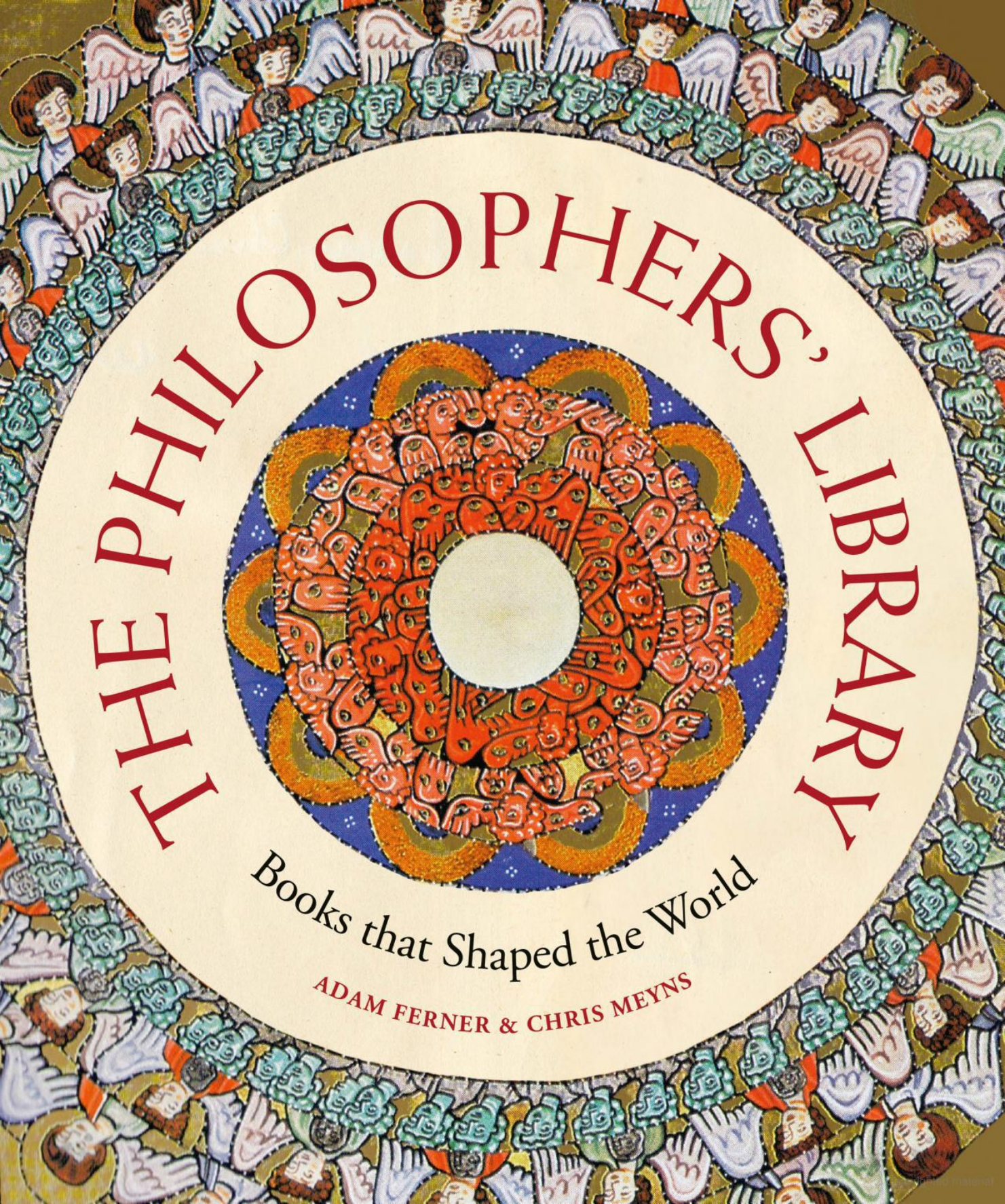
THE PHILOSOPHERS' LIBRARY
Books that Shaped the World
ADAM FERNER & CHRIS MEYNS

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

RIGHT

Destruction of Books by Qín Shǐ Huáng, Eighteenth Century, China

Painted on a silk scroll by an unknown artist, the image shows the Chinese Emperor ordering the burning of books as well as the live burial of Rúist scholars. The painting is now housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, having been donated by the estate of Henri Bertin, an eighteenth-century, French comptroller of the East India Company.

BELOW

Burning of the Library of Alexandria, 1532, Germany.

This woodcut by the German designer Hans Weiditz depicts the Library's supposed founder Ptolemaeus Philadelphus despairing at the conflagration and being forced to choose which books to save. It is found in a text titled *On the Remedies of Good and Bad Fortune*.

Books are surprisingly hard to burn. The paper from which they are made is often so tightly compacted that there is insufficient oxygen for them to easily catch. This does not stop people from trying. While the book as we know it today – printed sheaves of paper, bound in covers – is a relatively recent innovation, the burning of literary works has a history as long as it is troubling.

Among the first ever recorded burnings are those in 221 BCE, ordered by the first Emperor of the Qín dynasty as a statement of his new empire's anti-Rúist ideology. Scrolls and scripts from around the provinces were burned by the wagonload. Then there is the razing of the Library of Alexandria by Roman forces under the direction of Julius Caesar as part of his campaign against Ptolemaic Egypt. In the twelfth century the supporters of Muhammad bin Bakhtiyār Khaljī set fire to the the library at the Indian Nālandā University, creating a blaze so fierce it supposedly took months to die out. The streets of Florence were coated with ash after the spontaneous 'Bonfire of the Vanities' in 1497 and in 1562, Bishop Diego de Landa Calderón ordered the burning of Maya books in the city of Maní, in Yucatán, Mexico. Somewhat later, in 1814, British forces set the Library of Congress in Washington ablaze in retaliation for American attacks in Canada. And in the 1930s the National Socialist 'Nazi' party conducted a widespread campaign of ceremonial book burnings throughout Germany and Austria, targeting anti-fascist or socialist literature and works by Jewish authors.

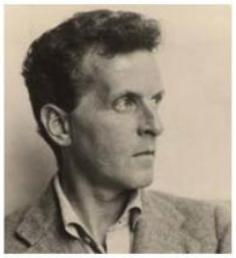
Why would anyone want to burn a book? Because books are incendiary – in more senses than one. They are *powerful*. The printed page can contain radical ideas and as such books can be subject to censure and censorship, even to hatred. They are symbols, ciphers and carriers of explosive and challenging philosophies that other groups may seek to suppress. Book burnings stand alongside similar forms of cultural assault, such as the destruction of archaeological sites and attacks upon religious monuments. They play as important a role in warfare today as they did in days past; witness the damage sustained by the Iraq National Library and Archive in Baghdad during the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States and allied forces. The 8,000 rare texts burned when militant group Dā'esh (ISIS, the so-called 'Islamic State') detonated a bomb in Mosul Public Library in 2015 are among the most recent losses – but they will not be the last.

It is the power of books that makes book burnings themselves demonstrations of power. They are threats and expressions of force, as well as a marking of both territorial and cultural borders. At the same time that the Nazis were throwing banned books – philosophical or otherwise – on

ABOVE

Adolf Hitler, cover of *Mein Kampf*, People's Edition, 1933, Franz Eher Verlag: Munich, Germany.

Mass-produced at the start of the Second World War, this propagandising fascist text *Mein Kampf* – or *My Struggle* – was used to promote the dictator's Nazi ideology. It was printed and distributed by the Nazi Party's central publishing house, Eher-Verlag.



ABOVE

Portrait of Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1930, Cambridge, UK.

This photograph of the Austrian-British philosopher was taken during his time teaching at Cambridge and is currently in the Austrian National Library. By way of strange coincidence, the young Wittgenstein was in the same class as Adolf Hitler at a school in Linz.

to bonfires, they were handing out copies of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (printed in the hundreds of thousands by the state). In so doing they demarcated the ideological space within which their movement lived; *this*, they were saying, is what falls within; *that* is what falls without. *This* is acceptable; *that* is forbidden.

This practice of cultural and philosophical demarcation also takes other, less inflammatory forms. Linda Nochlin, Charles Mills and Michael Apple have shown that the suppression of literature also occurs in the creation of literary canons, curricula, syllabi and lists of Great Works. This process is less eye-catching than the fire and fury of burning books, but it is consequently more pernicious and less easily arrested. By subtle and insidious means certain figures are pushed to the margins of history, even as others are celebrated, championed, their names inscribed on the façades of learned institutions. It is all part of a system of subtle 'memory management', of which book burnings are simply the most visible manifestation.

One question we have encountered in the writing of this book is why some works are deemed 'Classics' of philosophical literature. Another intimately related question is what makes a work of philosophical literature and – rippling out from this – the question of what, exactly, is 'philosophy'.

Maybe there is no single essential feature, nor even a determinate collection of features, that makes a text a work of philosophy. Perhaps, to use a concept developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein, we group works of philosophy by 'family resemblance'. Members of the group partake of some set of a series of overlapping similarities, but no single feature needs to be shared by all. While it might be hard to lock down exactly what constitutes a work of philosophy, we know one when we see it.

Unfortunately there are serious issues with a method that relies, in whole or in part, on statements that individuals 'look the same' or claims that 'you can just tell'. These are issues that Wittgenstein, as a Jewish man living through the rise of Nazism and as a queer man forced to hide his sexual identity, would have been more sensitive to than many. Individual biases flourish, and any list born from this method will reveal more about *who* is doing the looking, and who is doing the telling, than about philosophy itself.

