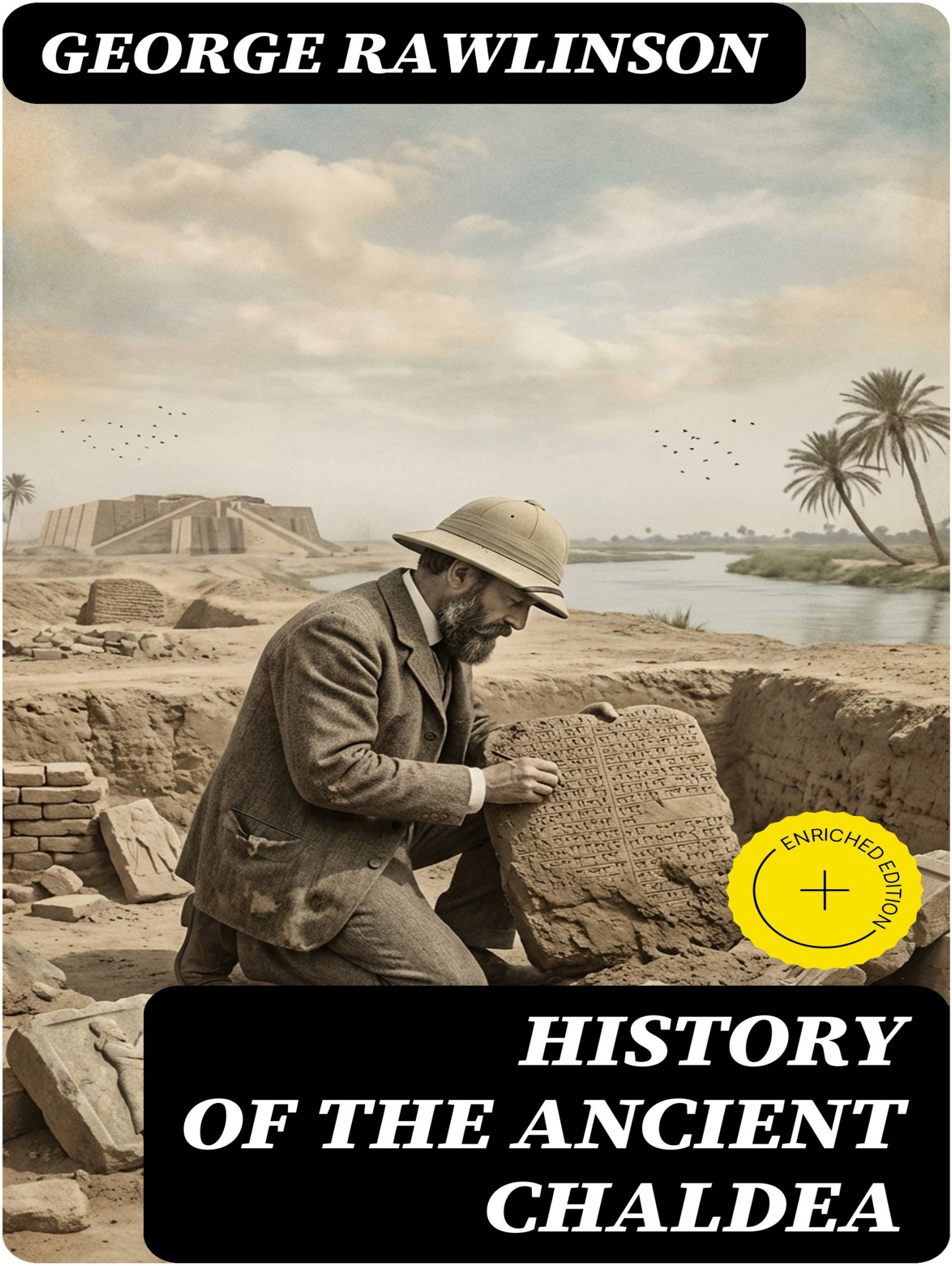
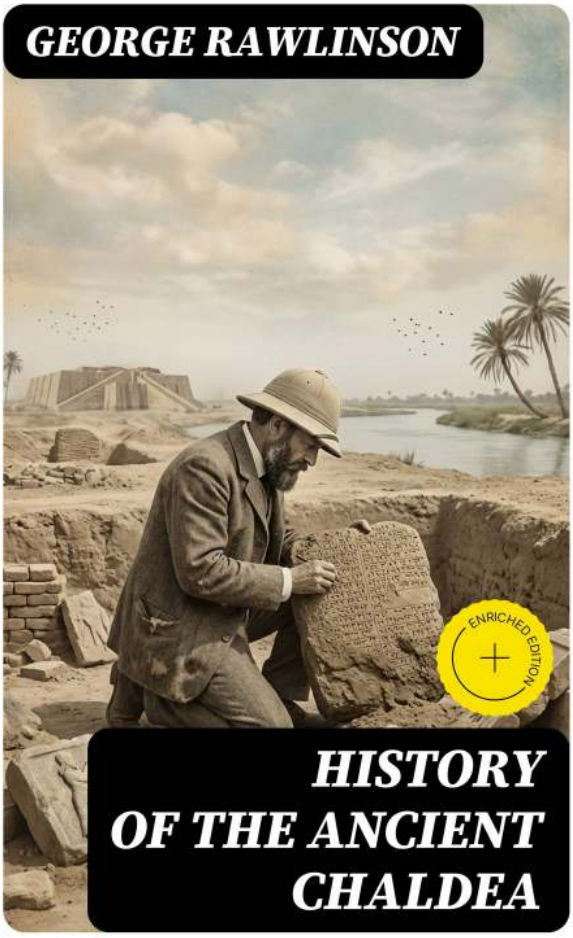
GEORGE RAWLINSON



