

HUM 300: CLASSICAL HUMANITIES TEXTBOOK



Alyson Collom
American River College

HUM 300: Introduction to Humanities (Collom)

This text is disseminated via the Open Education Resource (OER) LibreTexts Project (<https://LibreTexts.org>) and like the thousands of other texts available within this powerful platform, it is freely available for reading, printing, and "consuming."

The LibreTexts mission is to bring together students, faculty, and scholars in a collaborative effort to provide an accessible, and comprehensive platform that empowers our community to develop, curate, adapt, and adopt openly licensed resources and technologies; through these efforts we can reduce the financial burden borne from traditional educational resource costs, ensuring education is more accessible for students and communities worldwide.

Most, but not all, pages in the library have licenses that may allow individuals to make changes, save, and print this book. Carefully consult the applicable license(s) before pursuing such effects. Instructors can adopt existing LibreTexts texts or Remix them to quickly build course-specific resources to meet the needs of their students. Unlike traditional textbooks, LibreTexts' web based origins allow powerful integration of advanced features and new technologies to support learning.



LibreTexts is the adaptable, user-friendly non-profit open education resource platform that educators trust for creating, customizing, and sharing accessible, interactive textbooks, adaptive homework, and ancillary materials. We collaborate with individuals and organizations to champion open education initiatives, support institutional publishing programs, drive curriculum development projects, and more.

The LibreTexts libraries are Powered by [NICE CXone Expert](#) and were supported by the Department of Education Open Textbook Pilot Project, the California Education Learning Lab, the UC Davis Office of the Provost, the UC Davis Library, the California State University Affordable Learning Solutions Program, and Merlot. This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 1246120, 1525057, and 1413739.

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation nor the US Department of Education.

Have questions or comments? For information about adoptions or adaptations contact info@LibreTexts.org or visit our main website at <https://LibreTexts.org>.

The LibreTexts name, logo, and book covers are trademarked by LibreTexts, Inc. (a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization) and protected against unauthorized use.

This text was compiled on 10/13/2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Licensing

1: Introduction

- 1.1: Historical Bias
- 1.2: Our Moral Endowment
- 1.3: What is History For?
- 1.4: What is Philosophy For?
- 1.5: What is Art For?

2: Prehistory

- 2.1: Prehistory - Crash Course Big History #6
- 2.2: Khan Academy - Neolithic Revolution
- 2.3: The Evolution of Language
- 2.4: Paleolithic Beginnings
- 2.5: The Roots of Religion
- 2.6: Gobekli Tepe
- 2.7: Stone Age Art
- 2.8: Ted- A Darwinian Theory of Beauty

3: Ancient Mesopotamia

- 3.1: Mesopotamia Crash Course
- 3.2: Mesopotamia
- 3.3: Love, Sex, and Marriage in Ancient Mesopotamia
- 3.4: Mesopotamian Religion
- 3.5: Mesopotamia Art History
- 3.6: What is Myth?
- 3.7: The Hero's Journey and the Monomyth
- 3.8: The Epic of Gilgamesh

4: Ancient Egypt

- 4.1: Ancient Egypt - (Crash Course World History #4)
- 4.2: Khan Academy - Ancient Egypt and the Nile River Valley
- 4.3: Women in Ancient Egypt
- 4.4: Ancient Egyptian Religion
- 4.5: Egyptian Book of the Dead
- 4.6: Egyptian Art

5: Ancient Greece

- 5.1: Overview of Ancient Greece
- 5.2: Persians and Greeks - Crash Course
- 5.3: Women in Ancient Greece

- 5.4: Greek Mythology
- 5.5: Philosophy - Plato
- 5.6: Plato on The Allegory of the Cave
- 5.7: Plato's Ladder of Love
- 5.8: Philosophy - Aristotle
- 5.9: Introduction to Greek Architecture
- 5.10: Greek Art History

6: Ancient Rome

- 6.1: Introduction to Ancient Rome
- 6.2: Overview of the Roman Empire
- 6.3: The Role of Women in the Roman World
- 6.4: Female Gladiators in Ancient Rome
- 6.5: Roman Religion
- 6.6: Epicurus
- 6.7: The Philosophy of Stoicism
- 6.8: Life Changing Stoic Ideas
- 6.9: Roman Art History

7: Ancient India

- 7.1: Ancient India
- 7.2: Introduction to the Vedic Period
- 7.3: Sanskrit Connections to English
- 7.4: Ashoka the Great
- 7.5: Hinduism
- 7.6: Hindu Temples
- 7.7: Reading- Shiva As Lord of the Dance (Nataraja)
- 7.8: Buddhism
- 7.9: Mandala
- 7.10: Stupa
- 7.11: Buddhist Wheel of Life and Death
- 7.12: Bodh Gaya

8: Ancient China

- 8.1: History of Ancient China
- 8.2: Women in Ancient China
- 8.3: Religion in Ancient China
- 8.4: 2,000 Years of Chinese History! The Mandate of Heaven and Confucius- World History #7
- 8.5: Who Was Confucius
- 8.6: Eastern Philosophy - Confucius
- 8.7: Eastern Philosophy - Lao Tzu
- 8.8: Eastern Philosophy - Wu Wei
- 8.9: Be Humble - and other Lessons from the Philosophy of Water | Raymond Tang

8.10: The Tao of Pooh

9: Judaism

9.1: Judaism Explained

9.2: The Ancient Roots of Anti-Judaism

9.3: It's Time to Reclaim Religion

9.4: The Israel-Palestine Conflict

9.5: Writing a History of Jewish Architecture

9.6: The Golden Haggadah

9.7: Relief from the Arch of Titus

9.8: Diarna- Documenting the Place of a Vanishing Jewish History

10: Christianity

10.1: A Multicultural Story

10.2: Ten Should-Be Famous Women of Early Christianity

10.3: Best Known Gospels

10.4: Jesus the Teacher

10.5: Early Christian Art History

11: Byzantine Civilization

11.1: Fall of the Roman Empire

11.2: Christianity in the Roman Empire

11.3: Justinian and the Byzantine Empire

11.4: The Silk Road

11.5: The Princess who Rewrote History

11.6: Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy

11.7: A Beginner's Guide to Byzantine Art

11.8: Iconoclastic Controversies

11.9: Hagia Sofia

11.10: Theotokos Mosaic

12: Islam

12.1: Introduction to Islam

12.2: Contextualization of the Development of Islam

12.3: What it's like to be a Muslim in America

12.4: Judaism and Christianity in the Qur'an

12.5: Muhammad the Messenger

12.6: What does the Qur'an really say about a Muslim Woman's Hijab?

