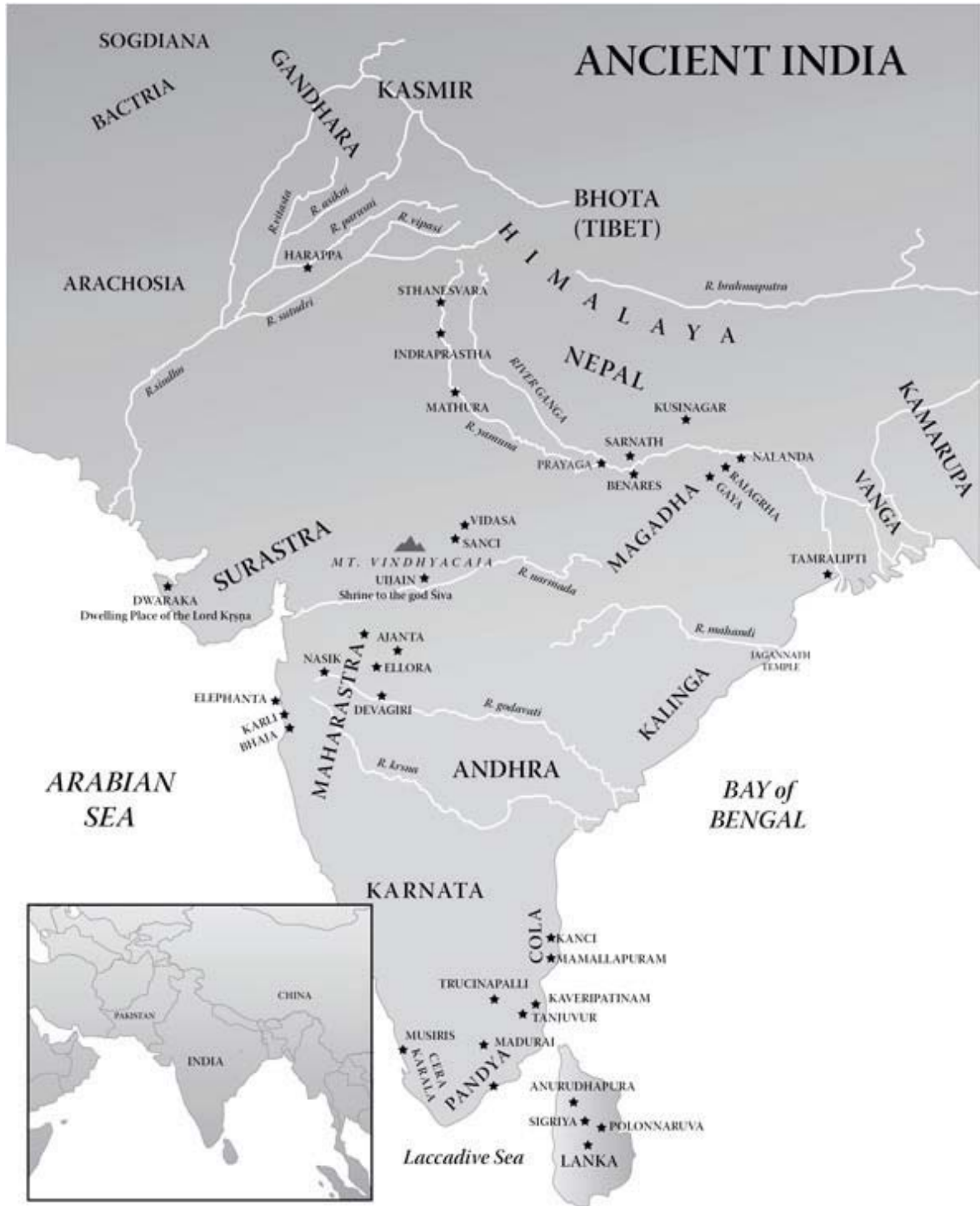


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# OVERVIEW



## ◆ Ancient Egypt

Ancient Egypt is usually considered one of the world's oldest and most developed civilizations, having left behind not only monumental structures such as the famous pyramids and other magnificent structures but also having produced a rich and complex mythological system featuring numerous gods. Ancient Egyptian myths often influence the literature and culture of this era.

### BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Ancient Egypt's first continuous writing, or writing used in phrases rather than list form, appeared during the Old Kingdom (the twenty-sixth through twenty-second centuries BCE). Little of this early literature survives, particularly from the beginning of the era. However, a collection of poems known as the Pyramid Texts has been found in several pyramids from the end of the Old Kingdom period. These funerary texts, written at first for kings but then more commonly for nonroyal persons, were written on the walls of the tombs and contained prayers for the deceased to pass safely through the underworld and ascend to the sky as immortals. Tomb autobiographies, written by the most elite members of Old Kingdom society for inclusion in their tombs, also

developed during this time. By the end of the Old Kingdom, another type of literature came into being: wisdom texts, written to provide guidance for a younger or less experienced reader.

