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New Perspectives



JANE R. MCINTOSH

A B C  C L I O

Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

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Series Editor's Preface

In recent years there has been a significant and steady increase of academic and popular interest in the study of past civilizations. This is due in part to the dramatic coverage, real or imagined, of the archaeological profession in popular film and television, and to extensive journalistic reporting of spectacular new finds from all parts of the world. Because archaeologists and other scholars, however, have tended to approach their study of ancient peoples and civilizations exclusively from their own disciplinary perspectives and for their professional colleagues, there has long been a lack of general factual and other research resources available for the nonspecialist. The *Understanding Ancient Civilizations* series is intended to fill that need.

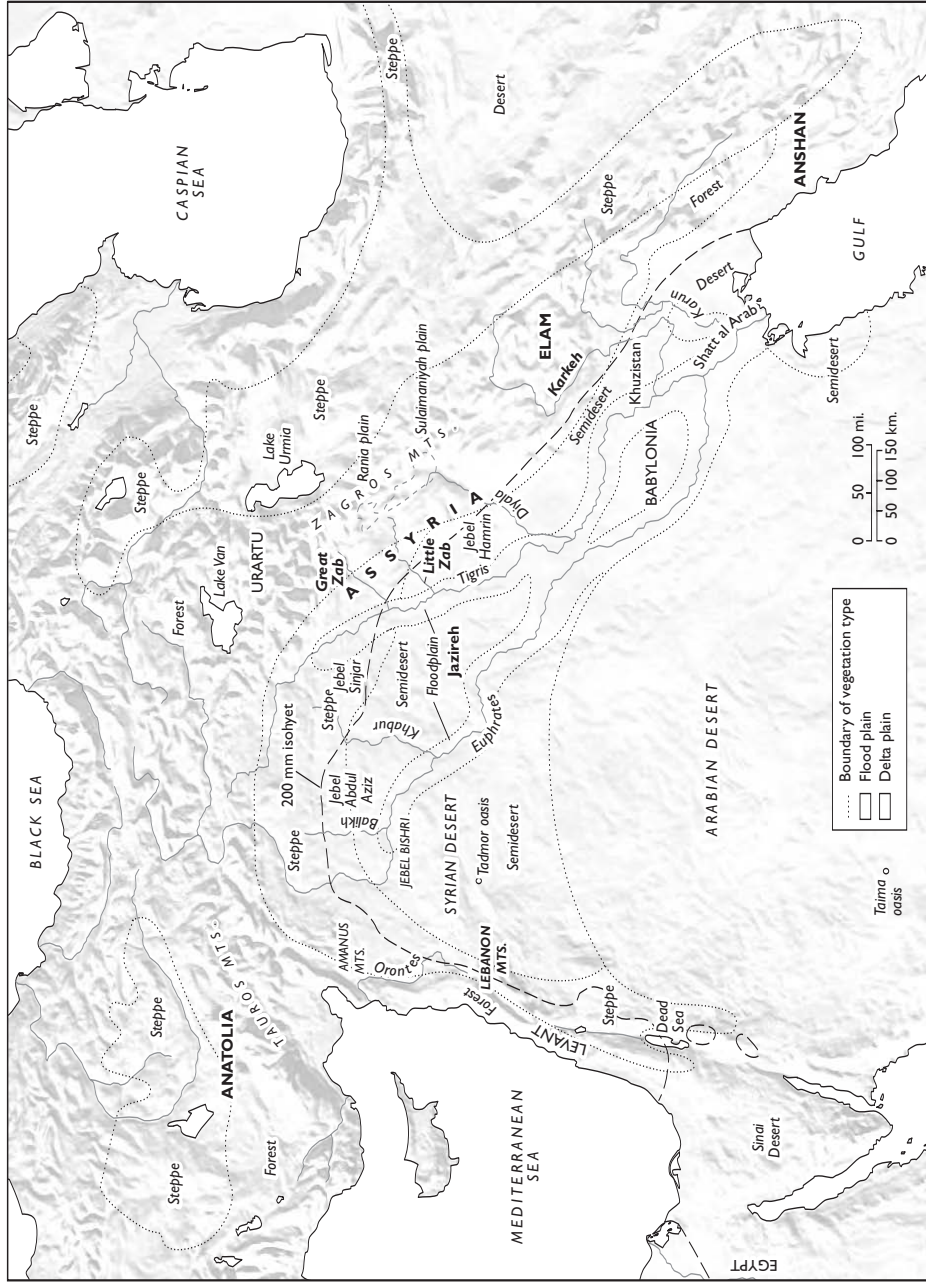
Volumes in the series are principally designed to introduce the general reader, student, and nonspecialist to the study of specific ancient civilizations. Each volume is devoted to a particular archaeological culture (e.g., the ancient Maya of southern Mexico and adjacent Guatemala) or cultural region (e.g., Israel and Canaan) and seeks to achieve, with careful selectivity and astute critical assessment of the literature, an expression of a particular civilization and an appreciation of its achievements.