HISTORY OF THE ANCIENT CHALDEA


GEORGE RAWLINSON
ENRICHED EDITION
HISTORY
OF THE ANCIENT
CHALDEA

George Rawlinson

History of the Ancient Chaldea

Enriched edition. Including Maps, Photos & Illustrations

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Nolan Mercer

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Introduction

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Between clay tablets and ruined mounds, George Rawlinson pursues the shape of a civilization that still speaks across millennia. History of the Ancient Chaldaea is a nineteenth-century work of historical scholarship on southern Mesopotamia’s earliest recorded societies, informed by the then-emerging decipherment of cuneiform and readings of classical sources. Composed in a sober, synthetic Victorian mode, it places political change alongside religion, culture, and material life. Readers enter a landscape of rivers, cities, and temples recovered from text and earth, where argument meets fragment. The result is a study that foregrounds method as well as narrative, presenting antiquity through disciplined, evidence-led inquiry.

Rawlinson guides the reader from the geographical conditions of the alluvial plain to the emergence of urban life, tracing how environment, craft, and belief converged into recognizable institutions. The book proceeds by assembling testimonies—inscriptions, ancient narratives, and material reports—into a continuous account while openly weighing competing interpretations. The voice is measured, patient, and didactic, favoring clear exposition over speculation, yet capable of arresting synthesis when evidence allows. Rather than dramatize personalities, it emphasizes structures: the city, the temple, royal authority, and the networks that connected them. The experience is

cumulative, each chapter strengthening a scaffold for understanding subsequent developments.

Central themes emerge with clarity: the relation between environment and social order; the interplay of religious worldview with administrative practice; and the ways power is represented in art, architecture, and text. A persistent concern is epistemic—how much can be known from broken tablets and partial chronicles, and how historians should balance continuity with rupture. Rawlinson treats Chaldaea as a meeting point of communities on the lower Tigris–Euphrates plain, where cities negotiate alliance, rivalry, and ritual obligation. The narrative foregrounds institutions and material processes over individual drama, inviting readers to consider how memory, record-keeping, and monumentality shape what the past allows us to recover.

Composed in the high tide of nineteenth-century interest in the ancient Near East, the book belongs to an early phase of Assyriology, when decipherment was opening archives that had been mute for centuries. Its arguments therefore carry both freshness and tentativeness, acknowledging limits while proposing patterns that subsequent research would test. The scholarly manner is characteristic of its era: extensive comparison of sources, careful geographical description, and a steady movement from detail to generalization. Yet the prose remains accessible, seeking to educate general readers as well as specialists, and maintaining a decorous tone that favors lucid transitions over polemic or digression.

For contemporary readers, the value of History of the Ancient Chaldaea lies in both content and method. It offers

a foundational synthesis of southern Mesopotamian antiquity at a moment when the evidentiary horizon was rapidly expanding, modeling how to build arguments from fragmentary data. Its discussions of urbanism, resource management, and interregional exchange resonate with current interests in the origins of complex societies and the environmental conditions that sustain them. Equally important, the book serves as a document in the history of knowledge, revealing how historical narratives are shaped by available sources, disciplinary tools, and the interpretive habits of a given age.