As European authors, educated in an Anglophone tradition, we have been trained (without always being aware of it) to have a very specific and local view of philosophical history. Part of this education involved being told that our history is neither specific nor local, but monolithic and impartial. We have been fed Eurocentric reading lists and introductory texts that reinforce an image of philosophy as a series of 'great works' by 'great men' (typically European and typically racialised as white). Our 'Classics' reflect what Peter Linebaugh calls 'philhellenism', the love of Hellenic culture: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle figure prominently. This is no accident. We find compelling Martin Bernal's observations that the British love of Hellenic literature arose at the peak of the Atlantic slave trade, when the British Empire was heavily invested in disparaging the cultural output of the Nile Valley and the African peoples they were enslaving. Philosophical catalogues are deeply enmeshed with projects of empire.

In compiling our selection of books, we have tried to examine the generally unspoken understanding of what makes a text 'properly philosophical'. We raise questions about why certain texts rise to prominence at certain times while others are left languishing. The

canons of philosophical literature are sites of domination and resistance. Philosophical texts are remembered for socio-political reasons.

This connects to a broader point about the cultural politics of philosophy as a discipline. Philosophical thought is important. Philosophical puzzles are not like the puzzles at the back of a newspaper; they are not simply mind games to be pondered at leisure. Despite philosophers' attempts to remove themselves from everyday life – working in seclusion in seminar rooms and behind the veils of technical jargon – even the most abstruse, abstract theories are of political relevance. The consequence of an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object, for instance, may seem the subject of idle musing. Yet when we realise that the unstoppable force is God and the immovable object is a law of logic, we see a very real political quandary about the investment of epistemic authority: do we trust institutions of reason or institutions of revelation? Philosophy, no matter how much it pretends to the contrary, is politically active.

None of these thoughts is especially original, of course. The belief of Audre Lorde, philosopher-activist and poet, that 'There are no new ideas' bears repeating at the start of a book about philosophical innovations. As Kristie Dotson has explained, the

LEFT

Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley, 1797, France.

Jean-Baptiste Belley played a crucial role in the Haitian Revolution as a captain of infantry fighting against the colonists. The painting, which shows Belley leaning nonchalantly on a bust of the French philosopher G.T. Raynal, was the work of the artist Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Triosont and emphasises the connections between theory and revolution.

ABOVE

Egyptian papyrus, *c.* 1250 BCE, Egypt

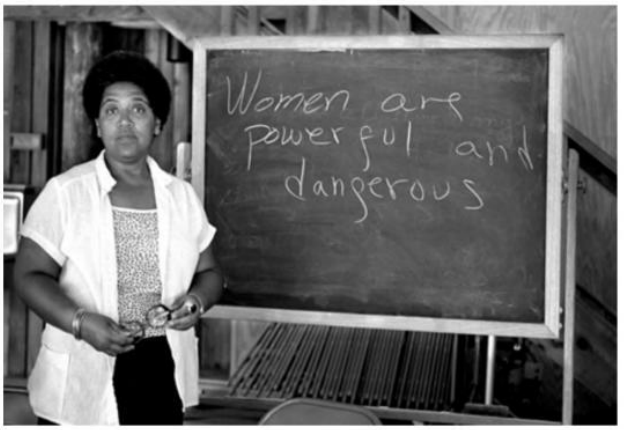
Known as the 'Papyrus of Ani', this scroll was found in the Tomb of Ani and depicts the god Anubis 'weighing the heart of the deceased'. Like many of the works illustrated in this book, it was smuggled out of the place of origin by antiquarians and currently resides in a museum of the imperial power that took it – in this case, the British Museum.

fetishisation of newness and originality is both misdirected and politically tied to the 'newness' of the 'New World' – the marking out of ancient spaces for colonisation and exploitation. Instead of spontaneous novelty, this book aims to emphasise shifts and reconfigurations. Descartes' *'cogito'*, for example, is the retelling of an argument found in Ibn Sīnā (and reformulated in earlier works), which allows the former to distance himself from the Aristotelian scholasticism of dominant contemporaries. Leibniz's theodicy, which reiterates notions found as far back as the *Babylonian Kōhelet*, defends the status quo as 'the best possible world'; it thus carries a particular weight in the context of his employ by the House of Brunswick of the Holy Roman Empire.

Relatedly, we want to challenge the idea that thoughts emerge, complete and discrete, from single and singular minds. The notion of a lone 'genius', producing radically new ideas in isolation, is narratively helpful but historically vexed. More often the evidence points to individuals who develop ideas in concert with their contemporaries, predecessors, collaborators and intellectual opposites. Instead of abstracting individuals out of their broader contexts, we try to highlight the rich intellectual communities and co-authoring projects of which they were so often a part. The bias towards individual scholars also connects with the privileging of written, rather than oral traditions – and while the focus here is on books, we attempt to incorporate literal as well as literary conversations.

The following chapters are ordered roughly chronologically and consider constellations of concepts that appear throughout philosophical literatures. Rather than one single, linear, grand narrative, they lay out multiple, fascinating, interweaving patterns of philosophy's history. Chapter One, 'Natural Divides', covers the early period stretching from 2500 to 300 BCE; it examines the conceptual moves by which local concerns are rendered global – 'naturalisation' – which occurs in the very earliest philosophical texts of the *Vedas* and the *Dàodé Jīng*. Chapter Two, 'Boundary Crossings' (300 BCE–200 CE), spans the start of the first millennium. It considers the works that lent legitimacy to the imperial projects of the Persian and Macedonian Empires, as well as the revolutionary epistemologies of Siddhārtha Gautama and Mahāvīra in Ancient India. In Chapter Three, 'Assimilation' (200–600 CE), we discuss the ways in which works of radical critique are neutralised by governing bodies who absorb them into mainstream culture – a process apparent in Roman, Vedic and Rúist society. During the period covered in Chapter Four, 'Regimes of Truth' (600–1000 CE), we turn our attention to the 'Islamic Golden Age'; here we explore the different truth-telling bodies and the books they produced to defend different conceptions of reality. Chapter Five, 'Balanced States' (1000–1450), continues this theme and articulates a tension in the texts of Christian, Islamic and Jewish scholars between deference to the laws of revelation and to the laws of reason. In Chapter Six, 'Open Borders' (1450–1850), we consider how narratives about reason and 'natural philosophy' begin to displace the modes of older institutions, giving rise to more 'scientific' establishments while simultaneously legislating colonial expansion on 'objective' grounds. Our final chapter, 'Grand Narratives', brings us up to the year 2000. In this we examine the way in which philosophical themes shift in relation to world events such as the World Wars, the Cold War, decolonisation and liberation.

Book burnings evoke a special kind of horror. *All* ideas bear remembering – even, and perhaps especially, the more troubling ones – and it is for this reason that the bibliographic histories on which this book is based are so important. Even when they contain disturbing, confrontational, or 'impolitic' ideas, books best bring light, warmth and excitement not when they are in flames but when they are read. With that in mind we hope that you enjoy our book and the tapestries and colours of the histories it contains.



ABOVE

Portrait of Audre Lorde, 1983, Florida, USA.

The writer, feminist, poet and civil-rights activist poses for a photograph during her residency at the Atlantic Centre for the Arts in New Smyrna Beach, Florida. On the blackboard we see the words: 'Women are powerful and dangerous'.

1

NATURAL DIVIDES

(2500 BCE–300 BCE)

1 Begin at the beginning?

Where should a book about books begin? The first printed paper books only start to appear at the very end of the first millennium of the Common Era. Beginning there, we would neglect a whole range of philosophical texts from Babylonia, Greece, the Indian subcontinent and many other places besides. But how far back can we feasibly reach? There is no 'dawn of civilization': humans have gathered into sophisticated social groups for hundreds of thousands of years, right back to and beyond the Sangoan culture in present-day Uganda in 65,000 BCE. Yet the further back we stretch the more gestural our histories become. Artefacts from the earliest human cultures are few and far between; the stories they tell are partial and often ambiguous.

Histories start stabilising (relatively speaking) around 3000 BCE. Thanks to new archaeological methods, we are beginning to get a much better sense of this period. We know, for instance, that the islands we call 'Britain' were little more than a network of swamps populated by a few people and some hardy boars. North America was much the same, though with more bison than boars, and slightly less bog.

On the continent of Africa, however, technologically developed societies already had an impressive cultural output. Nubian kingdoms, in the region of modern-day Sudan and southern Egypt, had already been around for centuries. Further north, Pharaoh Mnj ('Menes' or 'Narmer') and his court were ushering in the Dynastic Period of Egyptian history, from which emerged the pyramids, hieroglyphic writing and the Sphinx of Giza. The Nile played a significant part in the east African economy, making the region immensely fertile and rendering it the 'breadbasket' of the world.

Around the same time, the Sumerian and Akkadian Empires were established in Mesopotamia, a region covering present-day Iraq. Here the empires expanded and contracted along the similarly fertile Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Further east, in modern-day Pakistan, the Harappān civilization was spreading throughout the Indus Valley and traces of its deep roots still remain today.

These were highly advanced civilisations with their own cities, political systems and distinctive cultures. They should give pause for thought to those seduced by the idea of history as a process of linear progression from lesser societies to more advanced ones. These empires were far from 'primitive', and their cultural and social procedures shape much of the so-called modern world.

Among the technologies developed at the time was writing. Tally systems and pictograms have existed for millennia, but the emergence of these vast governing bodies, alongside the associated expansion of cities, meant that record keeping had to adapt to keep pace with trade. Writing systems became more and more complex. The Sumerians used a wedge-like script called cuneiform, which by the middle of the third millennium BCE had shifted from pictograms to more abstract figures, closer to the characters in which this book is written. The Egyptians employed hieroglyphs and a cursive writing system called hieratic, often

BELOW

Proto-Cuneiform tablet, *c.* 3100–2900 BCE, Mesopotamia.

