AN ATHEIST'S HISTORY OF Belief

UNDERSTANDING OUR MOST EXTRAORDINARY INVENTION

MATTHEW KNEALE

CONTENTS

For Robert Orme and Graham Bearman, of Latymer Upper School, London: two outstanding teachers of history, to whom I owe much.

About the Book

What first prompted prehistoric man, sheltering in the shadows of deep caves, to call upon the realm of the spirits?

And why has belief thrived ever since, leading us to invent heaven and hell, sin and redemption, and above all, gods?

Religion reflects our deepest hopes and fears; whether you are a believer or, like Matthew Kneale, a non-believer who admires mankind's capacity to create and to imagine, it has shaped our world. And as our dreams and nightmares have changed over the millennia, so have our beliefs – from shamans to Aztec priests, from Buddhists to Christians: the gods we created have evolved with us.

Belief is humanity's most epic invention. It has always been our closest companion and greatest consolation. To understand it is to better understand ourselves.

About the Author

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Let us consider that we are all partially insane. It will explain us to each other; it will unriddle many riddles; it will make clear many things which are involved in haunting and harassing difficulties and obscurities now.

Mark Twain, *Christian Science*

Imagination rules the world.

Napoleon Bonaparte

INTRODUCTION

As the son of a Manx Methodist atheist and a refugee German Jewish atheist, I have never been much of a believer. Yet, like everyone else, I find myself surrounded by belief. Belief was in the Lord's Prayer that I murmured uneasily at school assembly, wondering if it was quite *done* for someone like me to repeat the words. Belief was in the churches, and later the mosques, synagogues and temples, that I visited on travels. For that matter a form of belief was responsible, among many other things, for my own existence, when it forced my mother to flee from Germany to England, where she met my father.

Growing up in England gave me a vague knowledge of the official version, at least of Christianity. What, I sometimes wondered, had really happened? What had caused people to come up with such strange-seeming notions as paradise, or sin? Or gods?

This book is an attempt finally to satisfy my curiosity. Broad questions such as *Why did people invent gods?* are, unsurprisingly, hard to answer with certainty, yet I have tried to offer ideas. Where possible I have sought answers from specialist scholars. When questions have been so broad that scholars – no doubt wisely – have averted their eyes, I have done what I can.

One subject this book is *not* concerned with is the history of religious institutions. I find little fascination in organisational power struggles. I wanted to know what ordinary people *believed*. Something else I was keen to avoid was religious jargon. I have tried to recount, as clearly as I could, how beliefs evolved, without recourse to terms

that require looking up in a theological dictionary. In these pages you will find no mention of dualism, monism or transubstantiation.

Though I have tried to give an overall picture of people's beliefs, I will not claim that this picture is complete, or even balanced. I have concentrated on those beliefs that I was most curious about, and that seemed to fall into something resembling a story. Though I have looked at beliefs in China, India and the Middle East, as well as the religions of the Mayans, Aztecs and Incas, I have paid particular attention to Christianity, and its parent, Judaism.

This book does not look exclusively at religious belief. I have also glanced at a couple of creeds that are, supposedly, purely political, such as Marxism. I have done so because these ideologies seem, in some ways, remarkably like religions. What is more, many of their ideas were descended from earlier religious notions that one would not normally associate with twentieth-century politics.

This book does not seek to belittle religion. On the contrary, the more I have looked at intense beliefs, the more I have found them fascinating. They say so much about us. As a fiction writer, who tries to make a livelihood from imagination, I have considerable professional respect for what is, I would propose, humankind's greatest imaginative project.

It is a project that has had a huge role in shaping our past. Non-believers ignore it at their peril. Our beliefs have been a conduit for much of our finest creativity in literature, art, music and architecture. They have also inspired a surprising number of our greatest technological breakthroughs. Beliefs have frequently played a key role in shaping the course of great events. I would go so far as to suggest that human history can be rather better understood not through the clear air of logic and scientific discovery, but through the

murky waters of intense, emotional and, at times, downright odd beliefs.

