

ON THE EDGE OF DEATH

Evidence to suggest that the 'fabulous bird' Simurgh – nurse, physician and personal adviser to the legendary kings of Iran – had been a human being in disguise was not difficult to find. In one edition of the *Shahnameh*, the footnotes accompanying the story in which the great bird tends the needs of the infant Zal on Mount Elburz explained that 'the fable simply meant a holy recluse of the mountains, who nourished and educated the poor child which had been abandoned by its father'.¹ A holy recluse who impersonates 'a noble vulture' and dresses as a great bird? Who, then, was this 'holy recluse' and what might his or her relationship have been to the royal house of Sam and Nariman?

Other stories that feature the Simurgh also seem to point strongly to the bird's human origin. In one folktale preserved by the Mandaean – the strange cult of great antiquity existing among both the Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq and the isolated communities of western Iran – the Simurgh is greeted at the court of a shah named Hirmiz like a foreign envoy of great renown. He prepares a throne for the bird, who possesses a female gender, and entertains her with a meal of 'fruits of the mountain-country', since the Simurgh 'does not eat meat'.² He also provides a breathtaking display of song and dance by the finest troupe of maidens in the land. Even the birds reared by the dancing maidens are brought in to perform before the enthroned Simurgh, an indication perhaps of some kind of ritual dance in which individuals would adorn themselves with bird feathers. In the many conversations she has with the king, the Simurgh shows a profound knowledge of the secret wisdom and displays powerful visionary abilities.

The wondrous bird entertained by Hirmiz bears all the

hallmarks of having been a woman, a shaman perhaps, dressed as a bird. I could see no alternative explanation, other than to suggest that the whole story was purely allegorical in content.

The Divine Physician

In another story found in the *Shahnameh* of Firdowsi, the Simurgh cures Rustam and his magical horse Rakhsh of mortal wounds inflicted on them by the hero Isfendiyar. Earlier in the text, Isfendiyar had himself managed to slaughter a Simurgh by cutting it in two with his sword, having travelled a great journey 'over desert, plain, mountain, and wilderness until he (had) reached the neighbourhood of the Simurgh'.³

As on previous occasions, Rustam's father, Zal, burns one of the Simurgh's feathers on a high place and the fabulous bird appears as if out of nowhere. She tells the elderly king to have no fear as she can cure both Rustam and his beloved horse. Beginning with the animal, the Simurgh uses her beak to remove six arrows and then heals the wounds by passing one of her feathers over Rakhsh's body. Turning to Rustam, she then deals with him in a similar manner – first removing eight arrows, before sucking out the poisonous blood and finally healing him completely by passing feathers over his wounds.⁴

After Rustam has recovered, he solicits the aid of the Simurgh to tell him how he might defeat his rival, Isfendiyar. The 'noble vulture' severely advises against this act of revenge, since Isfendiyar is a hero of Rustam's own race, adding that if she does provide him with the means by which he can defeat his enemy, then this deed will inevitably bring about his own death. Rustam accepts his fate and the Simurgh at once falls into 'deep thought . . . and remained some time silent',⁵ perhaps a trance state not unlike those achieved by shamans in tribal cultures.

After regaining consciousness, the Simurgh informs Rustam that he must mount his treasured horse Rakhsh and follow behind her. They travel far and eventually arrive at a place of reeds where grows the magical Kazu-tree, almost as if this had been the sight seen in vision by the bird. The Simurgh then instructs Rustam on

how he might make a deadly arrow from one of the tree's branches, which he then uses to kill Isfendiyar, himself dying in the process.

The Drug of Immortality

Before his death, however, Rustam encounters Isfendiyar's brother, Bashutan. He inquires as to how the king has made such a speedy recovery from the mortal wounds inflicted on him only the previous day. In reply Rustam says:

*'I am now wholly free from wounds, and so is my horse, for I possess an elixir which heals the most cruel lacerations of the flesh the moment it is applied; but no such wounds were inflicted upon me, the arrows of Isfendiyar being only like needles sticking in my body.'*⁶

Rustam was obviously attempting to pass off his wounds as insignificant to Bashutan, since he did not wish to reveal just how close to death he had come before the arrival of the Simurgh. Yet here once again was an example of the highly advanced knowledge of drugs and medicine apparently possessed by this 'noble vulture'. What was this 'elixir which heals the most cruel lacerations of the flesh'? Was it the same 'herb' that, when mixed with milk and musk, healed the wounds inflicted on Rudabeh during the delivery of her child by Caesarian section? In past ages the 'elixir' was looked upon as a much-sought-after divine liquor believed by the ancient alchemists to be able to transform base matter into a state of purity. It was also seen as a fabled super-drug believed to be able to rejuvenate the body and prolong life.

Although the nature or reality of the elixir has always remained a matter of speculation, it has strongly been linked with a sacred drug referred to in Iranian myth as *haoma*, a substance produced from a plant or fungus of uncertain origin. Most Iranian scholars believe *haoma* to be linked with a species of *ephedra*, the genus of a trailing shrub belonging to the family *Gnetaceae*, or sea-grape, while other Persian stories say that it grew either 'on mountain-tops or in river valleys'.⁷ When mixed with milk or water, the resulting juice could not only create intoxicating effects, but it could also heal the body and induce alleged supernatural powers.⁸ More

recent research has suggested that the active ingredient of *haoma* may actually have been the mushroom Fly-Agaric, a major hallucinogen now thought to have been used by shamanistic cultures for anything up to 10,000 years.⁹

Because of its enormous spiritual significance to the Iranian religion, *haoma* became a healing god in its own right, which, because of the plant's apparent curative properties, could bestow health and strength on its worshippers. In some accounts the Simurgh is perceived as the guardian of the *haoma* plant, for as the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* explains:

*... in the traditions of the Indo-Iranians, [the drug is] closely connected with a mystical bird which took the ... haoma from the place where it lay hidden and brought it to gods and men. The Avesta speaks of the bird Saena, which is the Simurgh of the Persians who make him play the same part.*¹⁰

So the Simurgh revealed the secrets of *haoma* to both the gods and mortal kind. This role is played in early Hindu mythology by the half giant, half eagle known as Garuda. It steals the moon goblet containing the Ambrosia, Amrita, nectar or *soma*, which provides the *asura* gods with supernatural power and renders them immortal. In response, an *asura* named Indra the Thunderer flings his deadly bolt in a vain attempt to prevent this theft. He fails to wound Garuda, but does dislodge one of the bird's feathers, which falls to the ground. The Amrita is delivered by Garuda to 'the serpents' in exchange for the freedom of its mother, who has been held by them in bondage. Afterwards the giant became known as 'the golden sun bird, deadly foe of all serpents', linking it with the two basic totemic forms of the Watchers – the bird-man and serpent.¹¹

Garuda was undoubtedly the Indian equivalent of the Simurgh, while the *soma* is, of course, the same as the Iranian *haoma*, which could also prolong life and create supernatural powers. In some legends, *haoma* was said to have grown upon a special tree situated in the proximity of Mount Elburz, known only to the 'immortals', those, assumedly, who could prolong life by taking this super-drug.¹²

The existence and alleged properties of *haoma*, particularly its ability to prolong life, made me recall the passage in Genesis 3 in

which Adam and Eve are cast out of Eden for fear that they would eat of the Tree of Life and 'live for ever', in other words become immortal like gods themselves.¹³ Might the 'fruit' of the Tree of Life have been *haoma*? All the indications are that such a drug could have originated from a much earlier shamanistic culture, who may well have used it as part of their death-inducing rites, perhaps utilizing the vulture as a symbol of the soul's transformation. Might these have been linked with the enigmatic bird-men of the Book of Enoch? Had such a super-drug been known to the fallen race, and could it provide an answer as to why Mount Elburz was purportedly the realm of the immortals? Had *haoma*, or *soma*, really been given to the mortal world by a fabulous bird?

In addition to the Simurgh's superior knowledge of drugs and medicine, the story of Rustam's killing of Isfendiyar shows the bird to have been skilful in the art of manufacturing deadly accurate weapons, such as the arrow made from the branch of the Kazu-tree. As with the apparent medical knowledge understood by the Simurgh, this is not the sort of knowledge usually equated with the bird kingdom.

Isfendiyar's slaughter of a Simurgh earlier in the same story also demonstrates that the Iranians must have believed there to have been not just one such creature of this description, but *a whole host of them* living in the mountainous region of Elburz. In my opinion, it seemed certain that the term 'Simurgh' was simply a figurative title masquerading the actions and deeds of many people, not just one 'holy recluse' leading a solitary existence among the mountains of Iran. Furthermore, the idea of birds possessing clear human characteristics and traits appeared to be a familiar one in Iranian myth, for it resurfaces again in the writings of Persian Islamic mystics, or sufis, during the Middle Ages.¹⁴

Had the story-tellers of ancient Iran unwittingly used myth and legend to preserve the former existence of a prehistoric culture which appeared to have been associated with ornithomorphic rites, especially in connection with the eagle and the vulture? If the answer was yes, then why had they chosen these particular birds as their shamanistic devices? Had they held some special place in their ritualistic lives, in the same way as, say, Siberian shamans led symbiotic lifestyles alongside the reindeer and the bushmen of

South Africa saw the reebok as a personification of their own higher states of consciousness?

The Noble Vulture

The key appeared to be the source of inspiration for the Simurgh. In one account it is described as 'a noble vulture', in others as a composite beast with elements borrowed from 'the peacock, the lion, the griffin and the dog'.¹⁵ In still others it is distinctly described as a kind of gryphon – a mythological creature of classical origin, part lion and part eagle. The lion was an animal of Angra Mainyu in Zoroastrian tradition,¹⁶ while the gryphon's association with the eagle derives in the main from a basic misconception. Very often the eagle, as a totemic symbol in mythology, only appears as a substitute for the much uglier and far more disliked vulture, and this has particularly been so in the Old Testament.¹⁷ The connection between the gryphon and the vulture, as opposed to the eagle, is exemplified in the knowledge that one of the principal species extant in the mountains of Iran and Iraq in ancient times was the griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*). Although modern ornithologists believe that the griffon vulture gained its name from the gryphon of classical fable, the word 'gryphon' actually means hook-nosed, which is a very apt description of the vulture's bill, implying that the connection between them is the other way around.¹⁸

So the Simurgh was predominantly a kind of fabulous vulture, and little else, which begged the immediate question: why should the 'noble vulture' have risen to the rank of 'king of birds' in Iranian myth? I looked towards the religious texts of the Zoroastrian faith for answers, and answers I found. Vultures, I quickly realized, have *always* played an integral role in the religion's myths and rituals, especially in respect of its grisly funerary customs.

Excarnation

In the middle of the fifth century BC the noted Greek historian Herodotus visited different parts of the Persian empire on his

famous travels. On these journeys he would make a point of observing and recording local customs and ritual practices, which he subsequently entered into his nine-volume work entitled, simply, *History*, and it is Book I of this series that contains reference to strange death-rites he witnessed in Media involving Magi priests, for as he reveals:

*It is said that the body of a male Persian is never buried, until it has been torn either by a dog or a bird of prey. That the Magi have this custom is beyond a doubt, for they practise it without any concealment. The dead bodies are covered with wax, and then buried in the ground.*¹⁹

Other classical writers, including Agathias and Strabo, also mention these so-called rites of 'excarnation', as they are known today, in which the body of the deceased is exposed to the ravages of wild beasts and carrion birds, such as black crows and vultures. According to Herodotus, these practices were confined to male priests and were quite basic in content. They would also appear to have been specific to the Magi, a reference to the priests of Media, and *not* to the rival Zoroastrian priesthood. Herodotus undoubtedly knew the difference between the two, for it was he who reported that the rites of Magophobia – the festival in which people were encouraged to kill any Magi they chanced upon in remembrance of the Magian-led usurpation of the throne during the reign of Cambyses – was still being upheld in his day. So there can be little doubt about his words.

Exposure of the dead continued to be practised in Iran through to the time of the Parthian confederacy of kings – who ruled Persia for a span of nearly five hundred years from the third century BC onwards. It also continued to take place under the Sassanian kings of Persia, who ousted the Parthians during the third century AD. It was during this final phase in the empire's long history that excarnation would appear to have become more widely accepted and practised among all walks of society. Whether they be ecclesiastical or secular, male or female, rich or poor, the bodies of Magians and Zoroastrians were now exposed to the wild beasts and carrion birds. Scholars accept that this great shift in funerary customs and practices among the Persians was almost certainly a result of the heavy influence exerted on both the ruling Sassanian monarchs and

the state-run religion by the Magi priests, who had somehow managed to wheedle their way back into some of the most important places of power during this period.²⁰

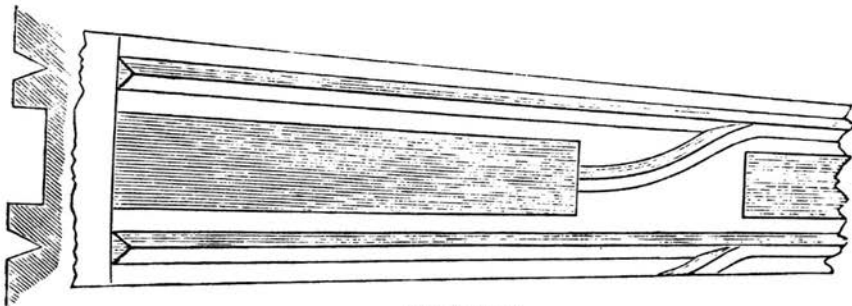
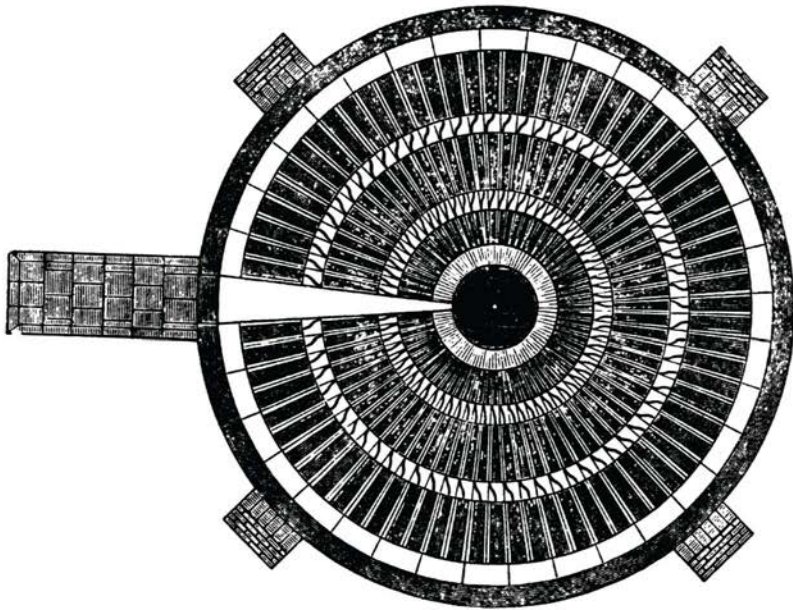
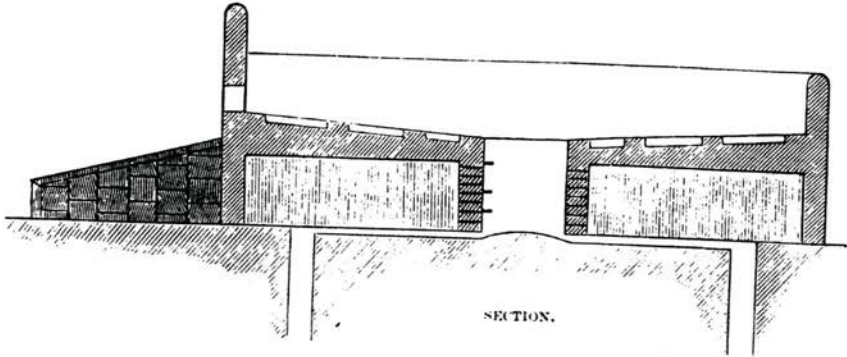
After the bulk of the Zoroastrians of Iran had fled the Arab persecutions and settled in India during the ninth century, excarnation took on a whole new significance. For no obvious reason, it suddenly became more structured, more organized and more widespread; in fact, from this time onwards it would appear that all Zoroastrians, or Parsees as they were now known, became subject to exposure after death. Moreover, instead of excarnation taking place on high open ground, the bodies were now placed in huge stone mortuary buildings, known as *dakhmas*, or Towers of Silence, situated well away from habitation.

Inside each of these great, open-topped amphitheatres was a huge radial platform with three concentric rows of stone slabs called *pavis*, set out like the spokes of an enormous stone wheel. On these the dead bodies would be placed in position by corpse-bearers, and then left to the ravages of vultures, who would take as little as thirty minutes to denude the flesh. Running along the edges of each *pavi* were deep channels for carrying away bodily fluids and rain water. This liquid matter would flow into a central stone-lined pit known as the *bhandar*, and from here it would be conveyed to the outside walls by four equally spaced channels containing a filtering system of charcoal and sandstones. Once the hot sun had dried the clean skeletons, they would be collected up and thrown down into the *bhandar*, where they would eventually turn to dust and be washed away by the rain.

Exposure of the dead actually makes good sense, even if such practices may seem barbaric to the Western world. It is nature's way of disposing of flesh and blood, and what is more it complied with a Zoroastrian tenet which decreed that 'the mother earth shall not be defiled' by impure substances.²¹ Yet what prompted the

Fig. 4. Line illustration of one of the *dakhmas*, or Towers of Silence, used by Indian Parsees to expose human corpses to vultures. This process, known today as excarnation, is very possibly the last remnant of a shamanistic practice that pre-dates the rise of Western civilization.

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earliest Magians to employ the use of excarnation in the first place?

Modern-day Zoroastrians claim that such practices were conducted by Iranians in prehistoric times. Their history books say that in the distant past dead bodies were taken out to mountain-tops, tied securely to the ground using iron pegs, and then left to the dogs and vultures. Afterwards, the remaining bones would be collected up, placed in a container or casket known to archaeologists as an ossuary, and then buried, either in the ground or inside caves.²²

Excarnation was also not restricted to the practitioners of Magianism and Zoroastrianism. The Mandaean of Iraq and Iran exposed their dead to carrion birds, for as one of their great teachers, Sheikh Nejm, commented: 'Once our funeral was like that of the Persians. We placed our dead in an open place, surrounded by a wall, and birds came and ate them.'²³ Evidence of exposure of the dead has also been found among the earliest inhabitants of Baluchistan in central Asia,²⁴ while so-called 'fractional' or 'secondary' burials – that is, bones which have been collected up and buried after exposure – were once practised by various Indo-Iranian cultures of prehistory. These include the proto-Elamites of south-west Iran, c. 3500 BC,²⁵ and the Indus Valley peoples of the Indian sub-continent, c. 2500 BC.²⁶ In addition to this, there are firm indications that the vulture played an important role in the pagan religions of these cultures, for abstract representations of the bird appear frequently on their ritualistic art. Cylinder seals and painted pottery often depict the vulture (usually misidentified as a 'bird of prey') swooping down towards shamanistic figures who have their arms raised in a devotional manner.²⁷ So what might this great bird have meant to these Indo-Iranian cultures of a bygone age?

Rites of the Vulture

The role played by the vulture in the excarnation practices of Iran obviously earned it a very special place among its myths and legends. Why should this have been so? The answer appears to lie in its ability to seek out and denude the bodies of animals and

human beings in a matter of minutes, making it an obvious symbol of mortality as well as a carrier of the soul into the next world. Furthermore, because it was seen as a bird of flight that often lived in high, mountainous regions, many early cultures believed that it guided the spirit to the starry realms of heaven, reached via the lofty heights of some sacred mountain peak, which constituted the connecting point between heaven, earth and underworld.²⁸ To the earliest neolithic cultures (i.e. the first, settled farming communities of Eurasia, as opposed to the earlier palaeolithic and mesolithic hunter-gatherers) the vulture symbolized the spirit of death.

Evidence of this powerful belief is to be found in the funerary customs practised until comparatively recent times by the Parsees of India. Once a person had died, it was deemed that his or her soul would remain close to the body for three days, during which time constant prayers and hymns would be recited over the deceased. After the body had lain in the house for this statutory period, the departure of the soul would be ascertained by a process of divination known as *sag-did*. In one variation of this theme – which usually involved observing the reactions of a chosen dog brought into contact with the corpse²⁹ – the mourning relatives would watch for the shadow of a black crow or vulture to pass over the dead body. When this happened, it was seen as a sign that the soul had departed the house and that the body could now be exposed.³⁰ Might this custom be linked to the way in which the shadow cast by the feather of the Simurgh was able to aid the healing of Rudabeh's wounds in the *Shahnameh* story concerning the birth of Rostam?

To the ancient Iranians the vulture would appear to have been linked not just with physical mortality, but also with the gradual process of illumination and transmigration of the soul achieved after death, something that was understood by prehistoric cultures through the mental process we know today as near-death experience (NDE). Parapsychological studies into this fascinating subject have conclusively shown that individuals who are classed as clinically dead, before being resuscitated, often experience so-called out-of-the-body sensations, as well as visionary glimpses of the next world and encounters with either deceased relatives or shining beings.³¹

Although we perceive such strange experiences as a modern and purely psychological phenomenon, shamanistic cultures worldwide have always accepted that death-like states can be induced through artificial processes.³² These have included the use of intoxicating drugs, sensory deprivation, or the actual creation of near-death situations, during which time the brain is tricked into believing that the body is on the edge of death. Trials by fire or water, the introduction of deadly poisons into the body (with the necessary antidote at hand) or death-defying physical feats, such as jumping off cliffs with a rope tied to one leg, and many more similar such feats of endurance, can *all* induce traumatic mental states similar in style to the near-death experience. During such times, astral flight, spirit communication and visionary glimpses of ethereal realms will hopefully take place.

Since the vulture was the ultimate symbol of death, then it seems likely that the ancient Indo-Iranian cultures invoked the spirits of these giant birds to guide them on their other-worldly journeys in search of universal knowledge, inspired truth and divine illumination. This close relationship with the vulture in their religious practices would have involved shamans adorning themselves with coats of feathers and conducting the necessary tribal rites in the belief that this would aid them in achieving astral flight. Lastly, when physical death did overcome any prominent member of the community, they would have continued this symbiosis with the spirit of the vulture by using excarnation in the hope that their souls would be successfully guided into the next world.

Çatal Hüyük

From the archaeological evidence of secondary burials and exposure among the Indo-Iranian cultures, there is every reason to suggest that the cult of the vulture was once widespread. Despite this knowledge, there was not enough evidence in Iran itself for me fully to understand the extent or nature of this strange cult of the dead, or how it might be linked with the traditions concerning the fallen race of Judaic religious literature. For this I had to journey

across the rugged mountain ranges of Iran, Iraq and Syria to the vast plains of Anatolia, close to the old town of Konya, in southern Turkey.

Here, one chilly November day in 1958, a British archaeological team led by an expert in Anatolian studies, named James Mellaart, arrived to survey a great double-mound of earth known locally as Çatal Hüyük. Turf and ruin-weed covered everywhere, but here and there the harsh south-westerly winds had peeled away the top soil to reveal tell-tale signs of human occupation – scattered mud-bricks, discarded hand-tools, broken potsherds and patches of grey ash. At the time those present had no idea of the immense importance of this discovery, for when the excavations began in 1961, Mellaart and his team started to uncover a vast metropolis – a network of shrines and dwellings belonging to a protoneolithic community that had lived between 8,500 and 7,700 years ago.³³ From the extraordinary level of detail and decoration of the sub-surface buildings, as well as the jewellery, the tools, the weapons and the murals found within the double-mound, it soon became clear that the Çatal Hüyük culture had been extremely advanced in its beliefs, lifestyle and artistic capabilities. Nothing like this had ever been found before, either in Turkey or anywhere else in the world. It was so unique that many scholars now believe that Çatal Hüyük may provide important clues concerning the rise of civilization in the Old World.

Walking among the many religious shrines while the excavations were in progress between 1961 and 1964, the visitor would have seen life-size bulls' heads with horns protruding from the decorated plaster, as well as high-relief leopards either stamped with ringed trefoil designs or spread-eagled in the birth position. He or she would also have seen wall after wall of abstract geometric or polychromic patterns such as double-axe designs, hand-imprints, lozenges, zig-zags and huge, circular eyes, all painted either in ochre red or black. These have now either faded or been removed by the Turkish authorities to a museum at Ankara, where they may still be seen today.

It was, however, the vulture shrines that were by far the most perplexing enigma of Çatal Hüyük, for they raised poignant questions about the strange ritual practices conducted beneath the

plains of Anatolia during the seventh millennium BC. Shrine VII, for instance, left the visitor awestruck. Covering two complete walls was a gigantic mural depicting seven enormous vultures, some up to five feet in wing-span. They were frozen in mid-flight and appeared to be swooping down to devour six headless, matchstick men, four of whom were crouched up with their legs bent towards their chests. The birds' characteristic bald heads, their short legs and distinctive crests identified them as *Gyps fulvus*, the griffon vulture, the source behind the Simurgh of Iranian myth and legend.³⁴ Walk into another shrine and you would have seen a mural depicting human figures trying to beat off vultures that seemed to be attacking a corpse.

Walk into Shrine VI and you would have found probably the most important scene of all – a detailed fresco showing vultures in association with erect, wooden-framed towers, their open-topped roofs linked to the ground by angled stairways.³⁵ In one case two huge birds could be seen perched on top of the tall structure, poised to envelop a sole human head with their curled wings. Next to this image was another similar tower with a headless, matchstick man hanging upside down and a vulture on each side, ready to attack. At the base of the stepped ramp were two figures, perhaps priests, walking away from the towers. Each wore a knee-length kilt and an upper garment with triangular-shaped shoulder-pads.