The pictographs on this Sumerian clay tablet record details of barley distribution and include an impression of a male figure, hunting dogs and boars. The marks were drawn in the clay with a pointed implement, perhaps a reed pen or a stylus with a wedge-shaped tip. It is currently housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art after it was purchased from the collection of the Swiss antiquarians Marie-Louise and Hans Erlenmeyer. The routes by which these objects fall into public or private ownership are fascinating and often troubling, but unfortunately largely outside the ambit of this book.

ABOVE

The Seated Scribe, *c.* 3800–1710 BCE, Egypt.

This Egyptian statue portrays an unknown figure in a white kilt, holding a partially rolled papyrus scroll. The inlaid eyes consist of red-veined white magnesite with truncated rock crystal. Taken out of Egypt by the French archaeologist Auguste Mariette in the nineteenth century, it is currently housed in the Louvre.

LEFT

Detail from the Stele of Zezen-nakht, *c.* 2000 BCE, Egypt

A 'stele' is an upright stone slab, which typically bears a commemorative inscription or relief design. This one, uncovered in Naqādah, is rendered in stucco and paint and portrays the nobleperson Zezen-nakht, wearing a curled wig, sandals and a white kilt. It presently resides in the Toledo Museum of Art.

written with reed quills on papyrus. And it is from papyrus, a material produced from the malleable pith of the papyrus plant, that our first philosophical text, *The Maxims of Ptahhotep*, was made.

2 Divine instructions

One of the world's earliest examples of systematic ethical thought hails from the Nile Valley in north Africa, in the Old Kingdom of ancient Egypt (or 'Kemet'). It involves sets of instructions or teachings (*sebayt*) and offers both theoretical insight and a guide to practical action, with the aim of moral and spiritual uplift. The intention was to encourage people to speak truly, act correctly and contribute to the community.

The Maxims of Ptahhotep (*c.* 2000 BCE) was written by pth-htp, or 'Ptahhotep', a high-ranked official, for his son (also named Ptahhotep). It provides practical, ethical guidelines for proper conduct. What should you do, for instance, if someone behaves aggressively towards you? Show restraint and humility, advises the author. Avoid behaving in ways that might irritate others. Be humble. Take responsibility if friends entrust things to you. Do not be selfish or greedy. Do not gossip. Foreshadowing today's self-help manuals, the *Maxims* recognize the value of self-promotion. 'If you give heed to these things about which I have spoken to you', says the author, 'all your affairs will be successful.'

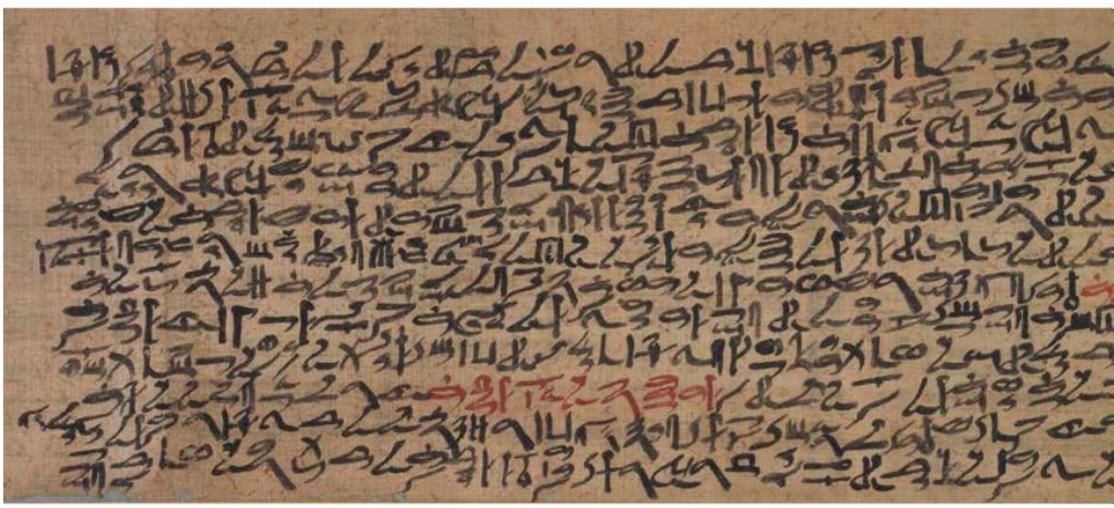
A core concept that underpins these instructions is that of '*Ma'at*'. Ma'at is concerned with moral values and doing what is right; it means truth, justice and uprightness. However, the word also means evenness, straightness and correctness, and as such reflects the order and regularity in the world. An ethical and a metaphysical principle, Ma'at upholds both the laws of the universe and of human society.

> **Great is Maʾat, and its foundation is firmly established**
> **It has not been shaken since the time of Osiris**
>
> **And he who violates the laws must be punished.**

We are told in the *Maxims* that the wise are lovers of Ma'at. Their learning allows them to gain insight into the natures of things. As a result, they are well placed to provide instructions about how to behave, revealing that order in nature and order in society are intertwined.

But who exactly are 'the wise' here? In the tradition of the time (as in many subsequent ages), those with the luxury to engage in abstract theorising were mainly the nobility and powerful officials. The scholar and architect Imhotep, who lived in the second millennium BCE, was also a high priest. The great Pesešet was a doctor, instructor and funerary priestess, while her near-contemporary Hordedef was a prince associated with the prestigious Giza pyramids. Akhenaten, also known as Amenhotep IV (d. *c.* 1335 BCE), was a king. Written instructions about the cosmic legitimacy of the status quo were delivered by people at the top.

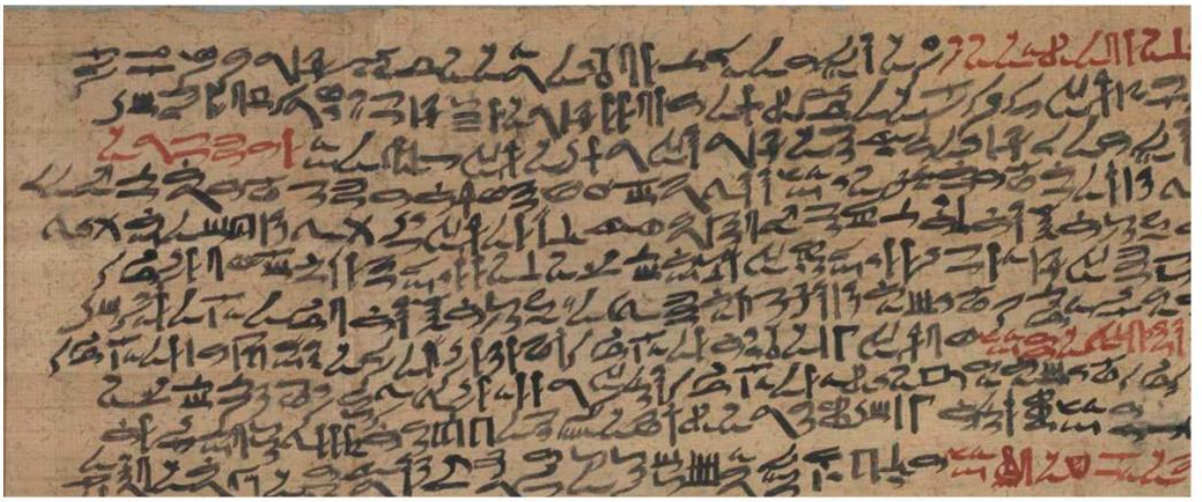
Our next text shows what happens when someone tries to question social orthodoxy. Anglophone scholars typically refer to this work as the 'Babylonian Theodicy'.

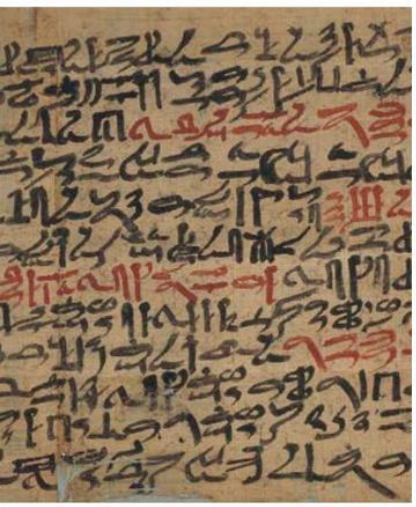


LEFT

Portrait of Ptahhotep, *c.* 2400 BCE, Egypt.

This light relief is found in the mastaba or 'tomb' of Ptahhotep in the north-west part of the necropolis of Saqqara. This detail from a larger image shows Ptahhotep sitting before an offering table, drinking from a beaker.