Where and when can one begin to discover such beliefs? The answer is: rather earlier than one might think.

1

INVENTING GODS

Someone Who Picked Up a Piece of Mammoth Tusk

AROUND 33,000 YEARS ago, in what is now Baden-Württemberg in south-west Germany, but which was then a frozen wilderness nestling between great ice sheets, somebody picked up a piece of mammoth tusk and, probably crouching by a fire to keep warm, began carving.

When finished, the figure they had made was only 2.5 centimetres, or less than an inch, tall. Tiny though it is, it is immediately striking, and also a little puzzling. It stands on two legs, in a pose easily recognisable as human, yet it has a lion's head. Precisely what was done with it remains a mystery, though it was clearly the object of much attention. Over time it became polished smooth from being held by fingers. Eventually, whether deliberately or by accident, it was broken into pieces and left deep in a cave, the Hohle Fels. Here it remained until 2002, when it was discovered, and carefully reassembled, by a paleoanthropologist, Nicolas Conard, and his team.

Why should we be interested in this tiny lion-person? It is one of the very oldest examples of figurative art yet found. It also holds another first that, to my eyes, makes it much more intriguing. It is the first clear example of religious art. It provides the earliest evidence that people believed in

supernatural beings. Can one really have an idea what beliefs people held 33,000 years ago? The answer, perhaps a little surprisingly, is *yes*.

Why, one might ask, should we be interested in what people believed so very long ago? Put simply, beliefs have a way of enduring. Despite the claims of religious visionaries across the ages, I would suggest that there is no such thing as a new religion. Religions are like ice cores. In each, one can find layer upon layer of past belief. Beliefs, even from 33,000 years ago, are still present in our world. This book seeks to examine some of these ice cores, to discover how their many layers came into being, and to see how they continue to influence our world, sometimes in the most unexpected ways.

Before looking at what beliefs the maker of our lion-person may have held, I would like to pause for a moment, and consider what one might *expect* them to be. What would people today, whether they believe in a god or not, consider to be the essential prerequisites of any religion?

Paradise would probably come top of the list. One of the chief functions of any religion, surely, is to offer an alternative to the grim prospect of our temporary existence. Almost all modern religions dangle the hope of a happy afterlife that can be reached by their faithful if they follow the rules, at least most of the time. And yet, as will be seen, heaven first appears around 4,000 years ago. This makes it, when compared to the lion-person, a distinctly newfangled invention.

What, then, of morality? This, many would say, is at the very heart of all belief. According to almost all modern religions one’s behaviour is carefully supervised by gods, and one’s actions will be appropriately rewarded or punished. Yet morality, too, is a relatively new innovation. It appears, in fact, to have emerged side by side with the idea of heaven.

If heaven and morality are not the key elements of all religions, then what is? The answer, I would suggest, is *reassurance*. From the earliest times every religion has given people comfort by offering ways – so their followers believe – of keeping their worst nightmares at bay. What these nightmares are, inevitably, has changed a good deal over time. As people's lifestyles have altered, so have the things they most fear. It is the changes in our *fears*, I would argue, that have caused our religious *ideas* to change. In effect, our need to quell our nightmares has inspired humankind's greatest imaginative project: an epic labour of invention that puts fiction writing to shame.

What were people's worst nightmares 33,000 years ago? How can we hope to have even a vague idea of beliefs that existed a full 28,000 years before writing was first developed, and human history set down? The simple answer is, by making comparisons. By examining peoples whose way of life was recorded in recent times, but who led a similar existence to the carver of the lion-person. As we will see, humans are unoriginal creatures. Put them in similar locations, give them similar ways of spending their hours, and similar needs and fears, and they will generally come up with similar ideas about their world.

Studies of hunter-gatherer peoples in recent times have revealed something rather surprising. All across the world, from the Arctic to Australia, from Patagonia to southern Africa, these peoples, despite having had no direct contact with one another for many tens of thousands of years, had a great deal in common. They all lived in tribes of the same size, of around 150 people. They all moved from place to place with the seasons, and in search of animals to hunt. And they were all very interested in the curious business of going into a trance. Entering a trance, in fact, lay at the centre of all their beliefs.