There seems little doubt that this last mural had been executed as an abstract representation of excarnation – the inverted matchstick man symbolizing a lifeless body about to be denuded by carrion birds. The high wooden towers with their open roofs and stairs could be compared with the *dakhmas*, or Towers of Silence, of Parsee tradition. The solitary head, in one instance, signified the soul being released from the body to begin its journey to the otherworld under the protection, or *wing*, of the *genius* of the vulture, which is believed by many present-day prehistorians to have possessed a female gender.³⁶ And the feminine attributes of the vulture cannot be denied, for on one wall of a shrine were found modelled human breasts in plaster, inside which were actual skulls of vultures, their bills protruding to form nipples. Another mural showed a recurring design featuring a vulture and a plump mother goddess clutching a new-born baby;³⁷ indeed, there was so much

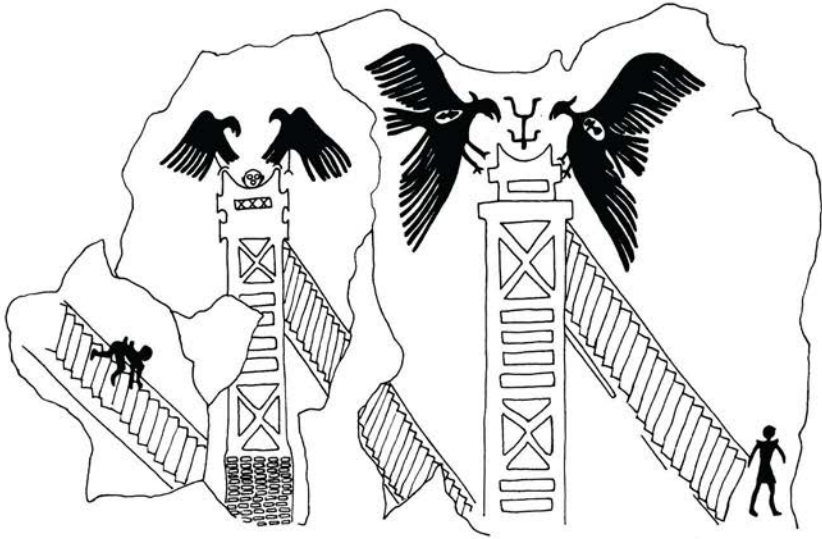


Fig. 5. Wall mural from one of the 8,000-year-old shrines at Çatal Hüyük in Turkey showing vultures devouring human corpses exposed on wooden towers. The process of excarnation, or exposure of the dead, was a major feature of vulture shamanism in early neolithic times and is almost certainly behind its survival among the Zoroastrians of Iran and India.

female symbolism in the shrines that it seems certain that the primary function of the Çatal Hüyük culture had been the celebration of life, death and rebirth into the next world.

Confirmation that excarnation had been integrally linked with the rites performed in the vulture shrines at Çatal Hüyük was the overwhelming evidence of secondary burial found in many graves, some located beneath the floors of houses. Within the shrines themselves archaeologists also uncovered several skulls, one with sliced cowrie shells as eyes.³⁸ These had almost certainly been used for oracular purposes in the belief that the seat of the soul was in the head, even after the point of physical death. Plastered skulls, probably used for similar ritual purposes, were also found in some of the lowest occupational levels at Jericho in Palestine, where an important protoneolithic township had thrived from the ninth millennium BC onwards (see Chapter Twenty-One).³⁹ Evidence of

partial or secondary burials was uncovered here too, indicating that, like their distant neighbours at Çatal Hüyük, the people of Jericho had practised excarnation.⁴⁰

Yet some of the vulture frescos showed far more than simply the transmigration of the soul after death. Since these gigantic birds with broom-like wings overshadowed the tiny headless matchstick men, they were undoubtedly being portrayed as superior to mortal kind. More importantly, they were clearly depicted in one shrine with jointed legs, showing that in some cases they were not vultures at all but men or women dressed up as vultures – a conclusion drawn by most scholars who have studied the prehistoric art of Çatal Hüyük.⁴¹ There is every reason to believe that these scenes showed shamans either involved in funerary rites or assuming the guise of a vulture for other-worldly purposes.

Similar rites would undoubtedly have been practised by the various prehistoric cultures of Iran and eastern Asia, who had also employed the use of excarnation in their funerary practices. The last surviving fragments of this shamanistic tradition were, it appeared, the religious beliefs and customs of the Zoroastrians, who, through the intervention of the Magi priests during Sassanian times, had inherited an archaic tradition already many thousands of years old.

The Çatal Hüyük culture came to a sudden demise around 5600 BC, having left behind no less than thirteen different levels of occupation. What happened to these people is still unknown. Some founded a new site beyond a local river, which thrived for around seven hundred years, while others would have taken up residence at the nearby settlement of Hacilar, near the town of Burdur. Here James Mellaart had previously uncovered extensive evidence of a later, though more basic neolithic community which had occupied the site between 5700 and 5000 BC.⁴²

No one could deny the importance of the culture at Çatal Hüyük, with its unique preservation of what was quite clearly a vulture cult paralleling that practised in Iran during prehistoric times. I had, however, been wondering what possible relevance it might have to my knowledge of the fallen race when I chanced upon certain almost throwaway remarks James Mellaart made about this protoneolithic community in his essential book *Çatal*

Hüyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia, first published in 1967. Not only did the culture practice one of the earliest recorded forms of primitive agriculture and metal-working, but it also appeared to have possessed advanced technical skills totally inexplicable to archaeologists. These perplexed Mellaart to such a degree that he had been forced to ask:

*How, for example, did they polish a mirror of obsidian, a hard volcanic glass, without scratching it and how did they drill holes through stone beads (including obsidian), holes so small that no fine modern steel needle can penetrate. When and where did they learn to smelt copper and lead, metals attested at Çatal Hüyük since Level IX, c. 6400 bc?*⁴³

With respect to this highly advanced stone industry of Çatal Hüyük, Mellaart admitted that it marked the climax of an 'immensely long ancestry'⁴⁴ that reached back into palaeolithic times, well before the end of the last Ice Age, which had been over in Europe and Asia for around two thousand years. So where might this superior knowledge have come from? Had it been the fallen race of Enochian and Dead Sea tradition, who would also appear to have utilized a form of bird shamanism to obtain astral flight and dream-visions, and were said to have revealed to humanity the arts and sciences of heaven?

An abstract clue suggested that the answer would indeed be yes.

The artist Alan Sorrell was commissioned by the archaeological writer Edward Bacon to draw an impression of how the interior of one of the vulture shrines at Çatal Hüyük might have looked at the height of its devotional usage in the mid-seventh millennium BC. Using whatever knowledge had been gained from the years of research and excavation at the site, Sorrell produced a detailed picture of remarkable relevance to my work. It depicts three vulture shamans, adorned in beaked headdresses and garments of feathers, who kneel before a huge bull's head protruding from a wall before them. One tends a human skull placed in a wicker basket as sunlight pours in through openings cut into the uppermost sections of the timber-framed roof of the building, illuminating vulture frescos and still more bulls' heads on the far wall. A fourth figure in a hooded robe sits in meditation, while on the floor are further skulls and a square hearth in which burns a small fire.

Looking at Alan Sorrell's compelling picture for the first time sent a tingle down my spine; it also put a wry smile on my face. Here was a conceptual representation of vulture shamans who had lived on the Anatolian plateau 8,500 years ago. Yet there was something strangely familiar about their appearance – something which made me recall the Enochian legends where the Nephilim are described as 'bird-men' and the Watchers are said to wear garments 'very dark' or with 'the appearance of feathers'. The similarity between Alan Sorrell's artist's impression of vulture shamans at Çatal Hüyük and Billie Walker-John's line drawing of the feather-coated Watchers was too close for comfort.

Was it possible that the Watchers really were distorted memories of a shamanistic culture who had once inhabited a mountainous region, perhaps in Iran, and possessed a knowledge of science and technology well beyond that of other less evolved races of the Near East? If so, then were they also behind the legends of the Simurgh's contact with the earliest kings of Iran, who would appear to have possessed distinct physiological features resembling those of the fallen race? And what about the stories concerning the fall of the shining *ahuras* and the rise of the *daevic* race – the traditions best preserved in the dualistic teachings of the Magi priesthoods of Media, modern-day Azerbaijan. Could the apparent transgressions of this tall race of bird-men, with white Caucasian features and long viper-like faces of east Asian appearance, account for these Iranian legends as well?

My hunches told me I was still on the right track. What was more, left in my mind was the tantalizing possibility that, prior to my own interest in the subject, Alan Sorrell's imaginative interpretation of Çatal Hüyük's vulture shamans was perhaps the closest anyone had ever come to accurately depicting a real-life angel.

IN THE REALM OF THE IMMORTALS

Tales of the wondrous feats and skills possessed by the Simurgh must have been recounted by story-tellers around the camp-fires of isolated communities for thousands of years. The most memorable occasion of its appearance, they would have said, was the time when Zal called the great bird to his presence so that it could provide him with a means to deliver his son Rustam from the belly of his mother. And if at any time Zal needed the Simurgh's assistance, all he needed to do was burn one of its feathers.

By anyone's standards, such strange, unnatural fables were comparable with the European folktales in which the Fairy Queen appears to the lucky beholder to grant three wishes. Indeed, somewhere within these children's stories are marked similarities to the deeds of the Simurgh and the fallen race as a whole – too far removed, however, to be of any real relevance to the present study. Even so, the legends of the Simurgh might well encode invaluable information concerning a lost prehistoric culture that recognized the spirit of the vulture as the patron of death and as the guardian of the soul during its other-worldly journeys.

Yet did the memory of this forgotten race also leave behind other, more abstract legacies among the peoples of the Old World? Did it, for instance, influence the belief adhered to among Greek women until fairly recent times that, if they held the feather of a griffon vulture while giving birth, it would guarantee a swift delivery of their child?¹ Was this a distant echo of the way in which the Simurgh was said to have aided the delivery of the infant Rustam? Did these superstitious women believe that, by not clutching a vulture feather, they might give birth to babies of such size that it could kill them?

I think the probable answer is yes; however, such archaic customs were also probably linked to the close association in prehistoric times between the vulture and the Great Mother, the earliest form of goddess worshipped in Europe and Asia. In ancient Egypt, for example, the hieroglyph used to denote 'vulture' was also synonymous with the word 'mother'.² And in addition to easing childbirth, feathers of the griffon vulture, the great swooping bird depicted on the walls of the subterranean shrines of Çatal Hüyük, were held to be able to cure blindness and protect the holder against the bites of snakes and scorpions, creatures associated with Angra Mainyu, and his offspring the *daevas*, in Iranian tradition.³ Might this close association between vultures and serpents have stemmed from the presence of these two quite specific totems among the proposed shamanistic practices of the fallen race?

In Hindu mythology the ability to be able to destroy snakes was accredited to Garuda, the fabulous bird who was seen as the 'deadly foe of all serpents'. Even though this fabulous creature was often equated with the eagle, the description of its movements makes it more likely to have been a vulture, a view proposed by at least one authority on vulture lore.⁴

Further connecting the potency of magical feathers with the vulture is the knowledge that, as late as the thirteenth century, at least one actual Simurgh feather was still thought to exist. In the medieval sufi classic entitled *The Conference of the Birds* by the Persian poet Farid ud-Din Attar, it says that one was 'still . . . on view' in China.⁵ The author goes on to say that: 'If this same feather had not floated down, the world would not be filled with his [*the Simurgh's*] renown.'⁶ Apparently, 'rumours of its fame spread everywhere',⁷ implying that it had become the focus of pilgrimages from afar. Whether this feather had been plucked from the wing of a vulture or some other large bird shall never be known, yet the very existence of such holy relics shows the great significance accredited to the vulture's mythical counterpart.

Among the Avestan writings of Zoroaster there is an example of talismanic qualities being attributed to the feathers and bones of angels. In one legend the prophet asks Ahura Mazda what he might do if struck by 'the curse of the enemy'. The Wise Lord tells him

that he should rub his body with the feather of Verethragna, an angel of victory who takes on ten different incarnations, including that of a great bird and a man.

*With that feather thou shalt curse back the enemies. If a man holds a bone of that strong bird, no one can smite or turn to flight that fortunate man. The feather of that bird brings him help.*⁸

The name of this ornithomorphic incarnation of Verethragna is Varaghna – the bird that transmits the royal *farr* from one person to another in Avestan tradition. This therefore linked the shining countenances of the divine kings of ancient Iran with the feather and bone of an angel who was said to have adopted the form of a bird.

Did such relics of angels really exist in past ages? It is impossible now to say; however, what we do know is that *representations* of angel relics were once revered as the genuine item in Christian tradition. One such example from Britain is a cluster of white goose feathers preserved in the parish church at Pewsey, in the county of Wiltshire, which were said to have been dropped ‘in the Temple’ by the archangel Gabriel. Little is known about these particular feathers, which were found inside a stone pillar during restoration work in 1800. It is known, however, that several churches in Europe once possessed similar feathers which were probably acquired in the Holy Land at the time of the Crusades.⁹

Even though the angelic feathers of Pewsey belonged to a goose and not a vulture, there *were* firm connections between angels, vultures and Zoroastrianism. For instance, in Islamic religious lore the angel Sa‘adiya‘il is said to have been the leader of a group of angels who took the guise of vultures.¹⁰ Even though this angel is of Islamic origin, he is also found in a slightly different form in earlier Judaic tradition. Here he is the ‘archangel’ Sadayel, whose name, along with those of Raphael and Tiriël, was found inscribed within a pentagram on a ring amulet used for divine protection.¹¹ In Zoroastrian tradition, Sa‘adiya‘il becomes the *yazata* Sadwes, or Satavaesa, one of the three companions of Tir, while in Manichaean lore he is equated with a rain-making divinity of the same name.¹²

Vulture feathers. Simurgh feathers. Angel feathers.

Did they all stem from the same original source?

Was it possible that the Watchers had really been a prehistoric culture who practised vulture and perhaps snake shamanism, and lived in some remote mountainous region of Iran many thousands of years ago? How might I go about tracing its roots? The most immediate solution appeared to be finding the true whereabouts of Mount Elburz, the mythological home of the Simurgh and the source of the sacred plant *haoma*.

My mind kept returning to the *Shahnameh* story in which Sam had left his 'demon' son Zal to the mercy of wild animals and vultures. In my opinion, there had to be a connection between the rites of excarnation carried out in high open spaces during prehistoric times and the lofty heights of Mount Elburz where the Simurgh bird had made its home.

Only the piles of open books on Zoroastrianism scattered across my work-top could provide me with an answer, so I carefully reread the sections on funerary rites and customs and eventually chanced upon something of immense significance.

The Iranian Expanse

Zoroastrians believe that once the soul departs the physical body at the commencement of the fourth day after death – the same day as it is exposed to vultures in a Tower of Silence – it makes a hazardous journey to a mythical location known as Cinvat Bridge, where it is judged by the god Mithra and the angels Sraosha and Rashnu. If the soul is allowed to cross this perilous causeway, which stretches between this world and the next, it enters an ethereal domain known as *Airyana Vaejah* (*Eranvej* in the *Bundahishn* of the Parsees), inhabited by immortals, or those that are beyond death. The name *Airyana Vaejah* means, literally, the Iranian, or 'Aryan', Expanse, and in mythological tradition this paradisaical world was situated at the centre of Khvaniratha, the earth's great land-mass.¹³

From *Airyana Vaejah* had come the first humans, as well as the dynasty of Pishdadian kings, the heroic race that began with Kiyumars, the first king, and ended with the dynasty of Nariman and Sam. Here, too, could be found Mount Elburz – the abode of the

Simurgh, Iran's most holy mountain, which is referred to in Zoroastrian tradition as Mount Hara, or Mount Harburz.

Although these legends quite obviously related to mythological realms of fanciful construction, there was good reason to suggest that the concept of *Airyana Vaejah* had been based on actual geographical locations that certainly played a significant role in the development of Iran's most ancient cultures, perhaps even the genesis of the Iranian race.

So where, then, was *Airyana Vaejah*?

Let's look at the possible clues.

To the south of Mount Elburz, or Hara, was the so-called Vourukasha Sea, a huge expanse of water that supposedly covered one third of the world and was the gathering-point of all water.¹⁴ In the centre of this inland sea, presumably on an island, were said to have been two divine trees – the first being the Tree of All Remedies, which was also known as the Tree of All Seeds, or the Saena (Senmurv in Pahlavi, Simurgh in later Persian) Tree. On the branches of this wondrous tree the 'king of birds' perched, even though this tradition obviously contradicted Firdowsi's *Shahnameh* account, which placed the Simurgh actually on Mount Elburz. Near by this tree was the 'mighty Gaokerena' tree, which possessed healing properties and bore fruit that provided immortality to those souls that achieved salvation, a reference once again to the *haoma* plant. Together these two sacred trees equated respectively with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life in the Book of Genesis.

Airyana Vaejah is referred to in the texts as 'the first, the best of dwelling-places and lands', that once experienced a winter of ten months' duration and a summer of two months, a point which has led some scholars to locate it in the region of Khwarezmia, an ancient Iranian province in central Asia.¹⁵ Others have suggested that the Vourukasha Sea was either the Black or Caspian Sea, despite the fact that neither can be said to have ever covered one third of the known world. This would have placed Mount Elburz, and therefore *Airyana Vaejah*, in central Russia, since this holy mountain was said to have been located on the *north* side of the Vourukasha Sea.

Clearly there were many elements to this mythical domain which

were either highly distorted or else related to an ancestral homeland outside of Iran altogether, perhaps even on a different continent.¹⁶ Mount Elburz, on the other hand, is traditionally associated by the Persians with the summit of Mount Demavand, which lies in the aptly named Elburz mountain range. This forms an unbroken chain around the southern coast of the Caspian Sea, north of the capital Tehran. So, was this the domain of *Airyana Vaejah*?

Before any real conclusions could be drawn, it was important to remember that even the most orthodox Persian scholars accept that Iranian mythological locations were determined purely by the myth-makers themselves, and were often changed to suit the landscape in which the nomadic story-teller was reciting his or her fable.¹⁷ Equating the mythical Mount Elburz with the snowy peaks of Mount Demavand, and the Elburz range as a whole, was almost certainly a misnomer. The Persians favoured these mountains over and above any others for the simple reason that they signified the most distant northerly horizon, implying that the name of the actual mountain range had probably derived from this association alone, and *not* because it was the site of the *original* 'Mount Elburz' of myth and fable. Furthermore, if the mythical Mount Elburz *was* to be linked with the snowy heights of Mount Demavand, then the Vourukasha Sea could never have been either the Black or Caspian Seas, since both lay to the *north* of the Elburz range, not to its south, as in the traditions of *Airyana Vaejah*. Even so, it was silly to make such precise statements, for myth and legend have a habit of becoming grossly distorted over a period of many millennia.

So if not Mount Demavand, where might I place the geographical Mount Elburz? I felt a clue lay in the fact that many of the legends regarding Mount Elburz, or Hara, had actually stemmed from Magi tradition. They had unquestionably influenced the development of many of Iran's ancient myths, which were already hoary with age when Zoroaster adopted them into his own faith. Since the domain of the Magi had been the remote mountainous regions of north-west Iran, then perhaps I would have to look towards this direction for a possible solution to this perplexing enigma.

And simply by studying the Magi-influenced texts of Zoroastrianism, it became abundantly clear that they had placed Iran's most

sacred locations in or around Media, modern-day Azerbaijan. Indeed, it had undoubtedly been down to their influence that in the *Bundahishn* the realm of *Eranvej* – the *Airyana Vaejah* of the older texts – is clearly located ‘in the region of Azerbaijan’.¹⁸

This was all very well, but what credence could be placed on the word of the Magi? Why should I have reason to believe their word over and above any other Iranian tribe or kingdom’s claim to know the true whereabouts of its holiest of places? Remember, in the opinion of Zoroaster the Magi were ‘followers of the Lie’, who preached only falsehood and untruths. The answer seemed to be in the fact that it was not just the Magi who favoured Azerbaijan as their spiritual homeland.

Mountain of the Madai

The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran, for instance, had their own ideas about the mythical realm of the gods. We know that they, too, attached great importance to the Simurgh bird,¹⁹ and once performed rites of excarnation. I had therefore been intrigued to discover that they placed their ancestral homeland in the vicinity of somewhere they referred to as the Tura d Madai, the Mountain of the Madai.²⁰ This, so the Mandaeans hinted, was situated in a mythical domain known as *Mshunia Kushta*, ‘the ideal world’,²¹ which appeared to have striking similarities to the Iranian concept of *Airyana Vaejah*, or *Eranvej*.

The name Madai, as opposed to Mandai, is thought, with very good reason, to mean Media, since the Median peoples had originally been known as the *Mad* or *Mada*.²² To the Mandaeans, the Mountain of the Madai lay somewhere ‘in the north’, which, if taken literally, would have placed it directly in line with the mountainous regions of northern Iraq, north-western Iran, on the western edge of the kingdom of Media. This was a solution generally accepted by Mandaeans themselves; for one priest, pressed on where exactly the Mountain of the Madai could be found, had responded to the British author E. S. Drower when she was making an in-depth study of this culture in the 1930s: ‘It is, I think, in Iran, for Madia (Media) is in Iran.’²³

Adding further confirmation to this view is the knowledge that European scholars have long backed the idea that the Mandai were originally a Median tribe, and that their priesthood, the Nasurai, were themselves descended from the Magi priesthoods.²⁴ If correct, it seemed fairly certain that not only did the Mountain of the Madai correspond with the mythical Mount Elburz, or Hara, but that it had also been located somewhere in the vicinity of the Magian homeland of Azerbaijan.

Among the Angels

Mandaean mythology is a confusing mixture of Babylonian, Persian, Judaic and gnostic Christian traditions, meaning that the origin of specific stories is often impossible to place in a definite time-frame or geographical context. Despite these difficulties, I had been intrigued to find that it was from the Mountain of the Madai that their 'first priest', Anush, or Enoch, had originated.

And, yes, this Enoch was indeed the same antediluvian patriarch found in Judaic tradition.²⁵ The fact that Enoch had been revered by the Mandaeans should not have come as any surprise, for he was venerated in Iraq more than he ever was in Palestine. Yet, to the Arabs, he was known by the name of Edris, or Idris – a great prophet and teacher who had once lived in Iraq. Indeed, until fairly recent times thousands of Arabs are known to have made regular pilgrimages to Edris' supposed tomb in a village just outside Baghdad.²⁶ This connection with Enoch was very important, for in Azerbaijani tradition Enoch was said to have been the teacher of Kiyumars, the first legendary king of Iran and all the world, who had ruled from his seat of power in the mountains of *Airyana Vaejah*.²⁷

There was, however, further tantalizing evidence to link Enoch with Azerbaijan. In the surviving fragments of the Dead Sea text known as the Genesis Apocryphon, Methuselah goes in search of his father Enoch for advice on the birth of the infant Noah. To this end he journeys to a place named 'Parwain',²⁸ where the patriarch is said to live 'among the angels'.²⁹ In most translations, the original Aramaic word is rendered as Paradise, although Parwain is the

actual name given. I was therefore quite stunned to find that in Mandaean tradition the Mountain of the Madai was linked not just with Anush, or Enoch, but with a 'white mountain' named 'Parwan' or 'Mount Parwan'.³⁰ Although it is not specified whether this was simply an alternative name for the Mountain of the Madai, or another holy mountain altogether, the name 'Parwan' was very interesting indeed. It would appear to have been derived from the old Median word 'Parswana', meaning 'rib, side, frontier', used to describe the peoples and territories *beyond* the borders of Media itself. These would have included the region of Parsa to its south and, more significantly, the mountainous region known as Parsua to its west.³¹ Was Enoch therefore believed to have lived 'among the angels' in the harsh mountainous territories *beyond* the limits of the ancient kingdom of Media? In the remote region of Parsua, to the west of Media, perhaps? Is this where the Watchers had come from? Was it also the true whereabouts of the *Airyana Vaejah*, the abode of the immortals and the seat of the prehistoric god-kings of Iran, who had borne clear physical characteristics of the fallen race and could well have been their direct descendants?

Suddenly, the mountainous region of Azerbaijan was beginning to take on a whole new meaning in my search to find the roots of the fallen race. Unfortunately, however, all roads appeared to lead back to the Magi priesthood, who obviously had vested interests in ensuring that the kingdom of Media contained the most sacred locations of Iranian mythology. Could I therefore believe their word? The answer lay, not so much with the Magi themselves, as in the fact that cultures and religions throughout the Middle East had always recognized the isolated regions beyond the plateaux of Media, not only as the cradle of civilization, but also as the place where the preserver of the seed of humanity had alighted from his ark following a universal deluge.

Azerbaijan forms the easternmost flanks of a vast snow-capped expanse of mountains that stretch west to the Taurus range of eastern Anatolia and northern Syria; north to the remote mountainous regions of Russian Armenia; and south-east along the length of the Zagros mountains, as they gradually descend towards the Persian Gulf and act as a virtually impenetrable barrier between Iraq and Iran. This enormous, mostly desolate part of the earth, home for

the most part to wandering nomads, bands of warring rebels, isolated religious communities and the occasional village, town or city, is known to the world as Kurdistan – the cultural and political homeland of the much troubled Kurdish peoples. And yet, according to biblical and apocryphal tradition, it was here, too, that the Garden of Eden, the Cave of Treasures, the resting place of Noah's Ark and the stamping ground of the great patriarchs could be found, and I realized that it was to here I would need to look in my search for the realm of the immortals.

EASTWARD, IN EDEN

And the Lord God planted a garden eastward, in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became four heads.¹

These are the words of the Book of Genesis. They tell of the existence of a terrestrial garden created by God in a place called Eden. It is beyond the eastern gate of this idyllic realm that Adam and Eve are cast, once God has realized that they have tasted of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

So what exactly *is* the Garden of Eden? And what did it mean to the early Jews? And if it was connected with the story of the fall of the Watchers, then how did it link to the concept of heaven and paradise?

The word 'Eden' is considered by Hebrew scholars to mean 'pleasure' or 'delight',² a reference to the fact that God had created the garden for the pleasure of humanity. This is not, however, its true origin. The word 'Eden' is in fact Akkadian – the proto-Hebrew, or Semitic, language introduced to Mesopotamia by the people of Agade, or Akkad, a race that seized control of the ancient kingdom of Sumer, in what is today Iraq, during the second half of the third millennium BC. In their language the word 'Eden', or *edin*, meant a 'steppe' or 'terrace',³ as in a raised agricultural terrace.

Turning to the word 'paradise', I found that this simply inferred a 'walled enclosure', after the Persian root *pairi*, 'around', and

daeza, 'wall'. It is a late-comer to Judaeo-Christian religious literature and was only really used after the year AD 1175.⁴ The English word 'heaven', on the other hand, is taken from the Hebrew *ha'shemim*, a plural form of a word interpreted as meaning 'the skies'. It can also be used to refer to 'high places', such as lofty settlements.⁵ Moreover, the Hebrew word-root *shm* can also mean 'heights', as well as 'plant' or 'vegetation', implying, perhaps, that the word 'heaven' might more accurately be interpreted as 'planted highlands'.⁶

This quick round of etymological translation, in my opinion at least, conjured the image of a walled, agricultural settlement with stepped terraces placed in a highlands region. Was I doing the fabled Garden of Eden an injustice by thinking of it in such a mundane manner? And was I right to suggest that Eden, heaven and paradise had been one and the same place? Surely heaven is a utopian realm created by our psychological necessities, or at best the ethereal domain where the souls of the departed will rejoice with God and his angels on the Day of Judgement.