Reading it now also invites reflection on perspective. Written in a Victorian context, the study employs terminology, categories, and emphases characteristic of that period, and some formulations may differ from current scholarly usage. Recognizing this frame does not diminish the work; it clarifies its intention and helps readers track how understandings of Mesopotamia have evolved. Approached with curiosity and critical attention, the book becomes a double window—onto ancient Chaldaea and onto the practices of nineteenth-century scholarship—encouraging questions about evidence, translation, and the ethics of reconstructing distant lives from archaeological and textual remains that come to us through complex histories of recovery.

Ultimately, History of the Ancient Chaldaea offers a disciplined pursuit of understanding across gaps in the record, balancing scholarly restraint with the ambition to tell a coherent story about a formative region. It presents cities, institutions, and beliefs not as curiosities but as frameworks

through which human communities organized meaning and power. By tracing what can be known and how it is known, Rawlinson equips readers to navigate both the allure and the limits of the surviving evidence. The book remains a rigorous, accessible entry point to ancient Mesopotamia and a lasting testament to the craft of historical reconstruction.

Synopsis

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George Rawlinson’s History of the Ancient Chaldaea presents a systematic account of the earliest civilization in the alluvial plain at the head of the Persian Gulf. Setting out to synthesize textual testimony with then-recent archaeological finds, Rawlinson frames two guiding questions: who the Chaldaeans were and how their environment shaped their institutions. He situates the study within broader Eastern history, outlining limits of certainty and the rationale for combining inscriptions with classical and biblical notices. The opening sections define terms, position Chaldaea in relation to later Babylonia and Assyria, and sketch the scope of a narrative that moves from origins to cultural legacy.

Rawlinson begins with the land itself, emphasizing rivers, marshes, and the man-made canals that turned silt into farmland. He treats geography as explanatory, arguing that irrigation, transport, and the ready availability of clay and bitumen underpinned distinctive arts and institutions. A methodological chapter surveys evidence: cuneiform inscriptions, bricks and cylinders recovered from mounds, and testimony preserved by Greek and Latin authors. He weighs their credibility, noting fragmentary archives and the difficulties of chronology. Instead of forcing exact dates, he proposes relative sequences and cross-checks traditions, establishing a framework within which political, religious,

and economic developments can be discussed with careful, source-based restraint.

With this groundwork, the book traces the rise of early urban communities into organized kingship. Rawlinson describes how clustered city-states alternately cooperated and contended, producing cycles of consolidation, monumental building, and renewed fragmentation. Military episodes are treated alongside administrative measures, such as canal maintenance and provisioning, to show how rule depended on managing water and trade. External pressures from neighboring highlands and the northern plain complicate the picture, but the focus remains on the southern centers and their evolving institutions. Rather than exhaustive king lists, the narrative emphasizes types of authority and the material signs by which sovereignty announced itself in temple and town.

From politics the discussion turns to daily life and social order. Agriculture, fostered by regulated irrigation, anchors the economy, while craft production in clay, metal, and textile workshops furnishes both domestic use and long-distance exchange. Rawlinson reconstructs classes and professions from inscriptions—scribes, priests, officials, traders—showing how literacy and accounting supported governance and commerce. He examines weights and measures, the calendar, and contractual habits visible in tablets, cautiously inferring legal customs without overstating precision. Maritime and overland routes tie Chaldaea to surrounding regions, and the book highlights how these networks circulate goods and ideas that, in turn, reinforce urban specialization and cultic centers.

Religious belief and intellectual inquiry occupy a central place in Rawlinson’s portrait. He surveys a many-tiered pantheon administered through temples and priesthoods, with festivals, offerings, and vows structuring communal time. The prominence of celestial observation is linked to divination, omen-reading, and the development of a precise notational system for numbers and time. A chapter on writing explains the evolution of cuneiform from earlier signs and its role beyond administration, including hymns, myths, and instructional texts. While cautious about ascribing discoveries, Rawlinson argues that sustained observation and record-keeping nourished early advances in astronomy, mathematics, and calendrics, binding scholarship to ritual authority.