There was great variety in the way in which different tribes entered a trance, from taking psychotropic

substances to starving their senses in silent darkness. Likewise there was variety in who did it: in some tribes many people became entranced, though it was more usual that only one or two specialists did so. These specialists are best described as shamans. The experiences such people had when they entered a trance were very similar the world over. They heard noises like the buzzing of bees, saw geometrical patterns, and had the sensation of being drawn into a great tunnel. They felt they could see themselves transformed into something else, usually an animal. They felt themselves to be flying, and often claimed to be guided by a spirit bird. They would enter a land of spirits, which were also usually animals. These animal spirits had the power to help humans, especially in three precise areas, which recur in hunter-gatherer beliefs all across the world. Firstly, spirits could help heal the sick. Secondly, they could control the movement of animals to hunt. Finally, they could improve the weather.

So, it seems, we catch a glimpse of humans' earliest angst. These fears do not seem particularly surprising. Sickness would have been a constant and incomprehensible danger. For people who had no choice but to spend much of their time outside, bad weather was not only frightening, but life-threatening. Finally, if hunter-gatherers failed to find game to hunt, they would slowly starve to death. So it is only natural that the trio of disease, animal availability and meteorological conditions would have been high on people's worry list.

Can we be sure that these recent hunter-gatherer beliefs were the same as those of the carver of the lion-person in the frozen wilderness of Baden-Württemberg 33,000 years ago? It is widely accepted today that the statuette found in the Hohle Fels cave depicts a shaman who is lost in a state of trance and believes himself, or herself, to have been transformed into a lion. It is clear that the Hohle Fels statuette was no random piece of creativity as a second and

larger lion-person, dating from around the same time, was found in another nearby cave. It seems these figures represented something that was well established in people's minds. So it appears that as early as 33,000 years ago people had already devised a simple form of religion. If one entered a trance and contacted animal spirits, they might help one cope with disease and bad weather, and make one's endless search for prey a little easier. A way of lessening life's frightening uncertainties had been found.

Clues as to how this early religion might have looked and felt can been found in the remarkable cave paintings of south-western France and northern Spain, some of which date from only 1,000 years or so after our lion-person was carved. The paintings are almost all of animals, and it used to be thought that they depicted hunting scenes. Rather puzzlingly, though, the creatures often lack hooves, so they seem to hang in the air. Also lacking are details of rocks or foliage. What does this signify? David Lewis-Williams, a cognitive archaeologist, came up with a notion. Having studied one of the last hunter-gatherer tribes to have kept its old ways right up to the present – the San people of south-western Africa – and then examined early-European cave paintings, he concluded that these paintings in fact represented animal spirits.

The ancient ancestors of the San people are responsible for a great deal. They are responsible for us. Genetic evidence indicates that all modern humans are their descendants. They may also have been responsible for our first religion. The Blombos Cave on the coast east of Cape Town – not far from where the San live today – is one of the earliest known sites inhabited by modern humans. One find discovered here is especially intriguing. Dating from around 77,000 years ago it is a piece of ochre carved with geometrical patterns. The patterns resemble the lattice of squares that humans see when entering a deep trance. Though more ambiguous as evidence than the Lion Person

of the Hohle Fels cave, the ochre strongly suggests that people living here already practised a form of shamanistic spirit worship. That they did would explain why hunter-gatherer peoples dispersed all across the globe had similar beliefs. As our ancestors moved out of Africa they would have brought their religion with them.

How would these first supernatural beings have been worshipped? What were early religious services like? Archaeological finds offer some ideas. People would have crept into the depths of caves, far beyond the reach of any natural light, using simple lamps made of animal fat on flat pieces of stone, with strands of juniper as wicks. These would have flickered feebly, illuminating only tiny patches of the paintings. Deep in the caves, perhaps with a small congregation gathered round them, shamans would have entered a trance and tried to contact the spirits. There could well have been music. A number of bone flutes have been found in early caves, while people may also have sung or chanted, and used stalagmites as natural bells, striking them to produce deep booming sounds. The caves lacked oxygen, which would have added to the sense of unreality for those taking part. The whole effect of music, smoke, near darkness and airlessness would, when combined with the utterings of the shaman lost in trance, have been intense.