The Middle Kingdom (the twenty-first to seventeenth centuries BCE) marked the flourishing of ancient Egyptian literature under a stable and expanding state. The use of tomb autobiographies spread into a larger section of elite society, a change that some contemporary scholars have suggested led to further development of other written forms. Wisdom texts continued to flourish, while many different types of poetic, narrative, historical, and religious writing developed. Poetry of the Middle Kingdom was marked by a concern with the nature of an ethical life rather than a concentration on individual expression or emotions such as romantic love. Many works produced during the Middle Kingdom, such as the *Tale of Sinuhe* and *The Shipwrecked Sailor*, attained classic status during the subsequent eras of ancient Egypt.

Ancient Egyptian culture and, by extension, literature continued to thrive in the New Kingdom (the sixteenth through eleventh centuries BCE). Lyric poetry became common, while the earlier funerary text developed into books of the dead written to provide the deceased with magical protection on his or her way into the next world. Many texts were written in the more



This statue of Menkaure with Hathor and Anput is an example of a group statue with Old Kingdom features and proportions. Egyptian Museum, via Wikipedia. [Public domain.]

colloquial Late Egyptian rather than the Ancient Egyptian language that had become somewhat archaic. The wisdom text became less prominent as narratives and miscellanies, or collections of various types of texts compiled into an anthology, became more popular.

—Alyssa Connell

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Pyramid texts, the oldest known funerary texts of ancient Egypt, often included protection spells. Above, a limestone block fragment with pyramid texts found in the antechamber of Pepi I. Photo by Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin, Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology.



## ◆ Gilgamesh

One of the most important of all early human myths was only discovered, ironically, in the mid-nineteenth century. It was preserved in one of the earliest forms and examples of writing ever unearthed. In 1853, the Assyrian archaeologist Hormuzd Rassam was conducting fieldwork at the site of the ancient city of Nimrud in an area now part of Iraq. It was in this excavation that Rassam found the first copies of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (ca. 2000 BCE). Although Rassam could not decipher the tablet or place the myth, he immediately understood its potential importance. While twenty more years passed before a translation of the epic was published, scholars around the world soon came to recognize its significance. Although literally unheard of for thousands of years, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was the oldest piece of surviving literature in the world, coming likewise from the oldest human civilization. Through the twentieth century, further fragments of the myth were discovered, and academics began to understand the development of a myth that was foundational to human culture.

One of the core stories of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is the story of Gilgameš (Gilgamesh) and Huwawa. In this myth, Gilgameš is the warrior king of the city of Uruk (or Erech), a role he inherits from his father, a king, and his mother, a goddess. Gilgameš works to advance the city, building strong walls to protect it from outside invaders. When the story of Gilgameš and Huwawa begins, the king decides that he will travel into the distant cedar forests where the giant Huwawa lives, taking with him his constant companion and beloved ally, Enkidu, to complete the quest. The journey is inspired by Gilgameš's need to establish a legacy, knowing that his renown will last beyond his mortal death. It is also, however, a quest for the cedar resources of the forest, which were unavailable in the region of Uruk yet were valuable to the development and growth of the city. While he and Enkidu eventually complete their quest, gathering the cedar and slaughtering Huwawa through a mixture of deception and brute strength, they are ultimately chastised by the god Enlil for not instead welcoming Huwawa into their civilization.

Gilgameš and Huwawa is an important story in both the development of the character of Gilgameš and in the study of Sumerian civilization. Gilgameš is a figure who constantly struggles with the reality of human mortality. While he will try to achieve immortality following the death of his beloved Enkidu later in the myth, at the point



*Ancient Assyrian statue that may be of Gilgamesh, Louvre. Photo by Urban, via Wikipedia.*

of the story of Gilgameš and Huwawa, he has accepted that death is inevitable. In response, the king turns to civilization and to community—to his reliance on Enkidu and to the ongoing culture of Uruk—to form a meaning and a legacy that can transcend death. Gilgameš never truly finds peace in his crisis of mortality, but the myth of Gilgameš and Huwawa affirms that human civilization offers some solace, even when the humans themselves struggle through their own flaws and failings.

### SUMMARY

Gilgameš, the king of the Sumerian city of Uruk and a demigod, decides one day that he should head into the distant cedar mountains. The mountains are protected by a monstrous beast named Huwawa, but they also contain valuable lumber, which is difficult to obtain in the

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## ◆ Hinduism

Hinduism, one of the most important systems of religious belief both in the ancient past and in contemporary life, is thought to have begun around 200 BCE in South Asia and India. Although it is most known for its commitment to peace, gods capable of mighty destruction and war—including Śiva and Vishnu—also play important roles in Hindu mythology. Hinduism is one of the five largest religions in the world, and it has had a major influence on the art, architecture, and beliefs of southern Asia from India through Cambodia to Indonesia.