ABOVE AND LEFT

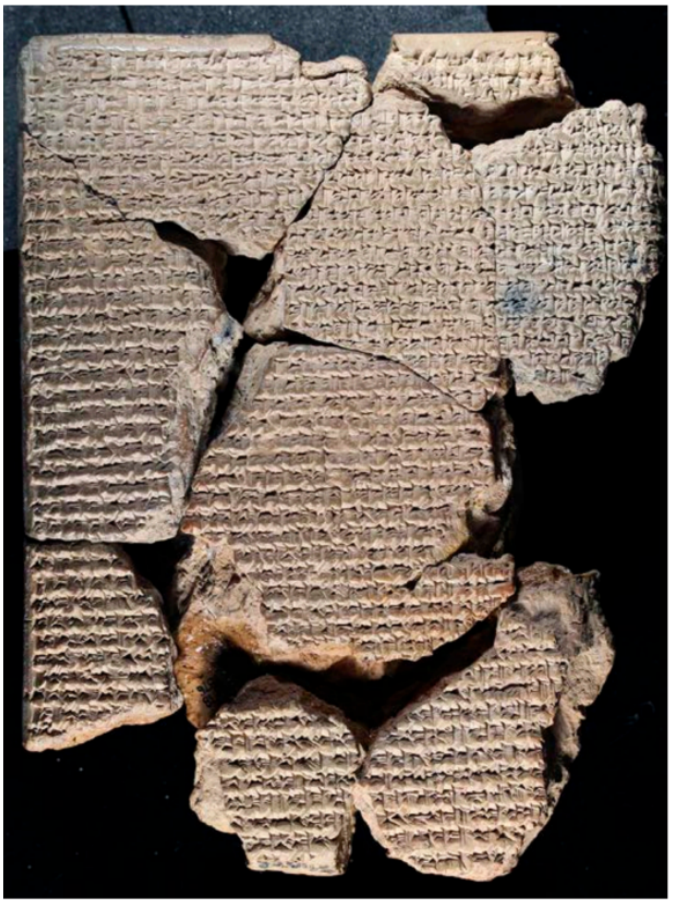
Ptahhotep, Maxims of Ptahhotep, *c.* 2000 BCE, Egypt.

This is the only surviving copy of the *Maxims*, which forms a part of the so-called 'Papyrus Prisse', found inside the coffin of Pharaoh Sekhemre-Wepmaat Intef and appropriated by Émile Prisse d'Avennes in 1847. In this section, Ptahhotep warns his interlocutor against being excessively proud of learning. As a result of Prisse's endeavours, it now resides in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

3 Gods, kings and theodicies

Babylonia was the ancient kingdom that grew to prominence around 1850 BCE in Mesopotamia, in the middle of the 'fertile crescent' around the Euphrates and Tigris rivers (the 'rivers of Babylon'). Babylonian society was contiguous with the cultures that came before, and many of their technological and artistic developments were built on those of the Sumerian and Akkadian peoples who had previously ruled in the region. This includes the cuneiform Akkadian language in which the *Theodicy* is written.

Sometimes referred to as the *Babylonian Kōheleṯ* (*c.* 1000 BCE), the structure of the theodicy is dialogic. We read about two people who are discussing suffering. Neither is given a name, but scholars typically refer to them as the 'Sufferer' and the 'Friend'. The Sufferer, the grumpier of the two, bemoans the unfairness of the world. Why do bad people prosper? Why do good people suffer? Why do the gods let this kind of unfairness persist?



RIGHT

Fragment of the Babylonian Theodicy, *c.* 1000 BCE, Mesopotamia.

As we see time and again with these ancient texts the tablet on which the Babylonian *Kōhelet* is inscribed was itself the subject of imperial plunder. Taken by British antiquarians it now resides in the British Museum, an institution whose hoards are the centre of constant controversies about repatriation.

The author of this text did not call it a 'theodicy'. That term was popularised much later by the seventeenth-century German thinker Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who combined two ancient Greek words – *theós* (meaning god) and *díkē* (meaning justice) – to form the title of his last book. In essence a theodicy is a defence of a divine being (or beings), often in relation to perceived worldly injustice or unfairness. Why does crime pay? Why do innocents die when the Supreme Being could organise things otherwise? In the *Kōheleṯ*, the Sufferer talks specifically about societal injustice and his own penury. He is a pious person, he says, and devoted to the gods. If they are so powerful and so good, why do they not reward him with health and riches? Why, instead, do they let impious, wealthy people persecute him? (The speaker is so piqued by this injustice that he considers turning to a life of crime.)

This story recurs throughout the history of philosophy. We see it in another text from the late second millennium, a work known as the *Poem of the Righteous Sufferer* (*Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, Akkadian for 'I will praise the lord of wisdom'), and again in the Hebrew Bible's *Book of Job*. In the *Kōheleṯ*, the Friend offers what has become a canonical response to his companion's concerns. Yes, it seems unfair, he says, but this is simply because mere mortals are constitutionally unable to understand the plans of the gods.

Theodicies are often treated as purely theological or metaphysical puzzles. They are construed as having an almost paradoxical flavour: if God is omnipotent and omni-benevolent, how can evil exist in the world? However, theodicies also perform a powerful political function. In defending the gods and the divine order, they serve to uphold a specific social structure.

ABOVE

Fragment of *The Way of a Pilgrim*, *c.* 600 BCE, Mesopotamia.

Written in Akkadian with a hard-tipped stylus, this text was found in the Library of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh and describes the misfortunes of the nobleperson Šubši-mešrê-šakkan and his recovery due to the blessings of Marduk. The clay tablet is currently housed in the Louvre, on loan from the British Museum.

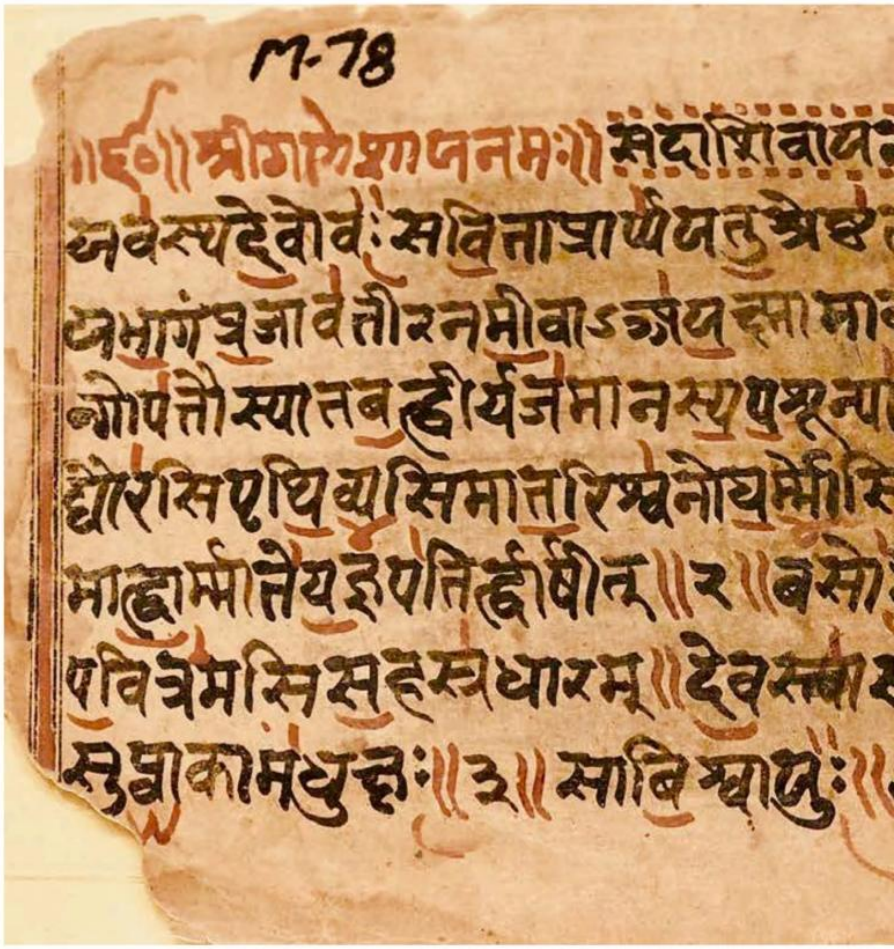
> **I, Saggil-kīnam-ubbib, the incantation-priest, am the one who worships the gods and the king.**

Revealed by an acrostic as the author of the *Theodicy*, Saggil-kīnam-ubbib declares his allegiance both to the gods and the monarch. It is a common partnering; monarchies are often justified by 'the divine right of kings', which maintains that a monarch's political legitimacy is underwritten by one or more supreme beings (similar in tone to the 'mandate of heaven' considered later; see page 29). In Babylonia, for example, we see this special relationship invoked by King Hammurabi, a ruler whose authority was grounded, in part, in his supposed endorsement by the god Marduk.

Given the association of gods and kings, theodicies inevitably carry a particular political resonance. A defence of a god becomes a defence of the monarch and, by extension, of their governance. When the Sufferer describes his concerns about social injustice, his Friend assures him that he is worrying about nothing. The gods (and the king) do have a plan, but it is one that eludes his understanding. Philosophical debate blurs very quickly into political activity.