Material culture rounds out the portrait. Rawlinson describes construction in sun-dried brick bonded with bitumen, the stepped massing of sacred precincts, and the visual vocabulary of reliefs and seals. He treats costume, weaponry, and furniture as indices of status, and he uses small finds to illuminate diet, domestic space, and workshop practice. Comparative sections contrast Chaldaean solutions with those of other ancient centers, always tying aesthetics to available materials and civic needs. The result is a concrete sense of how buildings, images, and everyday tools expressed hierarchy and belief, while also serving the practical requirements of storage, defense, water control, and ritual movement.

Finally, Rawlinson situates Chaldaea within the succession of Near Eastern powers, tracing how southern institutions, crafts, and learning continued as political

control shifted. He stresses continuity amid change, showing that later kingdoms inherited and adapted southern precedents in administration, architecture, and sacred science. The closing reflections acknowledge gaps in the record and the provisional character of 19th-century reconstructions, inviting future excavation and philology to refine the picture. As a synthesis that unites inscriptions, classical texts, and material traces, the work’s enduring value lies in establishing a coherent starting point for Mesopotamian history and demonstrating how landscape, writing, and worship shaped an early civilization.

Historical Context

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George Rawlinson’s History of the Ancient Chaldaea situates its subject in southern Mesopotamia, the alluvial plain between the lower Tigris and Euphrates. From the late fourth to early second millennia BCE, this region saw dense urbanization, canal irrigation, and the rise of city-states such as Uruk, Ur, Lagash, and Eridu. Temple complexes and palace institutions organized labor and land, while cuneiform writing on clay enabled administration and enduring records. Rawlinson treats "Chaldaea" broadly as early Babylonia, emphasizing the physical environment, monumental architecture like ziggurats, and the institutional roles of priesthood and kingship that framed political authority and cultural production.

Drawing on archaeological and textual evidence available in his day, Rawlinson outlines the Sumerian foundations of Chaldaean society. He describes how temple households coordinated agriculture, craft production, and trade, linking the delta to Dilmun in the Gulf and to northern routes via river traffic. The Early Dynastic period witnessed rival city dynasties asserting hegemony through warfare and alliance, memorialized in dedicatory inscriptions and votive objects. Administrative tablets, weights, and standardized measures reveal an economy calibrated by record-keeping. Lawgiving and cult maintenance appear as reciprocal duties of rulers, while the scribal schools preserved language, myth, and technical knowledge that anchored civic identity.

Political consolidation forms a central thread. Rawlinson recounts the rise of the Akkadian Empire under Sargon of Akkad in the twenty-third century BCE and its imperial administration spanning Mesopotamia and beyond. Naram-Sin’s titulature and victory stelae signaled unprecedented sovereignty before instability and Gutian incursions. The subsequent Ur III revival under Ur-Namma and Shulgi restored centralized taxation, provincial governance, and large-scale building, including ziggurats and canals. Surviving legal texts, like the Code of Ur-Namma, and vast accounting archives illuminate bureaucracy and royal ideology. These cycles of unification and fragmentation contextualize the later predominance of Babylonian culture over the southern cities.

Rawlinson stresses cultural achievements that shaped ancient Near Eastern civilization. Cuneiform script, evolving from pictographic signs, supported literature, contracts, and royal annals. Mathematical tablets attest to sexagesimal calculation, metrology, and geometric problem-solving, while astronomical observation and omen compendia informed ritual calendars and divination. Cylinder seals and reliefs display courtly, martial, and mythological scenes, reflecting pantheons headed by Anu, Enlil, and Inanna/Ishtar, with city tutelaries like Nanna of Ur. Temple endowments and festivals structured public life, and technical mastery in brickwork and bitumen underpinned ziggurats and hydraulic systems. Such evidence underlies Rawlinson’s reconstruction of religious and administrative continuities.

In classical and first-millennium usage, "Chaldeans" often denoted southern Babylonian groups famed for astrology, and the Neo-Babylonian rulers arose from that milieu. Rawlinson, following sources like Berossus and later historians, connects this heritage to earlier southern traditions. He sketches the fall of the Assyrian Empire and the rise of Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II, whose building inscriptions at Babylon and Borsippa testify to urban renewal and temple patronage. Although later than the earliest city-states, this Chaldean ascendancy preserved scribal, religious, and legal norms rooted in the south, allowing Rawlinson to frame "Chaldaea" as both an origin and a revival.