The keynote of the *Understanding Ancient Civilizations* series is to provide, in a uniform format, an interpretation of each civilization that will express its culture and place in the world, as well as qualities and background that make it unique.

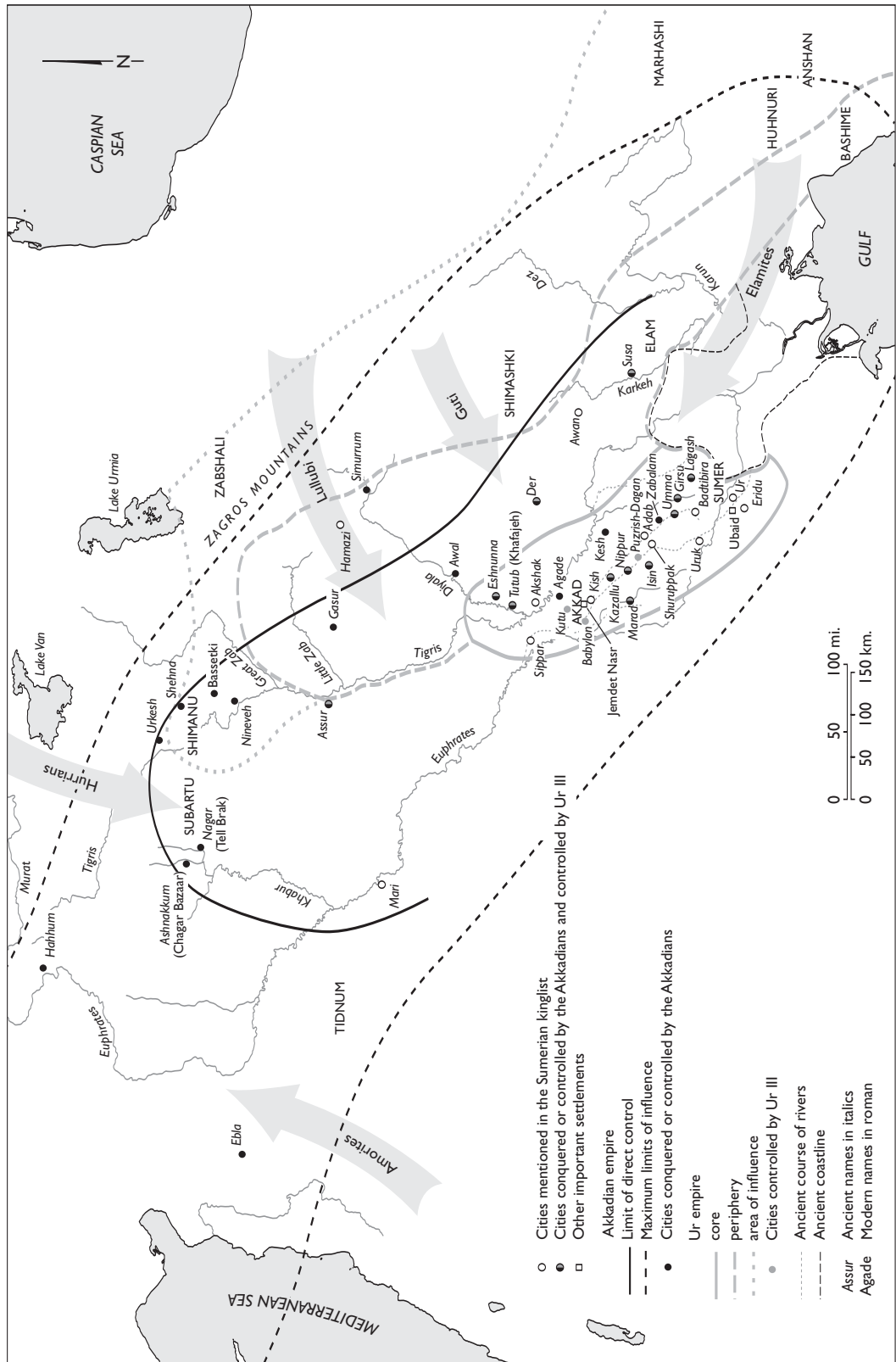
Series titles include volumes on the archaeology and prehistory of the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Greece, Rome, and Mesopotamia, as well as the achievements of the Celts, Aztecs, and Inca, among others. Still others are in the planning stage.