4 Order and sacrifice

At roughly the same time that the *Babylonian Kōhelet* was being pressed into a block of wet clay, authors were carving our next set of texts, the *Vedas*, into birch bark and palm leaves in the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent. The *Vedas* figure variously as religious scriptures, speculative metaphysics, political documents, epic poems and instruction manuals. Written in the Indo-European language of Sanskrit, they are perhaps best described as transcribed rather than created; the Vedic texts are the written form of a much older oral tradition that emerged during the period known as the Indus Valley Civilization (sometimes called the 'Harappān Civilization'). This advanced Bronze Age culture flourished in the basins of the Indus river, around the sprawling cities of



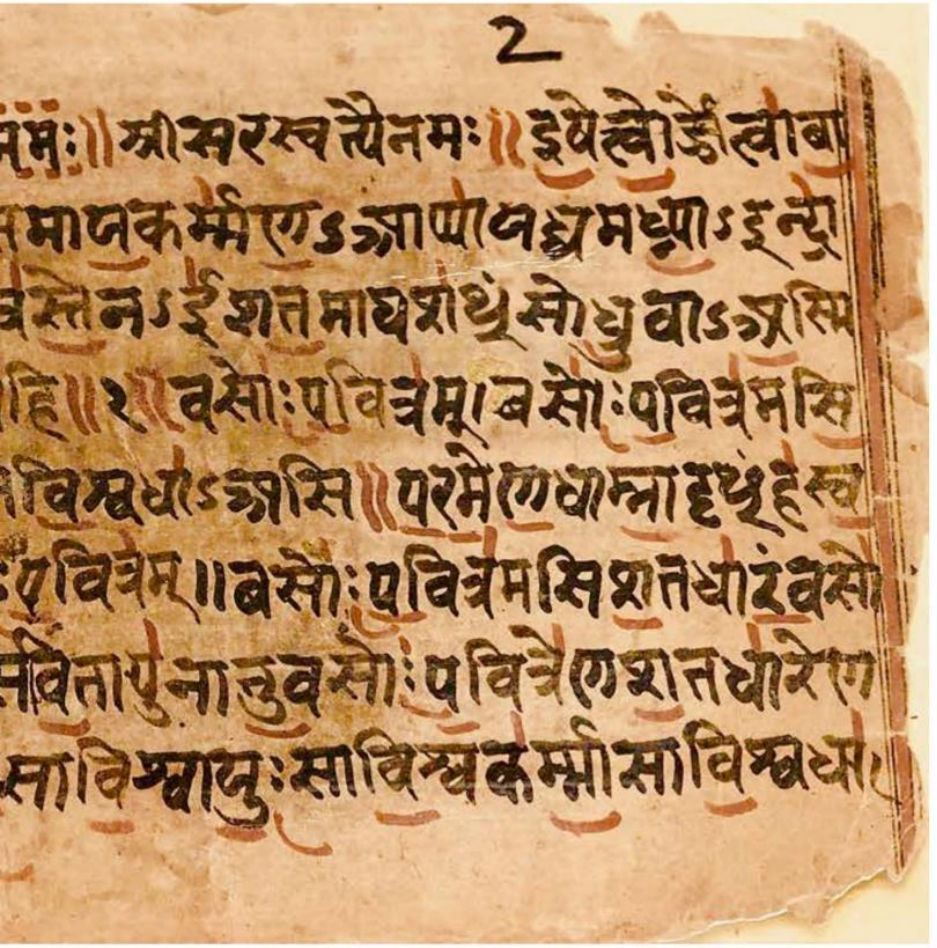
RIGHT

Fragment of the *Shukla Yajurveda*, 1735, India.

An ancient Vedic Sanskrit text, this version of the *Shukla Yajurveda* is preserved at the Lalchand Research Library in Chandigarh, India. This is an eighteenth-century reproduction of the 3000-year-old text, with Arabic numerals in the top margin.

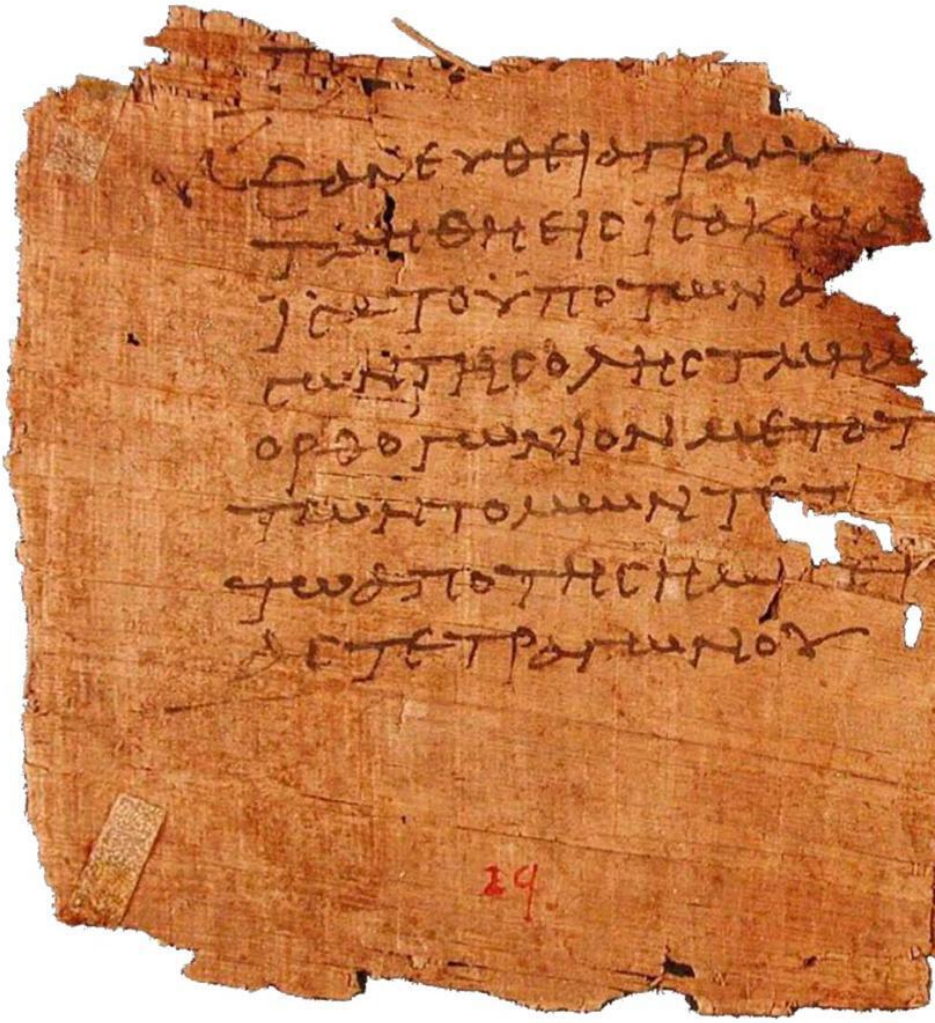
Mohenjo-daro and Harappā, *c.* 2600–1700 BCE. From the few artefacts that survive, we know that the Harappāns routinely traded with the Mesopotamians. Otherwise information is scant. Indeed, linguists cannot even decipher the surviving instances of Indus script. Some historians, however, speculate that many of the Harappān social modes were incorporated into the culture of the Kuru kingdom, established following Aryan migrations to the Indus Valley from Central Asia, after *c.* 1200 BCE – and about this culture we know a good deal.

The official religion of the Kuru kingdom was Vedism, the precursor of present-day Hinduism. It revolves around the idea of Brahman, an infinite cosmic soul. The



Vedas – the written records of the Vedic tradition – appear at first to fall firmly within the sphere of religious scripture. The word *veda* roughly translates as 'knowledge' or 'wisdom', and the *Vedas* are often configured as spiritual instruction. Yet their conceptual boundaries are hard to define. Written as hymns or verses, the *Vedas* deal with deities (and how to praise them), but they also examine further-reaching metaphysical and social questions.

The Vedas are split into four texts: the *Ṛgveda,* the *Yajurveda*, the *Sāmaveda* and the *Atharvaveda*. The *Rgveda* is the oldest, containing scripts dating from around 1200 BCE (and a system of belief from much earlier). It is composed of ten books, each in turn composed of around a hundred hymns, consisting of mantras (sacred



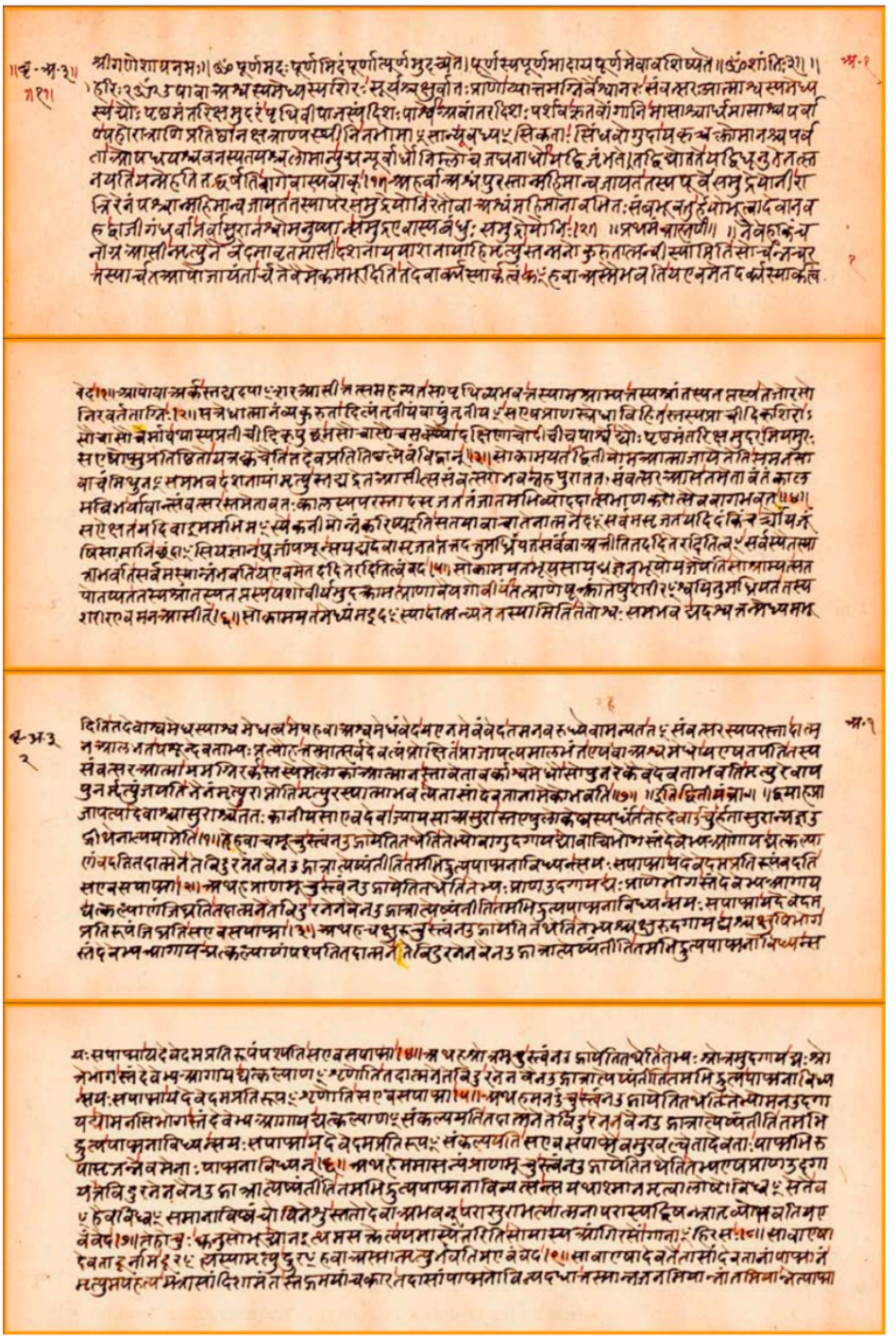
chants), expressions of metaphysical theses, speculations on cosmology and instructions on ritual sacrifice. All of these overlap and interweave in ways that defy rigid classification.