The Journey to Heaven

Hebrew myth records that the first mortal to enter the Garden of Eden after the expulsion of Adam and Eve was the patriarch Enoch.⁷ Scholars would suggest that this rather naïve assumption stemmed originally from a literal translation of the lines in the Book of Genesis which imply that Enoch had been translated to heaven and did not die in the usual manner. It is a theme dealt with in extraordinary detail within Enochian literature, where Enoch is not simply taken to heaven, he is actually given a guided tour of its seven individual 'heavens' before being returned to the physical world.

This quite extraordinary tale begins with the unexpected arrival of the two 'very tall' men, with radiant faces and raiments that have 'the appearance of feathers', who enter Enoch's home and demand that he go with them. Having made his departure, the righteous patriarch is then taken up on to the wings of these two 'men' who carry him off to heaven. On approaching the paradisaical realm,

Enoch is allowed to rest temporarily on a moving cloud, and here he gazes out over 'the treasures of the snow and ice' and espies 'the angels who guard their terrible store-places'.⁸ Also set out before him is 'a very great sea, greater than the earthly sea'.⁹ Turning to the first of the seven heavens, Enoch is then escorted through its gates, beyond which he finds two hundred astronomer angels and their elders who 'rule the stars and their heavenly service'.¹⁰ If, for one moment, I could consider that the patriarch might actually have visited some kind of terrestrial, as opposed to ethereal, domain, then might these words suggest an elevated observatory dedicated to the study of astronomy and the measurement of time?

Moving on to the Second Heaven, Enoch is abhorred to find angelic prisoners 'suspended', awaiting some form of eternal punishment.¹¹ This made me recall the inhumane manner in which Shemyaza, the leader of the two hundred rebel Watchers, had been suspended upside down for his crimes against humanity. Those angels who guarded these poor, wretched souls are themselves 'gloomy in appearance, more than the darkness of the earth'.¹² Seeing the mortal, the shackled prisoners cry out for the patriarch to pray for them, to which he responds: 'Who am I, a mortal man, that I should pray for angels?'¹³

Wise words from a man confronted with a scene he could never have thought possible – angels in prison. To incarcerate immortals hardly seemed like the righteous actions of incorporeal messengers of God.

Passing swiftly on to the Third Heaven, Enoch eventually finds himself in the Garden of Eden, which he describes as:

*a place such as has never been known for the goodliness of its appearance. And I saw all the trees of beautiful colours and their fruits ripe and fragrant, and all kinds of food which they produced, springing up with delightful fragrance. And in the midst (there is) the tree of life, in that place, on which God rests, when He comes into Paradise. And this tree cannot be described for its excellence and sweet odour. And it is beautiful more than any created thing.*¹⁴

From the roots of this tree come four streams – one of pure honey, one of milk, one of oil and the last of wine. These separate into four directions and 'go down to the Paradise of Eden' before 'they

go along the earth, and have a revolution in their circle like also the other elements'.¹⁵ There is also:

*another tree, an olive tree always distilling oil. And there is no tree there without fruit, and every tree is blessed. And there are three hundred angels very glorious, who keep the garden, and with never ceasing voices and blessed singing, they serve the Lord every day.*¹⁶

The Garden of Eden appears to have more in common with an Israeli kibbutz, or with the gardens of a Christian monastery, than with an ethereal kingdom peopled by angelic hosts. Moreover, the reference to the Tree of Life on which God 'rests, when He comes into paradise' is strangely reminiscent of the Tree of All Remedies, or the Tree of All Seeds, on which the Simurgh bird rests in Persian tradition. This heavenly tree is said to have been placed in the centre of the Vourukasha Sea, which is itself located in the *Airyana Vaejah*, the Iranian domain of the immortals. Curiously enough, like the Garden of Eden, the Vourukasha Sea is seen as the gathering point of all water, fed by a mighty river named Harahvaiti. From this waterway come two separate rivers that flow out towards the east and west and spread throughout the whole of the land. They then return to the sea, their waters cleansed of any impurities.¹⁷

The two men then show Enoch 'a very terrible place' where crazed prisoners are held captive by ruthless angels who carry savage weapons and commit unmerciful torture. It is a place of darkness, with only a gloomy fire that burns constantly. The text relates that this dreadful prison is reserved for all those who do not honour the word of God and commit any one of a whole list of heinous crimes that were undoubtedly added to by each different story-teller or translator who retold this tale.¹⁸

In the Fourth Heaven Enoch enters what appears to have been another observatory, where he is able to study the 'comings and goings forth and all the rays of the light of the sun and moon'.¹⁹ Here he is able to measure the descent of the celestial bodies and compute their light, for he says that the sun 'has a light seven times greater than the moon'.²⁰ He also realizes that there are 'four great stars' with another 8,000 stars in their charge.²¹ Here, once again, the angels' apparent interest in astronomy is reaffirmed. The study

of the stars is, of course, listed among the forbidden sciences revealed to mortal kind by the rebel Watchers.

And so to the Fifth Heaven, where Enoch finds the two hundred Watchers who have transgressed the laws of heaven by revealing the forbidden arts and taking wives from among the Daughters of Men. For their misconduct, they have been incarcerated like lowly prisoners. As the mortal passes by them, too, call out for him to help their claim of innocence. These fallen angels are described as *grigori* – the Greek for Watchers. They are said to have looked ‘like men’, and to have borne a height ‘greater than that of the giants (i.e. their Nephilim offspring)’.²² Enoch also recalls how ‘their countenances were withered’,²³ bringing to mind the way in which the mythical Iranian kings would lose the royal *farr* if they turned their backs on the path of truth.

In the Sixth Heaven Enoch encounters seven bands of angels whose faces, he says, were ‘shining more than the rays of the sun. They were resplendent, and there is no difference in their countenance, or their manner, or the style of their clothing’.²⁴ Like the angels in the First Heaven, these shining beings watch ‘the revolution of the stars, and the changes of the moon, and the revolutions of the sun’, even further evidence that the term ‘Watchers’ relates not to their observation of mortal kind, but to their observation of the movement of stars and their study of the cycles of time. Here the angels ‘superintend the good or evil condition of the world’, a reference perhaps to the study of climatology and seismology, and the way in which it affects the earth. These Watchers also ‘arrange teachings, and instructions, and sweet speaking, and singing, and all kinds of glorious praise’, for ‘these are the archangels who are appointed over the angels’.²⁵

In the seventh and final heaven Enoch witnesses whole hosts of great archangels, Cherubim, Seraphim, and all sorts of incorporeal powers that attend the throne of God.²⁶ In a separate rendition of this story, the patriarch finds himself alongside a wall built of ‘crystals’ that is surrounded by mysterious ‘tongues of fire’.²⁷ Its ‘groundwork’ appears to be made of the same crystal-like stone, while of the building’s interior, he recalls: ‘Its ceiling was like the path of the stars and the lightnings . . . A flaming fire surrounded the walls, and its portals blazed with fire.’²⁸ The temperature here

also seemed contradictory, for it appeared to him 'as hot as fire and [as] cold as ice', all at the same time. There were apparently 'no delights of life therein', in other words he found no furniture or decoration, showing the apparent spareness and emptiness of this 'house'. Yet then fear overcame Enoch, who suddenly found himself trembling and quaking at the awesomeness of the strange sights around him. I recall feeling exactly the same when I visited St Paul's Cathedral as a boy – the vastness of its interior seemed so overbearing that it made me cry.

Moving quickly on to a second 'house' with a similar appearance, which 'excelled in splendour and magnificence and extent', Enoch now perceived a 'lofty throne' of crystal. Upon this were moving wheels as bright as the 'shining sun', and from beneath it appeared to come 'streams of flaming fire', so bright that he could not look upon them. And 'sat thereon' the throne was the Great Glory, whose 'raiment shone more brightly than the sun and was whiter than any snow'.²⁹ I will give you Enoch's own recollection of how he felt at that moment:

*None of the angels could enter and could behold His face by reason of the magnificence and glory, and no flesh could behold Him. The flaming fire was round about Him, and a great fire stood before Him, and none around could draw nigh Him.*³⁰

Following Enoch's brief encounter with the Great Glory of God, he is led away and, still in the company of the two feather-clad 'men', departs the seven realms of heaven. The Watcher-like figures take him as far as the 'extremity of heaven' and here they leave him to return to his own world.

Like anyone who has just witnessed some of the most awesome sights a mortal can ever expect to see, Enoch is mind-blown and afraid. In what must have been virtual madness, he falls on his face and screams out to himself, 'Woe is me! what has come upon me!'³¹

Here the story of Enoch's visit to paradise is concluded.

Clearly then, Eden was not some delightful garden created by God for the pleasures of Adam and Eve! Admittedly the Enochian text does resume its narrative, making the archangel Gabriel go back and fetch the half-crazed Enoch in an attempt to get him to re-enter heaven. There is even mention of the patriarch visiting an

eighth, ninth and tenth heaven, yet this section has the look of a late interpolation hoping to emphasize to the reader that Enoch ends his life in paradise, in accord with the statements in the Book of Genesis concerning his translation to heaven.

Heaven – Fact or Fantasy?

No one would deny that the account of Enoch's visit to heaven is fanciful in the extreme; indeed, much of its phantasmagorical narrative is difficult to take seriously. In spite of this admission, I honestly believe that it contains a kernel of truth – first-hand, second-hand or probably even third-hand accounts of an actual settlement of an extraordinary nature that once existed in this world. Perhaps it was somewhere visited by someone who had no real understanding of the nature and purpose of what he or she was witnessing first-hand.

Enoch's words are virtually meaningless, but they hint at the very real possibility that, not only was the Garden of Eden equated with the location named heaven, but that it was also home to the Watchers. If these bold assertions were correct, then it suggested the existence of a remarkable highland settlement that included astronomical observatories, schools of learning, productive orchards containing fruit-bearing trees, well-attended cultivated terraces and seemingly even dark prisons and places of torture for those of the race who transgressed its heavenly laws.

Might the memory of this settlement have been preserved among the earliest Semitic or Iranian peoples living in the foothills and plains below this other-worldly domain? Did these lowland cultures preserve the memory of those who belonged to this settlement – a race which, through its extreme physiological features and shamanistic qualities, had become the viper-faced bird-men and shining angels of Hebraic tradition?

Might the descent of the Watchers 'on' Mount Hermon, as recorded in the Book of Enoch, refer not to their flight from heaven to earth, but to their actual descent down a hilly mountainside to the foothills and plains, where they were able to walk among the less evolved pastoral communities, like gods walking among men,

like immortals walking among mortals, like the dead walking among the living?

Might the sight of these tall, feather-coated individuals with long radiant faces, snow-white hair, pale ivory-like skin and ruddy cheeks have instilled utter fear in these people, to such a degree that their appearances made them into the demons, devils and evil spirits of much later cultures?

Might the trafficking between these walking serpents of the highlands and the developing cultures of the lowlands have been the basis behind the idea of the Sons of God coming unto the Daughters of Men?

Turning to the Iranian traditions concerning the *ahuras* and *daevas*, I wondered whether knowledge of the angelic paradise visited by Enoch might lie behind the concept of the *Airyana Vaejah*, the Iranian Expanse, which had been the ancestral home of Iran's mythical kings.

All these things were certainly possible. More important, however, was to establish whether Eden existed in our minds alone, or whether it was out there somewhere, waiting to be rediscovered.

The Rivers of Paradise

If Eden *had* once existed as an actual geographical location, where might I start looking for it? Rivers appeared to be the answer, for the Bible records that in Eden one major water-course divided to become four 'heads', each of which grew into a river. The names of these are given as the Pishon, Gihon, Hiddekel and Euphrates.³² Of these four, only the last can properly be identified by name. The Euphrates flows through Turkish Kurdistan, Syria and Iraq before emptying into the Persian Gulf. The other three rivers were identified by early theologians with, respectively, the Indus of Asia (although occasionally the Ganges of India), the Nile of Africa and the Tigris of western Asia, which, like its sister river the Euphrates, flows through Iraq and empties into the Persian Gulf. The other two were chosen as suitable substitutes simply because they were looked upon by scholars as the mightiest rivers of the classical world. In no way could it be said that all four of these rivers rose in

the same geographical region, a problem that was conveniently overlooked by theologians before the rediscovery of cartography in the sixteenth century AD.

Since that time the blatant discrepancy of the four chosen rivers of paradise has been used as evidence by religious critics to demonstrate that the Garden of Eden was merely a conceptual realm without any geographical reality. Yet, to the Israelites at the time of Moses, Eden was unquestionably an actual location, for as the Book of Genesis clearly states: 'And the Lord God planted a garden eastward, in Eden.'³³

Eastward? Eastward of where? Eastward of Israel? Eastward of Jerusalem? As Jerusalem has been the holiest place in Palestine since the establishment of the Israelite kingdom at the beginning of the first millennium BC, then presumably the Genesis statement meant eastwards of this ancient city. So, if I was to take an easterly bearing from Jerusalem, where would it take me? Reaching for a large-scale map of western Asia, I laid it open and took up a ruler. The line followed a course just below the 32nd parallel through the modern Arab republics of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and finally into Iraq. So, had the ancient city-state of Babylon been implied by the compilers of Genesis? It seemed unlikely, since Babylon was seen by Jews as a place of gross iniquity, especially after their oppression at the time of the Captivity. Continuing eastwards, the line reached the southern extremes of the Lower Zagros mountain range. East of here were the Iranian plains, hardly the most obvious candidate for the birth-place of the Jewish race. Perhaps, then, the Zagros was being implied by the expression 'eastward, in Eden', for I was hardly likely to find the Mountain of God, on which Eden was said to have been situated,³⁴ in the middle of the Iraqi desert.

That the Jews believed the Garden of Eden to be somewhere in the vicinity of Iraq is pretty clear, for all the earliest events in the Book of Genesis focus around this region, known within its pages as 'the land of Shinar'.³⁵ This was a reference to the land once known as Sumer, or Sumeria, where from 3000 BC down to around 1900 BC there existed a series of city-states which controlled the plains between the foothills of Iraqi Kurdistan and the Persian Gulf in southern Iraq. Here the descendants of Noah flourished in the generations after the Great Flood, until, the Bible tells us, a

mighty tyrant named Nimrod constructed a tower that reached towards heaven itself – an act that prompted God to strike down this abomination and punish the world. Henceforth its population would be made to speak in many tongues instead of the one single language used until that time.³⁶ One classical writer named Eupolemus records that the tower owed its foundation to ‘the Giants’, who included Nimrod himself. Apparently, after the structure was destroyed by divine wrath, these giants (‘Titans’ in Greek) had been ‘scattered over all the earth’.³⁷ Quite obviously the tower is seen to have been located at Babylon – which is erroneously said by Judaeo-Christians to have derived its name from the word ‘babel’, or confusion. Despite some sterling research by various scholars and archaeologists of the Victorian age, no hard evidence has ever been found to verify the actual existence of either Nimrod or his fabled tower.³⁸

There were, however, other more sound reasons for locating the land of Eden in the highlands above the ‘fertile crescent’ of ancient Sumer. Some bible commentators have long considered that, since two out of four of the rivers of paradise rise in the mountains of Turkish Kurdistan, the other two must also be major rivers that have their headwaters in this same region. They have therefore seen fit to link these – the Pishon and Gihon – with the Greater Zab and Araxes, both of which do rise in northern Kurdistan.³⁹ So strong had this link become by the time of the Babylonian Captivity that many Jews erroneously started to identify Eden with a place called *Bit Adini*, or Beth Eden, a town on the Lower Euphrates seized by the Assyrian army.⁴⁰

Since there has never been any suitable alternative to this solution, Jews and Christians alike now accept that the Garden of Eden must have been located in this region of the world, firmly connecting the abode of the angels with the highlands of Kurdistan. Yet was this right? Could this region really have played such an important role in the development of Judaeo-Christian myth and legend? Certainly all the indications from Iranian and Mandaeen sources appeared to suggest that their mountain of origin was situated somewhere in the vicinity of ancient Media, which once stretched westwards to encompass the whole of Iranian Kurdistan. But did these traditions refer to the same area where

the Jews and Christians believed the Garden of Eden to have been located?

The Place of Descent

Before I made any final judgements, I needed to understand why the early Israelites saw this far-off land as the place of origin of the human race. For this I turned to the Genesis account of the Great Flood with its hero Noah, who, as I already knew, had been born with clear Watcher traits.

As any Jew or Christian will know, Noah is warned by God of an impending deluge, and so gathers together his wife, his three sons, and his sons' wives, and together they construct an enormous sea-going vessel, made of gopher wood and pitched inside and out with bitumen. On this they assemble two of every kind of beast of the earth and bird of the air. The company wait on their 'Ark', and finally the rains come and the earth is covered with water to a depth of 15 cubits. For 40 days it rains unabated, and after a further 150 days the waters begin to subside. A raven is then unsuccessfully sent out by Noah to find land. Later a dove is dispatched for the same reason, and this time it returns with an olive leaf in its beak.

Soon afterwards the Ark comes to rest at a place referred to in the Bible as 'the mountains of Ararat', a mythical location known in Armenian tradition as *Nachidsheuan*, the Place of Descent. The use of the rather vague term 'mountains of Ararat' has long caused heated debate among theologians. 'Ararat' is the Akkadian rendition of 'Urartu', the name given by the Assyrians of Upper Iraq to a powerful Indo-Iranian kingdom, first referred to in texts dating back to 1275 BC. The Urartu culture grew to become a major influence in the Near East until its final demise around 590 BC.⁴¹ Initially the people of Urartu inhabited only the area around Lake Van – an enormous inland sea some sixty miles across and around thirty-five miles wide – situated on the border between Turkish Kurdistan and the Russian Republic of Armenia. Their kingdom gradually expanded, however, to encompass a wide geographical area that reached as far east as the shores of Lake Urmia in ancient

Media, as far north as the Caucasus mountains and as far west as northern Syria.

The 'mountains of Ararat' could therefore be a reference to any one of a whole range of prominent mountains in what is today the desolate border area between the countries of Russian Armenia, Iran, Iraq and Turkey. Despite this vagueness on the part of the Bible, Christians have seen fit to associate the 'mountains of Ararat' with the twin-peaks of Greater Ararat – the highest mountain (16,946 feet) in Turkish Kurdistan.

Over the years fundamentalist Christians, and more open-minded explorers, have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to locate the remains of Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat. Sightings of alleged 'arks' in the vicinity of its bleak summits make extraordinary reading, and should not be dismissed out of hand;⁴² however, the Christians are alone in identifying Greater Ararat with the Place of Descent.

In the Koran, the holy book of Islam, the story of Noah's Ark and the Great Flood is repeated. Yet in this version the vessel comes to rest 'on the mountain of Judi' – Judi being an Arabic word meaning 'the heights'. A strong Kurdish tradition links this mythical location with Al Judi, or Cudi Dağ a mountain that rises to the height of 6,436 feet and is located some sixty-five miles south of Lake Van in Turkish Kurdistan.

In the early years of the twentieth century, two Englishmen, the Rev. W. A. Wigram and Edgar T. A. Wigram, spent some years studying the cultural history of Kurdistan. They discovered that the Kurds were in no doubt as to the authentic Place of Descent, for in their 1914 book *The Cradle of Mankind*, the Wigrams spoke of animal sacrifices being annually offered up by all faiths on Al Judi to commemorate Noah's landing here, for, as they reported at the time:

*Christians of all nations and confessions, Mussulmans [i.e. Muslims] of both Shiah and Sunni type, Sabaeans (Mandaeans), Jews, and even the furtive timid Yezidis are there, each group bringing a sheep or kid for sacrifice; and for one day there is a 'truce of God' even in turbulent Kurdistan, and the smoke of a hundred offerings goes up once more on the ancient altar.*⁴³

This archaic festival would take place on 14 September – the generally accepted date on which the Ark came to rest on dry land. At the base of the mountain there is apparently a village named Hasana, where, according to the Wigrams, men ‘still point out Noah’s tomb and Noah’s vineyard, though this last, strange to say, produces no wine now’.⁴⁴

Such traditions are in themselves hollow, especially as the foothills around Greater Ararat proclaim similar such associations.⁴⁵ Despite this confusion, the first-century AD Jewish writer Flavius Josephus also spoke specifically of ‘Mount Judi near Lake Van’ as the resting-place of the Ark.⁴⁶

Whatever the exact location of the so-called Place of Descent, the importance placed on central and northern Kurdistan by the compilers of the Pentateuch was difficult to ignore. It had been standard practice for bards and story-tellers of all ancient cultures to use sites of national and/or local importance when reciting tales of a spiritual or cultural significance, especially in the company of kings and nobles. No one wanted to venerate holy places in far-off lands that might once have been occupied by their culture, but were now in the hands of their sworn enemies. Unless, that is, they held such a significance that they could *never* be forgotten or replaced. This could only mean that the Israelite tribes at the time of Moses believed that the highlands of Kurdistan held some deep spiritual significance to their race, for here they located not just their place of genesis, but also the point at which the world had renewed itself after a universal deluge.

Furthermore, according to the Jewish Talmud, the patriarch Abraham was said to have spent ten years in prison – three in Kutha, near Babylon, and seven in Kardu, the old Semitic name for Kurdistan,⁴⁷ showing his own integral link with the region.

The Cradle of Mankind

If the highlands of Kurdistan really had played such an important role in the development of Hebrew myth and legend, then perhaps I was to take seriously the idea that the earthly paradise, and, by virtue of this, the abode of the Watchers, had actually been located

in this country. Since the local Kurdish peoples were so sure about the whereabouts of the Place of Descent in the Noah story, then surely they would hold similar convictions concerning the location of the Garden of Eden. If an advanced culture like the Watchers really had existed in this geographical region, then its memory would surely not be forgotten. Indigenous cultures, such as the Kurds, who had led isolated and often nomadic lifestyles until comparatively recent times, must have retained the knowledge of such human activity in their midst.

The two Wigrams spent many years in Kurdistan recording previously unknown customs and legends. Indeed, so thorough was their study of the Kurdish race that modern scholars still use their much-sought-after book, *The Cradle of Mankind*, as a valuable reference work. So what had they learnt concerning the alleged existence of the Garden of Eden among the Kurdish highlands?

First, there seemed little doubt that the Kurds saw the four rivers of paradise as being the Euphrates, Tigris, Greater Zab and Araxes, the last of which empties into the Caspian Sea to the east. Indeed, so strongly did the local Nestorians, or Christians of the Assyrian Church, believe that the Greater Zab was the river Pishon that, according to the Wigrams, its patriarch would often sign-off his official letters 'from my cell on the River of the Garden of Eden'!⁴⁸

It was, however, the headwaters of the Euphrates and Tigris that would appear to have most shaped the Kurds' belief in the Garden of Eden's geographical reality. These two rivers curl their way around the solid wall of mountains that act like an impenetrable fortress to encircle Lake Van. The Wigrams speculated that the Garden of Eden had been situated either in the vicinity of the city of Van, the site of the old Urtian capital of Tushpa on its eastern coast, or somewhere around the ancient city of Bitlis beyond its south-western shoreline.⁴⁹

Descendants of Giants

Did the Garden of Eden, the birthplace of the human race, as well as the seven heavens visited by Enoch, once exist in the vicinity of

Lake Van? Very possibly. Armenian legend asserts that the Garden of Eden now lies 'at the bottom of Lake Van', after it was submerged beneath the waves at the time of the Great Flood.⁵⁰ What is more, the lake is also connected with the descendants of Noah. On the lake's west bank is the province of Tarawn, where, according to the fifth-century AD Armenian historian Moses of Khorenats'i, Noah's son Sem (Shem) had settled temporarily after the Ark had come to rest on the mountains of Ararat. He had lingered for two months by a river and a mountain, which even today bears the name Sim, or Sem. His son Tarban is also said to have settled in this same area, along with his thirty brothers, fifteen sisters and their husbands. It is for this reason that the location is also known as Ts'rawnk', meaning 'dispersion' – an apparent reference to the dispersion of Tarban's sons and family.⁵¹

The warm waters of this huge inland salt sea would have provided the area with a mild, temperate climate able to sustain human life and cultivation of the sort spoken of in the Enochian literature, while the wall of mountains surrounding the watery expanse would have acted as a natural shield against the intrusions of the outside world.

Any one of the many mountains that soar into the sky around Lake Van might well have constituted the Mountain of Paradise – the curiously named Mount Nimrod, or Nemrut Dağ, on its south-western shoreline, being a prime candidate. This preserves the name of Nimrod (or Bel), the mighty king of the land of Shinar, who in Armenian tradition not only was a giant, but also enlisted the aid of fellow-giants to help him build the mountain-like Tower of Babel,⁵² the story also recorded by the classical writer Eupolemus. One of these giants was, according to Moses of Khorenats'i, a figure named Hayk, the son of T'orgom, who was a direct descendant of Yapheth (Japheth), another of the three sons of Noah.

Hayk was said to have been the founder of the Araradian, or pre-Armenian, race,⁵³ and it was on the north-west of Lake Van that he had established the province of Hark' – a place-name apparently reflecting the fact that it had been here that the ancestors of his father T'orgom had settled, presumably after the destruction of the Tower of Babel.⁵⁴ Nemrut Dağ is likely to have derived its name from an Armenian tradition which asserts that Nimrod was killed by an

arrow shot by Hayk during a major battle between two rival armies of giants to the south-east of Lake Van.⁵⁵

I found it more than a little curious that the pre-Armenian race should claim descendency from a race of giants, or Titans, who supposedly settled close to Lake Van and were themselves descendants of Noah, the child born with distinct Watcher traits in Enochian and Dead Sea tradition. Indeed, in the Armenian language, the name Hayk is directly associated with the word 'gigantic', as if to emphasize the great stature of their most distant ancestor.⁵⁶ Whatever the actual reality of this tradition, these local legends helped to strengthen the link between this area and the mythical homeland of the Watchers.

Nemrut Dağ, at 9,567 feet, also happens to be the largest inactive volcano in Kurdistan. It possesses an enormous crater six miles across, which is known to have been used in the past as an effective hiding-place for Kurdish rebels.⁵⁷ Indeed, vulcanism has played a major role in the shaping of the local terrain, with the lava flow from Nemrut Dağ having provided the dam which allowed the formation of Lake Van in the first place. Among the other great volcanoes of Kurdistan is Greater Ararat, north-east of Van. So active has this region been, even in more recent ages, that the Wigrams were forced to admit that if the Garden of Eden *had* once been placed in this area, then it 'now lies buried beneath the lava of these volcanoes',⁵⁸ as opposed to lying at the bottom of the lake.