12.7: Islamic Art

12.8: Arts of the Islamic World

13: Middle Ages

13.1: Introduction to the Middle Ages

13.2: The Dark Ages...How Dark Were They?

- 13.3: Golden Age of Islam
- 13.4: Introduction to the Crusades
- 13.5: An Overview of the Crusades
- 13.6: Women in the Middle Ages
- 13.7: Hildegard of Bingen
- 13.8: The Medieval Church
- 13.9: Chivalry in the Middle Ages
- 13.10: Pilgrimage Routes and the Cult of the Relic
- 13.11: Thomas Aquinas
- 13.12: Medieval Art History
- 13.13: Pentecost and Mission to the Apostles
- 13.14: Chartres Cathedral
- 13.15: Making Manuscripts

Index

Glossary

Detailed Licensing

Licensing

*A detailed breakdown of this resource's licensing can be found in **Back Matter/Detailed Licensing**.*

1: INTRODUCTION

1.1: Historical Bias

1.2: Our Moral Endowment

1.3: What is History For?

1.4: What is Philosophy For?

1.5: What is Art For?

1.1: Historical Bias

Learning Objectives

- Identify some examples of historical bias

Key Points

- Regardless of whether they are conscious or learned implicitly within cultural contexts, biases have been part of historical investigation since the ancient beginnings of the discipline. As such, history provides an excellent example of how biases change, evolve, and even disappear.
- Early attempts to make history an empirical, objective discipline (most notably by Voltaire) did not find many followers. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, European historians only strengthened their biases. As Europe gradually dominated the world through the self-imposed mission to colonize nearly all the other continents, Eurocentrism prevailed in history.
- Even within the Eurocentric perspective, not all Europeans were equal; Western historians largely ignored aspects of history, such as class, gender, or ethnicity. Until the rapid development of social history in the 1960s and 1970s, mainstream Western historical narratives focused on political and military history, while cultural or social history was written mostly from the perspective of the elites.
- The biased approach to history-writing transferred also to history-teaching. From the origins of national mass schooling systems in the 19th century, the teaching of history to promote national sentiment has been a high priority. History textbooks in most countries have been tools to foster nationalism and patriotism and to promote the most favorable version of national history.
- Germany attempts to be an example of how to remove nationalistic narratives from history education. The history curriculum in Germany is characterized by a transnational perspective that emphasizes the all-European heritage, minimizes the idea of national pride, and fosters the notion of civil society centered on democracy, human rights, and peace.
- Despite progress and increased focus on groups that have been traditionally excluded from mainstream historical narratives (people of color, women, the working class, the poor, the disabled, LGBTQI-identified people, etc.), bias remains a component of historical investigation.

Terms

Eurocentrism

The practice of viewing the world from a European or generally Western perspective with an implied belief in the pre-eminence of Western culture. It may also be used to describe a view centered on the history or eminence of white people. The term was coined in the 1980s, referring to the notion of European exceptionalism and other Western equivalents, such as American exceptionalism.

Bias in Historical Writing

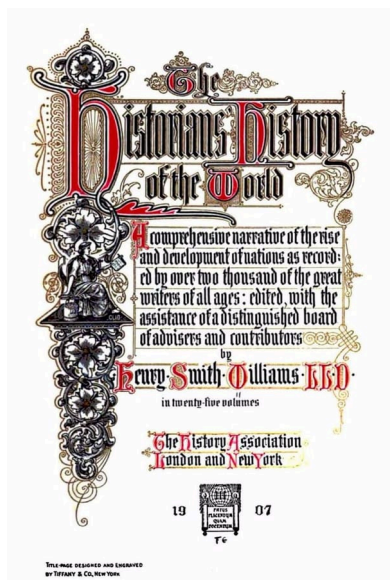
Bias is an inclination or outlook to present or hold a partial perspective, often accompanied by a refusal to consider the possible merits of alternative points of view. Regardless of whether conscious or learned implicitly within cultural contexts, biases have been part of historical investigation since the ancient beginnings of the discipline. As such, history provides an excellent example of how biases change, evolve, and even disappear.

History as a modern academic discipline based on empirical methods (in this case, studying primary sources in order to reconstruct the past based on available evidence), rose to prominence during the Age of Enlightenment. Voltaire, a French author and thinker, is credited to have developed a fresh outlook on history that broke from the tradition of narrating diplomatic and military events and emphasized customs, social history (the history of ordinary people) and achievements in the arts and sciences. His *Essay on Customs* traced the progress of world civilization in a universal context, thereby rejecting both nationalism and the traditional Christian frame of reference. Voltaire was also the first scholar to make a serious attempt to write the history of the world, eliminating theological frameworks and emphasizing economics, culture, and political history. He was the first to emphasize

the debt of medieval culture to Middle Eastern civilization. Although he repeatedly warned against political bias on the part of the historian, he did not miss many opportunities to expose the intolerance and frauds of the Catholic Church over the ages—a topic that was Voltaire's life-long intellectual interest.

Voltaire's early attempts to make history an empirical, objective discipline did not find many followers. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, European historians only strengthened their biases. As Europe gradually benefited from the ongoing scientific progress and dominated the world in the self-imposed mission to colonize nearly all other continents, Eurocentrism prevailed in history. The practice of viewing and presenting the world from a European or generally Western perspective, with an implied belief in the pre-eminence of Western culture, dominated among European historians who contrasted the progressively mechanized character of European culture with traditional hunting, farming and herding societies in many of the areas of the world being newly conquered and colonized. These included the Americas, Asia, Africa and, later, the Pacific and Australasia. Many European writers of this time construed the history of Europe as paradigmatic for the rest of the world. Other cultures were identified as having reached a stage that Europe itself had already passed: primitive hunter-gatherer, farming, early civilization, feudalism and modern liberal-capitalism. Only Europe was considered to have achieved the last stage. With this assumption, Europeans were also presented as racially superior, and European history as a discipline became essentially the history of the dominance of white peoples.