So, even thirty millennia ago, religion was already a leading sponsor of the arts. As people endeavoured to make their world less frightening, and so to feel less helpless, they devoted their hours to making music, to carving sculptures, and to creating paintings that, to this day, remain hauntingly beautiful. It was the beginning of a remarkably fruitful association. Up to our own times religion has encouraged breathtaking art, architecture, music and literature. Whatever reservations one may have about religion, it is hard not to admire the many beautiful creations it has inspired.

Before leaving this distant era, I would like to ask one more question, one that takes us even further back, to times when evidence is negligible and conjecture can only be of the vaguest kind: why might people have devised such a strange thing as religion? What on earth could have prompted them to believe that their fate lay in the hands of beings they could not see or hear, except when lost in a state of trance? Here, unsurprisingly, no clear answer is forthcoming. Yet a little theorising is possible.

In recent decades there has been increasing interest in a remarkable human ability: one which is on a par with our skill for using complex language, or tools. That this talent had escaped much notice before now was perhaps because it is so basic to our nature that it was almost invisible to us. It is our skill at imagining others' points of view, known as 'Theory of Mind'.

Theory of Mind is something that only humans possess to any degree. Even chimpanzees struggle to comprehend any view outside their own. Theory of Mind lies at the heart of all fiction, and, arguably, storytelling may have come into existence to provide us with a little practice. Fiction certainly offers the best means of describing what Theory of Mind is. Shakespeare's *Othello* is sometimes cited as an example, though any bedroom farce would do. In *Othello* members of the audience need to keep in their heads, simultaneously: Desdemona's point of view (innocent and unknowing), Othello's view of Desdemona (filled with jealous suspicions she has little idea of) and Iago's view of Othello (maliciously leading him astray by planting his suspicions). Plus, perhaps, Shakespeare's view of all the characters, and, finally, the member of the audience's own view of the whole effect. People can routinely balance four or five layers of others' points of view.

Why did humans develop this skill to such remarkable levels? Almost certainly because it was key to our ancestors' survival. In a hunter-gatherer tribe, where violence was

likely to have been common, especially when stomachs were empty, having a good grasp of Theory of Mind would have helped people to recognise, and fend off, danger from their fellow humans. It would have allowed them to make alliances and friendships, to win the help of others in protecting and feeding themselves and, crucially, in protecting and feeding their children. It would have been a case of *survival of the most intuitive*.

This remarkable talent for Theory of Mind leads us to *imagine other people's thinking*, every waking moment of the day, whether we intend to or not. We constantly consider others' feelings towards ourselves, and try to guess the reasons for their behaviour. It seems not such a big step to suppose that, at some point long ago, our specialisation led us to start detecting humanlike personalities even outside the world of humans. We began to detect them *everywhere*. We began to see human points of view in anything that was important to our survival. We saw human moods in the sky, in the weather, in brooks we drank from, in trees that might conceal prey or give us shade. Most of all we gave human personalities to animals, whose thinking we needed to understand if we were to find and hunt them. Almost anything could be given a personality, or spirit. Naturally we sought help from these beings, just as we sought help from one another. To contact these spirits, people entered that mysterious state of trance, which they found they were also skilled at. So, it may have been, that we invented our very first gods.

There would, needless to say, be many, many more.

A New Pastime on a Bare Mountain

One day, around 9500 BC, on a mountaintop with panoramic views – now Göbekli Tepe in modern south-east Turkey – a group of people occupied themselves doing something

wholly new. It was also wholly backbreaking. They chipped away at a bed of limestone rock, using only tiny flint blades, until they had cut free a gigantic piece of stone. Thin and T-shaped, it looked like a huge, slender stone mallet. It was five metres high and weighed almost ten tons. The group then hauled the stone for several hundred metres to the mountain's summit, where they set it carefully upright, facing another just like it. The two became the centrepiece of a stone circle, dug into the ground like a kind of sunken bath and enclosed by a wall, which contained no fewer than eight more giant mallet-shaped stones.