I mention this vulcanism, for it is clear from the Book of Enoch that when Enoch visited the earthly paradise, the surrounding landscape contained 'a mountain range of fire which burnt day and night',⁵⁹ an allusion perhaps to active volcanoes. On one occasion he witnesses 'a river of fire in which the fire flows like water and discharges itself into the great sea towards the west'.⁶⁰ If this might be equated with the 'great sea' viewed by him on approaching the First Heaven, then it could imply that he had witnessed lava flowing into an expanse of water. Might the volcano have been Nemrut Dağ and the 'great sea' Lake Van? If so, then this great watery expanse might also provide us with a geographical location for the Vourukasha Sea of Iranian tradition.

I would not be the first to realize the obvious link between the vulcanism of Kurdistan and the fiery realms portrayed in the Book

of Enoch. The French writer on ancient mysteries, Robert Charroux, in his 1964 book *Legacy of the Gods* reviewed the Watcher material presented in the Book of Enoch and surmised that the region of Kurdistan had been the setting for the fall of the angels. He added that: 'The guilty angels are hurled into the Valleys of Fire, which may refer to the Land of Fire (Azerbaijan) near which Noah's Ark landed.'⁶¹

Charroux had looked beyond the snowy heights of Mount Hermon in the Ante-Lebanon range to seek a solution to the mysteries of Enoch, and had come to similar conclusions to myself. This was obviously good news, but it did little to prove the case. As the Wigrams had realized, any obvious remains of the Garden of Eden – and, more importantly, the Watchers' proposed settlement of 'Heaven' – were probably now buried beneath tens of feet of hardened lava flow. So there was little point in mounting an archaeological expedition to the area just yet. For the moment I would concentrate on the Kurds themselves, in an attempt to establish whether any of their religions, indigenous or otherwise, had preserved knowledge of the Watchers' presence, starting with the strange, devil-worshipping sect known as the Yezidi.

THE PEACOCK ANGEL

October 1846. Upper Iraq. Austen Layard, the British explorer, diplomat, titan of archaeology and lover of oriental customs ascended the foothills, north of Mosul, on a sturdy horse. For the trip into Iraqi Kurdistan he was accompanied by Hodja Toma, the dragoman of the vice-consulate, and a priest, or *kamal*, sent to act as their mountain escort by Sheikh Nasr, the chief priest of the Yezidis, a Kurdish religious sect known to Europeans as the 'devil-worshippers'.¹

After a night spent in a small hamlet near Khorsabad, the party continued across open plains to the village of Baadri, the home of the sect's chief, Sheikh Hussein Bey. As the village came into view, the Yezidi leader appeared in person on the horizon. Following behind him on foot was an entourage of priests and villagers adorned in flowing robes and wearing thick headgear in either black, brown or white. As they approached, Layard realized that Hussein Bey was 'one of the handsomest men' he had ever seen. At around eighteen years of age, he had regular and delicate features, lustrous eyes, and long dark ringlets that fell from beneath his thick black turban.

Layard endeavoured to dismount so as to greet the Bey courteously, but before he had a chance to do so, the fellow attempted to kiss his hand, a ritual he promptly refused to oblige. Instead the two men embraced, while still on their horses, as was the manner of this country. The Bey insisted that the two of them should dismount and walk together. This done, they strolled side-by-side, exchanging pleasantries as they entered the village.

Inside the chief's *salamlik*, or reception room, filled with carpets and cushions, a stream of fresh water passed by them, fed from a

neighbouring spring. All running water was of immense sanctity to the Yezidi, as it was to both the Magians and the Mandaean of Iraq and Iran. Once the Englishman and the 'devil-worshipper' had begun engaging in conversation, an audience of curious villagers started to gather at the other end of the room. They simply listened in respectful silence, seemingly with the Bey's full permission.

How different were the two cultures represented by these two great men. Sir Austen Henry Layard (1817-94) had been responsible for the recent excavations on behalf of his patrons Sir Stratford Canning and the British Museum at the ancient ruins of Nimrud, the Assyrian ruins situated at the confluence of the Tigris and Upper Zab rivers, near the city of Mosul.

As a traveller, Layard respected the native religions of the region, and this included the secretive Yezidis of the Kurdish foothills. He had heartily accepted an invitation from the Bey to be the first European to witness the sect's strange rites during its yearly *Jam*, or religious festival. This was to take place over a several-day period in the village of Lalish. Being a good Christian, Layard naturally had reservations about attending such a devil-worshipping festival, but these fears were fast being alleviated in the company of the religion's tribal leader.

The isolated Yezidi tribes were probably the most obscure of the three quite separate yet interrelated cults of the *yazata*, *yazd* or *yezad*, the Persian for 'angel' or 'angels', which still thrived in certain parts of Kurdistan. Each paid lip-service to the Islamic faith, whether of the Shi'ite or Sunni persuasion, and yet each also held true to its own unique cosmogony, mythology and ritual practices, which had more in common with Magian or gnostic dualism than with the Muslim or Judaeo-Christian faiths.

The Angelicans

The appellation of 'devil-worshippers' had been given to the Yezidis by the earliest European travellers, yet their creed ventured far beyond such an ignorant description. The name Yezidi derived from the nature of their beliefs, which focused primarily around an indigenous breed of angelic beings. In many ways their name can

be translated as the 'angelicans', and originally this would appear to have been the name by which all the Kurdish angel cults were known. Yet chief among the Yezidi angels was a unique and very important figure indeed. His name was, and still is (for the Yezidis still exist), *Melek Taus*, the Peacock Angel. He corresponds with the Judaeo-Christian concept of the Evil One – Satan or Lucifer – but this association hardly does him justice, for Melek Taus is seen as a supreme being, with authority over worldly affairs. To these people he was the creator of the material world, which he made from the scattered pieces of an original cosmic egg, or pearl, inside which his spirit had previously resided.

According to one Yezidi text known as the *Mes'haf i Resh*, or 'the Black Book' – the contents of which were entirely unknown to Europeans in Layard's time – it reveals that:

*In the beginning God (Kurdish Khuda) created the White Pearl out of his most precious Essence; and He created a bird named Anfar. And He placed the pearl upon its back, and dwelt thereon forty thousand years. On the first day [of Creation], Sunday, He created an angel called 'Azâzil, which is Melek Tâwus, the chief of all [angels].'*²

The beliefs of the Yezidi tribes of Kurdistan are littered with ornithomorphic themes. The *Anfar* is almost certainly a cosmic form of the Persian and Zoroastrian Simurgh bird. More importantly, the Yezidi holy book, which is thought to date in its present form to the thirteenth century AD, states that the first name of the Peacock Angel had been '*Azâzil*, an Arabic rendering of Azazel, one of the leaders of the Watchers in Judaeo-Christian apocrypha.

Yezidis have attempted to contain their own limited, and often contradictory, knowledge and understanding of the Peacock Angel within the Islamic account of the fall of Azazel, or Eblis. According to the Koran, the Fallen Angel was outcast by God for having refused to bow down before Adam, the creature made of clay, since he himself had been born of fire. In the traditional rendition of the story, Azazel is doomed to walk the earth eternally, but according to the Yezidi version, God *forgave* Azazel, who was then reinstated in Heaven.

The Peacock Angel is undoubtedly seen by the Yezidi tribes as a form of Satan, or *Shaitân* as he is known in Arabic, since every

effort is made *not* to mention this name out aloud. Fail to do so and the culprit would be struck blind. This fanatical attitude goes so far as banning the use of words that even sound like *Shaitân*. Furthermore, no one is allowed to make a curse in the name of *Shaitân*, unless it is out of earshot of neighbours and is directed at those not of the faith.³

Like the Zoroastrians and the Dead Sea communities of post-exilic Judaea, the angelicans of Kurdistan have always revered whole pantheons of *yazatas*, or angels. And in similar with these other angel worshippers, the Yezidi hold that a group of seven, sometimes six, head the angelic hierarchy – these, of course, can be equated with both the Iranian concept of the *Amesha Spentas* and the Judaeo-Christian belief in seven archangels. The leader of the main Yezidi group of angels is *Lasifarûs*, a cosmic incarnation of *Melek Taus*, who is specifically said to speak Kurdish, as if to demonstrate his indigenous nature.⁴ Scholars have attempted to connect his name with Lucifer, the Christian form of Satan, which seems highly probable indeed. The rest of the seven angels are given standard Christian-Islamic names such as *Jebra'il* (Gabriel), *Mika'il* (Michael), *Ezra'il* (Azrael) and *Esrafil* (Raphael). Another angelic hierarchy of the Yezidi are the *Chehelmir*, or *Chelmir*, who number forty.

All this was, of course, quite unknown to Layard as he sat with the current Yezidi leader Hussein Bey in his *salamlik*. He was the son of one of the greatest sheikhs of their tribes, Ali Bey, who had defended their people against countless attacks from Kurdish Muslims, the Ottoman Turks, as well as the Islamic armies of both Iraq and Iran. Quite obviously they saw the Yezidis as not just infidel, but as heretics *par excellence*, fit only to be wiped out completely unless they renounced their faith and became Muslims themselves.

In past centuries the Yezidis had been very powerful, covering extensive areas all over Kurdistan, but slowly their tribes had been persecuted and destroyed until there were now only isolated groups left in the Iraqi and Turkish foothills of Kurdistan, as well as further south in the vicinity of Jebel Sinjar, a solitary mountain in the Iraqi desert, whose name translates as the mountain of the 'bird'.⁵ Yezidis have also survived in small pockets across central Kurdistan, as well as in the Russian Caucasus and in various

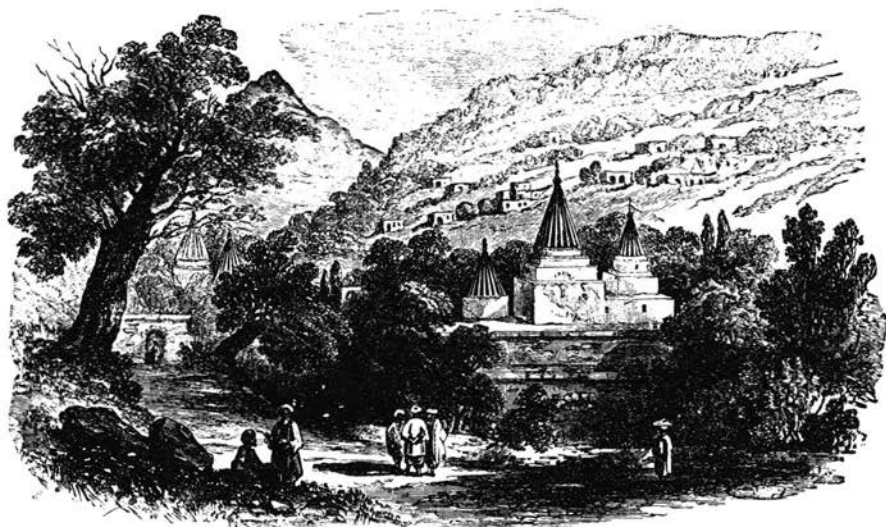


Fig. 6. Entering the village of Lalish in the foothills of Iraqi Kurdistan. Here Yezidis come each year for the annual *Jam* festival in honour of their principal avatar, or saint, Sheikh Adi. The conical towers, or *mazzars*, mark Yezidi shrines and tombs.

satellite communities in northern Syria, Lebanon, Anatolia and Iran. Today their tribes represent some 5 per cent of the Kurdish population,⁶ yet as each year passes their numbers diminish even further.

Layard spent the evening pleasantly chatting with Hussein Bey, and in the morning the two men travelled by horse to Lalish. Hussein himself was dressed in bright robes, and accompanying them was a large contingent of horsemen, who constantly discharged guns into the air and sang Yezidi war songs. Also with them were musicians, who played pipes and tambourines, and a whole procession of Yezidi villagers, who followed behind on foot. The journey was long and arduous, seemingly ever upwards. Occasionally the party would be forced to dismount from their horses and ascend precarious mountain paths in single file.

Having reached the summit of one final pass, the party looked down into a wooded valley to see a large cluster of buildings, interspersed here and there with brilliant white conical spires, each one

vertically ribbed into many ridged sections. Known as *mazârs*, these towers marked the position of Yezidi shrines and tombs. All at once the tribesmen discharged their guns into the air in celebration of their arrival at Lalish. Almost immediately this indiscriminate use of firearms was answered by another volley of shots from the village itself.

As the procession descended down into thick oak woodland, it began to pass many other pilgrims making their way to the tomb of Sheikh Adi, the cult's main avatar (the living incarnation of a divine being), in whose honour the annual *Jam* festival is held. He is supposed to have lived during the twelfth or thirteenth century AD, and is believed to have been an incarnation of *Melek Taus* himself. Even though Sheikh Adi is recognized as the founder of the Yezidi faith, both the religion and the tribes are ascribed a much earlier date of origin. Interestingly enough, the Yezidi sacred work entitled the *Mes'haf i Resh* is written in a very ancient Kurdish language known as *Kermânji*, which, at the time of its composition in the medieval period, was confined to the rugged Hakkâri mountains south of Lake Van, close to the suggested location of the Garden of Eden. Indeed, this very area was the traditional stronghold of Sheikh Adi, who, despite a belief among modern Yezidis that he was born in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon, was once known as Adi al-Hakkâri, or Adi of Hakkâri.⁷

Roots of the Yezidi

Sheikh Adi had obviously revitalized an existing set of beliefs already adhered to among the Kurdish tribesmen, yet where exactly these people had obtained their quite unique religious views is not known. Yezidi cosmogony and mythology were unquestionably non-Christian and non-Islamic in origin, although they did appear to bear some striking similarities to the teachings of the Persians, in particular the religion of the Magi. The Yezidis believe in a form of dualism, where they give equal respect to both the 'good' and 'evil' principles of their religion. This therefore paralleled the Magi's belief in the eternal struggle between the *ahuras* and *daevas*, the root of virtually all later dualism in the Near

East. So were the Yezidis descendants of the Median Magi? The answer has to be yes, for the angelicans believe that the next incarnation of *Melek Taus* will come in the form of a personage named Sheikh Mêdî, or Mahdî – an avatar who will bear the blood and power of the ancient spiritual leaders of Media.⁸ That the Yezidi are among the last survivors of the faith of the Magi is not disputed. Scholars are in no doubt that it was the Magi, and not the Zoroastrians, who had influenced the development of Yezidism.⁹

Clinching the connection was the belief among the Yezidi that Sheikh Adi had himself been a Magian. According to the Wigrams in *The Cradle of Mankind*: 'there seems some historical evidence that he (Sheikh Adi) lived in the tenth century (a disputed date), and that he was originally a Magian who had fled from Aleppo (in Syria) when the Magian cult was suppressed'.¹⁰ It was he who had established the Yezidi creed and sacred books, and it will be his spirit that is going to come again in the final days; hence the prophecy about the incarnation of Melek Taus as Sheikh Mêdî, or Mahdî.

The Shrine of Sheikh Adi

As Hussein Bey and Layard journeyed through the oak wood, they watched as women broke away from their chores to rest for a few minutes and as the men busily reloaded their rifles in readiness for the next party of pilgrims to appear over the mountain pass. Soon the European and the sheikh were greeted by the chief Yezidi priest Sheikh Nasr. He approached with the principal members of the priesthood, who were all dressed in white. Nasr appeared to be about forty years of age, and the warmth with which he and his priests greeted Layard was commendable. They all insisted on kissing his hand as he remained on his horse, despite his clear dislike of this custom. Hussein and Layard then dismounted and began the last part of the journey on foot.

The tomb of Sheikh Adi contained an outer and inner courtyard which led into a darkened room within which was the saint's tomb. This ancient building had almost certainly once been a Nestorian church, before these local Christians had departed the area.¹¹

Layard quickly realized that entry into the inner courtyard was by barefoot only, so he removed his shoes before venturing further. Once inside the open enclosure, he sat down alongside Hussein Bey and Sheikh Nasr on the carpets provided. Only the sheikhs and *kawals*, the two principal orders of priesthood, were allowed to join them in this sacred area. Each took seats around the walls of the precinct, some of which was shaded by enormous trees that grew within the courtyard. Beyond them on all sides was a rocky valley that seemed to act as a natural amphitheatre overlooking the events taking place below, for pilgrims were already gathering beneath the shades of trees or on roof-tops in readiness for the evening's proceedings. At one end of the sanctuary was running water said to issue from a spring that had been miraculously diverted to this place from the more famous spring of Zemzem at Mecca by Sheikh Adi himself.

The Black Serpent

Around the east and west doorways into the darkened tomb was an assortment of devotional images carved in high relief. Many of these were obscure, their symbolism uncertain. They included items such as combs, assorted birds (probably peacocks), crescents, hatchets, stars, as well as various animals, including a lion. Most striking of all was a long, black snake carved to the right of the eastern entrance, close to where tiny red flowers had been attached to the wall using black pitch.¹² Layard tried in vain to find out the meaning of this serpentine form from Sheikh Nasr, who merely stated that it had been carved for decoration by a Christian mason some years beforehand. This explanation, Layard quickly realized, was a little short of the truth, for the carving was paid the highest respect by all Yezidis who daily coated it in charcoal to preserve its stark black lustre.¹³ Each person, on entering the tomb, would stop to kiss the black snake, as if it held some special place in their personal beliefs.¹⁴

And Layard was right, for the serpent did hold a special significance in the Yezidi religion. Not only was it venerated on feast days,¹⁵ but it was also a symbol of totemic magic. Descendants

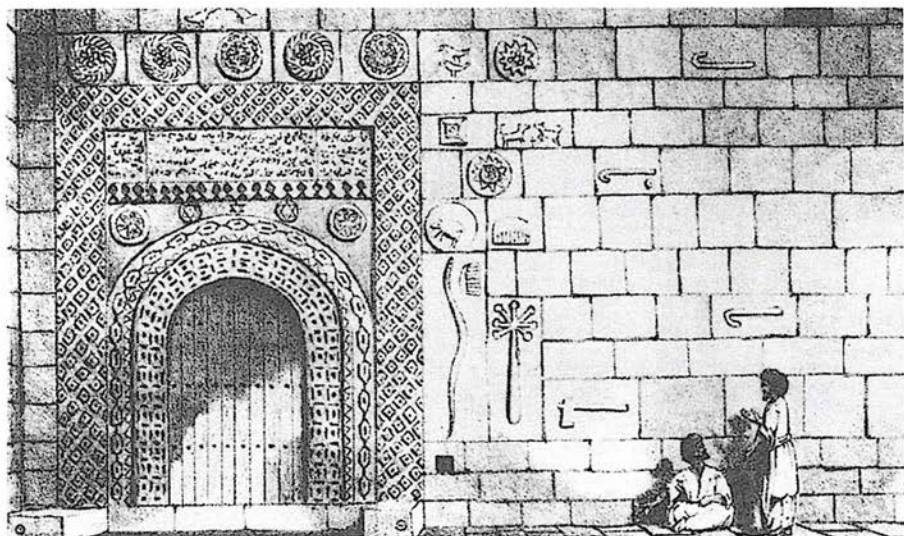


Fig. 7. The exterior wall of Sheikh Adi's tomb within the Yezidi village of Lalish in Iraqi Kurdistan. To the right of the door is the much-venerated black snake, a symbol of Azazel, the Greatest Angel in Yezidi beliefs.

of certain Yezidi sheikhs, in particular Sheikhs Mand and Ruhsit,¹⁶ the latter being found in the villages of Baibân and Nasarî in the Mosul Vilâyet, believed they had power over serpents and were immune from the effects of snake poison. European travellers referred to these people as snake-charmers, for they would go from village to village displaying their magical talents to any household willing to pay them.¹⁷

The British author E. S. Drower, whose book *Peacock Angel* is one of the only documented studies of the Yezidis, encountered a snake-charmer and his 'ugly little' daughter Jahera, or 'Snake-Poison', during a visit to the village of Baashika in 1940. Mrs Drower described how she watched the sheikh, a descendant of Sheikh Mand, and his daughter enter a courtyard with huge patterned snakes coiled around their shoulders. The father then proceeded to remove the serpent from his daughter's neck before dropping it to the ground. It slithered 'along in the sparse grass looking very evil indeed. It was five or six feet in length and its

body two inches or more in thickness.¹⁸ The sheikh then caught the snake and placed it back on the child's shoulders. Mrs Drower having given the odd couple 'an offering', the sheikh and his daughter posed for photographs, holding the snakes' flat heads close to their lips, before moving on to the next household.¹⁹ Mrs Drower asked her Yezidi host whether the claims regarding the magical powers attributed to the snake-charmers were real, only to be told that they had seen Jahera handle a poisonous snake fresh from the fields, and that the snakes do not have their fangs removed.²⁰

Snake-charming is a form of showmanship. It is also the outer manifestation of snake shamanism, which appears to have been extremely important to the angel-worshipping Yezidis since time immemorial. The fact that these magical talents were said to have been passed down from generation to generation implied a hereditary lineage of immense antiquity. It is unclear exactly what the serpent represented to the Yezidi, although its veneration would suggest that it played a similar role to that of the Peacock Angel, in other words it was a symbol of Azazel, or Shaitân. It must also have represented the spiritual energy and magical potency of the snake shamans themselves.

So where had this symbol of magical potency come from? Did it signify, not only the hereditary shamanism among the Yezidi, but also its original source? Snake shamanism and viper-like features would appear to have been characteristics associated with the Watchers. So if they really *had* existed as an actual culture living in this same region during prehistoric times, then it was possible that the Yezidis' veneration of the serpent was a memory of their presence and influence.

Power of the Evil Eye

Layard noticed that in the centre of the inner courtyard in front of Sheikh Adi's tomb stood a square plaster case, inside which was a small recess filled with what seemed to be small balls of clay. These were eagerly purchased by the pilgrims as if they had some special purpose to play. On inquiring as to what was going on, Layard was informed that these balls had been made from mud collected from

the actual tomb of Sheikh Adi, which is placed next to a muddy spring. Yezidis regard them as sacred relics able to ward off evil spirits, including the evil eye, which is paid unparalleled attention among all the Kurdish faiths. For instance, at a Yezidi sacred place named Dair Asî in the Sinjar region, there is a secret rock cleft where 'those afflicted with the influence of the "evil eye" deposit their gifts in order to alleviate their misfortune'.²¹ Yet even more fearful of the evil eye are the Muslims and Christians, for as Mrs Drower recorded, few mothers 'would dare to take their babies abroad without sewing their clothes over with blue buttons, cowries, and scraps of Holy writ, either Qur'an or Bible'.²² Blue is the Yezidis' most sacred colour and is never worn by them for this reason, yet to all the other Kurdish faiths it is used to ward off the evil eye. Why was there this great fear of the evil eye in Kurdistan? And why did the colour blue play such a contradictory role among the Kurdish faiths? The matter of the evil eye is discussed in a subsequent chapter, but the colour blue I shall deal with now.

In the Persian *Shahnameh* turquoise blue is the colour of sovereignty and kingship. The Pishdadian kings wore blue crowns and garments, a tradition also echoed in ancient Sumer and Akkad, where the monarchs were adorned in items fashioned from blue lapis lazuli stone. Since the mythical kings of Iran were said to have borne strong physiological features of the *daevas*, then perhaps this colour was deemed to possess divine characteristics appertaining to the fallen race. If so, it might explain why later generations of humanity came to either revere or fear this colour, depending on the nature of their faith. Evil has always been used to ward off evil, which is why church gargoyles and grotesques are said to keep away demons, and why eye charms are used to repel the evil eye, so blue must have been used by Kurdish Muslims and Christians in a similar capacity.

The Jam Begins

At midday, Sheikh Nasr, the chief priest, stood up, signalling that everyone else should do likewise. Layard followed suit, walking with the party as it moved from the inner to the outer court, which

by now was a hive of frenzied activity. Some peddlers sold handkerchiefs and cotton items from Europe while others sat before bowls of dried figs, raisins, dates or walnuts collected from different parts of Iraqi Kurdistan. Men and women, boys and girls, appeared to be involved in feverish conversation, the din rising at the sight of Hussein Bey and Sheikh Nasr, whom they now respectfully saluted. The party continued through the outer court and moved into the open air, where an avenue of tall trees offered a welcome shade. A constant sound of pipes and tambourines pervaded the air as Layard joined the various sheikhs and *kawal* priests, who proceeded to sit down in a circle around a sacred spring. All watched as women approached to take water from the little reservoir below the fountain.

As this was in progress, lines of pilgrims continued to approach along the avenue of trees. Layard could not help noticing among them 'a swarthy inhabitant of the Sinjar' with long black ringlets and piercing black eyes. Over his shoulder was slung a matchlock gun, while his long white robe rustled about in the warm breeze. Behind him came the rich and the poor – men in colourful turbans with ornate daggers in their belts, women wearing long, flowing gowns with their long hair in neat tresses, and poverty-stricken families dressed in ragged white clothes. They all approached the fountain, as if it was the penultimate station along the pilgrim route to the tomb of their saint. The men would lay down their arms before kissing the hands of Hussein Bey, Sheikh Nasr and the white-skinned European, who was treated with equal respect by everyone. They then made their way towards a small stream where each person washed both themselves and their dirty garments in readiness to enter the outer courtyard. As this was happening, firearms were still being discharged in response to those who announced their own entry into the valley in a likewise manner.

Perpetual music, song and dance filled the afternoon, and eventually Layard decided to retire to the roof of a nearby building. Here he was supplied with food by black-turbaned *fakir* priests and a wife of Sheikh Nasr. Down below in the inner court other *fakir* priests had appeared carrying lamps and cotton-wool wicks that were placed in niches on the outer walls of the tomb as well as in the surrounding valley. Layard saw that Yezidis would run their

right hand through the flame and then rub the opposite eyebrow with the resulting black soot. Women would do likewise for young children, or for those less fortunate than themselves. As in the Magian and Zoroastrian faiths, fire is sacred to the Yezidi.

As nightfall came, the valley looked star-spangled with a myriad of tiny flames flickering in the cool evening breeze. But something else now stirred. Literally thousands of people – Layard estimated up to 5,000 – moved about the slopes like a great moving sea of orderly activity. Many carried lighted torches and lamps, further illuminating the trees dotted all around the valley.