However, even within the Eurocentric perspective, not all Europeans were equal; Western historians largely ignored aspects of history, such as class, gender, or ethnicity. Until relatively recently (particularly the rapid development of social history in the 1960s and 1970s), mainstream Western historical narratives focused on political and military history, while cultural or social history was written mostly from the perspective of the elites. Consequently, what was in fact an experience of a selected few (usually white males of upper classes, with some occasional mentions of their female counterparts), was typically presented as the illustrative experience of the entire society. In the United States, some of the first to break this approach were African American scholars who at the turn of the 20th century wrote histories of black Americans and called for their inclusion in the mainstream historical narrative.



The title page to *The Historians' History of the World: A Comprehensive Narrative of the Rise and Development of Nations as Recorded by over two thousand of the Great Writers of all Ages*, 1907. *The Historians' History of the World* is a 25-volume encyclopedia of world history originally published in English near the beginning of the 20th century. It is quite extensive but its perspective is entirely Western Eurocentric. For example, while four volumes focus on the history of England (with Scotland and Ireland included in one of them), "Poland, the Balkans, Turkey, minor Eastern states, China, Japan" are all described in one volume. It was compiled by Henry Smith Williams, a medical doctor and author, as well as other authorities on history, and published in New York in 1902 by Encyclopædia Britannica and the Outlook Company.

Bias in the Teaching of History

The biased approach to historical writing is present in the teaching of history as well. From the origins of national mass schooling systems in the 19th century, the teaching of history to promote national sentiment

has been a high priority. Until today, in most countries history textbook are tools to foster nationalism and patriotism and promote the most favorable version of national history. In the United States, one of the most striking examples of this approach is the continuous narrative of the United States as a state established on the principles of personal liberty and democracy. Although aspects of U.S. history, such as slavery, genocide of American Indians, or disfranchisement of the large segments of the society for decades after the onset of the American statehood, are now taught in most (yet not all) American schools, they are presented as marginal in the larger narrative of liberty and democracy.

In many countries, history textbooks are sponsored by the national government and are written to put the national heritage in the most favorable light, although academic historians have often fought against the politicization of the textbooks, sometimes with success. Interestingly, the 21st-century Germany attempts to be an example of how to remove nationalistic narratives from history education. As the 20th-century history of Germany is filled with events and processes that are rarely a cause of national pride, the history curriculum in Germany (controlled by the 16 German states) is characterized by a transnational perspective that emphasizes the all-European heritage, minimizes the idea of national pride, and fosters the notion of civil society centered on democracy, human rights, and peace. Yet, even in the rather unusual German case, Eurocentrism continues to dominate.

The challenge to replace national, or even nationalist, perspectives with a more inclusive transnational or global view of human history is also still very present in college-level history curricula. In the United States after World War I, a strong movement emerged at the university level to teach courses in Western Civilization with the aim to give students a common heritage with Europe. After 1980, attention increasingly moved toward teaching world history or requiring students to take courses in non-western cultures. Yet, world history courses still struggle to move beyond the Eurocentric perspective, focusing heavily on the history of Europe and its links to the United States.

Despite all the progress and much more focus on the groups that have been traditionally excluded from mainstream historical narratives (people of color, women, the working class, the poor, the disabled, LGBTQI-identified people, etc.), bias remains a component of historical investigation, whether it is a product of nationalism, author's political views, or an agenda-driven interpretation of sources. It is only appropriate to state that the present world history book, while written in accordance with the most recent scholarly and educational practices, has been written and edited by authors trained in American universities and published in the United States. As such, it is also not free from both national (U.S.) and individual (authors') biases.

Contributors and Attributions

CC licensed content, Shared previously

- Boundless World History. **Authored by:** Boundless. **Located at:** <https://www.boundless.com/world-history/textbooks/boundless-world-history-textbook/>. **License:** CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike

1.2: Our Moral Endowment

<https://humanjourney.us/intercultural-understanding-and-empathy/our-moral-endowment/>

1.3: What is History For?

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



1.4: What is Philosophy For?

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



1.5: What is Art For?

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



2: PREHISTORY

2.1: Prehistory - Crash Course Big History #6

2.2: Khan Academy - Neolithic Revolution

2.3: The Evolution of Language

2.4: Paleolithic Beginnings

2.5: The Roots of Religion

2.6: Gobekli Tepe

2.7: Stone Age Art

2.8: Ted- A Darwinian Theory of Beauty

2.1: Prehistory - Crash Course Big History #6

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



2.2: Khan Academy - Neolithic Revolution

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



2.3: The Evolution of Language

<https://humanjourney.us/the-evolution-of-language-section/thought-and-language/>

2.4: Paleolithic Beginnings

<https://humanjourney.us/ideas-that-shaped-our-modern-world-section/paleolithic-beginnings/>

2.5: The Roots of Religion

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



2.6: Gobekli Tepe

<https://www.worldhistory.org/article...-first-temple/>

Located in modern **Turkey**, **Göbekli Tepe** is one of the most important archaeological sites in the world. The discovery of this stunning 10,000 year old site in the 1990s CE sent shock waves through the archaeological world and beyond, with some researchers even claiming it was the site of the biblical **Garden of Eden**. The many examples of sculptures and **megalithic architecture** which make up what is perhaps the world's earliest **temple** at Göbekli Tepe predate **pottery**, metallurgy, the invention of **writing**, the wheel and the beginning of **agriculture**. The fact that hunter-gatherer peoples could organize the construction of such a complex site as far back as the 10th or 11th millennium BC not only revolutionizes our understanding of hunter-gatherer **culture** but poses a serious challenge to the conventional view of the rise of **civilization**.