At some point the circle was covered with earth, and, over a period of some 1,500 years, another nineteen or so circles were created, on top of one another, so they formed a large mound on the mountain's summit. On some stones there were carvings of scorpions, foxes, snakes, lions and other creatures. One was decorated with the disturbing image of a detached human arm. Some had patterns that, to modern eyes, look beguilingly – and misleadingly – like writing. Finally, around 8000 BC, after some fifteen centuries of work, the site was abandoned. It remained forgotten for another 10,000 years, until, in 1994, it was visited by the archaeologist Klaus Schmidt, who quickly realised he had found something remarkable.

The people who built Göbekli Tepe did not live there. No houses or waste tips have been found that would indicate the presence of a village. It seems they clambered up the mountainside from settlements elsewhere. They *commuted*. Why, one might wonder, did they choose to make their lives so very hard? Why, instead of struggling up a mountain, to carve out and haul vast pieces of stone, did they not just stay comfortably down below, as their ancestors had been content to do? Why not spend their hours on tasks that were easier, and more practically useful, like gathering nuts or

hunting animals? What, once they had built a stone circle, did they do up there?

As is so often the case when looking back to prehistoric times, answers are elusive. In fact, in many ways, it is harder to guess what went on at Göbekli Tepe than it is to guess what occurred some 20,000 years earlier in the painted caves of Europe, whose occupants' religion is easily comparable with those of recent times. This situation may change. Only a small part of the Göbekli Tepe site has so far been excavated, and further work may provide new clues. In the meantime, it is possible at least to point to an idea that, almost certainly, was keenly present in the minds of stone-circle makers. This was a notion that had a limited place among hunter-gatherers, but was much in vogue among the societies that gradually displaced them. It was *sacrifice*.

It is not hard to imagine where the idea originated. Humans constantly interact with one another *reciprocally*. We do each other favours and keep a rough tab of what we owe and are owed. People may sometimes choose to ignore the reciprocity system, and give without expecting anything in return, but this, I would suggest, is a little exceptional, and is usually seen as such, entitling the giver to special prestige. If this seems a rather cold-blooded account of human behaviour, ask yourself how you would feel if a friend, who is as well provided with the necessities of life as yourself, repeatedly asks you for favours, but refuses to give anything in return, or even to recognise his or her rising debt. You would probably feel used. The notches on your tabs would become so far apart that your friendship would come under strain.

It makes sense that a system which is profoundly engrained in our thinking would become extended also to the world of our invented helpers: the gods. If supernatural beings were going to save us from our nightmares then surely, like humans, they would expect something in return. As the help of the gods was, in people's imaginations, of

great value, so people's payment to them, or sacrifice, also had to be of great value. It had to be difficult. And what could be more difficult than repeatedly climbing the slope of Göbekli Tepe, to chip away with tiny flint blades, and haul ten-ton slabs of limestone?

Hunter-gatherers, such as the carver of our lion-person, do not seem to have been especially interested in sacrifice. Why did the idea become so popular? The answer is almost certainly connected with what was, arguably, humankind's greatest lifestyle change. Around 9600 BC – roughly the same time that people began climbing up the slopes of Göbekli Tepe – the climate suddenly and dramatically improved. After a thousand-year mini ice age, the Middle East became green and temperate. This change allowed people to achieve something that had eluded them until then. They were able to give up their endless wandering and settle down in permanent villages. Country life had begun. People were not yet farmers, but they were close. They were *hunter-gardeners* cultivating wild crops, which they harvested with bone scythes lined with sharpened stones.

With this new lifestyle would have come new fears. Hunter-gatherers' lives may have been dangerous, but at least they were uncomplicated. They wandered from place to place, hoping to find and kill prey without being injured or killed themselves. They lived from day to day. Though people in villages would have enjoyed more regular meals, their lives may also have felt more precarious. They had to think ahead, clearing land for their wild crops to grow, while these crops, on which they soon depended, could be suddenly and unexpectedly destroyed by disease or bad weather.