Consider the famous description of the horse sacrifice found at the start of the *Ṛgveda*. Priests are given complex instructions about how to treat a horse before, during and after its sacrifice: the steed should be allowed to roam free before being offered as oblation (a gift to the gods); the priests should collaborate closely with the king in its dissection; its bones must be arranged in a special order and the body parts must be named as they are laid out. The horse sacrifice falls firmly within the realm of religious ritual, but also reveals detailed metaphysical and ethical reflection.

LEFT

Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 29, *c.* 200 BCE–640 CE, Egypt.

The 'Oxyrhynchus Papyri' are a collection of manuscripts discovered in an ancient rubbish dump near Oxyrhynchus. Dating from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, the scrolls include administrative texts as well as fragments of works by Plato and, in this instance, Euclid's *Elements*. Some of the Greek texts are 'boustrophedon', meaning the lines read alternately left-to-right, then right-to-left.



RIGHT

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, **700 BCE, India.**

These pages, from the first folio (from the Latin 'folium', meaning 'leaf') of the 'Great Forest' Upaniṣad are stored in the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. The institute is one of many such organisations, which takes its name from wealthy benefactors. Lawrence J. Schoenberg was a business person in the computer industry and a collector of manuscripts. In 2011, he and Barbara Brizdle Schoenberg donated 287 manuscripts, worth over $20 million, to the Pennsylvania Libraries.

5 Laws of nature

The texts of the *Vedas* can be obscure and elusive. The meaning of passages, such as those pertaining to sacrificial practices, is drawn out by extended commentaries known as the *Upaniṣads*. In their earliest form these texts date from around the seventh century BCE. Originally preserved through oral tradition, the texts of the *Upaniṣads* are written on bark and cloth, composed as extended anecdotes, dialogues and poems. Their aim is to unpick the secret teachings of the complex *Vedas*.

One thought that recurs throughout the *Upaniṣads* is that the patterns we find in the animal world correspond to those of the cosmos. This idea figures prominently in the oldest of the *Upaniṣads*, the *Brhadāraṇyaka* or 'Great Forest' Upaniṣad, which discusses the ritual of the horse sacrifice described on page 21. The authors of the *Brhadāraṇyaka* claim that the *Ṛgveda* draws connections between the parts of the sacrificial horse and parts of the cosmos: the head of the horse is the dawn, its flesh the clouds, its back the sky. The ritual encapsulates a sophisticated cosmology with an associated method for metaphysical inquiry: studying the structure of these earthly bodies grants insight into the structure of all things, including the cosmic ordering of primary elements and celestial bodies.

Since the horse's body parts stand in a one-to-one relation to the parts of the cosmos, a ritual sacrifice can effect a re-ordering of the world. In the tradition of the *Ṛgveda*, a sacrifice is not simply a gift to the gods (and there are a variety of conflicting beliefs about the importance of deities such as Śiva, Viṣṇu, Lakṣmi and Brahmā, and to whom one should offer oblation). The religious instructions overlap an intricate metaphysical system that sees direct correlations between the microcosmic and the cosmic.

We also see the correspondence between natural and social in the verses of the *Ṛgveda* known as the *Purusa Sūkta*. According to the *Purusa Sūkta*, the universe is the result of the self-sacrifice of a Cosmic Person (identified as Visnu or Śiva). The text describes how the Cosmic Person was dissected into four castes: the head became the *Brahmins* (priests), the arms the *Kṣatriya* (aristocratic warriors), the thighs the *Vaiśya* (traders) and the feet the *Sūdra* (labourers). Social hierarchy is thus presented as a cosmic fact: warriors are 'higher' than merchants, priests are 'higher' than labourers, and it is no surprise that the *Sūdra* are excluded from Vedic rituals.

This 'naturalisation' – where social status is presented as a cosmic or natural fact – recurs throughout the history of global thought. We see it in Immanuel Kant's reification of racial hierarchies and in Catholic condemnations of supposed 'unnatural acts'. Over and again the claim that the natural world is ordered in a specific way is given as justification for prevailing orthodoxies. In Vedic metaphysics, this deference to a natural order appears to have privileged the *Brahmin* and *Kṣatriya* over the *Sūdra*.

BELOW

Oracle Bone, *c.* 1400 BCE, China.

This petrified pale buff tortoise shell is inscribed with oracle bone 'seal' text, possibly dating from the Shāng dynasty. 'Seal script' is a style of writing Chinese characters. It may be assumed that writing technologies have improved in a linear fashion, but few materials are quite so durable as this millennia-old shell.

6 Cosmic balance

In ancient China comparable cosmological musings were informing public policy. Unlike Harappā and Babylonia, the Neolithic tribes of ancient China existed in relative isolation. The Yǎngsháo and Dàwènkǒu cultures, present before and during the 'Jade Age' (3000–2000 BCE), centered around the Shāndōng region of eastern China. Like the Lóngshān culture that followed (2500–1700 BCE), these societies spread along the Lower Yellow River Valley, but not so far that their trade routes intersected with the Harappāns'. The Yǎngsháo and Dàwènkǒu peoples possessed their own thriving economies, and archaeologists have uncovered a wealth of turquoise, ivory, jade and pottery artefacts dating from these epochs, finds which indicate monarchical, dynastic forms of rulership and small, frequently warring polities.

After the Lóngshān, the Shāng dynasty came to dominate the Lower Yellow River Valley between 1600 and 1046 BCE. Alongside bronze, jade and ceramic artefacts they have left us, we have some of the earliest examples of Chinese writing. Foremost among these are the divination texts inscribed on the famous 'oracle bones' – the bases for our next philosophical text. The cosmologies carved into these bones, typically turtle shells and ox scapulae, found determinate form in the *Yìjīng* (also known as *I Ching,* or the *Book of Changes*). This divination manual was compiled shortly after the Shāng rule, during the period known as the Western Zhōu.

Historians consider the society of the Western Zhōu (1046–771 BCE) to be similar to the feudal societies of Europe in the 'Middle Ages' many centuries later. It was hierarchical, with power over disparate provinces dispensed to regional lords by monarchs, such as the legendary King Wǔ of Zhōu. It possessed centralised governance and thereby achieved greater standardisation of cultural output, of which the *Yìjīng* is the best-known example. Widely consulted and widely reproduced, it came to stand as one of the defining texts of the era and laid the foundations for much of later Chinese philosophy.

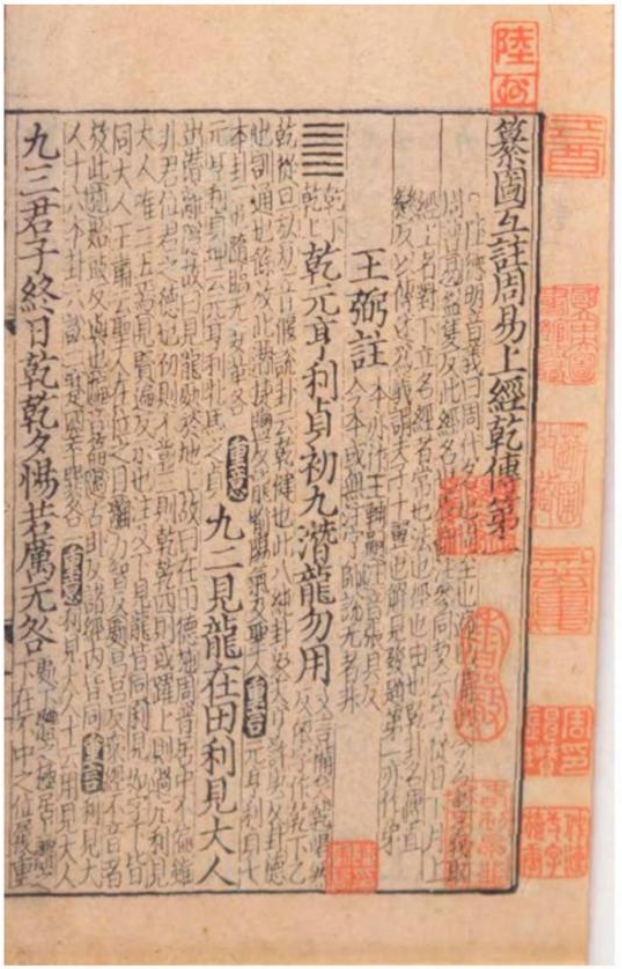
BELOW

Oracle Bones, *c.* 1400 BCE, China

Polished, burned and carved with inscriptions, these segments of tortoise plastrons (the flat part of the tortoise shell) and oxen bones date from the Shāng dynasty and would have been consulted in ethical and administrative matters (as depicted in the illustration on the facing page).