Layard watched as large numbers of sheikhs, dressed immaculately in white; *kawals*, adorned in black and white; *fakirs*, wearing brown robes and black turbans; as well as numerous women priests attired in white, began to assemble in the inner court for what appeared to be the climax of the *Jam* festival. The *kawals* played sweet melodies on flutes and tambourines, which grew steadily in pitch and intensity. Accompanying the pleasant sounds was a slow choral chant that radiated from the men on the surrounding slopes. This continued unabated for over an hour, the pitch hardly varying at all. Occasionally contrasting harmonies would emanate from the priests positioned in the inner court. Gradually the whole bizarre cacophony quickened its pace and volume, until finally it blended to become an eerie wall of harmonic sound that seemed to hang motionless in the air.

The tambourines were then banged louder and louder as the flutes were played with ever more ferocity. Voices were raised to their highest pitch, while women warbled a strange low shrill that seemed to make even the rocks reverberate with constant sound. Overcome by the ecstasy of the highly charged atmosphere, the *kawals* began to discard their instruments as they started flinging themselves around in wild trances, induced by the almighty crescendo of noise. Each fell to the ground when their body could take no more.

And then the focus of their ritual was made apparent to the chosen few for the first and only time that day. In the inner court, out of view of the masses, a sheikh delicately clasped an item in a red cloth coverlet, something that appeared to be of immense spiritual significance to these people.

Slowly the priest removed the red covering, and immediately held aloft what lay beneath it. In his hand was a strange statue of a bird, made either of brass or copper. It was perched upon a tall stand, like a weighty candlestick, that appeared to be made of a similar metal. The image itself seemed crude with a bulbous body and a long hooked beak, like that of a predatory bird. Its name was *Anzal*, the Ancient One,²³ the embodiment of *Melek el Kout*, the Greatest Angel, whose presence had now been summoned.²⁴

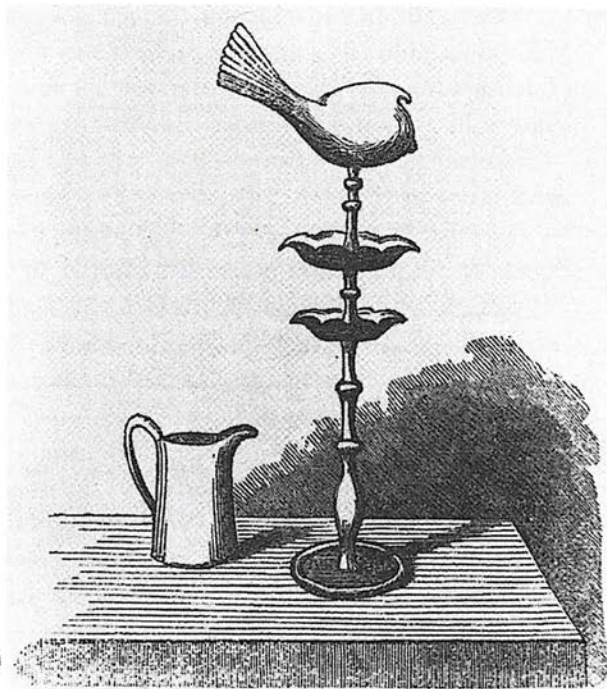
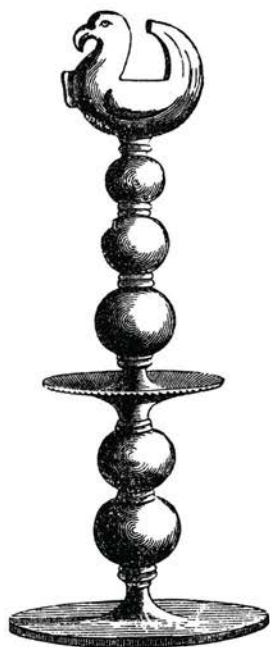
This strange bird icon of immense antiquity was the Yezidis' chief subject of veneration. So who was the Greatest Angel? And what possible significance did this archaic worship have to my knowledge of the fallen race?

The Greatest Angel

Aside from the sculptured bird icon kept at the tomb of Sheikh Adi at Lalish, there were apparently six more of these so-called *sanjaqs*, a word meaning either 'standard' or 'dioceses'.²⁵ Each of these examples was made to be carried in a dismantled state by traveling *kawals*, who would move from village to village looking for a suitable venue to conduct a very strange ceremony in which the priest would invoke the spirit of *Melek Taus* into the bird icon, using a form of trance communication.

The *sanjaq* icons are greatly revered by the Yezidis, and until 1892 it was claimed that none had ever fallen into the hands of enemies.²⁶ Who exactly *Anzal*, the Ancient One, might have been is sadly not recorded. It was probably another form of Azazel, the Peacock Angel. A possible clue as to its identity may, however, come from the candlestick-like stand on which the images perch. This almost certainly symbolized the divine tree on which the *Saena*, or Simurgh bird, sat in Persian tradition, suggesting that these stands represented the seat of all knowledge and wisdom, passed on to Yezidis through the presence of the Ancient One.

That these metal images became identified with the peacock bird is a complete mystery since peacocks are not indigenous to Kurdistan. Some were introduced to Baghdad during the Middle Ages. They were also to be found in Persia, which is probably why



Figs. 8 and 9. Two examples of *sanjaqs*, the metal bird icons venerated by the angel-worshipping Yezidi of Kurdistan. On the left is one seen by Sir Austen Henry Layard in 1849, and on the right is another sketched by a Mrs Badger in 1850. Are these strange icons abstract memories of Kurdistan's protoneolithic vulture shamans?

Aristotle referred to them as 'the Persian bird'.²⁷ Yet it is in the Indian state of Rajasthan that the peacock is most revered. Hindus here see it as sacred to Indra, the god – or *asura* – of thunder, rains and war. Much folklore and superstition also surrounds this bird in India. For instance, in similar with its mythical counterpart Garuda, it is said to be able to attack and kill snakes.²⁸ It is also believed to hypnotize its intended female partner into submission,²⁹ while its distinctive call and dance is said to announce the arrival of the monsoon rains.³⁰

Only the last accredited ability of the peacock is based on any truth, for the bird senses the oncoming rains and attempts to have

one last fling before its feathers get so wet that it is forced to shed them! Yet the other two legends are significant in themselves, since they have both contributed to the bird's veneration among the Yezidi. Like the peacock, the Yezidi relish a power over serpents, as witnessed by the snake-charming descendants of Sheikhs Mand and Ruhsit. The hypnotic gaze of the peacock is integrally linked with the power of the evil eye, and it is interesting to note that peacock feathers have long been considered effective deterrents against this baleful influence.³¹

The striking blue, black and green eyes on a peacock's feather must also have played a major role in establishing the bird's sanctity among the Yezidi, especially since the colour blue is given such respect by their faith. Another curious superstition concerning the peacock feather is its believed ability to prevent the decay of any item placed with it, perhaps a distant echo of the connection between the Simurgh and the drug of immortality.³²

Descendants of Noah

It was, however, the link between peacocks and rain-making that seemed of greatest importance, for as with the wild *zaddik*-priests of the Dead Sea, the Yezidis claim direct descent from Noah – in their case through an unknown son named Na'umi.³³ They say that from Noah's other son, Shem, who was reviled by his father, came all the other races of the world. This therefore implied that the Yezidi tribes were not only unique, but that their ancestors had a special relationship with the hero of the Great Flood.

The Yezidis in fact believe there to have been two floods,³⁴ not one – the last of which, the Flood of Noah, took place 'seven thousand years ago'.³⁵ On what information they base this chronology is unknown. In their own rendition of the traditional story, the Ark had drifted on the open sea until it accidentally struck the tip of Mount Sinjar. A major disaster was averted, however, when the quick-thinking snake promptly slithered across to the gaping hole and corked the leak using its curled-up body. (The Armenian Church claims that this same incident occurred at Sipan Dağ, a mountain on the northern shores of Lake Van.)³⁶ The vessel was

then able to continue its journey, which ended, as in the case of Judaic, Islamic and Kurdish tradition, at Judi Dağ, not Mount Ararat.³⁷ Yezidis attend the annual sacrifices that take place each year on Al Judi to commemorate the offerings given up to God by Noah after the Ark had come to rest on dry land.³⁸

Nomadic Rainmakers

The Yezidis seem to possess a great affinity for the Noahic tradition, almost as if they believe themselves to be the inheritors of his succession, as well as the antediluvian cosmogony he brought with him into post-diluvian times. They see him, along with Seth and Enoch, as one of the 'first fathers' of their tribes, who they say were conceived by Adam alone.³⁹ This intimate connection with Noah is highly significant, for as with the Dead Sea communities, the Yezidi recognize a certain type of wild, nomadic priest known as the *koçek*. These individuals are regarded as seers, visionaries, mediums and miracle workers – gifts which they apparently receive from hereditary sources. Moreover, like the *zaddik*-priests of the Dead Sea, the *koçek* have the power to bring rain. One folk-story recorded by the Yezidi scholar R. H. W. Empson tells how a *koçek* named *Bêrû* was asked by the sheikhs of various communities to bring rain during a particularly dry season. Having agreed to do this within seven days, the *koçek* ascended to heaven, where he managed to secure the assistance of Sheikh Adi himself. Together they took the matter to a heavenly priest named Isaac (*Is'hâq*), who informed *Bêrû* that his request would be granted. After seven days no rain had fallen, so the *koçek* was called before the Yezidi chiefs to explain himself. He pointed out that heaven received so many requests for rain that they would have to wait their turn like everyone else. Shortly afterwards the rains did come, vindicating the supernatural powers of the *koçek*.⁴⁰

Could it be that the *koçek*s' apparent ability to influence the weather was one of the feats originally accredited to the fallen race, for rain-making activities have always played a prominent role in shamanistic practices around the world. The fact that the Yezidi

saw themselves as inheritors of ancient ancestral traditions going back to Noah would appear to hint at this possibility. If so, then there seemed little doubt that the geographical focus of this tradition has always been the area around Judi Dağ in Turkish Kurdistan.

The Secret Cavern

Yezidi myth and legend must contain many elements inherited from older indigenous cultures of the Kurdish highlands. Who these people were, and what their relationship might have been to the Watchers, is unknown, yet one tentative clue comes from a series of strange carvings greatly venerated by the Yezidi. They are situated in a cavern at a place named Ras al-‘Ain, on the Syria-Turkish frontier, and were seen, and described to the Baghdad authorities, by E. S. Drower in 1940.

To reach this secluded site, Mrs Drower had followed an elderly Yezidi woman named Sitt Gulé up a precarious rock-face. The two had climbed higher and higher, using available crevices as footholds, until the woman took them around a right-hand bend where they suddenly encountered deeply worn steps. These entered a lofty cavern in which a gushing spring issued from behind a rock-face. On inquiring as to who was worshipped here, the woman had replied ‘Kaf’, or more correctly *kahaf*, a Kurdish word meaning ‘cavern’. Yet Sitt Gulé clearly believed this to be the name of the *genius loci*, or guardian spirit, of the place, for she went on to point out his image to the Englishwoman.

Looking around, Mrs Drower noticed that the walls contained niches, blackened with the smoke of a thousand lamps, as well as various shelves for offerings and lights. There were also three large panels in which were carved extraordinary images of human forms. One was unfortunately defaced beyond all recognition. The second contained ‘a single seated figure facing the worshipper, almost Buddha-like in its dignity and repose’.⁴¹ Although the figure was not cross-legged, he was seated in a ‘concave frame’, shaped like the lotus thrones of Buddhist art. He also wore ‘a conical cap’, like those worn by Tibetan holy figures. In the third panel was a ‘seated

and bearded personage also wearing a conical cap', and advancing towards him were a procession of people 'on a wave of movement and worship'.⁴²

On the other side of the chamber, beyond the stream of running water and over the spring-head itself, was a human face in low relief. Although somewhat damaged, it was similar in style to the other two figures, with a beard and conical hat. Yet it was what she saw cut into the polished floor that most baffled Mrs Drower, for she could trace 'an oblong with twelve small round depressions, placed six a side'.⁴³ She surmised that this design represented some kind of 'gaming board', which seems unlikely bearing in mind the immense sanctity of the place.

To what ancient culture did this secret cavern once belong? And what did these strange carvings of holy figures, with beards and conical hats, seated on lotus thrones, actually represent? No one knows. The only thing that can be said with any certainty is that the carvings were extremely old, and did not belong to the faith of either the Yezidi or the Magi. The clear Buddhist appearance of these serene carvings cannot be overlooked, although they are unlikely to have had any direct connection with the teachings of Buddha, the Indian prophet, who is said to have died in 543 BC. The conical hats are variations of what became known in Greek classical art as the Phrygian cap, which usually denoted a person of Anatolian or Persian origin. The earliest wearer of the Phrygian cap, or cap of Hades, was the mythical hero Perseus, who was said to have brought 'initiation and magic' to Persia and to have founded the cult of the Magi to guard over the 'sacred immortal fire'.⁴⁴ There is clearly a great mystery in these ancient carvings, and unravelling this could identify the origins behind both the Magi priesthoods of Media and the angel-worshipping cults of Kurdistan.

The great antiquity of the Yezidis is spelt out by themselves, for they employ enormously long periods of time to calculate the age of the world. They say there have been seventy-two different Adams, each living a total of 10,000 years, each one more perfect than the last.⁴⁵ In between each Adam has been a period of 10,000 years, during which no one inhabited the world. The Yezidis believe that the current world race is the product of the last of the

seventy-two Adams, making the earth a maximum of 1,440,000 years old. Such precise calculations are in themselves nonsensical; however, these figures (as I shall explain in Chapter Twenty-three) were not simply plucked out of thin air. Far from it, for they relate to astronomical time-cycles of extreme antiquity and represent a knowledge of universal numbers present in myths and legends world-wide.

I felt strongly that the ever-diminishing Yezidi cult held important clues in respect to the supposed presence of the fallen race in Kurdistan. Yet it was among another of the Kurdish angel cults, the mysterious and secretive Yaresan, as well as in the myths and legends of other local cultures, that their dark secrets are revealed in even greater detail.

CHILDREN OF THE DJINN

The Yaresan are a proud, fierce tribal culture, recognized by their distinctive red costumes. Somehow they have managed to remain even more elusive than the Yezidis, their religion being known only to a few scholars even today. Any member of their faith who was approached by early European travellers, and asked about their beliefs, would simply answer with the words *ahl-i haqq*, meaning, 'We are worshippers of the truth.' Although not wrong, such a response was a little misleading, since the word *haqq*, 'truth', was a pun on their real inner beliefs, revolving around the word *haq* (spelt with one q) – the name they give to the Universal Spirit, the creator of the universe.

Like the Yezidis, the Yaresan are organized into isolated communities, which currently make up around 10 to 15 per cent of the modern Kurdish population. They are to be found mostly in the region of Kermanshah in the Lower Zagros, although they have also survived in scattered pockets in the Elburz mountain range of Iran, in the highlands of Azerbaijan and in northern Iraq.¹ The earliest Yaresan religious texts are written in a sacred language known as Gurâni, which takes its name from one of the oldest tribes of Kurdistan. Many surviving Gurâns are Yaresan, although the religion itself encompasses other tribes as well. The origin of Yaresan beliefs is even more obscure than those of the Yezidi. Nobody knows for sure how old the faith might be, although it is known to have taken its final form during the late medieval period. Despite this, scholars consider that their beliefs, customs and rituals are among the oldest still surviving in Kurdistan, and are seen as dating back to the very earliest phases in the development of the Iranian religion.²

The truth worshippers possess a complex cosmogony that has distinct parallels with their Yezidi neighbours. They believe that the Universal Spirit, *Haq*, once resided in what they see as a 'pre-eternity', symbolized by a pearl and manifested through their supreme avatar, the Lord God *Khâwandagâr*. This manifestation began the first of Seven Epochs, after which the world was created. The *Haq* then formed a group of seven holy angels, known as the *Haftan*, who bear striking similarities to those revered by the Yezidi. In a subsequent epoch the creation of the physical world was followed by the genesis of humanity, helped, of course, by the angelic hierarchy. Subsequent epochs have seen the emergence of sequences of seven avatars, incarnate angels in bodily form, the last of whom have manifested for the seventh and final time in this present age.³ The Yaresan's chief avatar of the Fourth Epoch was a character named Sultan Sahâk, whose immense veneration goes far beyond preserving the memory of one mortal being.

In the Shadow of Sultan Sahâk

Sultan Sahâk is accredited with a life on earth sometime between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, and it is after him that the Yaresan say they gained their name – *yâr-i sân*, 'the people of the Sultan'.⁴ Yet it is also apparent that this great saint has been seen – as Kurdish scholar Mehrdad Izady rightly expresses it – as a kind of 'superhuman, a supreme avatar of the Universal Spirit, who lived many centuries, possessed mysterious powers, and lives on as a protective mountain spirit in caves on the high peaks'.⁵ Clearly, then, he was no ordinary figure of history. He seemed to be someone more like the fabled King Arthur of British tradition, whose memory embodies the lives of many kings and warriors, and whose story has enveloped much earlier Indo-European myth and legend.

So who was this super-hero of the Yaresan, and how might he be linked with the traditions of the fallen race?

Contradictory as it may at first seem, Sultan Sahâk can be directly equated with a dark, mythical tyrant named Zahhak, the demon or serpent king who appears in Firdowsi's Persian epic, the *Shahnameh* of the eleventh century AD.⁶ This anti-hero is said to

have ruled the world during an age of chaos and disorder after Jemshid (or Yima) had lost the royal *farr*, or Divine Glory, through greed, following a reign of three hundred years. According to Firdowsi, Zahhak had been a true hero of the Iranian mythical dynasty before he succumbed to the trickery of Angra Mainyu, with whom he entered into an evil pact. In exchange for ruling the world, the wicked spirit was allowed to enter into Zahhak. As this took place, black snakes grew from each of the king's shoulders, and thereafter these had to be satisfied each day with the brains of young men kidnapped from villages far and wide. Even though Zahhak tried to cut away the snakes from his shoulders, they simply grew back again and demanded more sacrifices.

Having reigned for a thousand years the demon king is eventually tricked and captured by Feridun. He is interred inside Mount Demavand, where he is chained and tortured, and left to die a slow painful death. It is said that he still remains there today, blood seeping from his heart. Feridun's victory over the wicked tyrant allows him to take up the vacant position of king of Iran and all the world, which he reigns in peace and prosperity for a full five hundred years.⁷

This is the traditional account of Zahhak's long reign as portrayed in Firdowsi's *Shahnameh*. The Zoroastrian literature gives a very similar account, yet cites Azhi Dahâka as the name of the king. Here he is said to have been among the greatest of the *daevas*.⁸ In addition to this, it is claimed that he contrived to pair a mortal woman with a male *daeua* and a mortal man with a female Peri, and in so doing created the Negro race, quite obviously a deliberate racial slur on black Africans.⁹

Such was Azhi Dahâka's legendary story. The reality is that this demon king owes at least part of his existence to an actual historical personage named Astyages (584–550 BC), the last Median ruler, who was overthrown by his grandson Cyrus the Great, the first king of the Persian Empire. Astyages, the name given to this monarch by the Greek historian Herodotus, is said to have borne the royal title of *Rshti-vegâ Azhi Dahâka*,¹⁰ and it was the degenerate memory of his alleged wickedness that supposedly created the demonic tyrant featured in both Persian and Avestan literature.

This explanation is, however, only partially correct, for Azhi Dahâka's character and symbolism undoubtedly derived from several quite diverse sources. For instance, the Median kings were known to their Iranian neighbours by the title *Mâr*, which in Persian signified a 'snake', giving rise to traditions among the Armenians of 'the dragon (*vishap*) dynasty of Media',¹¹ or the 'descendants of the dragon', i.e. the mythical descendants of Azhi Dahâka himself.¹² Strangely enough, the word *Azhdahâ*, an abbreviation of Azhi Dahâka, is now the only Persian word denoting a 'snake'.¹³ Indeed, it would appear that Azhi Dahâka came to symbolize not only the serpentine form of *Angra Mainyu*, but also his incarnation on earth.

In addition to this, the idea of snakes growing from the shoulders of Azhi Dahâka appears to have been a direct borrowing from the mythology of neighbouring Mesopotamia. Here a serpent god named Ningišzida, who bore the title 'Lord of the Good Tree', was depicted in art with snakes rising out of his shoulders in exactly the same manner as the demon tyrant had been portrayed in Armenian and Iranian mythology.¹⁴ Ningišzida's role varied – in some accounts he is a guardian of underworld demons, while in others he guards the gate of Anu (or An), the Sumerian concept of heaven.¹⁵ In all these capacities he was undoubtedly linked to the Hebraic concept of the Serpent of Eden – the good tree being either the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil or the Tree of Life. Confirmation of this connection is in the fact that the Armenian scholar Moses of Khorenats'i records that an ancient folk-song speaks of the descendants of Azhi Dahâka as being venerated in at least one 'temple of the dragons'.¹⁶ Also in Armenia are a number of prehistoric megaliths, or standing stones, that take the form of serpents which are known as *vishaps*, or dragons, showing the immense antiquity of this cult. More importantly, at least one Armenian scholar has associated this archaic worship of the *vishap* with the Sumero-Babylonian cult of the snake.¹⁷

The connection between Azhi Dahâka and the Median kings is also significant, for it was through their downfall that Zoroastrianism was able to climb so rapidly to the position of state religion in Persia. At the same time, many of Media's Magian priests had jumped ship, so to speak, and embraced this revitalized form of the

Iranian religion, and it was probably at around this very period that Azhi Dahâka gained his exclusively demonic character among the Persian peoples. As a consequence, the final Median king somehow became the personification of the terrible Lie preached by the serpent-worshipping Magi priesthoods, as well as a national anti-hero in Persian myth and legend.

Descendants of the Dragon King

In complete contrast, however, was the way in which Azhi Dahâka had been viewed by many of the Kurdish tribes who were previously subject to the Median dynasty of kings. To them the demon king was the hero and Feridun the villain! So much had they revered the memory of Azhi Dahâka that they came to believe that their entire race was descended of him. The story-tellers even readapted his legendary history to suit their needs. They claimed that a plot had been hatched by two of the king's stewards to substitute one of the human brains fed each day to the king's twin snakes. Instead of two human brains, they would feed them one sheep's brain and just one human brain in the hope that it would fool the serpents. Their plan worked, enabling them to daily liberate one of the two young men imprisoned for this sacrificial purpose. Each freed prisoner was given goats and sheep and allowed to escape into the mountains, and this was the supposed origin of the Kurdish peoples.¹⁸

The exact interpretation of this quaint myth is open to speculation, although it implied that the Kurdish race owed its entire existence to the two smart-thinking stewards of Azhi Dahâka, and by virtue of this to the king himself. Yet because this great tyrant was also seen as a *daeua*, or demon, he could never have been accepted as an anti-hero by the devout, angel-worshipping Yaresan. In their religion, the serpent is a symbol of lust and carnal delights. It is also a device of the Fallen Angel – Azazel or *Shaitân*. They therefore transformed Azhi Dahâka into an avatar named Sultan Sahâk.

The Yaresan today seem blind to Sultan Sahâk's true origins, and would vehemently deny any connection with his dark half,

Azhi Dahâka. This strange dichotomy in Yaresan beliefs is not speculative, but is accepted by Kurdish scholars such as Izady.¹⁹ Yet the influence of Sultan Sahâk goes far beyond the Yaresan, and is apparently found in various guises throughout the Upper Zagros region. He is also known by the name Sultan Is'hâq, or Isaac, the divine priest who features in the story about the Yezidi *kocheh* named *Bêrû*, who visits heaven in order to request rain on behalf of the Kurdish peoples.

So what was the true origin of Azhi Dahâka? Why was this dragon king accredited with being the progenitor of the Kurdish race? And why has his memory lingered so long? The answer appeared to lie in the fact that, before his fall, the tyrant was seen as one of the mythical kings of Iran. Since these monarchs would seem to have borne distinctive Watcher traits, could it be that Azhi Dahâka represented a faint echo of the presence and blood lineage of the fallen race – remembered in Armenia as the *vishaps* or dragon descendants – who lived during some distant age of humanity? It is to be recalled that, according to Firdowsi, one of Azhi Dahâka's, or Zahhak's, descendants had been the beautiful Rudabeh – the ivory-skinned princess whose face was 'a very paradise', whose skin from head to toe was as 'white as ivory' and whose height out-topped her future husband Zal, himself a giant of a man, 'by a head'.²⁰ All these features were clear Watcher traits, like those presented in Enochian and Dead Sea material.

Remember, too, that the Armenians actually claim descent from a race of giants under the leadership of Hayk, whose name is equated with the Armenian word for 'gigantic'. Bringing together these two quite separate traditions is the fact that in a sub-text entitled 'From the Fables of the Persians', included by Moses of Khorenats'i in his *History of the Armenians*, the author says that Azhi Dahâka '[lived] in the time of Nimrod'²¹ and that he was one of the chieftains who seized local territories after the giants, or Titans, had divided the races following the destruction, or fall, of the mythical Tower of Babel.²² Could this 'fall' simply preserve yet another distorted memory of the 'fall' of the Watchers, and their gradual dispersion on to the plains surrounding the highlands of Kurdistan?

The Utopian City of Tigranakert

Moses of Khorenats'i's *History* tells of the deeds and virtues of a much celebrated Armenian king named Tigran the Great, who ruled between 95 and 55 BC. He recounts the monarch's many great achievements, before going on to record that Tigran's ancestors came originally from Kurdistan and that they also claimed descendancy from the dragon king Azhi Dahâka. Apparently the family fled their homeland because of the tyrant's continued oppression and settled in Armenia, out of which the mighty Tigran had arisen.²³

At first this information might not seem to be of any special interest to my research into the fallen race, for many Kurds believed in a descendancy from Azhi Dahâka. Then I discovered something about Tigran which seemed to strike a nerve and was not to be overlooked.

Tigran the Great was a great warrior king who gained the crown of Armenia after winning back large tracts of land previously overrun by the mighty Parthian rulers of neighbouring Persia. He had then gone on to conquer Phoenicia, Syria, Upper Mesopotamia (northern Iraq) and Kurdistan. In 88 BC, King Mithridates IV of Pontus, a small kingdom in north-eastern Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), enlisted Tigran's support in defeating the Roman army in neighbouring Cappadocia and Phrygia – both also in Asia Minor. Five years later, in 83 BC, Tigran was invited to become sovereign of Syria, following the collapse of the Seleucid dynasty. He reigned here for a full eighteen years, during which time Tigran was seen as the most powerful pontentate in the whole of western Asia.²⁴

At the height of his success, Tigran decided to build a royal capital as his new seat of power in an area now occupied by the modern-day city of Siirt, in the heartland of Kurdistan.²⁵ Around this new city Tigran established a kingdom named Tigranuan, or Tigranavand. Not only did this appear to have been the very region ruled by his Kurdish ancestors before their departure for Armenia, but it also happened to be close to where Eden would seem to have been geographically placed.