Village life would have helped people come up with projects like Göbekli Tepe. For a start, village life meant that there were now many more people to work on a backbreaking sacrifice project. As Massimo Livi-Bacci has

shown in his study of population, when people stop constantly moving around, and no longer have to carry their small children from place to place, they have children more frequently. Thanks to the dramatic improvement in the climate, food was now more plentiful. Consequently this era would have seen a rapid rise in population. Once harvests were brought in, people would have had something they had never enjoyed before: spare time. People had the numbers and the leisure to embark on vast ventures to keep their gods sweet.

The results were spectacular. On Göbekli Tepe people constructed what is almost certainly the very first *purpose-built temple*. They created the first monolithic stone circles, which are more than twice as old as Stonehenge. They devised what was, in effect, the first architecture. They may also have inspired, unintentionally, another remarkable first, at least in the Middle East: farming. Genetic studies show that many key crops which are eaten across the Western world today are directly descended from wild plants that still grow in a single, small area: the Karadag hills in southern Turkey. The Karadag hills, as it happens, are only twenty kilometres from Göbekli Tepe. It seems a great coincidence that a number of major farming crops should have originated so close to this remarkable place. Almost certainly, there is no coincidence at all.

The archaeologist Jacques Cauvin has suggested that Göbekli Tepe helped *cause* the discovery of farming in the Middle East. How could a set of stone circles bring about one of humankind’s greatest discoveries? To answer, I first need to explain, very briefly, what farming was, and how it was altogether different from the hunter-gardening of wild crops that people had practised before. Farming was, in effect, humankind’s first foray into the world of *genetic manipulation*. People nurtured rare mutant types of crops, which failed to release their seeds. This meant we could thresh them and catch every grain. For these suicidal

varieties to prevail over the older, non-suicidal wild varieties – which *did* release their seeds – they needed to be planted in new locations, to reduce competition from wild crops. In effect, they had to be transported by humans. Pilgrim rock cutters clambering up to Göbekli Tepe would have done precisely this. As nobody was permanently living on the mountain, they would have needed to bring seeds there, to eat and perhaps sow. Studies of food remains from Göbekli Tepe show that farming had not begun when the site was built. The seeds are of wild varieties, not cultivated. Until recently it was widely assumed that organised religion grew from farming. In the Middle East at least, it now seems that the exact opposite was true: farming was a spin-off from organised religion. As we will see, it was the first of many technological breakthroughs that religion would inspire.

But heaving ten-ton blocks of stone was not the only kind of sacrifice that people invented in their efforts to impress supernatural beings. At Çayönü, a few dozen kilometres from Göbekli Tepe, between 8000 and 7000 BC, or just after Göbekli Tepe was abandoned, something very *grisly* seems to have taken place.

Archaeological excavations have uncovered the remains of a small, rectangular building with a semicircular apse in one wall. In its day it would have looked a little like a tiny Christian church. In a side chamber was found a huge polished stone, weighing close to a ton, along with a large flint blade. Both were stained with copious quantities of blood: from sheep, wild cattle and humans. In other antechambers were almost 300 human skulls, together with numerous other human remains, most of which belonged to young adults. It is widely assumed that the inhabitants of Çayönü indulged in large-scale human sacrifice.

They were almost certainly not alone. At one of the world’s earliest towns, the settlement of Jericho in today’s Palestinian West Bank, the archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon

found, in only one small portion of the site, the remains of almost 300 people. These were dispersed right through the very fabric of the settlement: under floors, between walls and in the town's stone tower. Especially disturbing was the large number of infant remains that Kenyon found. These were buried either in the walls of homes or beneath their front doors, indicating that they had been placed there for a specific purpose. Some corpses had been buried, then dug up again, and then had their skulls reburied, placed carefully in stacks, facing one another. Some had been picked out for honorary treatment, their faces re-created with plaster, with cowrie shells for eyes.