The *Yìjīng* is not intended to be read cover to cover (early versions would have been scrolls, rather than covered books). Using a randomiser – a cracked turtle shell, stalks of the yarrow plant or a roll of the dice – a qualified professional would identify one of its 64 hexagrams (figures composed of six stacked horizontal lines). They would use this as a basis to foretell the future or guide moral decision-making.

Statements in the *Yìjīng* are interpreted in terms of the principles of yīn and yáng. It is here that we first get a sense of the importance of the concept of balance in the Chinese tradition. The *tàijí* symbol, which features a black comma nestled into a white comma, describes a cosmic balance between opposites. The yīn, which refers to the 'shady side of a hill', is associated with notions of passivity, femininity, weakness, darkness, and wetness; the yáng, which refers to the 'sunny side of a hill', is associated with notions of action, masculinity, strength, light and dryness. Even here we see how cosmological associations can be politically biased. It is no surprise, for example, that a patriarchal society would associate masculinity with strength and femininity with weakness.



LEFT

***Yijing*, *c.* 960–1279, China.**

This page comes from an edition of the *Yijing* dating from the Song dynasty and features emboldened text of different sizes, for emphatic effect. It is housed in the National Central Library in Taipei, whose Rare Books Collection is one of the leading collections of Chinese antique books in the world.

ABOVE

Portrait of Genghis Khan, 1928, France.

This twentieth-century 'Chinese-style' engraving of Genghis Khan shows the Emperor consulting oracle bones to determine his destiny. It is found in the book *Grandeur and Supremacy of Peking* by Alphonse Hubrecht.

The Western Zhōu was succeeded by the Eastern Zhōu, a period traditionally split into two parts: the Spring and Autumn (770–476 BCE) and the Warring States (475–221 BCE). The Eastern Zhōu was an age of widespread cultural expansion and political tension. As its name suggests, the Warring States period saw societal breakdown, which led to a flourishing of Chinese philosophy, often referred to as the 'Hundred Schools of Thought'. The Zhōu kings lost power to their regional lords, who were eclipsed in turn by ministerial lineages. Governance became less centralised since there was no longer a structure to support a single, monolithic school of thought. What emerged, instead, was an intellectual pluralism – and a pressing need for political analysis. The Eastern Zhōu saw the burgeoning of many schools, including those that would become known as Rúism (or 'Confucianism'), Dàoism, Legalism, Yīnyáng cosmology, Agriculturalism and Mòhism (and many other '-isms' besides).

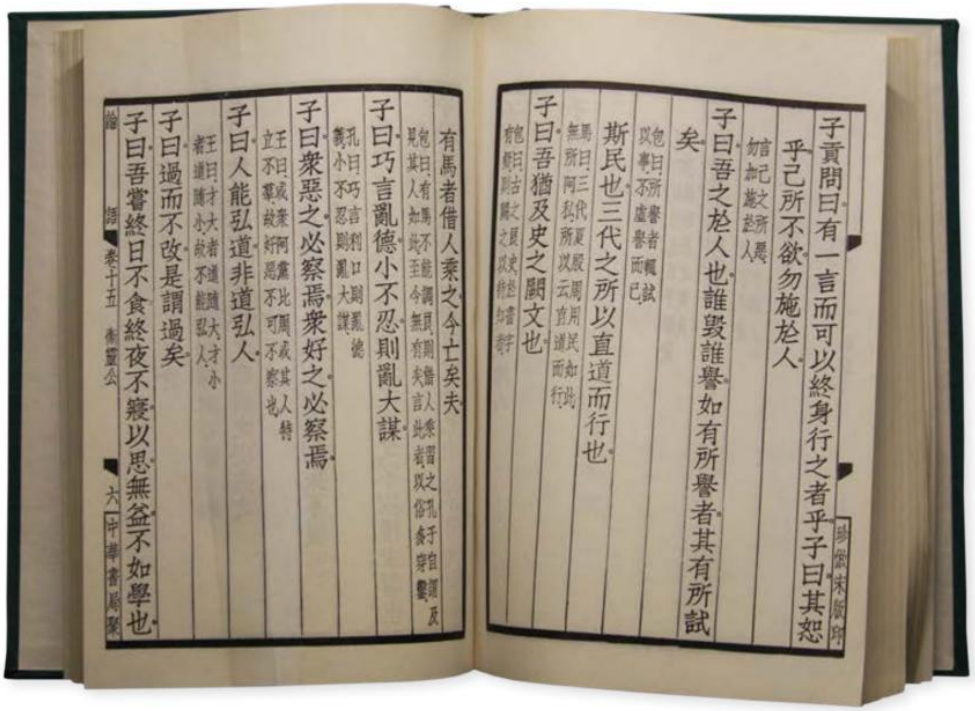
ABOVE

Portrait of Kǒngzǐ, Date unknown, China.

The philosopher is pictured in a state of calm contemplation, the hint of a smile on his lips, the tip of his index finger appearing out of his sleeve as if on the point of instruction.

The *Analects,* or 'selected sayings', is the work of our first 'big name' philosopher: Kǒngzǐ (*c.* 551–479 BCE). Living in the Shāndōng province of China, Kǒngzǐ ('Master Kong', also known by the Latinised name, 'Confucius') worked as a governor and itinerant teacher. He travelled the country lecturing his coterie of disciples, who in turn diligently recorded his sayings and compiled them into a single text. The *Analects* is a mixture of ethical and political rumination, focused on questions of sage rulership and social harmony. What are these things? How are they realised? It stands as a clear response to the political crises of the time. As China entered the age of the Warring States, the thinking of Kǒngzǐ – whose followers are known as 'Rúists', from the term *rú*, for 'scholar' – became increasingly relevant.

One thread woven throughout the *Analects* is the idea that a solution to social disunity lies in the past. Kǒngzǐ thought that the Western Zhōu, which had ended some centuries earlier, was a 'Golden Age' in which harmony flourished under the guidance of legendary sage kings, such as Wǔ or his father King Wén. Political unity, he thought, could be achieved through a return to the social modes of the past and a careful study of the characters of these exemplary rulers. Loyalty, filial piety and adherence to proper rites are high up on Kǒngzǐ's ethical qualities to cultivate.



LEFT

Kǒngzǐ, The *Analects*, Sixth Century BCE, China.

This copy of the *Analects* is housed in The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities located in Stockholm. The museum was founded by Johan Gunnar Andersson, an archaeologist and one-time advisor to the Chinese government, and one of the reasons many Chinese artefacts are now found in Sweden.

RIGHT

***Dàodé Jing*, Second Century BCE, China.**

Discovered in the Mǎwángduī tomb, Chángshā in the Hunan Province of China, this version of the *Dàodé Jing* is rendered in ink on a silk scroll and demonstrates the kinds of deterioration these texts are subject to. Chinese script is written vertically in columns going from top to bottom and ordered right to left.

7 One way or another

We see a comparable focus on the past in the work of Mòzǐ (*c.* 470–391 BCE), another 'big name' whose sayings are collected into the text known simply as *Mòzǐ*. In this text, Mòzǐ describes a semi-mythical period of Chinese history in which social turmoil was kept in check by 'the worthiest and most able [person]', the 'Son of Heaven', someone capable of founding a centralised and uniformly ruled universal state. Like Kǒngzǐ, Mòzǐ saw a single, all-powerful monarch as the solution to the chaos of the Warring States.

The *Mòzǐ* and the *Analects* are works of political theory. In examining the qualities of good rulership, however, they are also works of ethics, and consider issues of personal virtue. What makes a capable and worthy leader? Who might become the 'Son of Heaven'? In considering these questions Kǒngzǐ, Mòzǐ and their contemporaries asked themselves: what is the best way to live?

The word 'way', in this context, has a particular technical meaning. 'Way'is the English translation of the Chinese word *dào*. At its most basic, *dào* means a path to follow or a method for doing something. As it appears in the *Analects*, the term refers to a way of living, a way of life, closely connected to the concept of *dé*, meaning virtue. Kǒngzǐ was interested in what constituted a virtuous way of life, and his views were grounded in cosmological assumptions about the nature of the universe.

For Kǒngzǐ *dé*, or virtue, is bestowed by heaven, and it is a person's duty to properly cultivate it. 'Heaven' in this tradition is different from the concept commonly found in the West. It is not the realm of some omniscient deity (Kǒngzǐ rarely mentions gods), but is closer to the notion of cosmic order or, more generally, the universe – a phenomenon that exists, at its best, in a harmonious and balanced state. The notion of the 'mandate of heaven', referred to by both Kǒngzǐ and Mòzǐ, describes the authority conferred on a ruler. Both King Wén and King Wǔ, for instance, led with the mandate of heaven. In contrast to the 'divine right of kings', however, this authority is not granted by a god-like authority. Instead it emerges when an individual stands in the correct and balanced relation to the cosmos.

Balance is key when it comes to nurturing virtue. For Kǒngzǐ, the dynamic is similar to that required when cultivating flowers. If you want flowers to grow, you provide them with balanced diets of water and sunshine; too much sunshine and they will wilt, too little water and they will dry up.