Göbekli Tepe Teomancimit (CC BY-SA)

A Description of the Göbekli Tepe Site

Göbekli Tepe (Turkish for the 'hill of the navel') is a 1000 foot diameter mound located at the highest point of a mountain ridge, around 9 miles northeast of the town of Şanlıurfa (Urfa) in southeastern Turkey. Since 1994 CE, excavations conducted by Klaus Schmidt of the Istanbul branch of the German Archaeological Institute, with the cooperation of the Şanlıurfa Museum, have been taking place at the site. Results to date have been astounding; especially bearing in mind the excavators estimate that their work has uncovered a mere 5% of the site.

Göbekli Tepe consists of four arrangements of monolithic pillars linked together by segments of coarsely built dry stone walls to form a series of circular or oval structures. There are two large pillars in the center of each complex which are encircled by slightly smaller stones facing inward. Archaeologists believe that these pillars could have once supported roofs. The structures vary in size between around 33 and 98 feet in diameter and have floors made of terrazzo (burnt lime).

The Megaliths at Göbekli Tepe

The megaliths themselves, 43 of which have been unearthed so far, are mainly T-shaped pillars of soft limestone up to around 16 feet in height, and were excavated and transported from a stone quarry on the lower southwestern slope of the hill. Geophysical surveys on the hill indicate that there are as many as 250 more megaliths lying buried around the site, suggesting that another 16 complexes once existed at Göbekli Tepe.

ALTHOUGH SOME OF THE STANDING STONES AT GÖBEKLI TEPE ARE BLANK, OTHERS DISPLAY EXTRAORDINARY ARTWORK IN THE FORM OF ELABORATELY CARVED FOXES, LIONS, BULLS, SCORPIONS & MORE.

Although some of the standing stones at Göbekli Tepe are blank, others display extraordinary artwork in the form of elaborately carved foxes, lions, bulls, scorpions, snakes, wild boars, vultures, water fowl, insects, and arachnids. There are also abstract shapes and one relief of a naked woman, posed frontally in a sitting position. A number of the T-shaped stones have depictions of what appear to be arms at their sides, which could indicate that the stones represent stylized humans or perhaps gods. Although the pictograms at Göbekli Tepe do not represent a form of writing, they may have functioned as sacred symbols whose meanings were implicitly understood by local populations at the time.

The depictions of vultures at Göbekli Tepe have parallels at other Anatolian and Near Eastern sites. The walls of many of the shrines at the large **Neolithic** settlement of Çatal Höyük (in existence from approximately 7500 BCE to 5700 BCE) in south-central Turkey were adorned with large skeletal representations of vultures.

One theory put forward to explain the prominence of vultures in the early Anatolian Neolithic is in the context of possible excarnation practices suggesting a funerary cult. After **death**, bodies would have been deliberately left outside and exposed, perhaps on some kind of wooden frame, where their skeletons were stripped of flesh by vultures and other birds of prey. The skeletons would then be interred somewhere else. Perhaps the ritual of excarnation was the focus of a cult of the dead practiced by the inhabitants of Göbekli Tepe, as it certainly seems to have been elsewhere in **Anatolia** and the **Near East** in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic.



Göbekli Tepe: Pillar Ronnie Jones III (CC BY-NC-SA)

Curiously, Schmidt and his team have so far found no evidence of settlement at Göbekli Tepe - houses, cooking hearths, and refuse pits are all absent. The archaeologists did, however, find over 100,000 animal bone fragments, many of which exhibited cut marks and splintered edges which indicate that animals were being butchered and cooked somewhere in the area. The bones came from wild game such as gazelle (which accounted for over 60% of the bones), boar, sheep and red deer, and different species of birds such as vultures, cranes, ducks and geese. All of the bones were from wild species; evidence that the people who inhabited Göbekli Tepe were hunter-gatherers rather than early farmers who kept domesticated animals.

Similar Sites in the Area

Due to the presence of multiple monumental complexes at such an early date Göbekli Tepe is a somewhat unique site. However, there are some parallels with the site at the early Neolithic settlement of Nevalı Çori, on the middle Euphrates River in Eastern Turkey, which lies only 12.5 north-west of Göbekli Tepe. The main temple at Nevalı Çori was dated to around 8,000 BCE, perhaps a thousand years later than Göbekli Tepe. The cult complexes at the settlement had a number of features in common with Göbekli Tepe, such as a terrazzo-style lime cement floor, monolithic T-shaped pillars built into dry stone walls, and two free-standing

pillars in the center of the complex area. The T-shaped pillars show reliefs of what appear to be human hands. Unfortunately, Nevalı Çori is now lost, submerged beneath a lake created by the Atatürk Dam in 1992 CE.

The excavators of Göbekli Tepe believe that around 8,000 BCE the people at the site deliberately buried the monuments under mountains of soil and settlement refuse, such as flints and animal bones, brought from elsewhere. This backfilling is the main reason why the site has been preserved after so many thousands of years. Why the inhabitants of Göbekli Tepe abandoned the site is not clearly understood, though the monuments had obviously lost their relevance, which may have had some connection with the new way of life which accompanied the development of agriculture and **animal husbandry** which occurred around this time.



The plains of Göbekli Tepe Ronnie Jones III (CC BY-NC-SA)

We know from typological dating (of stone tools) and radio carbon dates that the final building phase at Göbekli Tepe dates to c. 8000 BCE. However, the date of its very earliest occupation is far from clear. Nevertheless, radio carbon dates (from charcoal) for the most recent part of the earliest layer (stratum III) at the site center around 9,000 BCE. Klaus Schmidt and his team estimate that Göbekli Tepe's stone monuments are about this age, though the structures have not been directly dated themselves. From the available evidence the site's excavators estimate Göbekli Tepe's beginnings at 11,000 BCE or earlier, which is incredibly early for such a complex set of monuments.

An Organized Society?