Then there is Çatalhöyük in western Turkey, which is surely one of the strangest settlements ever to have existed. The town, which peaked around 7000 BC, had no streets, so its houses formed a solid mass, and inhabitants could reach their homes only by walking over those of their neighbours, and then clambering down ladders through a hole in the roof. Though nobody has any idea what religious beliefs Çatalhöyükans may have had, the excavated remains of their town suggest an intense, even obsessive, state of mind. All houses were virtually identical, with their tiny, dark rooms, their hearths and their sleeping platforms arranged in precisely the same way. Some houses had bizarre wall paintings, painted and repainted dozens of times, of skulls and bulls, and of vultures feeding on headless humans. Others were decorated with wall reliefs of giant female breasts, whose nipples were pierced by real animal skulls. As at Jericho, human remains were found through the fabric of the town, between walls, and under floors and sleeping platforms. Male remains show a suspiciously high occurrence of wounds to their arms and skulls. The archaeologist Klaus Schmidt believes that human remains may well also be found beneath the stone circles of Göbekli Tepe.

So a shadowy picture begins to emerge of a culture of sacrifice. It seems people tried to bribe the gods into helping them – or at least into not punishing them – by sacrificing their time, their labour, their animals and themselves. On the evidence of later religions, they probably also made less dramatic, day-to-day offerings of small quantities of their food, which were burned or left out to rot.

It is time, though, to move on from vague conjecture. A new technological breakthrough was on its way, one which would allow us, for the first time, to see people's religious beliefs in clear detail: writing.

Dressing for Breakfast

Around 2100 BC at a temple in the city of Nippur, south of modern Baghdad – a religious centre that was the Mecca, or Rome, of early Mesopotamia – the chief of all the gods, and controller of weather, Enlil, dressed for breakfast. This was not a special day at Enlil's temple. No festival was taking place, bringing throngs of visitors. No god or goddess from a neighbouring city had come to pay court, their statue carried up the Euphrates in a huge, ceremonial barge. Thousands of days like this one had already occurred, and many thousands more would do so over the next two millennia.

Enlil – or rather his statue – would have been dressed in his private apartment, which was probably located on top of a kind of flat-topped Mesopotamian pyramid, or ziggurat. His wardrobe was extensive, and included loincloths, linen coats, lapis lazuli beads, silver earrings and gold rings. More remarkable than the clothes he wore, though, were Enlil's meals. Enlil would have dined four times a day, enjoying two light snacks and two full feasts. His food would have been brought by temple staff on great platters, which were placed

before him, as drums were beaten and hymns sung. Enlil's feeding required considerable organisation. Towns around Nippur took turns sending him cattle by the dozen, sheep and goats by the score, as well as huge quantities of butter, cheese, grain, fruit, beer and just about anything else that could be eaten or drunk. Near Enlil's temple, special warehouses and animal pens had been built as part of a vast state apparatus to keep him amenable.

We have this portrait of Enlil's daily routine and the vast economic system it spawned thanks to the invention of writing. Yet writing itself was almost certainly a spin-off from this religious machinery. The breakthrough that made it possible – coming up with the bizarre notion of representing sound with written signs – first occurred in Mesopotamia. Steven Roger Fischer, a historian of writing, goes so far as to suggest that it may well never have occurred anywhere else, and that all subsequent writing systems across the world are likely to have descended from a single Mesopotamian original.

This first breakthrough probably took place around 3500 BC, and it happened, almost certainly, in the world's first great city, Uruk, near present-day Basra in southern Iraq. How did it happen? A clue can be found in the very earliest written documents yet found, which date from around 3100 BC. These are not history or poetry or literature. Aside from a few magic spells, they largely consist of *accountancy*. They record temple transactions and receipts for goods received. It is likely that the breakthrough behind writing was stumbled upon in a busy warehouse, filled with grain, oil, and animals for Uruk's gods.

Thanks to writing we have for the first time a relatively precise idea of what people believed, and what rituals they followed. So what was Mesopotamian religion like? One of its most noticeable aspects was that it *had no heaven*. Mesopotamians looked forward to an afterlife, but it was a