The great contemporary historian David Christian’s modest disclaimer certainly applies to the present work. Once I realized that a history of early Western business would require delving into various ancient societies over long periods of time, it seemed presumptuous for me to attempt it. I prefer to view this work, therefore, as a report in story form, a report on what an inquiring businessman can learn from the historians who have studied such matters.

My hope was to trace the roots of modern business, meaning business as it developed in Europe and the United States after the Industrial Revolution and today exists in developed countries everywhere. Like the language, social culture, and political systems of Europe and the United States, the lineal ancestry of European and U.S. business traces clearly to Middle Eastern and Mediterranean antiquity. In India, China, and other places business also grew, but historians have not noted much cross-cultural influence.

Every book entails significant editorial choices. A fundamental choice here was to approach business history as a story and to tell it chronologically. The goal has been to report on a sequence of seminal places where
influential changes of significance first emerged, rather than providing a comprehensive enumeration of businesses and their practices. The result is selective in its description of businesses and of the places where business was practiced. Because knowledge about antiquity is often uncertain, those who aim to advance the state of scholarship often disagree about what things mean. As scholars they provide lengthy discussions and citations to justify their views. But since this is simply a report on what the scholars have found, rather than an effort to advance their learning, and since I doubt that most readers would find such discussions of value, I have limited references to the principal sources for each chapter and the particular sources I used for quotations and less obvious information.

I have been the happy beneficiary of enormous help from many people. Intellectually, I have formed my concepts of how history works from, among others, the great twentieth-century scholars Fernand Braudel, Alfred D. Chandler, Sir John Hicks, William H. McNeill, Douglass C. North, and Oliver Williamson. I also owe a debt to the late Harvard Law School professor of legal history Samuel Thorne, whose careful standards of scholarship I have always tried to follow.

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Dear Reader, much as I might wish to blame the book’s shortcomings on others, you and I know better.