Admittedly this principality had been strategically important in

controlling and defending the Persian Royal Road that cut through the Kurdish highlands; however, as Kurdish scholar Mehrdad Izady admits, Tigran's decision to build his citadel outside of Armenia 'can be interpreted as a sign that he felt his Kurdish past more than has been thought'.²⁶ Tigranakert, as this royal city was called, quickly grew to become a great centre of learning in the style of the Greeks, with scholars invited to come there from all over the old Hellenic world. The Greek biographer Plutarch (AD 50–120) described Tigranakert as 'a rich and beautiful city where every common man and every man of rank studied to adorn it'.²⁷

Within its huge defensive walls, Tigran quickly established a cosmopolitan population that included Assyrians, Cappadocians, Medians and Greeks from Cilicia on the Mediterranean coast, many, according to Plutarch, transported there after Tigran's army had razed their own cities in battle.²⁸ This great cultural mixture of peoples ensured that Tigranakert became the focus of different religious cults and philosophical ideals, something Tigran seems to have wanted to foster.

Unfortunately, however, Tigranakert was finally sacked and despoiled by the Roman general Lucullus in 69 BC, after which its multinational population and Greek scholars were returned to their own countries. Despite its downfall, the city remained a great wonder right down to Islamic times, when it is recorded that one Muslim general prayed that he might take it without bloodshed, upon which its eastern gates were said to have been flung open by invisible hands.²⁹

What then was the significance of Tigran's great city?

The writings of Moses of Khorenats'i would appear to suggest that, not only had Tigran and his descendants believed themselves to be descendants of Azhi Dahâka, but that they had also worshipped him in the form of an anthropomorphic serpent, similar in aspect to the Sumerian snake god Ningišzida.³⁰ If this was the case, then there seemed every reason to believe that the Armenian tyrant located Tigranakert in central Kurdistan because he wished to recreate Azhi Dahâka's own seat of power. Since the Kurds traced their ancestry back to this serpent king, it would imply that the place of genesis of the Kurdish race – in other words, Azhi Dahâka's kingdom – corresponded very well with the site of Eden,

the place of genesis of the human race according to Hebrew tradition. If the descendants of the Watchers really had instigated the serpent dynasty of Iranian kings, then it seemed likely that Azhi Dahâka had come to symbolize the legacy of the Watchers in the minds of the Kurdish peoples. Had Tigran therefore tried to create some kind of utopian city in full awareness of the region's past associations with the Serpent of Eden, the Lord of the Good Tree?

Yaresan Creation Myths

The Yaresan creation myths are quite unique in that they give two sets of names for the first couple. Not only are they referred to as Adam and Eve, but they are also known as *Masya* and *Masyanag*, their counterparts in the ninth-century *Bundahishn* text.

One Yaresan account tells how Azazel secured the services of the Serpent and the Peacock before entering paradise to tempt Adam and Eve into sin. Once inside the terrestrial garden, Azazel transformed himself into a handsome angel and encouraged Eve and then Adam to partake, not of the forbidden fruit, but of the forbidden *wheat* – an apparent symbol of material wealth among the Yaresan. As a result of his intervention, the first couple were expelled from paradise along with Azazel, the Serpent and the Peacock.³¹ This myth clearly demonstrates how the Kurds linked the fall of humanity with both the Serpent and the Peacock Angel, who are both seen as animal forms of the Fallen Angel. Once again, these are the most important totemic symbols of the Watchers.

The Kurdish Jews – who inhabited the area around the city of Arbela in Iraqi Kurdistan from the first century BC onwards until their final migration to Israel in the 1950s – also possessed a variation of the creation myth involving Adam and Eve. In their story, the Serpent of Eden appears, like Azazel in the Yaresan account, as a 'young, good-looking man'.³² Curiously enough, in this account the Serpent tries to seduce *Adam*, and *not* Eve. In fact, it says that he often used to hang around the Garden *before* even the creation of Eve!³³

Both these stories show the belief among the Kurdish peoples that the Serpent of Eden was looked upon as a handsome angel

who used the power of seduction to lure humanity to fall through disobedience. They were even more like an allegorical representation of the fall of the Watchers than their Judaeo-Christian counterpart. Why, then, had the Kurds placed a slightly different slant on the story of the Fall of Man? Did they have reason to update the story-line based on indigenous traditions concerning the fall of the angels?

Birds of the Angels

The Yaresan believe intensely in angels, many of whom appear to have distinct human qualities. One angel, named Mohammad Beg, claimed that in a previous incarnation he had been the fabulous bird *Anqa*, as well as the ancestor of *Masya* and *Masyanag*, the first human beings.³⁴ The *Anqa* was an Arab form of the Simurgh, and since this bird's mythical homeland in the *Airyana Vaejah* (the *Eranvej* in the *Bundahishn*) was most probably Kurdistan, this revelation was extremely important. It implied that the human race had been born of an angel equated with a fabulous bird somewhere in the highlands of Kurdistan.

I had also been intrigued to discover that, in Yaresan tradition, Sultan Sahâk is accredited with a miraculous birth connected with a great bird. It is said that a divine being known as the Royal White Falcon had alighted on a stick perch. On its departure the Virgin Lady Dayerak unwound her skirt, 'on which the Falcon [*had*] settled'. Afterwards, she refolded her skirt, before unwinding it again to find a child there.³⁵ This is all the legend says, although the clear connotation is that some kind of sexual union took place in which the virgin was inseminated by the seed of the Royal White Falcon, who signifies the carrier of divinity. Its role is identical to that of the Varaghna – the bird that transmits the royal *farr* from one king to the next in Avestan tradition.³⁶ The perch itself is very likely a variation of the divine tree on which the Simurgh rests in Iranian myth.

Sultan Sahâk's strange birth attempts to demonstrate that the avatar was born of a divine parentage and that he was inspired by the Glory of God, bestowed on him by the seed of the Royal White

Falcon.³⁷ Once again this brought home the overwhelming link between serpents, predatory birds, divine wisdom and kingly glory among the indigenous tribes of Kurdistan. Why had these particular symbols gained such a prominent place among the angel-worshipping tribes? Had they inherited them from tribal ancestors who had preserved the memory of the Watchers' presence in this region? Certain very strange legends found among the native Yaresan and Jewish communities of Kurdistan, concerning the race of beings known as the djinn, would seem to suggest the answer might well be yes.

Born of the Djinn

The djinn, so the thirteenth-century Yaresan work entitled '*Ajaye ol-makhlukat* tells us, are 'a kind of animal' that have the ability to change their shape and appearance. They can appear as snakes. They can appear as scorpions, and they can even appear as human beings. In Muslim theology, the djinn were said to have been created two thousand years before Adam. They ranked alongside the angels and the chief among them was Eblis. For refusing to bow down before Adam, the djinn, along with Eblis, were cast out of heaven forever to roam the earth as demons.

In Yaresan lore, the story of the fall of the djinn runs a little differently. They say that once this ancient race had lived on earth without any kings or prophets among them. Then they began to revolt against the human prophets, and the world quickly degenerated into lawlessness. On seeing what was happening on earth, God sent an army of angels to deal with the rebellious djinn. The warriors of heaven prevented the evil ones from penetrating too deeply into the land by pushing them towards the sea.³⁸ The angels finally took many djinn captive – among them the young Azazel, who was subsequently brought up in heaven.

This connection between the warring djinn and Kurdish folklore does not end here, for I found that among the legends of the Kurdish Jews there existed a most revealing tale. It featured that celebrated Israelite king Solomon, said to have been the wisest man in the world. The story tells how one day the monarch had ordered

five hundred djinn to find him five hundred of the most beautiful virgins in the world. They were not to return until every last one was in their possession. The djinn had set about their immense task, going to Europe to seek out these maidens. Finally, after gathering together the correct number of virgins, the djinn were about to return to Jerusalem when they learnt that Solomon had passed away. In a dilemma, the djinn had to decide on what to do. Should they return the girls to their rightful homes in Europe, or should they keep them with them? Because the young virgins had 'found favor in the eyes of the jinn, the jinn took them unto themselves as their wives. And they begot many beautiful children, and those children bore more children . . . And that is the way the nation of the Kurds came into being.'³⁹

In another rendition of the same story, a hundred genies are dispatched by Solomon to search out a hundred of the world's most beautiful maidens for his personal harem. Having achieved this quota, Solomon then dies and the hundred genies decide to settle down with the maidens amid the inaccessible mountains of Kurdistan. The offspring of these marriages result in the foundation of the Kurdish race, 'who in their elusiveness resemble their genie forefathers and in their handsomeness their foremothers'.⁴⁰ 'It is because of this story that the title "children of the djinn (i.e. genies)" is occasionally applied to the Kurds by their ethnic neighbours.'⁴¹

Why should the Jews of Kurdistan have possessed such stories about their gentile neighbours? Why should they see them as descendants of the djinn, who were never considered to have possessed corporeal bodies? And why should they have suggested that the Kurds bore physical resemblances to these djinn? They believed the djinn had settled in this mountainous region, and so they must have felt that the ancestors of the Kurds migrated to the region at some early stage in the history of the world.

For some reason, the Kurdish Jews assumed the djinn to have come from Jerusalem and the virgins, or maidens, from Europe. Why was this? And what constituted these alleged physiological similarities with the race of djinn? Did this suggest that the 'children of the djinn' bore both Watcher traits *and* white 'European' features? Certainly, there are two distinct races in Kurdistan – one

olive skinned and of medium height and build with dark eyes, and the other much taller, with fair skin and, very often, blue eyes. E. S. Drower noticed this on her visit to the Yezidi village of Baashika in the Iraqi Kurdish foothills during 1940. She reported that 'many we saw in the village' were 'tall, well-built' men with 'fairish' faces of 'an almost Scandinavian type', adding that: 'Amongst the children of the village some were as flaxen-fair and blue-eyed as Saxons.'⁴² The ethnological origin of these individuals with clear white Caucasian features is not known, although it is easy to see how they could have been accused by the Kurdish Jews of having European ancestry.

I was beginning seriously to believe that the Kurds really were *different* in some way, and that their origins held important clues regarding the presence and ultimate fate of the Watchers. Furthermore, this was not the only evidence that Kurds were often born with physiological features resembling those of the fallen race.

Fear of Changelings

One terrible fear among the Yezidi is that, during the first seven days after birth, an infant can be invisibly substituted for a demon child belonging to a race of 'evil fairy' known as Rashé Shebbé, or Shevvé.⁴³ For this very reason, the mother has to remain in bed during this initial period of vulnerability. The idea of 'fairy' children being exchanged for mortal babies is well known in European folklore, where the substitute infant is referred to as a changeling. The reality of such strange fears lies quite obviously in the fact that certain babies have been born with physiological features that are identified as traits of the 'demon' or 'fairy' race, and are therefore assumed to have been exchanged at birth. In the Near East, however, these legends refer not to small impish individuals, as in the European concept of 'fairies', but to the djinn and Peri – the progeny of Eblis, who before his fall was the angel Azazel. This therefore implied that the 'changeling' children of Yezidi tradition seemingly bore Watcher traits, bringing the debate back to the strange births of infants such as Noah, Rustam and Zal.

With this knowledge it becomes clear that the Yezidi women feared that their own children would develop features akin to those of the djinn, or the fallen race, and that in an attempt to prevent such ill-fated births precautionary measures would be taken.

Why should this fear of changelings exist so strongly among the Yezidi? The answer can only be that such 'demon' babies were once commonplace among Kurdish families, hinting at the rather disconcerting possibility that they could have been genetic throwbacks to a time when two quite separate racial types intermarried to produce offspring bearing the features of either parent, perhaps explaining why the offspring of the djinn and the maidens 'in their elusiveness resemble their genie forefathers and in their handsomeness their foremothers'. In time the chances of such inherited genes producing extreme traits obviously diminished, but every so often a giant child bearing the features of a 'demon' would be born into a community. As a consequence, it would be identified as a changeling that had been exchanged at birth by evil spirits.

These then were the 'children of the djinn'.

This knowledge of the Kurdish changelings could well represent further evidence in support of the idea that forbidden trafficking had taken place between the proposed Watcher culture and the earliest indigenous peoples of Kurdistan. But could such evidence be trusted? How old were these superstitious practices? So much of the Kurdish folklore, myths and legends seemed highly distorted, naïve and somewhat confused, making these accounts very difficult to decipher with any degree of certainty. Despite such shortcomings, hidden among them were several recurring symbols that seemed to crop up again and again – angels, demons, djinn, immortality, serpents, anthropomorphic birds, sovereignty, kingship and great cycles of time.

Missing, however, from the Yezidi and Yaresan literature was any real tradition that placed the biblical Eden in the highlands of Kurdistan.

Perhaps the Yezidi and the Yaresan were too close to the source of this mystery to have realized the immense importance once placed on this region by foreign religions. Only the Nestorian Church of Assyria (Upper Iraq) and the Church of Armenia

embraced and promoted the idea that the Garden of Eden lay at the headwaters of the four rivers of paradise.⁴⁴

Perhaps this was the point to begin looking much further back in time. The native religions of Kurdistan would seem to have preserved fragmented accounts of the Watchers' assumed presence in these parts; however, the most ancient cultures of Mesopotamia would appear to have recorded not only the existence of the fallen race, but also the *precise history* of their highland settlement among the mountains of Kurdistan.

WHERE HEAVEN AND EARTH MEET

The last years of the nineteenth century, Nippur, southern Iraq. Beyond the call of the distant muezzin the constant sound of pickaxes hitting the hard, stony ground filled the burning, dust-clogged air. Arab labourers, their heads wrapped in coloured headgear, worked furiously in the bright sunshine to clear away dirt and rubble from the rectangular trenches, cut deep into the ancient earth. Every hour some new find revitalized their enthusiasm to dig deeper.

News spread that fresh artefacts had been uncovered – close to the foundations of the E-kur, or Mountain House. This was the great temple of Enlil, the supreme god of the Sumerian pantheon and the legendary founder of this powerful city-state more than five thousand years earlier.¹

On learning of this discovery, Professor J. H. Haynes of the Babylonian Expedition of the University of Pennsylvania, navigated the labyrinthine pathways between the trenches and ditches that seemed alive with frenzied activity. Finally he reached the remains of the E-kur temple, which stood beside the crumbling mud-brick ziggurat known to the Sumerians as Dur-an-ki, or the ‘Bond of heaven and earth’.²

Guided by the voices of those who had made the find, Haynes quickly examined the newly dug pit. What he saw were eight fragments of a broken clay cylinder which, although partially defaced, clearly bore inscriptions in the wedge-like cuneiform alphabet. Its positioning, here among the ruins of the E-kur, strongly suggested that it was a foundation cylinder deposited following repairs on the temple during the reigns either of Narâm-Sin (2254–2218 BC) or his successor Shar-Kali-Sharri (2217–2193 BC), the last two kings

of Agade, or Akkad, the royal dynasty of Semitic origin, who had ruled supreme in Sumer for a total of 141 years during the second half of the third millennium BC.³

Dr Haynes was never to know the immense significance of this foundation cylinder, or of the extraordinary inscriptions on some of the other clay tablets found during this period by his team in the vicinity of the E-kur building and dating to a similar age. Along with many other more highly prized treasures from Nippur and other Mesopotamian city-states, the broken cylinder and inscribed tablets were taken back to the University Museum of Philadelphia by the Babylonian Expedition's chief archaeologist, Professor H. V. Hilprecht. They were never removed from their packing cases, but instead were dumped in the museum's basement until their eventual rediscovery by George Aaron Barton, Professor of the Bryn Mawr College, Philadelphia, during the second decade of the twentieth century.⁴ Aware of Haynes's and Hilprecht's earlier work, Barton decided to translate the E-kur foundation cylinder, which he found scattered about in three different transit boxes.⁵

After many painstaking hours of dedicated work, Barton became more and more excited about the contents of the cylinder's inscription, which was written in unilingual Sumerian. Arranged in nineteen columns on the eight fragments were, he believed, 'the oldest known text' from Sumeria, and 'perhaps the oldest in the world'.⁶ It featured many of the ancient gods, including Enlil, Enki, the god of the watery abyss, as well as a little-known snake goddess named Šir. She seemed to be synonymous with Enlil's spouse, Ninlil or Ninkharsag, leading Barton to conclude that Nippur had once been a cult centre for this ancient snake goddess.⁷ By contrast, the contents of some of the other tablets he translated were seen by Barton as a trifle mundane; there was a version of the Sumerian creation myth and what seemed to be hymns and eulogies to deified kings or localized deities, but little else.

Despite his initial excitement in respect of the clay cylinder, Barton could only conclude that the Nippur tablets he translated exhibited 'the neighborly admixture of religion and magic so characteristic of Babylonian thought . . . If not the religious expression of a democracy.'⁸ So, having completed his work, Barton left behind the Nippur texts, which were published in 1918 by Yale

University Press under the rather dull title of *Miscellaneous Babylonian Inscriptions*, and there the matter rested for the next sixty years.

Then, during the 1970s, a copy of Barton's by now extremely rare book came into the possession of a former exploration geologist named Christian O'Brien. He had studied natural sciences at Christ's College, Cambridge, and had worked for many years in Iran with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, now British Petroleum (BP). He was also a reader of cuneiform script and could see, even at a cursory glance, that Barton had misinterpreted much of what the E-kur foundation cylinder and some eight of the ten published Nippur tablets actually recorded, prompting him to retranslate each in turn. What he found shocked him completely.

As each new tablet was completed, more and more pieces of a slowly emerging jigsaw began to fit into place. Much of the texts appeared to tell the story of a race of divine beings known as the Anannage (*a-nun-na(ge)*), or the Anunnaki (*a-nun-na-ki*), the great, or princely offspring, or sons, of heaven and earth,⁹ who arrive in a mountainous region and set up camp in a fertile valley. They call the settlement *edin*,¹⁰ the Akkadian for 'plateau' or 'steppe' (see Chapter Twelve), as well as '*gar-sag*, or Kharsag, a term meaning, according to O'Brien, either the 'principal, fenced enclosure' or the 'lofty, fenced enclosure'.¹¹

The Anannage gradually develop an agricultural community that includes land cultivation, field systems, plant domestication, and the creation of water-irrigation ditches and channels. Sheep and cattle are placed in covered pens, and cedar-wood houses are constructed as dwellings.¹² Among the larger building projects undertaken by the Anannage is the construction of a reservoir to provide Kharsag with a more advanced form of land irrigation, as well as the erection of larger edifices, such as the Great House of the Lord Enlil, which stood on a rocky eminence above the Settlement.¹³ The texts also speak of a 'granary', the 'building [of] roads', 'a maternity building for mothers', and a place known as 'the Building of Life in the High Place'.¹⁴ In the valley surrounding the settlement are apparently 'loftily-built tree plantations', 'lofty cedar-tree enclosures' and orchards planted with trees that have a 'three-fold bearing of fruit'.¹⁵

The Kharsag tablets, as O'Brien began to refer to them, apparently detailed how the community had thrived for an immensely long period of time. Harvests were usually plentiful, with some excess grain being produced. It would even seem that they allowed outsiders into the community as both partners and helpers to 'share the bounty'.¹⁶

The principal founders of the settlement were fifty in number, the main leaders being Enlil, the Lord of Cultivation, and his wife Ninkharsag, the Lady of Kharsag, also known as Ninlil. Repeatedly she is referred to as 'the Shining Lady' and, more significantly, as 'the Serpent (*Sir*) Lady'¹⁷ – the title that had led Barton to assume she was some kind of snake goddess worshipped at Nippur. Also included in the group were Enki, Lord of the Land, and Utu, or Ugmash, a sun god. The Anannage possessed a democratic leadership, although a chosen council of seven would apparently come together when major decisions were made concerning the future of Kharsag.¹⁸ Just occasionally the supreme being, Anu, whose name means 'heaven', or 'highlands', would join the council to advise on their deliberations.

Different situations and events that arose in the settlement are outlined in some detail. For instance, one text speaks of a major epidemic that appears to have swept through Kharsag, for it explains:

The stone jars were pressed down with grain [i.e. there had been a good harvest]. The Serpent Lady hurried to the Great Sanctuary. At his home, her man – the Lord Enlil – was stricken with sickness. The bright dwelling, the home of the Lady Ninlil, was stricken with sickness.

*Sickness . . . sickness – it spreads all over [the settlement] . . . Our splendid Mother – let her be protected – let her not succumb . . . Give her life – let her be protected from the distress of sickness . . . There is no rest for this Serpent; from sickness to fever . . .*¹⁹

Even Enlil and Ninlil's own son, Ninurta, is struck down by the mystery illness. His mother calls for all light to be shut out, both day and night until the child regains its health. Those affected do finally get better, although strict new laws are introduced in an

attempt to ensure that there is no repeat of this mystery sickness, for as the text explains:

*In Eden, thy cooked food must be better cooked. In Eden, thy cleaned food must be much cleaner. Father, eating meat is the great enemy – thy food at the House of Enlil.*²⁰

Having finished retranslating this particular tablet, O'Brien began to realize that he had hit on a prehistoric jackpot, for as he excitedly recorded at the time:

*The parallels between this epic account and the Hebraic record at the Garden of Eden are highly convincing. Not only is 'Eden' twice mentioned [in this tablet alone], but the reference to the 'Serpent Lady', as an epithet for Ninkharsag . . . [is] clear confirmation of the scientific nature of the work carried out by the equivalent Serpents in the Hebraic account.*²¹

The 'Serpents in the Hebraic account' was a reference to the Watchers and Nephilim of the Book of Enoch.

Even further confirming this link between Watchers and Anannage was the reference on two occasions to Ninlil's husband Enlil as the 'Splendid Serpent of the shining eyes'.²² This recalled the vivid descriptions of the Watchers given in the Enochian and Dead Sea literature, particularly in the case of the Testament of Amram.

Had O'Brien really uncovered an account of the Watchers of Eden?

The Fall of Kharsag

Later tablets spoke of a 'winter of bitter cold', unlike anything Kharsag had ever seen before. For a time the Anannage managed to hold out in the bleak arctic-like conditions, but more cataclysms were to follow. First there came a 'great storm'. Then there was further destruction from flooding, presumably after the snow and ice melted. A storm-water course was quickly constructed that stretched from the heights of the mountains to the edge of the plantations, and for a time this worked, keeping out the rising flood waters. Yet then an even harsher winter came upon them, and this would appear to have been the final straw, for as the tablet records:

*The demon cold filled the land; the Storm darkened it; in the small households of the Lord Enlil, there were unhappy people. The House of Destiny was covered over; the House of the Lord Enlil disappeared [under snow] . . . The four walls protected the Lord from the raging cold. The fate of the Granary rested on its thick walls – it was preserved from disaster, from the power of the storm-water . . . The flood did not destroy the cattle.*²³

Warm clothes, communal gatherings and good cheer kept the remaining Anannage alive. Fires raged in enormous fireplaces, and it seemed they might survive the long winter, but then another disaster struck. The vineyard workers apparently made the decision to open the reservoir's sluice-gates in an attempt to 'irrigate morning and night'.²⁴ Yet the 'firm, deep watercourse was destructive; its noise was great; the power of its flowing was frightening . . . in the night, many strong houses which the Lord had established, were flooded . . .'²⁵

What happened next shall perhaps never be known, for the remainder of this particular tablet was too damaged for translation. The penultimate tablet speaks of even greater devastation, essentially by storms, but there is reference also to lightning destroying the shining house of Lord Enlil, and of the repeated presence of darkness ('darkness hung over the hostile mountains'²⁶ and 'the goats and sheep bleated in the darkened land'²⁷).

The final tablet speaks of mass disaster and lamentation. In the wake of the continual darkness, broken only by frequent thunderstorms, there came perpetual rain. The reservoir filled up and overflowed, quickly flooding the irrigated fields and then, finally, the low-lying parts of the settlement. Those buildings on higher ground were again said to have been struck by lightning, prompting Enlil and Ninlil, and presumably other Anannage, to try and contain the damage being inflicted on what remained of Kharsag.

Yet the end was at hand. The Anannage knew they were fighting a losing battle, forcing Enlil to admit:

*'My Settlement is shattered; overflowing water has crushed it – by water alone – sadly, it has been destroyed.'*²⁸

The mass devastation caused during this period of climatic turmoil

had brought to a close the idyllic settlement of Kharsag. O'Brien came to believe that this break-up of the Anannage had led to an important dispersal of individuals who inadvertently paved the way for the foundation of the city-states of Mesopotamia, some time around 5500 BC.²⁹

From these god-men of a previous age had come the first Near Eastern civilization, controlled by a number of city-states. Each of these had been peopled by indigenous races, but administered by the direct descendants of the Anannage, the serpents with shining eyes. They had preserved the memory of the Kharsag settlement until its story was finally set down on clay tablets and deposited in the E-kur by Akkadian priests during the reign of either Narâm-Sin or Shar-Kali-Sharri.

Such was the mind-blowing story presented in *The Genius of the Few*, a book written by Christian O'Brien, with his wife Barbara Joy O'Brien, and published in 1985. Unfortunately, because O'Brien's book fell between the devil and the deep blue sea – in that it was shunned by both the academic community and the ancient mysteries audience – it did not receive the popular success it undoubtedly deserved. All copies quickly disappeared, but one luckily found its way into a second-hand bookshop in Maldon, Essex, where in 1992 my colleague Richard Ward noticed it among the shelves of books on archaeology.

Had O'Brien Been Correct?

The explosive nature of Christian O'Brien's theory presented in *The Genius of the Few* was recognized immediately by Richard and myself. If O'Brien had been correct in his translation of the Kharsag tablets, then this was the most convincing evidence yet for not only the reality of Eden but also the independent existence of a highly advanced culture living in a mountainous region of the Near East during prehistoric times. O'Brien had identified the texts' 'serpents' with 'shining eyes' as the Watchers of the Book of Enoch, while in his opinion Kharsag was to be equated with the seven heavens visited by the patriarch Enoch.³⁰

Even more significant was the reference to the council of seven

Anannage who apparently came together to make major decisions on behalf of the Kharsag settlement. These so-called Seven Counsellors, or Seven Sages, were much celebrated in Sumerian myth and legend; furthermore, in Assyrian scripts belonging to the reign of King Ashurbanipal (668–627 BC), the seven Anannage, or Anunnaki, are mentioned in the same breath as the ‘foreign gods’ of Assaramazash, clearly a reference to the Iranian god Ahura Mazda and the six *Amesha Spentas*, thus inferring that the two sets of divine beings were perhaps one and the same.³¹ If this was indeed the case, then it meant that the council of seven Anannage were almost certainly the root source behind not only the *Amesha Spentas* but also the seven archangels of Judaeo-Christian tradition. These, it must be remembered, are cited in the Book of Enoch as the chief among the Watchers who remained loyal to heaven at the time of the fall.