The book emerged amid rapid advances in Assyriology. Between the 1840s and early 1860s, Austen Henry Layard and Hormuzd Rassam excavated Assyrian palaces at Nimrud and Nineveh; William Loftus and the British vice-consul Taylor explored Warka (Uruk), Muqayyar (Ur), and other southern mounds, recovering bricks, cylinder inscriptions, and architectural remains. Henry Creswicke Rawlinson’s work on the Behistun inscription, alongside Edward Hincks and Jules Oppert, established the decipherment of cuneiform; a Royal Asiatic Society test in 1857 publicly validated independent readings. George Rawlinson synthesized these materials with classical testimonies, integrating archaeological finds into a historical narrative accessible to general readers.

Victorian intellectual currents shaped Rawlinson’s method. He correlated cuneiform data with the Hebrew Bible, Greek historians, and Ptolemy’s Canon to construct

chronologies and lineages. Contemporary ethnological categories—"Semitic," "Turanian," and related classifications—framed discussions of language and population, reflecting nineteenth-century scholarly conventions rather than modern linguistics. Biblical archaeology supplied questions about flood traditions, primeval kings, and monumental towers, while imperial Britain’s engagement with Ottoman Mesopotamia facilitated collections in London. Within this milieu, Rawlinson emphasized the antiquity and complexity of southern Mesopotamia, using inscriptions and material culture to assess, confirm, or correct earlier literary authorities.

History of the Ancient Chaldaea thus mirrors its era’s confidence in synthesis and documentary proof. By juxtaposing Berossus and Herodotus with newly read inscriptions and excavated artifacts, Rawlinson presents Chaldaea as a cradle of urban administration, law, and sacred kingship, whose institutions resonated across later Mesopotamian history. The work’s careful citation of bricks, cylinders, and architectural surveys signals a shift from speculative antiquarianism to source-based history, even as its terminology and chronologies reflect nineteenth-century debates. In tracing continuity from Sumerian city-states to Neo-Babylonian revival, the book articulates a durable vision of southern Mesopotamia’s formative role.

History of the Ancient Chaldaea

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MAP OF
CHALDÆA, ASSYRIA
and the adjacent Countries,
Constructed from the latest Surveys.
CASPIAN SEA
PERSIAN GULF
East of Greenwich

Chapter I. General View of the Country

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"Behold the land of the Chaldaeans."—ISAIAH xxiii. 13**[1q]**.

The broad belt of desert which traverses the eastern hemisphere, in a general direction from west to east (or, speaking more exactly, of W. S. W. to N. E. E.), reaching from the Atlantic on the one hand nearly to the Yellow Sea on the other, is interrupted about its centre by a strip of rich vegetation, which at once breaks the continuity of the arid region, and serves also to mark the point where the desert changes its character from that of a plain at a low level to that of an elevated plateau or table-land. West of the favored district, the Arabian and African wastes are seas of sand, seldom raised much above, often sinking below, the level of the ocean; while east of the same, in Persia, Kerman, Seistan, Chinese Tartary, and Mongolia, the desert consists of a series of plateaus, having from 3000 to nearly 10,000 feet of elevation. The green and fertile region, which is thus interposed between the "highland" and the "lowland" deserts, participates, curiously enough, in both characters. Where the belt of sand is intersected by the valley of the Nile, no marked change of elevation occurs; and the continuous low desert is merely interrupted by a few miles of green and cultivable surface, the whole of which is just as smooth and as flat as the waste on either

side of it. But it is otherwise at the more eastern interruption. There the verdant and productive country divides itself into two tracts, running parallel to each other, of which the western presents features not unlike those that characterize the Nile valley, but on a far larger scale; while the eastern is a lofty mountain region, consisting for the most part of five or six parallel ranges, and mounting in many places far above the level of perpetual snow.

It is with the western or plain tract that we are here concerned. Between the outer limits of the Syro-Arabian desert and the foot of the great mountain range of Kurdistan and Luristan intervenes a territory long famous in the world's history, and the chief site of three out of the five empires of whose history, geography, and antiquities it is proposed to treat in the present volumes. Known to the Jews as Aram-Naharaim**[1]**, or "Syria of the two rivers;" to the Greeks and Romans as Mesopotamia**[2]**, or "the between-river country;" to the Arabs as Al-Jezireh**[3]**, or "the island," this district has always taken its name from the streams, which constitute its most striking feature, and to which, in fact, it owes its existence. If it were not for the two great rivers—the Tigris and Euphrates—with their tributaries, the more northern part of the Mesopotamian lowland would in no respect differ from the Syro-Arabian desert on which it adjoins, and which in latitude, elevation, and general geological character it exactly resembles. Towards the south, the importance of the rivers is still greater; for of Lower Mesopotamia it may be said, with more truth than of Egypt, that it is "an acquired land," the actual "gift" of the two streams which wash it on either side; being, as it is,

entirely a recent formation—a deposit which the streams have made in the shallow waters of a gulf into which they have flowed for many ages.