Although Vedism, an early form of Hinduism, existed from as early as 1500 BCE, Hinduism did not emerge in its classic configuration—with its emphasis on nonviolence, pilgrimages, and the celebration of multiple gods—until circa 200 BCE. Three primary ways to practice Hinduism developed: the way of deeds, the way of knowledge, and the way of devotion. Although each led to a different way of worship, each emphasized the limitations on physical desires as a precondition to entering Nirvana.

The way of deeds built on the existing idea of karma, which said that the way a person led his or her life would determine the individual's chance for deliverance through reincarnation. It also built on the traditional Indian beliefs in *ahimsā* (nonviolence) and *dharma* (good conduct). Various sets of laws of correct behavior were developed. The most famous of these is the *Manusmṛti* (probably compiled ca. 200 BCE–200 CE; *The Laws of*



*Statue of Shiva at Murdeshwar Temple, India. Photo by Pradeep717, via Wikipedia.*

*Manu*, 1886). These codes defined the rituals that a faithful Hindu should carry out to live the way of deeds successfully.

Knowledge was another path that could lead to spiritual fulfillment. According to this path, ignorance is the cause of evil and suffering for humans, and the awareness of the union with the Brahṁā is the desired spiritual state. The knowledge of having reached the union with Brahṁā indicates that one has escaped the wheel of life. This intellectual approach to salvation was more important among the priests and the elite.

The path followed by the common people to spiritual fulfillment has been the way of devotion. This means devoting the self to one of the manifestations of god such as Śiva or Vishnu (Viṣṇu), performing *puja* or worship rituals at their shrines, embarking on pilgrimages, and engaging in other acts of worship. The god can aid the devotee in his or her quest for deliverance from this life. The *Bhagavadgītā* (ca. 200 BCE–200 CE; *The*

## ◆ Helen of Troy

“Helen of Troy” was originally a Greek queen who, by absconding with a prince from Troy, helped ignite the famous Trojan war. Homer tells her story in his great epic poem the *Iliad*. In the midst of the Trojan War, the army of Greece has gathered to lay siege to the famed city of Troy. The army has been there nearly a decade, and their aim is to reclaim Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world and a daughter of the god Zeus. Helen’s beauty has earned her countless suitors, of whom the king of Sparta chose Menelaus to be her husband. However, the Trojan prince Paris came to the city of Sparta years after the marriage, supposedly on a friendly mission between the two cities but with the secret goal of seducing Helen. With the help of the goddess of love, Aphrodite, he won Helen’s heart and returned with her to Troy. Enraged, Menelaus gathered his massive armies and began the assault that now takes place.

The Trojan army advances from the gates of the city to meet the rallied Greek forces. Paris offers himself in one-on-one combat against any Greek warrior. Menelaus then steps forward from the Greek army and volunteers himself as Paris’s opponent. At first, Paris fears the famous warrior and tries to retreat from the battle, but his brother Hector chastises him for his lack of bravery, and he acquiesces. Paris and Menelaus agree that their duel will decide for good the outcome of the war, with the winner receiving Helen as a wife.



*The abduction of Helen, c. 1515–1527, Metropolitan Museum of Art, via Wikimedia. [Public domain.]*



*Attic amphora depicting Menelaus recovering Helen of Troy, c. 550 BCE. Painting by Amasis painter, via Wikimedia. [Public domain.]*

In the palace tower, the messenger goddess Iris visits Helen. Disguised as Paris’s sister, Iris inspires in Helen longing for her husband and her old Greek home and convinces Helen that she should watch the battle. Although Helen willfully ran away with Paris, she regrets the harm and misfortune that her romance has brought upon the Greeks, feeling great shame for her actions. She joins Priam, Paris’s father, alongside other lords of the city at the gates of Troy. There, she points out the famed warriors of Greece to them. Moments before the battle begins, Priam is overcome with worry and has to leave, fearful of seeing his own son’s death.

Menelaus and Paris begin their vicious battle. They first attack each other with spears, and then Menelaus breaks his sword over Paris’s helmet. It seems as though Menelaus will win back his wife when he manages to grab hold of the stunned Paris’s helmet. However, Aphrodite intervenes and breaks the helmet’s straps, setting Paris free again. Menelaus is about to stab Paris with his spear when Aphrodite uses her magic to spirit Paris away, placing him safely in his bed, where she also summons Helen. Although Helen is ashamed that Paris has abandoned the battle in this way, she lies with him while the soldiers of both armies search for the missing warrior.