There was, however, no indication among the Kharsag tablets of a ‘fall’ of the Anannage, although there is no reason to suppose that the texts were in any way complete. Moreover, references to the Anannage exist in other Sumerian texts, and these throw much greater light on the subject. It seems the Anannage were originally only gods of the ‘heaven of Anu’. Only later had they been separated into two quite separate camps – the gods of heaven and the gods of *ki*, ‘earth’. Amounts are even given – there were three hundred Anannage under the command of the god Anu in heaven and six hundred under the command of the underworld god Nergal, who lived ‘in the earth’.³²

Did this information constitute evidence, as O’Brien believed, of some kind of fragmentation of the original Kharsag settlement, whereby a large group of rebel Anannage had decided that instead of remaining in isolation among the mountains, they would descend on to the plains of ancient Iraq and live among humanity? Was this the same story as presented in the Book of Enoch concerning the ‘fall’ of the two hundred rebel Watchers? Certainly, there are various strange stories preserved in Sumerian mythology which relate how the Anannage had once walked among mortal kind. For instance, they were said to have designed and laid the foundations of the ancient Sumerian city of Kish.³³ They were also ‘put to work to help build the temple (in the city) of Girsu’,³⁴ while in another

myth they were given a 'city as a place in which they might dwell'.³⁵ This 'place' is likely to have been Eridu, Sumeria's oldest city-state, which is said to have had no less than fifty Anannage attached to it,³⁶ the same number that appears in the Kharsag texts. Excavations have revealed that Eridu was founded as early as c. 5500 BC,³⁷ the very date suggested by O'Brien for the break-up of Kharsag.

Yet had O'Brien been correct in his translation of the texts?

Academics who have followed in the footsteps of Professor George Barton would utterly dismiss O'Brien's rather 'colourful' interpretation of the Kharsag texts. They would support Barton's translation and reconfirm the orthodox view that they were simply miscellaneous religious texts of the late Akkadian period, c. 2200 BC. Furthermore, they would point out that the 'creation myths' contained on the tablets are conceptual and that any reference to Enlil and his Mountain House related to his temple at Nippur and *not* to some 'highland' settlement of the gods existing in prehistoric times. What O'Brien was therefore saying was utter nonsense and should be ranked alongside books on ancient astronauts and the lost land of Atlantis.

There the matter would rest.

One part of me wanted to believe this was correct. I struggle to support the more academic, down-to-earth views of our past history, as I know that straying too far off the beaten track can only mean ridicule and scorn, whether you are wrong or whether you are *right*. Yet O'Brien was no ancient astronaut theorist. His arguments against the orthodox interpretation of individual texts appeared convincing indeed.³⁸ Admittedly, O'Brien appeared to be over-enthusiastically convinced that the Kharsag tablets represented something more than simply ancient Sumerian religious texts. Yet his translations made far more sense than those originally produced by Barton, and on this basis I would continue my own review of the subject.

In Search of Kharsag

All the indications were that Kharsag had been situated in a high mountainous region,³⁹ so high in fact that 'some Anean trees could

not be cultivated'.⁴⁰ This does not appear to refer to the rugged plains around Nippur.

Where then had this highland settlement been located?

In an attempt to answer this question I studied various other early Mesopotamian texts and began to find tantalizing evidence for the existence of just such a mountain retreat of the gods. For example, the Akkadians of the third millennium BC would appear to have believed that Kharsag, or Kharsag Kurra ('gar-sag kurkurra) as it was also known, was a sacred mountain located to the north, 'immediately above'⁴¹ the northern limits of their country.⁴² To them it symbolized the cradle of their race, and was located in a kind of primordial version of Akkad itself.⁴³ Here, too, were 'the four rivers',⁴⁴ paralleling exactly the Hebraic concept of the four rivers of paradise. Beyond Kharsag Kurra 'extended the land of Aralli, which was very rich in gold, and was inhabited by the gods and blessed spirits'.⁴⁵

Akkadian myth therefore blended together both the Hebraic account of paradise and the contents of the Kharsag tablets, lending immediate weight to O'Brien's retranslation of these ancient texts. So where had this mythical domain of the gods been located? There was no question on the matter. It lay immediately north of Akkad, in other words in the mountains of Kurdistan. The later Assyrians of the first millennium BC, who adopted many of the Akkadian myths and legends, had spoken of 'the heavenly courts' of Kharsag Kurra in connection with the 'silver mountain' – a reference to the Taurus mountain range of Turkish Kurdistan, west of Lake Van, which was known to the Akkadians as the Silver Mountain.⁴⁶

A similar domain of the gods is featured in what must rank as Mesopotamia's most celebrated literary work – the Epic of Gilgamesh.

The Hero Gilgamesh

The Sumerian hero of this name had probably been a historical figure – seemingly a king of the city-state of Uruk in central Iraq, sometime during the first half of the third millennium BC. The

texts say that he had been a *lillu*, 'a man with demonic qualities',⁴⁷ and that he had been worshipped as a god at various shrines. At Uruk, for example, he is recorded as having been adopted as the personal deity of a king named Utu-heġal, c. 2120 BC, as well as by his immediate successors, who ruled from Ur, a city-state in Lower Iraq between c. 2112–2004 BC.

It was probably during this same age that a series of poems featuring the deeds of Gilgamesh were set down for the first time, for there exist several variations of his epic which date to the first half of the second millennium BC. Among these poems is one entitled 'Gilgamesh and Huwawa' or 'Gilgamesh and the Cedar Forest'.⁴⁸ The story begins with the beguiling of Enkidu, a wildman who lives in the mountains, but who is finally tamed and persuaded to begin a new life among mortal kind.

Enkidu grows to enjoy his new lifestyle, but in so doing he loses his courage and strength, so Gilgamesh suggests that they go into the mountains where they must find and kill a 'monster' named Huwawa (or Humbaba). This strange being has been made guardian of a great cedar forest by the god Enlil. At first Enkidu is reluctant to embark on this fearsome quest, as he himself has come across Huwawa on his own journeys across the mountains; however, he finally agrees to the proposal on the insistence of Gilgamesh.

Huwawa is described as 'a giant protected by seven layers of terrifying radiance',⁴⁹ who also possesses a hideous face, long hair, whiskers, and lion's claws for hands. Eventually the two heroes track down the giant, but at first spare his life. Then, in a fit of rage, Enkidu finally dispatches Huwawa.

The significant aspect of this poem is the section entitled 'The Forest Journey', where Gilgamesh and Enkidu approach the cedar forest for the first time. It is said to have stretched before them 'for ten thousand leagues in every direction', and as the text reveals:

Together they went down into the forest and they came to the green mountain. There they stood still, they were struck dumb; they stood still and gazed at the forest, at the mountain of cedars, the dwelling place of the gods [author's emphasis]. The hugeness of the cedar rose in front of the mountain, its shade was beautiful, full of comfort; mountain and glade were green with brushwood'.⁵⁰

What was this 'dwelling place of the gods'? The text suggests it is the 'green' mountain that stood within the vast forest. In front of this mountain is a huge cedar that seems to have its own significance in the story. Such lone trees, usually of immense height and size, are found in mythologies throughout the world and represent the point where heaven and earth meet. In mythological studies, such trees are known as the *axis mundi*, or the cosmic axis, and almost invariably they are linked with certain recurring themes, such as a holy mountain and a spring or wellhead that supplies the whole world with water. Kharsag itself is described in the opening lines of one of the tablets as the place 'where Heaven and Earth met',⁵¹ confirming its role as a cosmic axis. It was undoubtedly also 'the dwelling place of the gods', for Enlil, Enki, Ninlil, Ninurta and Utu were five of the most important deities of the Sumerian pantheon.

So where exactly had this great cedar forest of the gods been located?

In the oldest forms of the Epic of Gilgamesh written in Sumerian, the text is quite clear: it is in the Zagros mountains of Kurdistan.⁵² Later forms of the epic written in Assyrian times speak of the forest as being in Lebanon, although this is almost certainly incorrect. Palaeo-climatological research has shown that such forests replaced the cold tundra and sparse grasslands that had covered the lower valley regions of the Kurdish highlands after the final retreat of the last Ice Age, somewhere around 8500 BC. The appearance of powerful Asian monsoons in northern Mesopotamia and north-western Iran around this time had brought about dramatic changes in the climatic conditions of the Kurdish highlands, creating vast inland lakes as well as the proliferation of lush vegetation during the spring and summer months. Thick forests of deciduous trees, including cedars, began to grow in the valleys and on the mountain slopes, while the higher elevations turned into lush grasslands, ideal for cultivation. Indeed, these severe climatic changes corresponded almost exactly with the first appearance of the earliest neolithic communities in Kurdistan (see Chapter Seventeen).⁵³ Yet then, sometime between 3000 and 2000 BC, these Asian monsoons slowly retreated, leaving the region devoid of its essential spring and summer rains. As a consequence,

the lower valleys suffered most, with a reduction in the variety of vegetation, and a slow desiccation of the neighbouring lowland regions, a process that continues to this day.⁵⁴

It was also during this last period of prehistory that the Sumerians began wholesale felling of these vast mountain forests, both for building construction and as charcoal for brick furnaces and domestic fires. As a consequence, by the start of the first millennium BC the cedar forests of the Zagros no longer existed. Not only did this bring about huge ecological damage to the region, it also paved the way for gross geographical inaccuracies both in later versions of the Epic of Gilgamesh, and in many other myths and legends of this period. Since the editors of these texts lived in an age when not even their distant ancestors could remember such a 'cedar forest' having ever existed in the Zagros, their presence in the texts was inadvertently associated with the more obviously well-known cedar forests of the Ante-Lebanon range. Indeed, as the Kurdish expert Mehrdad Izady points out: 'some modern scholars, noting the geographical discrepancy but perplexed by the long absence of any large cedar stands in the Zagros, have come to interpret the ancient words of the (Gilgamesh) epic as "Pine Forest" rather than "Cedar Forest"'.⁵⁵

The Argument for Mount Hermon

Knowledge of the existence of these cedar forests in the Zagros mountain range of Kurdistan was a major blow to O'Brien's interpretation of the Kharsag tablets. Having assessed their contents, he had used almost identical palaeo-climatological evidence to establish that the cedar forests of the Lebanon dated back to the same post-glacial period, c. 8000 BC in his reckoning. With this knowledge, O'Brien concluded that the Kharsag settlement must have been located in the Ante-Lebanon range during this very same age. Indeed, he actually put forward a foundation date of 8197 BC for the settlement, based on these studies.⁵⁶ O'Brien then went on to demonstrate that this information proved that Kharsag was synonymous with the Eden/heaven settlement of the Book of Enoch, because it had been geographically located in the vicinity of Mount

Hermon, which is itself in the Ante-Lebanon range. Curiously enough, the Akkadian word for 'cedar' is *erenu*, or *erin*, which is phonetically the same as *'irin*, the Hebrew word for Watchers. As the term 'trees' is used as a synonym for the Watchers in Enochian literature, while the mythical kings of the *Shahnameh* are likened to cypress trees, I feel this etymological link between the Watchers and cedars must be more than simply coincidence.

Since there is clear evidence for the former presence of cedar forests in the Zagros, it seems much more likely that Kharsag was located either in this region, or in the eastern Taurus range, and *not* in far-off Lebanon. The most bizarre confirmation of this supposition comes from O'Brien himself, for after summing up the geographical evidence presented in the Kharsag tablets, he admits:

*It is strongly reminiscent of the Zagros Mountains of Luristan and Kurdistan, to the north of Sumer, on the north-eastern flank of the Fertile Crescent. But these mountains are now oak-tree bearing, and have no history of cedar forests . . . We are left with only the far north-western part of the Fertile Crescent covered by Lebanon.*⁵⁷

This is simply not true, and even further damaging O'Brien's belief that Eden/heaven/Kharsag had been located in the Ante-Lebanon range was the reference in Genesis 2:8 to God planting a garden 'eastward, in Eden'. Mount Hermon cannot be seen as eastward of anything, other than the old city of Sidon on the Mediterranean coast. Despite these errors of judgement on O'Brien's part, the importance of his retranslation of the Kharsag tablets cannot be overstated, for he returned to the world what might well represent the oldest surviving account of heaven on earth.

Yet did this tradition have a separate existence outside of the Kharsag tablets? And did these also lead back to the mountains of Kurdistan?

The Search for Dilmun

Eden and Kharsag are not the only names by which the dwelling-place of the gods was known to the Sumerian and Akkadian cultures. There are also legends regarding an alleged mythical

paradise known as Dilmun, or Tilmun. Here the god Enki and his wife were placed to institute 'a sinless age of complete happiness', where animals lived in peace and harmony, man had no rival and the god Enlil 'in one tongue gave praise'.⁵⁸ It is also described as a pure, clean and 'bright' 'abode of the immortals', where death, disease and sorrow are unknown⁵⁹ and some mortals have been given 'life like a god'⁶⁰ – words reminiscent of the *Airyana Vaejah*, the realm of the immortals in Iranian myth and legend, and the Eden of Hebraic tradition.

Although there is good evidence to show that the name Dilmun was directly connected with an island state established at Bahrain in the Persian Gulf by the Akkadian king Sargon of Agade (2334–2279 BC),⁶¹ there is also clear evidence to suggest that it was a mythical realm in its own right. For example, there are references to 'the mountain of Dilmun, the place where the sun rises'.⁶² Since there is no obvious candidate for this 'mountain' in Bahrain, and in no way can this island be described as lying in the direction of the rising sun with respect to Iraq, then it seems certain that there were two Dilmuns.

So where had this mythological Dilmun been located?

A chance, unexpected discovery gave me an answer. Glancing through Mehrdad Izady's authoritative book *The Kurds – A Concise Handbook*, published in 1992, I happened to see references to a Kurdish tribal dynasty known as the Daylamites, who had established a number of powerful Middle Eastern kingdoms during the medieval period, the most famous being the Buwāyhids (or Buyids) who reigned between AD 932 and 1062. Having succeeded in taking the important 'Abbāsid caliphate of Baghdad, the Daylamites had pushed forward to establish a Kurdish empire that stretched from Asia Minor to the shores of the Indian Ocean.⁶³

Yet as Izady points out in his book: 'Confusion surrounds the origin of the Daylamites.'⁶⁴ The main centre of their tribal dynasty had been the Elburz mountains, north of Tehran, where many scholars assume they rose to prominence. Yet if the tribe were to be traced back to pre-Islamic times, and in particular during the rule of the Parthian kings of Persia, between the third century BC and the third century AD, a different picture emerges. Their true ancestral homeland had been a region in north-western Kurdistan

named Dilamân, or Daylamân, where their modern descendants, the Dimila (Zâzâ) Kurds still live.⁶⁵

Dilamân? This sounded a lot like Dilmun.

Could they possibly be one and the same?

The ancient church archives of Christian Arbela (the modern Erbil) in Iraqi Kurdistan, confirm this same geographical location by recording that *Beth Dailômâyê*, the 'land of the Daylamites', was located 'north of Sanjâr', around the headwaters of the Tigris.⁶⁶ Furthermore, as Izady reveals: 'The Zoroastrian holy book, *Bundahishn*, (also) places Dilamân . . . *at the headwaters of the Tigris*, and not in the Caspian Sea coastal mountain regions [*author's italics*].'⁶⁷

I could hardly contain myself on reading these words – the *Bundahishn*, as well as at least one other major Kurdish source, placed Dilamân, the ancestral homeland of the Dimila Kurds, 'at the headwaters of the Tigris'! Quickly I checked the accompanying map and confirmed the worst: 'Dilamân' had been located south-west of Lake Van, close to Bitlis, in exactly the same area that I had placed the Garden of Eden! Quite obviously, these words belonged to different languages and were separated by thousands of years of cultural development in the Near East. This I accepted; however, place-names are one of the few things that can be preserved and reused by successive cultures without major alteration. It was feasible therefore that the indigenous peoples of north-west Kurdistan had not only preserved the original Mesopotamian place-name of Dilmun, but had also adopted it as a tribal title.

Source of the Waters

The links between Dilmun and the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers did not end there. The god Enki, who along with his wife was said to have been the first inhabitant of Dilmun, was seen as god of the Abzu – a vast watery domain beneath the earth from which all springs, streams and rivers have their source. In this capacity he was guardian protector of Sumer's two greatest rivers, the mighty Euphrates and Tigris, which were usually depicted as arched streams of water, either pouring out of his



Map 3. Eastern Kurdistan, showing the traditional locations associated with both the Garden of Eden and the Ark of Noah.

shoulders or emerging from a vase held in his hand. Fish are depicted swimming up these streams, like salmon attempting to reach the source of a river.⁶⁸

As sacred guardian of these two rivers, Enki would have been seen as the protector of the river's sources. In this way, he would undoubtedly have been associated with the headwaters of these rivers, where both the Christian records of Arbela and the *Bundahishn* text appear to place the mythical realm of Dilmun, and Hebraic tradition places the Garden of Eden.

The Red-headed Tribesmen

The principal religion of the Dimili Kurds is Alevism, the third, and perhaps the most enigmatic, of the Kurdistan angel-worshipping cults. Most of its adherents now live around the foothills of Turkish Kurdistan in eastern Anatolia. There is, however, one last bastion of Alevi tribesmen still surviving amid a sea of Sunni Islam in northern Kurdistan, and this just happens to be on the south-western shores of Lake Van.⁶⁹

So who were these mysterious Alevi tribesmen who worshipped the angels?

The Alevis take their name from the word *alev*, meaning 'fire', an allusion to its great reverence among their faith. Although in its present form Alevism dates only to the fifteenth century AD, its roots stretch back into the mists of time and encompass many diverse influences, mostly Iranian in origin. They are not Muslims, although they do recognize a series of avatars, or divine incarnations, the most important of which is Ali, the first Shi'ite imam or saint. In contrast, Azhi Dahâka is not forgotten by these people, for he features in an important Alevi ceremonial gathering known as the *Ayini Jam*.⁷⁰ Among the more obscure ritual customs of the Alevis is an archaic practice in which they insert a sword into the ground in order to communicate with the universal spirit.⁷¹ Women are also allowed to participate in all ritual gatherings, particularly the *Ayini Jam*, something that has laid the Alevis open to accusations of sexual improprieties taking place at such events, which are not open to outsiders.

The Dimili Alevis are also known as the Qizilbâsh, 'the red heads', in reference to their distinctive deep-red headgear, which they adopted in honour of Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammed, who had apparently said: 'Tie red upon your heads, so that ye slay not your own comrades in the thick of the battle.'⁷²

Closing the book, I could hardly believe what I had read. To say I was overawed by these discoveries is an understatement. Had the Daylamite, or Dimili, tribes of Turkish Kurdistan managed to preserve the name of Dilmun, or Dilamân, from the prehistoric age right down to medieval times? More importantly, did the red-

headed Alevi tribesmen guard age-old secrets concerning the Watchers' apparent presence in this region? And what of their home territory, south-west of Lake Van – had this really been the location of Dilmun, the Mesopotamian domain of the immortals, as well as Kharsag, the settlement of the Anannage, and Eden, the homeland of the Watchers?

It was a thought-provoking idea, and the circumstantial evidence for Dilmun's placement in northern Kurdistan looked good. Yet, before I moved on, I needed to find out whether any further clues concerning the alleged existence of the fallen race could be traced within the myths and legends left by the ancient city-states of Mesopotamia. I was soon to discover that in ancient Iraq, more than anywhere else, the memory of the god-men who had once walked among mortal kind had lingered far longer than I could ever have imagined.

SLEEPING WITH GODS

Long ago, when gods still walked among mortal kind, there was an eagle who lived peacefully alongside a serpent inside a great tree. Never did the two have any quarrel with the other. Both reared their young in separate parts of the tree, until one day, while the serpent was out hunting for food, the eagle decided to gobble up its neighbour's children. On returning to its nest, the serpent was horrified to find its babies gone and so lay down and cried. The god Shamash saw the snake's plight, and suggested to it a plan of action. It was to hide inside the carcass of an ox, and there wait until the eagle came to feed.

This the serpent did, and on the arrival of the great bird it wrought a most terrible revenge. First it caught the eagle. Then it broke its 'heel'. Then it plucked out its feathers and finally it threw the bird into a deep pit.

Meanwhile, down on the plains Etana, the king of Kish, was sad. His queen had borne him no child, and he did not wish to die without an heir. There seemed but one answer to this problem. He had heard that there existed among the mountains 'the plant of birth', which could make barren women fertile. If only he could find a way of asking the gods of heaven where he might obtain this great drug. In desperation, he cried, and the god Shamash heard his calls and provided an answer. Etana must befriend and rescue the eagle from the pit, and then enlist its help in finding 'the plant of birth'. This Etana duly did, and once the bird had been given its freedom, it flew over the mountains in search of 'the plant of birth'. Unfortunately it was unsuccessful in its quest, and so suggested that they visit Ishtar, the Mistress of Birth, who would provide an answer.

The eagle then said to Etana: 'Be glad, my friend. Let me bear thee to the highest heaven. Lay thy breast on mine and thine arms on my

wings, and let my body be as thy body.'¹ Etana agreed to this plan, and the couple climbed together towards the heaven of Anu. They soared higher and higher into the sky, as the earth gradually grew smaller and smaller. Finally they reached the gate of heaven and, after bowing down together, entered inside.²

Here the story preserved on the last of three ancient stone tablets ends, and as no further tablets have been found, we can only speculate on how it might conclude. Presumably Etana attained a solution from Ishtar, and as a result died in the knowledge that his heir would succeed him. According to the Sumerian king-list, Etana ruled a healthy 1,560 years, and left as a successor his son Balih, so the visit to heaven must have been successful!

The tale of Etana would appear to have been a popular one in ancient Mesopotamia, especially during the rule of the Akkadian kings in the late third millennium BC, as cylinder seals bearing the image of a figure riding on the back of an eagle have been unearthed at several locations.³

Yet this tale of Etana and his flight to heaven was more than simply a bedtime story told to small children, for it contained various abstract images already associated with the fallen race. There is the battle between the serpent and the eagle who live inside a great tree, which undoubtedly symbolized the cosmic axis joining together heaven and earth. Might this struggle between these two animal forms, both so strongly associated with the Watchers, represent some kind of conflict between the two separate factions of Anannage – those of heaven and those of the earth? Etana believes that the gods of the 'heaven of Anu' possess knowledge regarding a wonder-working drug known as 'the plant of birth', which an obliging eagle unsuccessfully helps him to search for. This brought to mind the medical knowledge of the Persian Simurgh and the healing properties of the sacred *haoma* plant – the secret of which was known only to the immortals. Could the two separate traditions be linked in some way?

Riddle of the Sacred Marriage

Stories surrounding the mythical life of the hero Gilgamesh also contain many quite extraordinary features that are never suitably explained by scholars. In a little-known classical work entitled *On the Nature of Animals*, written by the Roman naturalist and writer Claudius Aelianus (*fl.* 140), it records the strange birth of Gilgamesh. The story begins with a 'Babylonian' king named 'Seuechoros' being warned by his temple 'magicians' that his daughter, the princess, is soon to give birth to a son, who will one day usurp the throne. He therefore orders that she be kept under watch and guard within the 'acropolis'. Despite these precautions, the daughter becomes pregnant and inevitably gives birth to a son. Fearful of the king's wrath, the guards take the child to 'the summit' and cast it to the winds. At that very moment an eagle flies by and, having caught hold of the infant, carries it to a lofty orchard where the youth is tended until adulthood. He is given the name 'Gilgamos', and when the time is right he returns to the city and, predictably, seizes the throne from his grandfather.⁴

What kind of symbolism did this simple tale mask? How did the daughter get pregnant? Why was the child cast to the winds? Who, or what, was the eagle, and where was the orchard? No answers are provided by Claudius Aelianus, who is the only writer to have preserved this story of Gilgamesh's early life. Turning, however, to Sumerian myth, the hero's epic provides a few missing pieces of the jigsaw. His father is given as a king of Uruk named Lugalbanda, while his mother is said to have been 'the wise wild cow' Ninsûn, a 'lofty' goddess.⁵ Not only is Gilgamesh described as *lillu*, a demon, but because of his mother's divinity he is said to have been 'two-thirds' divine and 'one-third mortal'.⁶

Who was Ninsûn? Why is she described as a goddess? How did her status allow Gilgamesh to be part god, part human and part demon?

Repeatedly in ancient Sumerian and later Babylonian texts we find references to the so-called 'sacred marriage'. Here the king, or a chosen substitute, would become an *en*-priest and join in sacred union with the 'goddess', originally Inanna (Akkadian Ishtar), the

Lady of Heaven. Alternatively, a chaste *entu*-priestess, often the king's daughter, would join in 'marriage' with the god, usually Nanna-Suen, or Sin, the lunar deity. This event would take place yearly in a specially prepared room in a temple building, with its purpose being to ensure 'the productivity of the land and fruitfulness of the womb of man and beast'.⁷ Evidence suggests that the 'sacred marriage' ceremony goes back to the earliest dynastic period of Sumer, c. 2500 BC, and that it was performed in many of the city-states right down to late Babylonian times during the first millennium BC.⁸ Quite obviously, scholars have always seen this 'sacred marriage' as a purely symbolic event – humans taking the role of gods and the deity in question 'entering' the sacred room in metaphorical terms only.

But is this all it was – kings playing gods and priestesses playing goddesses? Perhaps. There are, however, records of a consummated 'sacred marriage' between an *entu*-priestess and a local 'storm god' in the Syrian town of Emar in the fourteenth century BC,⁹ while Herodotus speaks of a similar ritual that supposedly took place in the 'topmost tower' of the ziggurat of Babylon. Here on 'a couch of unusual size, richly adorned . . . a native woman . . . chosen for himself by the deity out of all the women of the land' would spend her nights.¹⁰ And as Herodotus adds: 'They [*the priests of Marduk*] also declare – but I for my part do not credit it – that the god comes down in person into this chamber, and sleeps upon the couch . . .'¹¹

Although these accounts must be treated with extreme caution, they might well preserve more ancient traditions in which both male and female Anannage, or Watchers, were able to combine in sexual union with mortals in a co-ordinated manner to produce semi-divine progeny that were classed either as part divine, part demon and/or part human, depending on how they were perceived by the royal family. If so, then it might help explain why certain kings appended their name with a star-shaped ideogram signifying that they were a 'god' – *dingir* in Sumerian and *ilu* in Akkadian – or why individuals such as Gilgamesh were said to have been *lillu*, 'a man with demon-like qualities'.