The planning and building of such a site as Göbekli Tepe would have required a degree of organization and resources hitherto unknown in hunter-gatherer societies. Schmidt has made the intriguing suggestion that rather than building temples and other religious structures after they had learned to farm and live in settled communities, the hunter-gatherers of the area first constructed megalithic sites like Göbekli Tepe and thus laid the foundation for the later development of complex societies.

Indeed investigations of other sites surrounding Göbekli Tepe has revealed a prehistoric village just 20 miles away where evidence of the world's oldest domesticated strains of wheat has been recovered. According to radio carbon dates agriculture developed in the area around 10,500 years ago, just a few hundred years after the construction of Göbekli Tepe. Other sites in the region show evidence for the domestication of sheep, cattle and pigs animals 1,000 years after Göbekli Tepe's monuments were erected. All this evidence suggests that the area around Göbekli Tepe was at the forefront of the agricultural revolution.

Perhaps the most elusive aspect of the megalithic structures at Göbekli Tepe is their function – why did hunter-gatherers construct such elaborate monuments? In Schmidt's opinion, the site was an important location for a cult of the dead, and although no definite burials have been discovered so far, he believes they will be found underneath the floors of the circular monuments.



Göbekli Tepe: Site Ronnie Jones III (CC BY-NC-SA)

In the absence of houses or domestic buildings of any sort in the area, Schmidt sees Göbekli Tepe as akin to a pilgrimage destination which attracted worshipers from as far away as a hundred miles. Indeed the vast amount of animal bone discovered at the site certainly suggests that that ritual feasting (and even sacrifice) regularly took place here. There is perhaps a parallel here with the much later site at Durrington Walls, close to [Stonehenge](#), in Wiltshire, England. Dating to around 2600 BCE Durrington Walls was a huge ritual timber circle where enormous amounts of animal bone, mainly pigs and cattle, were discovered, which suggested to its excavator Professor Mike Parker-Pearson that ritual feasting was an important feature of the site.

Intriguingly, in recent excavations at Göbekli Tepe Schmidt's team have uncovered pieces of human bones in soils which came from the niches behind the stone pillars at the site. Schmidt believes the bones show that corpses were brought into the ritual areas demarcated by the engraved T-shaped stone, where they were then laid out and left to be stripped of their soft tissue by wild animals. Such activity would Göbekli Tepe both a cemetery and a center of a regional death cult.

The Garden of Eden?

It is difficult to believe that the barren semi-desert where Göbekli Tepe is located was once a region of green meadows, woods, and fields of wild barley and wheat. The area would also have been thronging with vast herds of gazelle, flocks of geese and ducks. Indeed the animal and plant remains indicate such a rich and idyllic scene that Göbekli Tepe has been linked with the biblical story of the Garden of Eden. For those who take the story as a literal truth, the biblical location of Eden - at a point where four rivers descend, has been interpreted as within the [Fertile Crescent](#).

The ancient Fertile Crescent is defined as an agriculturally rich region in Western Asia which consists of present-day Iraq, [Syria](#), Lebanon, [Israel](#), Kuwait, [Jordan](#), south-eastern Turkey and west and south-western Iran. The four rivers of the biblical Eden include the Tigris and Euphrates, and believers in the connection between the two sites, such as the author David Rohl, point out that Göbekli Tepe lies between both of these. The Book of Genesis also states that Eden is ringed by mountains, as is Göbekli Tepe.



Totem Statue - Göbekli Tepe Ronnie Jones III (CC BY-NC-SA)

Other researchers believe that the Eden narrative in the [Bible](#) could be better interpreted as an allegory for the transition from a hunter-gather lifestyle to agriculture; though biblical accounts were recorded millennia after this transition took place. Interestingly, it is Klaus Schmidt's opinion that the shift from hunting to farming in the area brought about the decline of Göbekli Tepe. With the intense work required for agricultural societies to succeed there was no longer the time or perhaps the need for the monuments of Göbekli Tepe. In the surrounding area, trees were chopped down, soils became exhausted and the landscape was gradually transformed into the arid wilderness we see today.

Unfortunately, as the fame of Göbekli Tepe has spread art thieves and illegal antiquity dealers have been alerted. Around the end of September 2010 CE, a 1.3 foot-high, T-shaped stele decorated with a human head and an animal figure was stolen from the site. Since the theft, security at the site has been improved by installing a locking gate and a camera system; hopefully this will be enough to deter future thieves.

As long as only a tiny fraction of the incredible site of Göbekli Tepe has been excavated we can never know for sure why it was built and why it was buried and abandoned. Future work at the site will undoubtedly cast further light not only on these enigmas, but on our understanding of a critical stage in the development of human societies. One thing is certain - Göbekli Tepe has many more fascinating secrets to reveal.

Contributors and Attributions

Brian Haughton

Author and researcher of books on ancient civilisations & monuments, sacred places and supernatural folklore. Qualified archaeologist with a BA (Hons) from the University of Nottingham and an MPhil in Greek Archaeology from the University of Birmingham.

2.7: Stone Age Art

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



2.8: Ted- A Darwinian Theory of Beauty

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



3: ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

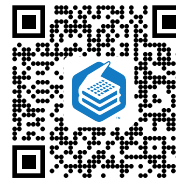
- 3.1: Mesopotamia Crash Course
- 3.2: Mesopotamia
- 3.3: Love, Sex, and Marriage in Ancient Mesopotamia
- 3.4: Mesopotamian Religion
- 3.5: Mesopotamia Art History
- 3.6: What is Myth?
- 3.7: The Hero's Journey and the Monomyth
- 3.8: The Epic of Gilgamesh

3.1: Mesopotamia Crash Course

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



3.2: Mesopotamia

<https://humanjourney.us/ideas-that-shaped-our-modern-world-section/mesopotamia/>

3.3: Love, Sex, and Marriage in Ancient Mesopotamia

<https://www.worldhistory.org/article...t-mesopotamia/>

Medical texts from ancient **Mesopotamia** provide prescriptions and practices for curing all manner of ailments, wounds, and diseases. There was one malady, however, which had no cure: passionate love. From a medical text found in **Ashurbanipal's** library at **Nineveh** comes this passage:

When the patient is continually clearing his throat; is often lost for words; is always talking to himself when he is quite alone, and laughing for no reason in the corners of fields, is habitually depressed, his throat tight, finds no pleasure in eating or drinking, endlessly repeating, with great sighs, 'Ah, my poor heart!' – he is suffering from lovesickness. For a man and for a woman, it is all one and the same. (Bottero, 102-103)

Marriage in ancient Mesopotamia was of vital importance to the society, literally, because it ensured the continuation of the family line and provided social stability. Arranged marriages were the norm, in which the couple had often never met, and – according to **Herodotus** – there were even bridal auctions where **women** were sold to the highest bidder, but human relationships in ancient Mesopotamia were just as complex and layered as those today and part of that complexity was the emotion of love. The historian Karen Nemet-Nejat notes, "Like people the world over and throughout time, ancient Mesopotamians fell deeply in love" (132).