The division, which has here forced itself upon our notice, between the Upper and the Lower Mesopotamian country, is one very necessary to engage our attention in connection with the ancient Chaldaea. There is no reason to think that the terns Chaldaea had at anytime the extensive signification of Mesopotamia, much less that it applied to the entire flat country between the desert and the mountains. Chaldaea was not the whole, but a part of, the great Mesopotamian plain**[2q]**; which was ample enough to contain within it three or four considerable monarchies. According to the combined testimony of geographers and historians, Chaldaea lay towards the south, for it bordered upon the Persian Gulf; and towards the west, for it adjoined Arabia. If we are called upon to fix more accurately its boundaries, which, like those of most countries without strong natural frontiers, suffered many fluctuations, we are perhaps entitled to say that the Persian Gulf on the south, the Tigris on the east, the Arabian desert on the west, and the limit between Upper and Lower Mesopotamia on the north, formed the natural bounds, which were never greatly exceeded and never much infringed upon. These boundaries are for the most part tolerably clear, though the northern only is invariable. Natural causes, hereafter to be mentioned more particularly, are perpetually varying the course of the Tigris, the shore of the Persian Gulf, and the line of demarcation between the sands of Arabia and the verdure of the Euphrates valley. But nature has set a permanent

mark, half way down the Mesopotamian lowland, by a difference of geological structure, which is very conspicuous. Near Hit on the Euphrates, and a little below Samarah on the Tigris, the traveller who descends the streams, bids adieu to a somewhat waving and slightly elevated plain of secondary formation, and enters on the dead flat and low level of the mere alluvium. The line thus formed is marked and invariable; it constitutes the only natural division between the upper and lower portions of the valley; and both probability and history point to it as the actual boundary between Chaldaea and her northern neighbor.

The extent of ancient Chaldaea is, even after we have fixed its boundaries, a question of some difficulty. From the edge of the alluvium a little below Hit, to the present coast of the Persian Gulf at the mouth of the Shat-el-Arab, is a distance of above 430 miles; while from the western shore of the Bahr-i-Nedjif to the Tigris at Serut is a direct distance of 185 miles. The present area of the alluvium west of the Tigris and the Shat-el-Arab maybe estimated at about 30,000 square miles. But the extent of ancient Chaldaea can scarcely have been so great. It is certain that the alluvium at the head of the Persian Gulf now grows with extraordinary rapidity, and not improbable that the growth may in ancient times have been even more rapid than it is at present. Accurate observations have shown that the present rate of increase amounts to as much as a mile each seventy years, while it is the opinion of those best qualified to judge that the average progress during the historic period has been as much as a mile in every thirty years! Traces of

post-tertiary deposits have been found as far up the country as Tel Ede and Hammam, 10 or more than 200 miles from the embouchure of the Shat-el-Arab; and there is ample reason for believing that at the time when the first Chaldaean monarchy was established, the Persian Gulf reached inland, 120 or 130 miles further than at present. We must deduct therefore from the estimate of extent grounded upon the existing state of things, a tract of land 130 miles long and some 60 or 70 broad, which has been gained from the sea in the course of about forty centuries. This deduction will reduce Chaldaea to a kingdom of somewhat narrow limits; for it will contain no more than about 23,000 square miles. This, it is true, exceeds the area of all ancient Greece, including Thessaly, Acarnania, and the islands; it nearly equals that of the Low Countries, to which Chaldaea presents some analogy; it is almost exactly that of the modern kingdom of Denmark; but it is less than Scotland, or Ireland, or Portugal, or Bavaria; it is more than doubled by England, more than quadrupled by Prussia, and more than octupled by Spain, France, and European Turkey. Certainly, therefore, it was not in consequence of its size that Chaldaea became so important a country in the early ages, but rather in consequence of certain advantages of the soil, climate, and position, which will be considered in the next chapter.

It has been already noticed that in the ancient Chaldaea, the chief—almost the sole-geographical features, were the rivers**[3q]**. Nothing is more remarkable even now than the featureless character of the region, although in the course of ages it has received from man some interruptions of the