Narām-Sin, the Akkadian king in whose reign the Nippur cylinder was most likely deposited, had adopted the epithet *ilu*, 'god',¹² while his grandfather, Sargon of Agade, the first Akkadian king to

rule Sumer, was said to have been born of a mother who was herself a *lillu* 'changeling'.¹³ The Akkadian epithet *ilu* was much later transformed into the Hebrew suffix *el* (or *il* in Arabic), which is used in connection with so many angelic names, both fallen and otherwise, and is interpreted by Jewish scholars as meaning 'of God'. In actuality, the word-root *el* means 'shining', 'bright' or 'light',¹⁴ bringing to mind the heavenly *farr* of the mythical Pishadian kings of Iran.

This knowledge also makes some sense of the 'miraculous' conception and subsequent birth of Gilgamesh, and why the child had to be spirited away to an orchard by an obliging 'eagle'. Had the child been taken away at birth by one of the Anannage, the 'eagle', and reared in Kharsag, the 'orchard', before being returned to Uruk where he eventually succeeded his grandfather? Might it also be possible that the 'lofty' goddess Ninsûn – the mother of Gilgamesh in the alternative version of his parentage – preserves the memory of a 'sacred marriage' between a tall, female Watcher and a mortal king, in this case Lugalbanda?

These were incredible thoughts, I knew, but they had to be postulated. Furthermore, an understanding of the 'sacred marriage' ceremony now makes more sense of the Etana story. After the eagle has been unsuccessful in finding 'the plant of birth', Etana experiences three dreams concerning his heirless situation. In the last of these, he and the eagle have already reached 'the heaven of Anu'. After bowing down together, they enter inside. Etana explains what happens next:

*'... I saw a house with a window that was not sealed.
I pushed it open and went inside.
Sitting in there was a girl
Adorned with a crown, fair of face.
A throne was set in place, and []
Beneath the throne crouched snarling lions.
I came up and the lions sprang at me.
I woke up terrified.'*¹⁵

In response to hearing the contents of Etana's dreams, the eagle responds: 'My friend, [the significance of the dreams] is quite clear! Come let me carry you up to the heaven of Anu.' Obviously we do

not know what happened when Etana and the eagle really did reach heaven, but it was usual in ancient texts for the prophecies of dreams to come true, right down to the last word. This therefore implies that Etana did enter a house and find a girl 'fair of face' seated on a throne. Her crown obviously signified that she was of a divine or royal line. The snarling lions were guardian forms that Etana would have to appease before he could approach her properly. But what happened next? In my opinion, there is every reason to suggest that some kind of 'marriage' took place, and that as a result of this bonding Etana gained his heir. The presence in the text of Ishtar, the Mistress of Heaven, who featured in the annual 'sacred marriage' during historical times, seems to imply that this was indeed what took place. Etana had gone to heaven to achieve an heir through some kind of ritual 'marriage' with a suitable 'goddess'. Might this 'goddess' have been a female Watcher?

It was a tantalizing thought, but one without anything more than circumstantial evidence to support its argument. Yet it opened the door to the possibility that not only were the earliest Sumerian and Akkadian kings in open contact with the Watchers of Eden, but that they had also been mating with individuals of this angelic culture during 'sacred marriage' ceremonies, either in their own city-states or in the Eden/Kharsag settlement. Just how many Sumerian and Akkadian kings actually believed they were the product of these divine unions?

Crime of the Imdugud

Fabulous birds, like the eagles in the Etana and Gilgamesh accounts, feature again and again in Sumerian, Akkadian and much later Assyrian and Babylonian myths of the first millennium BC. Most important among the legends are those concerning the monstrous thunderbird known as the Imdugud (Anzu in Akkadian). This mythical creature was seen as a lion-headed eagle of immense size that possessed a beak like a saw, and which, when it flapped its wings, could bring about sandstorms and whirlwinds. The Imdugud's principal story revolves around its theft of the so-called Tablets of Destiny from the god Enlil (Ellil in Akkadian), which, when

in its possession, gave 'him power over the Universe as controller of the fates of all'¹⁶ enough to endanger 'the stability of civilization'.¹⁷ At first no god would volunteer to retrieve the stolen tablets. Then the god Ninurta stepped forward and offered his services to his father Enlil. These being accepted, the god goes in search of the Imdugud's nest 'on its mountain top in Arabia'.¹⁸ Eventually he finds the thunderbird, which he then attacks with lightning bolts. The monstrous bird is eventually killed and the tablets are returned to Enlil.

The Imdugud is clearly the Simurgh in its Mesopotamian guise, since both birds are seen as half lion, half eagle. Furthermore, the thunderbird can be compared with the Simurgh's Indian counterpart, Garuda the half giant, half eagle of Hindu mythology. The similarities between the Imdugud's theft of the Tablets of Destiny and Garuda's theft of the Amrita, Ambrosia or *soma* of the gods are self-apparent, and have long been realized by students of mythology.¹⁹ Might Imdugud's 'theft' of the tablets relate not so much to destiny as to the revealing of forbidden knowledge – including the use of the *haoma/soma* plant of immortality – to mortal kind by rebel Watchers dressed in feather coats?

It was the Zagros range, however, that was the true home of the Imdugud, for in another work, entitled the Epic of Lugalbanda, Gilgamesh's father comes across an Imdugud fledgling in its nest within this mountain range. He tends the young bird until the adult Imdugud 'and its wife' return.²⁰ Furthermore, Lugalbanda was himself seen as a manifestation of the thunderbird. In this guise he was said to have stolen 'the sacred fire from heaven for the service and mental illumination of man',²¹ a role played by Prometheus in Greek tradition. For his theft and trickery, Prometheus was chained to Mount Caucasus in Transcaucasia, and for thirty years an eagle would come each day and pluck out his liver, which would then grow anew.

Although it is not my intention to cite Greek legends in support of the possible associations between the ancient Iraqi civilizations and the Watchers of the highlands of Kurdistan, it seems clear that the story of the theft of the divine fire, by both Lugalbanda and Prometheus, must originate from the same source material as the Garuda/Imdugud legends.



Fig. 10. The monstrous half-lion, half-eagle named Imdugud, or Anzu, being attacked by the god Ninurta. From a stone relief found at Nimrud in northern Iraq and belonging to the reign of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC). Does this mythical creature's theft of the Tablets of Destiny in Sumero-Akkadian tradition preserve abstract astronomical data over 10,000 years old?

Stela of the Vultures

The mighty thunderbird also appears alongside the god Ningirsu, a localized form of Ninurta, on a famous stone frieze known as the 'Stela of the Vultures', which dates to the Early Dynastic Period, c. 2470 BC. It commemorates a victory at war by a Sumerian king named Eannatum and shows the Imdugud, with its wings outstretched, above a flock of vultures that carry away the heads and arms of slain warriors. Ningirsu is shown with a vulture in his left hand, from which comes a huge net filled with naked prisoners.²²



Fig. 11. An eagle-headed deity from a stone relief found at Nimrud in Upper Iraq. Could such mythical creatures have been based on the contact between the earliest Mesopotamian races and the proposed Watcher culture of the Kurdish highlands?

This victory stela appears to draw together the basic associations between the Imdugud, the vulture and the god Ningirsu/Ninurta, a legacy which was inherited by the Assyrian nation of northern Iraq, who rose to power in the eighteenth century BC. Carved stone reliefs found at the palace of Nimrud on the Upper Tigris show a lion-headed winged beast, almost certainly the Imdugud, about to

strike Ninurta, who holds lightning bolts in each hand. It also seems certain that the feathered tail of the Imdugud influenced the development of the Assyrian winged disk, which portrayed the god named Ashur, who was possibly a form of Ninurta, standing upon a plume of feathers.²³ Curiously enough, it is this very symbol that was much later adopted as the sole pictorial representation of the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda.

Strange how certain themes appear to go around in circles.

Was I really stretching the imagination by suggesting that Mesopotamian winged monsters, such as the thunderbird, were not simply the personification of atmospheric forces, as the scholars have always believed, but abstract symbols of the fallen race? Sometimes I felt I was, but then a new piece of evidence would come along and strengthen my convictions even further, and one such piece of evidence was the so-called Kutha tablet.

Bodies of Birds

During excavations at the palace of the Assyrian king Sennacherib (704–681 BC) in Nineveh by Austen Layard in 1849, two large chambers were revealed ‘piled a foot or more deep in tablets’ bearing cuneiform inscriptions.²⁴ Three years later, in the nearby palace of Sennacherib’s grandson Ashurbanipal (668–627 BC), another huge horde of similar tablets was uncovered. They constituted a library collection that totalled around 25,000 tablets, or parts of tablets, which were each duly catalogued and dispatched to the British Museum.

On translation of these tablets, it was realized that the Assyrian kings of this period, in particular Ashurbanipal, had scoured the length and breadth of the empire searching for old inscriptions, ancient legends and variations on known myths for inclusion in this massive personal library, comparable only with its more famous counterpart in Alexandria.

Many of the thousands of tablets acquired by Ashurbanipal had been copied by the Assyrian scribes into Akkadian, the written language of the day, while others had been left in their original script. Why exactly the Assyrian king had amassed this unprecedented

library is unknown. It is obvious, however, that he had a keen interest in preserving the rich mythology surrounding his culture's ancestral heritage, for as he stated in one tablet:

*The god of scribes [i.e. Nabû, the guardian spirit of the library] has bestowed on me the gift of the knowledge of his art.
I have been initiated into the secrets of writing,
I can even read the intricate tablets in Shumerian;
I understand the enigmatic words in the stone carvings from the days before the Flood.*²⁵

In 'the days before the flood'? Clearly Ashurbanipal must have been a very learned figure, and if the Watchers really had survived as a culture in the mountains of Kurdistan, then surely the tablets amassed by Ashurbanipal would record their existence.

Sadly many thousands of these texts are unavailable to study. Yet one seemed to record the existence of bird-men in Sumer's distant past. Entitled the Kutha tablet, or the 'Legend of Creation from Cutha (Kutha)', its original author recorded that it had been written 'in the (Babylonian) city of Cutha, in the temple of Sitlam, in the sanctuary of Nergal'.²⁶ Unfortunately, the text – like so many others – is incomplete and fragmentary, making it that much more difficult to read, but its significance is plain enough. It concerns the incursions into Mesopotamia of an unknown race of demons, fostered by the gods in some nether region, who waged war on an unnamed king for three consecutive years. The invaders are said to have been:

*Men with the bodies of birds of the desert, human beings
with the faces of ravens,
these the great gods created,
and in the earth the gods created for them a dwelling.
Tamat (Tiamat) gave unto them strength,
their life the mistress of the gods raised,
in the midst of the earth they grew up and became great,
and increased in number,
Seven kings, brothers of the same family,
six thousand in number were their people.*²⁷

Who exactly were these 'men with the bodies of birds'? There is no

academic answer. All we know is that when they appeared a storm cloud would come over the land (storm clouds are symbols of demons). They would slaughter those whom they took captive, before returning to some inaccessible region for another year.

Although merely a taster of what this fragmentary text actually contains (much of which is unintelligible), there seemed to be just enough evidence to lend weight to the possibility that this was a very ancient, garbled account of confrontations between an unknown king and a bird-like race comparable with the degenerate Nephilim of the Book of Enoch. Was it possible therefore that, long after the fragmentation of Kharsag, the offspring of certain rebel Watchers engaged the earliest Sumerian and Akkadian kings in military combat? Is this what the Kutha tablet records – military conflicts between Nephilim and mortal kind? It was a disturbing prospect, and one that raised fundamental questions, such as how widespread did this culture become? And when did it die out? If evidence such as the Kutha tablet can be shown to be an account of very real events, then it could mean that the descendants of the original Watchers and Nephilim were still a force to be reckoned with right down to the third millennium BC. It was in this epoch that the Anakim and Rephaim, the giant descendants of the Nephilim, are alleged to have controlled vast areas of neighbouring Canaan (see Chapter Six).

The Descent of Ishtar

Bird-men like those of the Kutha tablet feature again in the following account of the descent of the goddess Ishtar into the underworld, for as she explains herself:

*I descend, I descend to the house of darkness, to the dwelling of the god
Irkalla:*

*To the house entering which there is no exit,
to the road the course of which never returns:
To the house in which the dwellers long for light,
the place where dust is their nourishment and their food mud.
Its chiefs also are like birds covered with feathers*

*and light is never seen, in darkness they dwell.
 In the house my friend which I will enter,
 for me is treasured up a crown;
 with those wearing crowns who from days of old ruled the earth,
 to whom the gods Anu and Bel have given terrible names.
 The food is made carrion, they drink stagnant water.*²⁸

These dwellers of an infernal region appear to be exactly the same as the bird-men in the Kutha tablet, although whether this underground realm is the same as the 'dwelling . . . in the midst of the earth' in which they lived is unknown. That their 'food is made carrion' implies vultures or ravens, and the fact that they have worn crowns and ruled the earth 'from the days of old' suggests that they were primeval beings of immense antiquity, who had obviously impressed their memory on the minds of much later story-tellers and narrators of religious epics.

What happened to these people? What was their ultimate fate?

The Search for Ut-napishtim

Returning to the Epic of Gilgamesh, I found many more symbols of the fallen race on closer scrutiny, particularly within the sequence of events that follow the death of the wildman Enkidu, who was finally killed by the gods for murdering the giant Huwawa.

On hearing of this tragic event, Gilgamesh embarks on a quest across the mountains in an attempt to discover the secret of immortality. He has been told that a forebear, who knows the ways of the gods, can give him some answers. His name is Ut-napishtim, and the hero finds this ancient one on an island across the waters. On sight of the old man, Gilgamesh realizes something is terribly wrong. He expects to meet an immortal, a god in his own right, but instead he finds a human being just like himself.

Ut-napishtim then recites the story of how he alone of humanity had been warned by the god Ea (Sumerian Enki) of an impending flood that was about to consume the world. With this knowledge he had constructed a huge vessel covered inside and out with bitu-

men. On to this he had placed his family and relations, along with the best craftsmen, and all the beasts of the field.

A dark cloud had then gathered overhead, turning light into perpetual darkness, and bringing fear even to the Anannage, who withdrew to the 'heaven of Anu', where they cowered and crouched like dogs 'by an outside wall'.

For six days and seven nights the almighty winds and terrible floods had raged, but then eventually the tempests had abated and the rains slowly ceased. The light returned and the waters receded. As the vessel rocked back and forth on the waves, Ut-napishtim looked for dry land, which began 'emerging everywhere'. Soon the ship had come to rest on 'Mount Nimush'. For six days the mountain held the boat fast and would not let it budge. Then on the seventh day, Ut-napishtim sent forth a dove, which had flown around and then returned to the ship 'for no perching place was visible to it'. He had then sent forth a swallow, which likewise returned. Then finally, he had sent forth a raven, which 'ate (carrion), preened, lifted its tail and did not turn round'. Ut-napishtim had then released the animals to the four winds, before going up to the mountain peak and making an offering to the gods of 'reeds, pine and myrtle'. In response they had gathered 'like flies . . . over the sacrifice'.²⁹

The Gift of Immortality

As a reward for having saved both the human race and the animal kingdom from extinction, the gods had granted Ut-napishtim and his wife the secret of immortality. It was never, however, to be given to the mortal race, so the Flood hero refuses to let Gilgamesh have it. Instead, he instructs him on how he might find a plant which has the power to rejuvenate youth (probably one and the same thing as the plant of immortality). This he will find at the bottom of the Abzu, the watery abyss beneath the earth, sacred to Ea (Enki). Gilgamesh plunges into the dark waters with stones tied to his feet, and reaches the plant of life, which is as thorny as a rose, and is known as 'The Old Man has Become a Young Man'. Yet later, while out bathing, a snake (a Watcher?) smells the plant and eats it, after which it sloughs its old skin and emerges shiny and young.³⁰

Gilgamesh's quest to find the secret of immortality ends here, bringing the epic to a close. Although he was unsuccessful in his attempts to find the plant in either of its forms, the existence of this text shows just how strongly the Sumerians believed that the gods possessed such a wonder-working drug. And when the hero comes face to face with Ut-napishtim, he is surprised to find that he looks like any other human being, even though he possesses the secret of immortality.

Evidence of this sort suggests that there once existed a highly developed culture who knew how to prolong life by taking a drug made from the extracts of a certain plant, or plants. If this is correct, then by how much was this drug able to increase the normal life-span of an individual? Was it fifty years? A hundred years? Two hundred years? Perhaps even more? Longevity of this order would have meant that the Watchers might have been able to outlive 'mortal' humans by many generations, making them seem 'immortal' in the eyes of those who did not possess the knowledge of this wonder-working drug.

Is it really possible that the Watchers could have lived across 'mortal' generations, like the vampires of popular myth? When might the last one have died? And did any survive into modern times? Is this all just too incredible to even contemplate? Humanity has striven unsuccessfully to discover the elixir of life for many thousands of years. It wants to know what the gods once knew, and perhaps one day it will find an answer.

Domain of the Edimmu

The connection with vampires is not as absurd as it might at first seem. In fact, it could hold the key to understanding the ultimate destiny of the Watchers. Assyrians and Babylonians of the first millennium BC believed fervently in vampires – hungry, blood-sucking beings called *Edimmu*, created as a result of the 'inter-marriage between human beings and the spirit world'.³¹ They lay waiting to seize upon humanity, draining the life-blood from households. The dead could become *Edimmu* simply by being neglected after death. If the body was left unburied, or the deceased's

relatives failed to provide good food for the departed soul once the body was in the grave, then it could be taken by a vampiric 'robber-sprite'.³² Thereafter the dead would return to the earth in order to satisfy their hunger by drinking blood.³³

Although these *Edimmu* were seen by the Assyrians and Babylonians as 'half-ghostly, half-human',³⁴ it would appear that they might well have had a more earthly origin, and had perhaps been a physical race who lived underground. It was said that the *Edimmu* lived in an underworld domain identified by scholars with 'the house of darkness', 'the dwelling of the god Irkalla' visited by the goddess Ishtar.³⁵ Here, remember, 'the dwellers long for light' and the chief among them are 'like birds covered with feathers'.

One incantation speaks of these vampires in the plainest of terms, stating that they are 'spirits that minish the land' who are of 'giant strength and giant tread',³⁶ in other words giants. These demons are said to have been 'full of violence'. They 'rage against mankind' and 'spill their blood like rain, devouring their flesh (and) sucking their veins'.³⁷ Most curious is the fact that there were apparently seven of these giant vampires,³⁸ a direct parody of the council of seven Anannage who governed the 'heaven of Anu'.

Might this cabal of seven *Edimmu* preserve some kind of distorted memory of the Anannage, or Watchers, who descended on to the plains of ancient Iraq? Did these vampires of great stature live out of the light in some kind of underground city of the sort described in the account of Ishtar's descent into the underworld, as well as in the Kutha tablets? Perhaps the distorted memories of this degenerate race really were behind the notion of immortal, blood-sucking vampires of the sort so popularized in Gothic horror from Victorian times through till the present day.

As Old as Methuselah

The profound knowledge of immortality among the 'gods' of both Iraq and Iran also began to make sense of the baffling lines of Genesis 6:3, squeezed in between the verses concerning the coming of the Sons of God unto the Daughters of Men, for they proclaim:

And the Lord said, My spirit shall not strive with man for ever, for that he also is flesh: yet shall his days be an hundred and twenty years.

Up until this time the generations of Adam had possessed much longer life-spans, the longest being Enoch's son, Methuselah, who was said to have been 969 years' old when he departed this world; hence the saying 'as old as Methuselah'. The Sumerian king-lists also speak of individuals living for impossible lengths of time before the age of the Flood. Did the lines of Genesis 6:3 therefore suggest that up until this time mortals may have possessed knowledge of this 'immortality' drug to extend their natural life-spans? Yet because of the part this drug had played in the downfall of the Sons of God, it would no longer be given to humanity, meaning that the maximum age an individual could now expect would be 120 years. If this was true, then it could mean that the accounts of fabulous birds presenting the plant or secret of immortality to humanity are distorted memories of the way in which certain Watchers had transgressed the heavenly laws by giving this forbidden knowledge to the human race.

Hebraic tradition asserts that the consequences of this forbidden trafficking between the two races – immortals and mortals – had been a series of global cataclysms of a climatic and geological nature, including the Great Flood. Somehow the same theme had been bound up in Sumerian and later Assyrian mythology as well.

I felt there was no need to make the obvious comparisons between Ut-napishtim's account of the Flood preserved in the Epic of Gilgamesh, and the story of Noah's Ark found in both the Bible and Koran. Yet where was this 'Mount Nimush', said to have been the place where Ut-napishtim's vessel had come to rest on solid ground? Assyrian scholars have tentatively identified it as the 9,000-foot Mount Pir Omar Gudrun in the Zagros range, south of the Lower Zab river.³⁹ This, however, is by no means certain, for a Babylonian priest and historian of the third century BC named Berossus also recorded an account of the Flood in a Greek work entitled *Babyloniaka*, based on what appears to have been a Sumerian original. He names the Noah figure as Xisuthros and states that the vessel came to rest on the 'Gordyaeon mountains of Armenia'⁴⁰ –

Gordyene being the name given to central Kurdistan in classical times.⁴¹ It is generally supposed that Berossus had been referring to Al Judi, which is situated within this range.

This supposition is strongly supported by the immense interest the Assyrian king Sennacherib, Ashurbanipal's grandfather, seems to have had in the ancient flood myth. Jewish Talmudic tradition records that: 'On his return to Assyria, Sennacherib found a plank, which he worshipped as an idol, because it was part of the ark which had saved Noah from the deluge.'⁴² If this assertion is correct, and the king *had* visited the Place of Descent of the Ark, then it is extremely unlikely that he would have known of the flood myth through Hebraic sources as is supposed by the Jews. It is much more conceivable that he had studied the Ut-napishtim story contained in the Epic of Gilgamesh – copies of which were found in the library rooms at Nineveh. I had therefore been intrigued to find that, during his military campaigns in Kurdistan, Sennacherib had taken time out to visit Al Judi, where he had carved a mighty image of himself standing before the gods,⁴³ and where fragments of wood and bitumen from Noah's Ark could apparently be picked up by travellers.⁴⁴ Why had he gone to Al Judi, if not to offer sacrifice at the alleged site of the flood hero's stone altar, which remained in the form of four stone pillars at the base of the mountain?⁴⁵ There is certainly no record of this great king having carved similar images at the base of Mount Pir Omar Gudrun, the other proposed site of Mount Nimush.

Preserver of the Seed

In the wake of the cuneiform tablets found in Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal's library rooms at Nineveh, much older – but far less complete – copies of the Mesopotamian flood myth were discovered. One found at Nippur, and dated to 1700 BC, was written in Sumerian and seems to have provided the basis for the story told by Berossus some 1,450 years later. Here the saviour of humanity is not Ut-napishtim, but King Ziusudra. The text is fragmentary and short, but ends with the following lines:

The king Ziusudra

Prostrated himself before An (Anu) (and) Enlil

...

(Who) gave him life, like a god.

At that time, the king Ziusudra

Who protected the seed of mankind at the time (?) of the destruction,

They settled in an overseas country, in the orient, in Dilmun

...⁴⁶

Once again, immortality is bestowed upon the saviour of humanity who lives out the remainder of his life at Dilmun, very likely the mythical realm of the gods in the mountains of northern Kurdistan. Ziusudra is said to have 'protected the seed of mankind', a statement paralleled almost exactly in the Book of Enoch. Here the Most High instructs the archangel Uriel to go down and tell Noah that 'he may escape and (that) his seed may be preserved for all the generations of the world'.⁴⁷ Hebrew scribes never used phraseology lightly, suggesting that there was a direct link between the Sumerian and biblical accounts of the flood. Both Ziusudra and Noah carry the 'seed' of humanity into the post-diluvian age, and this does not just mean through their lineage, for it would also appear to refer to the preservation of antediluvian knowledge of the sort revealed to mankind by the Watchers.

Evidence of this is found in Berossus' work *Babyloniaka*, in which it is recorded that the god Kronos appeared to Xisuthros in a dream to announce that humanity was about to be destroyed by a flood. The god therefore orders him to 'bury the beginnings, middles, and ends of all writings in Sippur (Sippara), the city of the Sun(-god)'.⁴⁸ Once the flood has receded, Xisuthros and his family are told to return to Sippur and dig up these writings, after which they go on to found many cities and shrines, including Babylon.⁴⁹

If they existed, then what did these 'writings' contain? Was it the records that Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal had so eagerly attempted to track down and preserve in the library rooms at Nineveh? Knowing of the strange fascination both kings appear to have held for this important subject, I feel this must be a very real possibility.

As I had already established, knowledge of the forbidden sci-

ences revealed to mortal kind by the rebel Watchers had finally been carried from Mesopotamia into Palestine, where it was recorded in works such as the Book of Noah, which subsequently became the basis for the Book of Enoch. Had these carriers of the 'seed' of Noah and Ziusudra included the nomadic *kochek* rain-makers of Yezidi tradition, as well as the wild *zaddik*-priests of the Dead Sea communities?

If so, had this 'seed' been carried into Canaan by migrating Semitic tribes, who had come out of the 'land of Shinar' at the time of the patriarch Abraham, sometime around 2000 BC? Or had this antediluvian knowledge only reached Judaea in post-exilic times? Either way, it seemed likely that in addition to the enormous influence that the Magian and Zoroastrian faiths of Iran had contributed towards the legends concerning the fall of the Watchers, the rich mythologies of ancient Iraq would appear to have influenced our knowledge of the angels of heaven.

According to the archaeologists and historians, the Mesopotamian city-states formed the earliest known civilization of the Old World. From its first foundations in the sixth millennium BC, it grew over a period of 2,500 years to become what was perhaps the most sophisticated culture on this planet. The Sumerians developed the first coloured pottery, the first medical operations, the first musical instruments, the first veterinary skills and the first written language. They also became highly accomplished engineers, mathematicians, librarians, authors, archivists, judges and priests. Their organized society and political administration was virtually unique, and yet, despite all this abundance of knowledge and capability, a big question mark still looms over the origins of this ancient race.

The Sumerians and Akkadians clearly stated that they had inherited this knowledge from the gods. So who were these 'gods'? Had they really been the Watchers – the tall, viper-faced bird-men whose homeland would appear to have been on the shores of Lake Van in northern Kurdistan? To answer this question, I would have to go beyond the recorded mythologies of Mesopotamia and look towards the evidence left behind by the earliest inhabitants of the Near East, for only this could truly determine whether the gods had once walked among mortal kind.