The popularity of what, today, would be called 'love songs' also attests to the commonality of deep romantic attachment between couples. A few of the titles of these poems illustrate this:

'Sleep, begone! I want to hold my darling in my arms!'

'When you speak to me, you make my heart swell till I could die!'

'I did not close my eyes last night; Yes, I was awake all night long, my darling [thinking of you].' (Bottero, 106)

There are also poems, such as an Akkadian composition from c. 1750 BCE, which depicts two lovers arguing because the woman feels the man is attracted to another and he must convince her that she is the only one for him. In the end, after they have discussed the problem, the couple reconciles and it is made clear that they will now live happily ever after together.

The Business of Marriage

Contrasted with romantic love and a couple sharing their lives together, however, is the 'business side' of marriage and sex. Herodotus reports that every woman, at least once in her lifetime, had to sit outside the **temple** of **Ishtar (Inanna)** and agree to have sex with whatever stranger chose her. This custom was thought to ensure the fertility and continued prosperity of the community. As a woman's virginity was considered requisite for a marriage, it would seem unlikely that unmarried women would have taken part in this and yet Herodotus states that 'every woman' was required to. The practice of sacred prostitution, as Herodotus describes it, has been challenged by many modern-day scholars but his description of the bride auction has not. Herodotus writes:

Once a year in each village the young women eligible to marry were collected all together in one place; while the men stood around them in a circle. Then a herald called up the young women one by one and offered them for sale. He began with the most beautiful. When she was sold for a high price, he offered for sale the one who ranked next in beauty. All of them were then sold to be wives. The richest of the Babylonians who wished to wed bid against each other for the loveliest young women, while the commoners, who were not concerned about beauty, received the uglier women along with monetary compensation...All who liked might come, even from distant villages, and bid for the women. This was the best of all their customs but it has now fallen into disuse. (Histories I: 196)



Babylonian Marriage Market Briangotts (Public Domain)

So while romantic love did play a part in Mesopotamian marriages, it is true that, according to the customs and expectations of Mesopotamian society, marriage was a legal contract between the father of a girl and another man (the groom, as in the case of the bride auction where the groom paid the girl's father the bride-price) or, more commonly, between two families, which functioned as the foundation of a community. Scholar Stephen Bertman comments:

In the language of the **Sumerians**, the word for 'love' was a compound verb that, in its literal sense, meant 'to measure the earth,' that is, 'to **mark** off land'. Among both the Sumerians and the Babylonians (and very likely among the Assyrians as well) marriage was fundamentally a business arrangement designed to assure and perpetuate an orderly society. Though there was an inevitable emotional component to marriage, its prime intent in the eyes of the state was not companionship but procreation; not personal happiness in the present but communal continuity for the future. (275-276)

This was, no doubt, the 'official' view of marriage and there is no evidence to suggest that a man and woman decided to simply get married on their own (although there is evidence of a couple living together without marrying). Bertman writes:

Every marriage began with a legal contract. Indeed, as Mesopotamian **law** stated, if a man should marry without having first drawn up and executed a marriage contract, the woman he 'marries' would not be his wife...every marriage began not with a joint decision by two people in love but with a negotiation between representatives of two families. (276)

Once the marriage contract was signed in the presence of witnesses, the ceremony could be planned.

The wedding ceremony had to include a feast in order to be considered legitimate. The course of the marriage process had five stages which needed to be observed in order for the couple to be legally married:

1. The engagement/marriage contract;
2. Payment of the families of the bride and groom to each other (the dowry and bride-price);
3. The ceremony/feast;
4. The bride moving to her father-in-law's home;
5. Sexual intercourse between the couple with the bride expected to be a virgin on her wedding night and to become pregnant.

If any one of these steps was not performed, or not performed properly (such as the bride not becoming pregnant), the marriage could be invalidated. In the event the bride turned out not to be a virgin, or could not conceive, the groom could return her to her family. He would have to return her dowry to her family but would get back the bride-price his family had paid.

The Engagement

Special attention was paid to the engagement. Bertman notes:

Engagements were serious business in **Babylonia**, especially for those who might have a change of heart. According to **Hammurabi's** Code, a suitor who changed his mind would forfeit his entire deposit (betrothal gift) and bride-price. If the prospective father-in-law changed his mind, he had to pay the disappointed suitor double the bride-price. Furthermore, if a rival suitor persuaded the father-in-law to change his mind, not only did the father-in-law have to pay double, but the rival wasn't allowed to marry the daughter. These legal penalties acted as a potent deterrent against changes of heart and a powerful incentive for both responsible decision making and orderly social behavior. (276)

These incentives and penalties were particularly important because young people in Mesopotamia, as young people in the present day, did not always wish to comply with their parents' wishes. A young man or woman might well love someone other than the 'best match' chosen by their parents. A poem featuring the goddess Inanna, known for her penchant for 'free love' and doing as she pleased, and her lover Dumuzi, is thought to illustrate the problems parents had in guiding their children, daughters in particular, in proper conduct resulting in a happy marriage (although, as Inanna and Dumuzi were a very popular couple in religious and secular **literature**, it is doubtful that young people interpreted the poem in the same way their parents may have). The scholar Jean Bottero describes the work, pointing out how Inanna was encouraged to marry the successful farmer god Enkimdu but loved the shepherd god Dumuzi and so chose him. Bottero elaborates:

She furtively left the house, like an amorous teenager, to go to meet her beloved beneath the stars, 'which sparkled as she did', then to dally beneath his caresses and suddenly wonder, seeing the night advance, how she was going to explain her absence and lateness to her mother: 'Let me go! I must go home! Let me go, Dumuzi! I must go in! /What lie shall I tell my mother? /What lie shall I tell my mother Ningal?' And Dumuzi suggests an answer: she will say that her girl companions persuaded her to go with them to listen to **music** and dance. (109)



Marriage of Inanna and Dumuzi TangLung (Public Domain)

The penalties and incentives, then, were supposed to keep a young couple on the desired path toward the marriage and prevent them from engaging in romances under the stars. Once the couple was properly married, they were expected to produce children quickly. Sex was considered just another aspect of one's life and there was none of the modern-day embarrassment, shyness, or taboo involved in Mesopotamians' sex lives. Bottero states that "Homosexual love could be enjoyed" without fear of social stigma and texts mention men "preferring to take the female role" in sex. Further, he writes, "Various unusual positions could be adopted: 'standing'; 'on a chair'; 'across the bed or the partner'; taking her from behind' or even 'sodomising her' and sodomy, defined as anal intercourse, was a common form of contraceptive (101). He further notes:

it could happen that an eccentric setting was chosen...instead of keeping to your favourite place, the bedroom. You might take it into your head to 'make love on the roof-terrace of the house'; or 'on the threshold of the door'; or 'right

in the middle of a field or orchard', or 'in some deserted place'; or 'a no through road'; or even 'in the middle of the street', either with just any woman on whom you had 'pounced' or with a prostitute. (Bottero, 100)



Erotic Plaque Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin (CC BY-NC-SA)

Bottero further points out:

Making love was a natural activity, as culturally ennobled as food was elevated by cuisine. Why on earth should one feel demeaned or diminished, or guilty in the eyes of the gods, practicing it in whatever way one pleased, always provided that no third party was harmed or that one was not infringing any of the customary prohibitions which controlled daily life. (97)

This is not to say that Mesopotamians never had affairs or were never unfaithful to their spouses. There is plenty of textual evidence which shows that they did and they were. However, as Bottero notes, "When discovered, these crimes were severely punished by the judges, including the use of the **death** penalty: those of men in so far as they did serious wrong to a third party; those of women because, even when secret, they could harm the cohesion of the family" (93). Bottero continues:

In Mesopotamia, amorous impulses and capabilities had traditionally been channeled by collective constraints with the aim of ensuring the security of what was held to be the very nucleus of the social body – the family – and thus to provide for its continuity. The fundamental vocation of every man and woman, his or her 'destiny', as they said, referring matters to a radical wish on the part of the gods, was therefore marriage. And [as it is written in an ancient text] 'the young man who has stayed solitary...having taken no wife, or raised children, and the young woman who has not been either deflowered, or impregnated, and of whom no husband has undone the clasp of her garment and put aside her robe, to embrace her and make her enjoy pleasure, until her breasts swell with milk and she has become a mother' were looked upon as marginal, doomed to languish in an unhappy existence. (92)

Procreation as the Goal of Marriage

Children were the natural, and greatly desired, consequence of marriage. Childlessness was considered a great misfortune and a man could take a second wife if the bride proved infertile. Bottero writes:

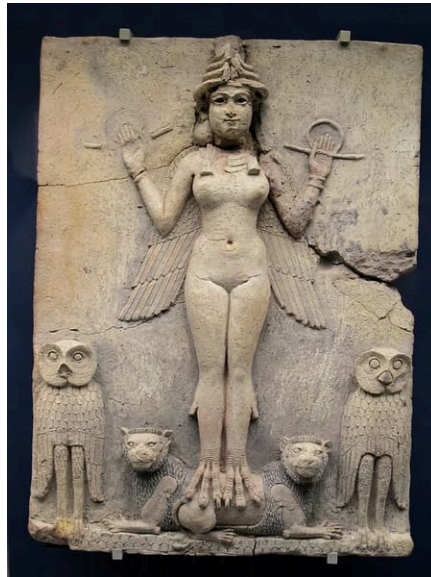
Once settled in her new status, all the jurisprudence shows us the wife entirely under the authority of her husband, and social constraints – giving the husband free rein – were not kind to her. In the first place, although monogamy was common, every man – according to his whims, needs, and resources – could add one or more 'second wives', or rather, concubines, to the first wife. (115)

The first wife was often consulted in choosing the second wives, and it was her responsibility to make sure they fulfilled the duties

for which they had been chosen. If a concubine had been added to the home because the first wife could not have children, the concubine's offspring would become the children of the first wife and would be able to inherit and carry on the family name.

As the primary purpose of marriage, as far as society was concerned, was to produce children, a man could add as many concubines to his home as he could afford. The continuation of the family line was most important and so concubines were fairly common in cases where the wife was ill, in generally poor health, or infertile.

A man could not divorce his wife because of her state of health, however; he would continue to honor her as the first wife until she died. Under these circumstances, the concubine would become first wife upon the wife's death and, if there were other women in the house, they would each move up one position in the home's hierarchy.



Queen of the Night Plaque Davide Ferro (CC BY)

Divorce & Infidelity

Divorce carried a serious social stigma and was not common. Most people married for life even if that marriage was not a happy one. Inscriptions record women running away from their husbands to sleep with other men. If caught in the act, the woman could be thrown into the river to drown, along with her lover, or could be impaled; both parties had to be spared or executed. Hammurabi's Code states, "If, however, the owner of the wife wishes to keep her alive, the king will equally pardon the woman's lover."