Unable to find him, the Greeks insist that they have won and demand that Helen be returned to them.

### SIGNIFICANCE

As the most beautiful woman in the ancient Greek world, Helen has a long and varied history, with poets telling and retelling her story throughout the ages and Greek cults worshipping her as a goddess. This particular episode in Helen's life comes from the epic poem *The Iliad*, attributed to the poet Homer and believed to have been composed in the eighth century BCE, one of the most influential narratives in world literature.

The *Iliad* is a story of heroes and of fate, with warriors and generals willing to wage decade-long battles in order to earn their glory and protect their pride. Helen, as the daughter of Zeus and the most beautiful woman in the world, would certainly have been a valued queen and wife in Greek society. However, the extremes of the battle fought over her companionship have much more to do with prideful vengeance than with her actual companionship, and even the gods themselves influence the war in pursuit of the fame and honor that comes with their side winning. As Menelaus and Paris finally agree to a duel to settle their grievance, the lesser soldiers collapse in relief, finally believing they might go home rather than continue to battle for someone else's dignity.

In addition to narrating the war itself, this particular section reveals quite a bit about the characters of Paris and Helen, two lovers whose hasty decisions have resulted in the long siege. For her part, Helen is remorseful, and she realizes that her selfish behavior brings her shame rather than glory. When she looks upon the battlefield, the absence of her brothers inspires fear, not that they have died but rather that they did not come to defend her honor in the first place. While Helen worries, however, Paris comes across in a much worse light. He is initially unwilling to face Menelaus directly in battle, despite having affronted the man's pride by seducing his wife, and only agrees to do so when his brother calls him a coward. When he finally does engage in the battle, he quickly begins to lose and needs to be rescued by Aphrodite. The involvement of gods in the wars of ancient Greece often led to glorious moments in which the might of the deities would bless the human warriors. Paris, however, is shamed by his rescue, as Aphrodite—a goddess of love—not battle, carries him away like a weakling rather than bolstering his strength.

In the epic of valor and dignity that is the *Iliad*, Helen and Paris are hardly inspirational figures. Instead,



*Fresco from the House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii depicting Helen boarding a ship for Troy, via Wikipedia. [Public domain.]*

this moment serves as a counterpoint to the bravery of the other warriors. Love and beauty play important roles, and Aphrodite does heavily influence the outcome of the war. However, the real heroes of Homer's epic are those who stake their claims broadly and fight for their own honor, not those who hide in bed with their beautiful wives at the day's end.

—T. Fleischmann



When the planet Uranus was discovered in the eighteenth century, five other planets had already been named for Roman gods. Three of those—Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn—were grandfather, father, and son in Roman mythology. Mars was the son of Jupiter and Jupiter was the son of Saturn. Continuing the naming tradition made the sixth planet Uranus, because Saturn’s Greek name was Cronus and his father was Uranus.

—Rebecca Kraft Rector

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## ◆ Zeus

Zeus, one of the most famous and important of all the gods of ancient Greece, was seen as a mighty deity who came to power by overthrowing his father, Cronus, just as Cronus had previously come to power by overthrowing *his* own father, Uranus.

### PLOT SUMMARY

Before the age of the Olympian gods, the universe is ruled by Gaia and Uranus, the earth goddess and sky god, and their children, the Titans. One of the Titans, Cronus, overthrows Uranus, and he and his sister Rhea become



Head of Zeus on a gold stater; Lampsacus, c. 360–340 BCE. Photo by Jastrow, via Wikipedia.

the king and queen of the gods, initiating a long period of peace and celebration in their realm.

While it is the duty of the Titans to give birth to more gods and goddesses, Cronus learns that just as he overthrew his own father, one of his children would someday come to overthrow him. Unwilling to give up his power or his physical relations with his wife, he insists on swallowing up their children the moment they are born. One after the other, Cronus swallows Hestia, Hades, Demeter, Poseidon, and finally Hera, imprisoning some of the most powerful deities inside of his stomach before they even have the chance to see a full day. While the gods and goddesses do not die, they remain weak and unable to usurp their father.

Rhea is distressed by her husband’s violent actions and seeks the advice of her parents, Gaia and Uranus. These gods agree to help Rhea not only for her benefit and for the benefit of their grandchildren but also because Cronus had overthrown and castrated Uranus years before. They know that if they can save only one infant from Cronus, that child will grow to overthrow him, securing their revenge.

On the advice of her parents, Rhea travels to the island of Crete as soon as she is ready to give birth. There, Gaia herself receives the child Zeus from Rhea, covering him with her protective arms and hurrying him to a sacred, hidden cave in the heavy forests of Mount Aigion.