I was particularly fortunate in having Kevin Downing from ABC-CLIO contact me in search of an editor for a series about archaeology. It is a simple statement of the truth that there would be no series without him. I was also lucky to have Simon Mason, Kevin's successor from ABC-CLIO, continuing to push the production of the series. Given the scale of the project and the schedule for production, he deserves more than a sincere thank you.

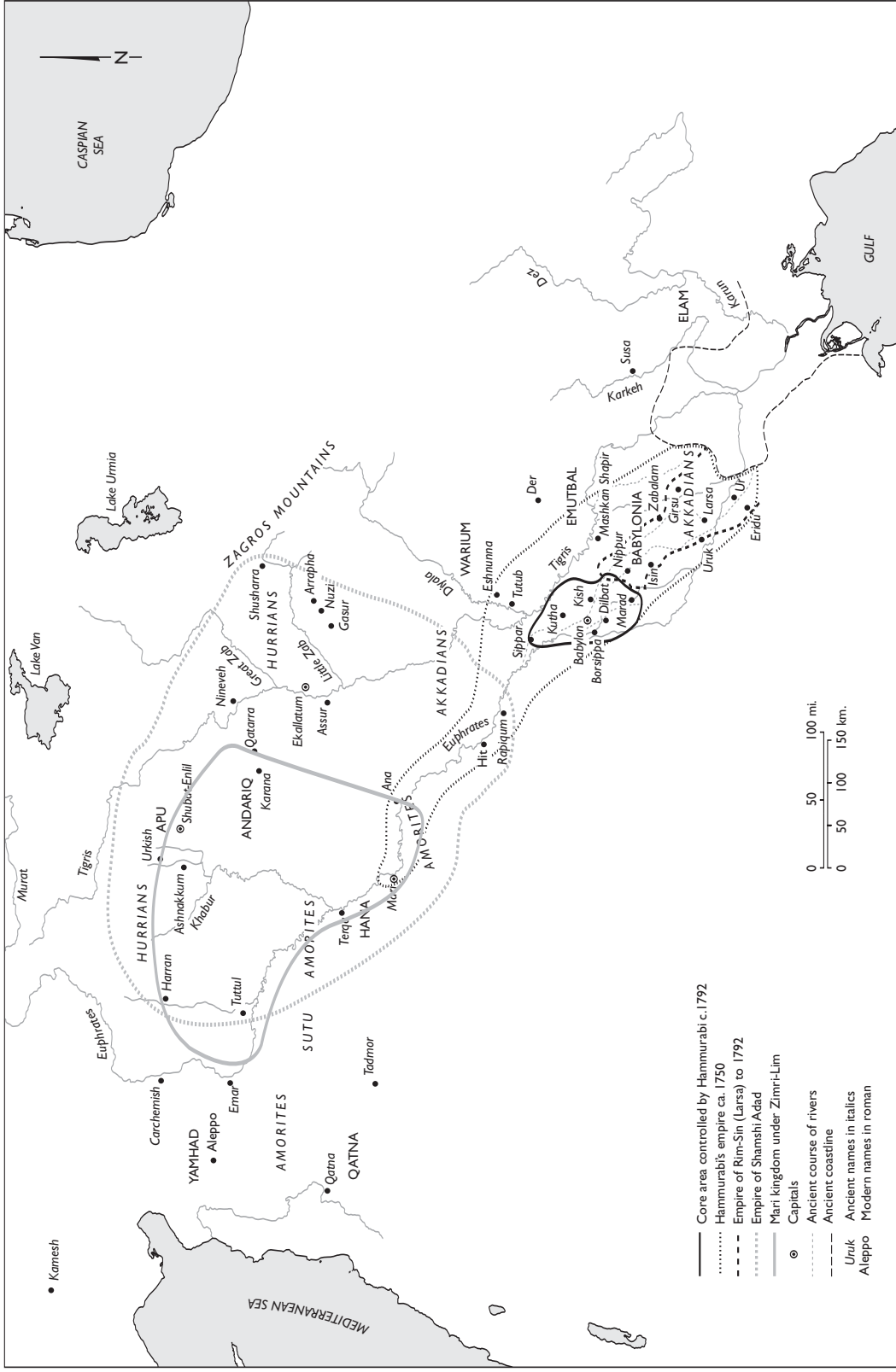
JOHN WEEKS



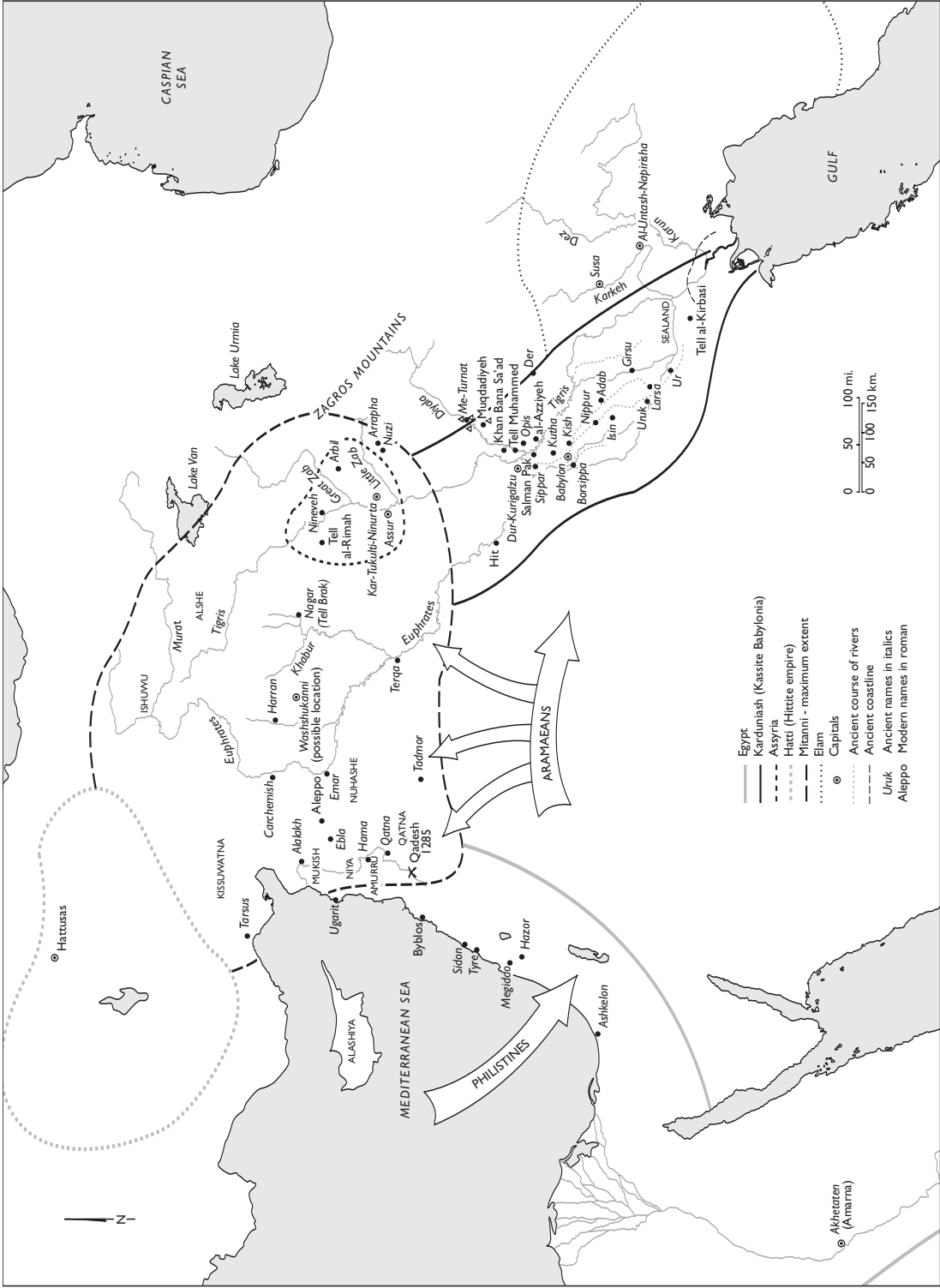
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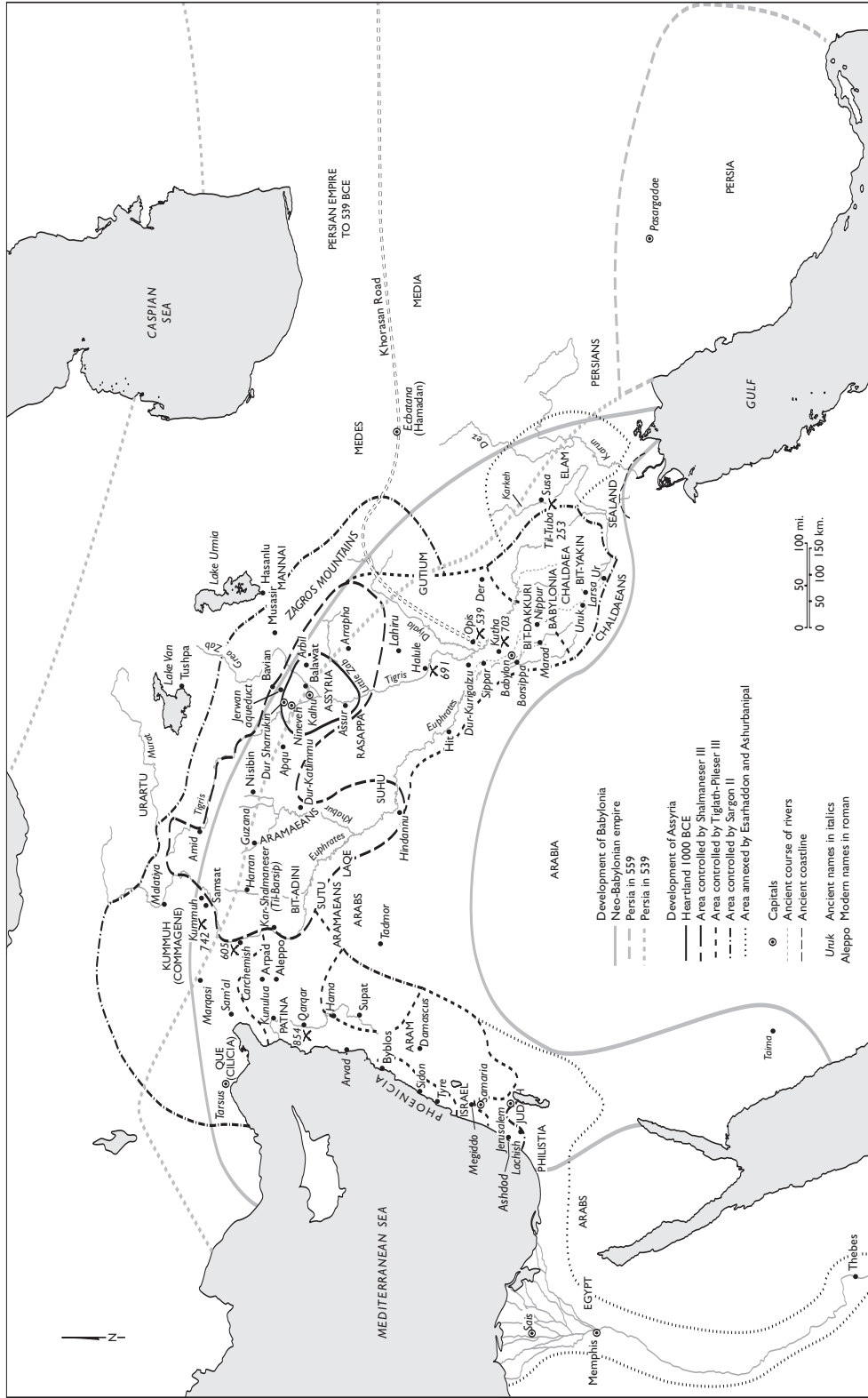
Sumer and Akkad in the Third Millennium