ABOVE

Statue of Lǎozǐ, 1438, China.

Lǎozǐ is the quasi-historical author of the seminal Dàoist text, the *Dàodé Jing*. This gilt brass statue, created by the artist Chen Yanqing, resides in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The kind of balance depicted in the *Yìjīng*, and captured by the *tàijí* symbol, comes to the fore in another classic of this era, the *Dàodé Jīng* (*The Book of Dào and Dé*). Like Kǒngzǐ, the authors of the *Dàodé Jīng* were interested in living in harmony with the flow of the universe. Unlike Kǒngzǐ, however, they resisted the idea that virtue could be actively nurtured. The *Dàodé Jīng* holds that a virtuous life involves a degree of passivity. Balance is achieved by 'going with the flow'; human nature should blossom naturally, rather than be forced into certain directions. Consequently, the 'Dàoists' advocate *wú wéi*, meaning 'non-action' or 'action in keeping with the natural way of things'. As it says in the *Dàodé Jīng*, a person can 'through stillness, gradually make muddied water clear'. This is the ethical manifestation of a cosmological theory. It finds form in the political sphere in the Dàoist belief that the perfect ruler is a monarch who fades into the background:

The greatest of rulers is but a shadowy presence...

Again we see abstract cosmological claims – about the balance of opposites – overlapping political directives. We also see how these metaphysical claims may be used to bolster a conservative political outlook. As the historian of science Lorraine Daston puts it, there is an 'understandable fear that grounding norms in nature can lead to an unthinking conservatism: if the norms come from nature, and nature is unchanging, then so are the norms'. Whether through deference to a universal balance (as in Dàoism) or to historical institutions (as in Rúism), the background thought organising these texts is that the world works and has always worked in a single specific way – one that we deviate from at our peril. Throughout history philosophers (and many others) have justified the social privileges of some – men but not women, rich but not poor, one social group but not another – by deferring to some unassailable 'natural order'.

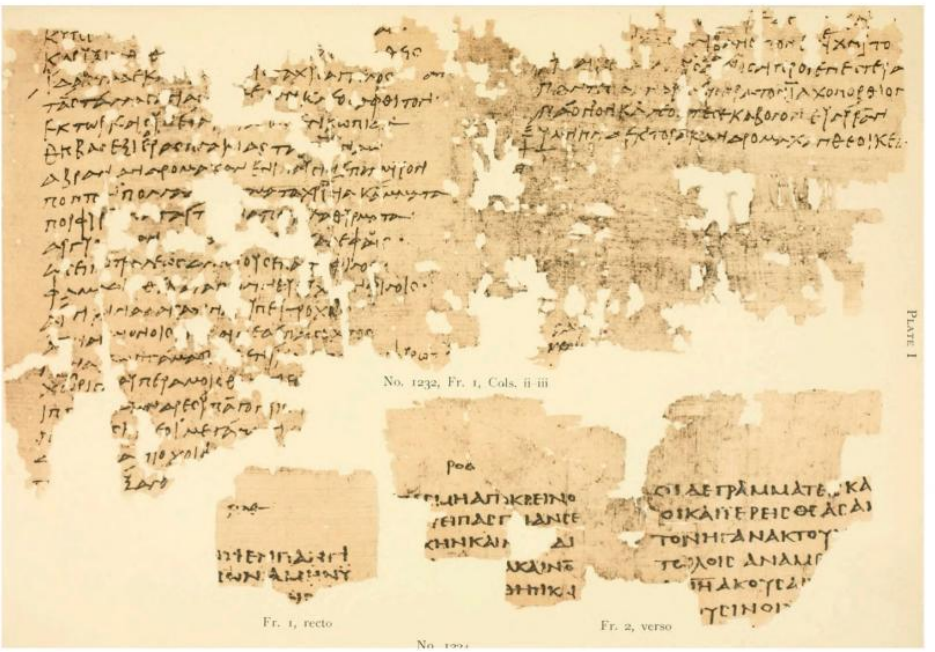


PLATE 1

LEFT

Sappho, Fragments, *c.* 200 BCE–640 CE, Egypt

Another contribution to the 'Oxyrhynchus Papyri' discovered in Egypt, these fragile sheets are among the few extant copies of Sappho's work. They offer tantalising hints of the completed work. The final lines run: 'Everywhere in the streets there were ... bowls full of wine, and cups, myrrh and cassia, frankincense, fragrances all pell-mell…'

FAR LEFT

Lǎozǐ Delivering the *Dàodé Jing*, Sixteenth Century, China

A delicate ink drawing on paper, the scene depicts Lǎozǐ sat in a pastoral setting, delivering the teachings of the *Dàodé Jing*. From the Ming dynasty, the original is sometimes attributed to the artist Li Gonglin, and it is now housed in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

8 Love, actually

Throughout history men have been accorded privileges and social status denied to others. This is as true within philosophical literature as anywhere. Think, for instance, of the 'big names' regularly listed for ancient Greek philosophy: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. Standard lists do not always show that women were performing this kind of intellectual labour as well. Yet closer historical attention reveals that one of the earliest thinkers working in the Aegean region – encapsulating Greece and modern-day Turkey – was the philosopher-poet Sappho (*c.* 610–570 BCE). She came from a wealthy family on the island of Lesbos. The few fragments that remain of her work speak to a sophisticated theory of emotions that focuses on love.

Sappho's *Ode to Aphrodite* was part of an oral tradition of lyric poetry (poems performed to the sound of the lyre), so we are lucky that any written records have survived. It presents a conception of emotions as concrete and sensual – love is a physical event – rather than something abstract. Yet Sappho resists reducing love entirely to its physical sensations (a theme that Plato would later take up in his *Symposium*). Love stands in a complex three-way relationship with beauty and goodness. When, in another poem, Sappho ponders, 'What is most beautiful?', she replies that it is whatever someone loves best. And goodness can generate beauty too (and consequently love). As she puts it, '… whoever is good will be beautiful as well'.

Sappho stands at the vanguard of a new cultural movement, an intellectual shift that resulted, in part, from the increasing economic and political stability of the region. In the

ABOVE

Portrait of Sappho, *c.* 50 CE, Italy.

Found in the ruins of Pompeii, the person pictured in this fresco is understood to be Sappho, holding a book and a stylus for writing. Preserved by the volcanic ash cloud that encompassed Pompeii in 79 CE, the painting is now housed in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples.

centuries following the Dorian invasion of mainland Greece in 1100 BCE, Greek colonies began to spring up around Ionia. Over time, booming agriculture meant city-states such as Miletus thrived, flourishing alongside the (relatively) tolerant Persian or Achaemenid Empire (which overthrew the Babylonian Empire in 539 BCE).

Another often-overlooked thinker of this period is Theano of Croton. Little is known about Theano (so little, in fact, that she is sometimes dismissed as a literary construct), but the evidence suggests she lived in the sixth century BCE in what is now southern Italy. Her three daughters Arignote, Myia and Damo all followed in their mother's footsteps, and her partner was reportedly Pythagoras of Samos (*c.* 580–500 BCE) (after whom the theorem is named). Theano is perhaps best known as the author of a text called *Advice for Women*.

On one level Theano's *Advice* functions as a guide to domestic practice, explaining how to raise children and govern households. Reflecting social mores, Theano suggests starving, freezing and shaming children to harden them to the vicissitudes of society and inculcate virtue. Interwoven with these severe instructions, however, are hints of a broader metaphysical project relating to the concept of harmony.

> **...imitate musical instruments and think over what sounds they make when they are loosened too much, and how they break when they are over-tightened. It is just the same with your servants. Excessive slackness creates dissonance in respect for authority, but a tightening always causes a natural break. You must think on this: the right amount is best in everything.**

Theano's attitude to domestic labourers, like her attitude to children, is condemnable, but her reference to 'the right amount' is indicative of her view of nature as something that conforms to a special order or harmony. Like Pythagoras, and the cults that grew up around him, she believed that this order could be expressed numerically. Musical harmonies resonate with mathematical harmonies, which in turn resonate with the harmonies we find in nature. If everything belongs to an overall order, then the family home is itself a microcosm of this order.

9 First principles

This period of Aegean thought sees an increasing interest in the fundamental structure of reality. What grounds what? What is the most fundamental *stuff*, the matter from which everything else is made? Answers to this question normally referenced one of the elements. Thales of Miletus (*c.* 624–545 BCE), for instance, maintained that the 'first principle', or *archē* in Greek, is water. It is not quite as outlandish as it sounds: all life-forms on earth contain something watery. Moreover, the quality of water – its fluidity – represents the fundamental dynamicity of the world.

From the fragments of his work *On Nature*, it appears that Thales's student Anaximander (*c.* 610–546 BCE) believed that the substance on which everything else stands was 'the unlimited' (*ápeiron* in Greek). This too makes a certain sort of sense. Most things – such as trees, ducks, handkerchiefs and so on – have limits and since limits are, by definition, restrictions, they must be restrictions of something else: that which has no limits, *ápeiron*.

Is this philosophy or science? Such a question is born out of an intellectual framework ordered around modern disciplinary divides. These thinkers saw no distinction between the two. Nor did Heraclitus of Ephesus (*c.* 535–475 BCE) or Parmenides of Elea (*c.* 515–460 BCE), authors of the not-so-imaginatively titled *On Nature* and *On Nature*. Both poems examine metaphysical issues manifesting in the biological realm. In addition

LEFT

Portrait of Anaximander, Third Century, Italy.

This Roman mosaic (an image composed of an arrangement of small pieces of stone or tile) depicts the seated figure of the philosopher Anaximander holding a sundial and gazing at the heavens.