Early Second-Millennium Empires



Later Second-Millennium Empires



Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Empires





PART I
Introduction



CHAPTER I

Introduction

MESOPOTAMIA IN THE NEAR EAST

Mesopotamia—the land between the rivers—is the Classical name for the ancient land that lies along the Tigris and Euphrates, ancient Assyria and Babylonia. Most of it is now within present-day Iraq, but it also includes parts of eastern Syria and small parts of Turkey and Iran; conversely, the modern state of Iraq includes areas that in antiquity were outside Mesopotamia. To the west lies the Syrian Desert, home in the past to seminomadic groups—Amorites, Aramaeans, and Arabs—and the foothills and mountains to the east held other tribal groups, including Guti and Lullubi. Beyond them the Iranian plateau nurtured city-states and empires: in the west Elam by the fourth millennium, and Media and Persia in the first, by turns enemies, friends, and trading partners of the Mesopotamians. Mountainous regions also set a northern limit to Mesopotamia, as the Zagros swung west to join the Taurus range: Here the kingdom of Urartu grew up in the first millennium B.C.E., with Mannai to its southeast in the northern Zagros. Further west lies Anatolia, where towns and cities eventually united into the great Hittite Empire. City-states and kingdoms also sprang up in the Levant; their inhabitants included the seafaring Phoenicians and their enterprising predecessors, and the peoples of the Bible. The region is today the scene of strife and hostility among states and would-be states; in antiquity it was no less turbulent, fought over by local states but also frequently a battleground between the empires of Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Egypt, and beyond them Iran and Europe. At their greatest extent, the empires of Mesopotamia ruled not only the Levant and all the lands between but also Egypt itself. The Persians added this entire region to their empire, which already controlled the lands from Thessaly to northern India; and Alexander the Great united these briefly with Greece and its dominions before the region was carved up by his successors.

THE CRADLE OF CIVILIZATION

The Near East and Egypt had been the cradle of Western civilization; after Alexander, Europe increasingly played a dominant role. By the nineteenth century C.E., Europe was a world power and the Near East was in decline under the decaying Ottoman Empire. Memories of its former greatness were kept alive through the distorting lens of the Bible, but investigations of its past, at first by amateur antiquarians, giving way to progressively more skilled and

competent professional archaeologists, gradually revealed the true magnificence of its history.

Southern Mesopotamia—ancient Babylonia—and more particularly Sumer, its southern part, first saw the emergence of many of the developments that transformed the world into the urban society of today. Intensive agriculture, industrial production, state-controlled religion, complex stratified society, and the city itself had their beginnings here, as did many key innovations—including writing, without which we could neither share nor preserve our cultural and technological heritage. Sumer’s achievements were built on developments elsewhere in the Near East, where millennia earlier agriculture had had its beginnings, providing a way of life able to sustain large and densely packed sedentary communities. The Near East and Sumer were not the only regions of the world in which these developments took place, but they were the first, and many of the lands beyond them were to adopt their innovations and build upon the foundations they had laid.

REVEALING MESOPOTAMIA’S PAST

The cruel picture of merciless Assyrian armies and Babylonian despots painted in the Bible was given substance by the discoveries in the nineteenth century in the ancient Assyrian cities and palaces—but a far richer and more varied world was also revealed. Alongside the enthusiastic but often destructive activities of the excavators, whose finds richly furnished the Oriental departments of major museums in Europe and the United States, the painstaking efforts of linguists and epigraphers enabled the writings of the ancient Mesopotamians to be deciphered and read once more. The deeds of kings, the exploits of heroes, and the acts of the gods were now laid bare, alongside the smug achievements of schoolboys, the angry actions of litigants, the careful calculations of engineers, and the devotions of priestesses. The clay that was the medium for writing for most of Mesopotamian history ensured the survival of huge numbers of texts, and the process of reading and publishing them occupies a major part in uncovering the story of Mesopotamia’s past, which is still far from complete. Monographs and journals are now being supplemented and will perhaps one day be superseded by the Internet, which offers modern scholars the opportunity to share their discoveries swiftly, universally, and cheaply. The modern world is less helpful in the opportunities it affords for investigation in the field, since most of ancient Mesopotamia lies in Iraq, virtually closed to scholars since 1991, shifting excavations and survey work to adjacent but often still troubled regions like Syria. The Iraq War has made Mesopotamia’s past even more inaccessible and has enabled looters to obliterate many of the remaining sites.

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