Divorce was commonly initiated by the husband, but wives were allowed to divorce their mates if there was evidence of abuse or neglect. A husband could divorce his wife if she proved to be infertile but, as he would then have to return her dowry, he was more likely to add a concubine to the family. It never seems to have occurred to the people of the time that the male could be to blame for a childless marriage; the fault was always ascribed to the woman. A husband could also divorce his wife on grounds of adultery or neglect of the home but, again, would have to return her property and also suffer the stigma of divorce. Both parties seem to have commonly chosen to make the best of the situation even if it was not optimal. Bottero writes:

As for the married woman, provided she had a little 'guts' and knew how to make use of her charms, employing all her guile, she was no less capable of making her husband toe the line. A divinatory oracle mentions a woman made pregnant by a third party who ceaselessly implores the goddess of love, Ishtar, repeating: 'Please let the child look like my husband!' [and] we are told of women who left their home and husband to go gallivanting not just once, but two, three...as many as eight times, some returning later, crestfallen, or never coming back at all. (120)

Women abandoning their families was uncommon but happened enough to have been written about. A woman traveling alone to another region or [city](#) to begin a new life, unless she was a prostitute, was rare but did occur and seems to have been an option taken by women who found themselves in an unhappy marriage who chose not to suffer the disgrace of a public divorce.

Since divorce favored the man, “if a woman expressed the desire to divorce, she could be thrown out of her husband's home penniless and naked” (Nemet-Nejat, 140). The man was the head of the household and the supreme authority, and a woman had to prove conclusively that her husband had failed to uphold his end of the marriage contract in order to obtain a divorce.

Even so, it should be noted that a majority of the myths of ancient Mesopotamia, especially the most popular myths (such as *The Descent of Inanna*, *Inanna and the Huluppu Tree*, *Ereshkigal* and *Nergal*) portray women in a very flattering light and, often, as having an advantage over men. While males were recognized as the authority in both government and in the home, women could own their own land and businesses, buy and sell slaves, and initiate divorce proceedings.

Bottero cites evidence (such as the myths mentioned above and business contracts) which show women in **Sumer** enjoying greater freedoms than women after the rise of the Akkadian **Empire** (c. 2334). After the influence of **Akkad**, he writes, “if women in ancient Mesopotamia, even though regarded at all levels as inferior to men and treated as such, nevertheless seem to have enjoyed also consideration, rights, and freedoms, it is perhaps one of the distant results and vestiges of the old and mysterious **Sumerian culture**” (126). This culture remained prevalent enough, throughout the history of Mesopotamia, to allow a woman the freedom to escape from an unhappy homelife and travel to another city or region to begin a new one.

Living Happily Ever After

Throughout all of the difficulties and legalities of marriage in Mesopotamia, however, then as now, there were many happy couples who lived together for life and enjoyed their children and grandchildren. In addition to the love poems mentioned above, letters, inscriptions, paintings, and **sculpture** attest to genuine affection between couples, no matter how their marriage may have been arranged. The letters between Zimri-Lim, King of **Mari**, and his wife Shiptu, are especially touching in that it is clear how much they cared for, trusted, and relied on each other. Nemet-Nejat writes, “Happy marriages flourished in ancient times; a Sumerian proverb mentions a husband boasting that his wife had borne him eight sons and was still ready to make love” (132), and Bertman describes a Sumerian statue of a seated couple, from 2700 BCE, thusly:

An elderly Sumerian couple sit side by side fused by sculpture into a single piece of gypsum rock; his right arm wrapped around her shoulder, his left hand tenderly clasping her right, their large eyes looking straight ahead to the future, their aged hearts remembering the past. (280)

Although the customs of the Mesopotamians may seem strange, or even cruel, to a modern-day western mind, the people of the ancient world were no different from those living today. Many modern marriages, begun with great promise, end badly, while many others, which initially struggle, endure for a lifetime. The practices which begin such unions are not as important as what the individuals involved make of their time together and, in Mesopotamia as in the present, marriage presented many challenges which a couple either overcame or succumbed to.

Bibliography

- Bertman, S. *Handbook to Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Black, J. , et. al. *The Literature of Ancient Sumer*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Bottéro, J. *Everyday Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- Kriwaczek, P. *Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization*. St. Martin's Griffin, 2012.
- Nemet-Nejat, K.R. *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Greenwood Press, CT, 1998.
- Van De Mieroop, M. *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000 - 323 BC, 2nd Edition*. Blackwell Publishing, 2006.
- Von Soden, W. *The Ancient Orient: An Introduction to the Study of the Ancient Near East*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994.
- Waterfield, R. *Herodotus: The Histories*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Wise Bauer, S. *The History of the Ancient World*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2007.
- Wolkstein, D. & Kramer, S. N. *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*. Harper Perennial, 1983.

Contributors and Attributions

Joshua J. Mark

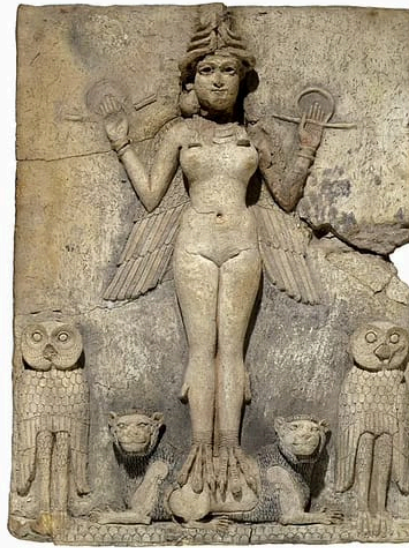
A freelance writer and former part-time Professor of Philosophy at Marist College, New York, Joshua J. Mark has lived in Greece and Germany and traveled through Egypt. He has taught history, writing, literature, and philosophy at the college level.

This page titled [3.3: Love, Sex, and Marriage in Ancient Mesopotamia](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

3.4: Mesopotamian Religion

https://www.worldhistory.org/Mesopotamian_Religion/

In ancient **Mesopotamia**, the meaning of life was for one to live in concert with the gods. Humans were created as co-laborers with their gods to hold off the forces of chaos and to keep the community running smoothly.



Queen of the Night, Old Babylon Trustees of the British Museum (Copyright)

Mesopotamian Creation Myth

According to the Mesopotamian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*, (meaning, 'When on High') life began after an epic struggle between the elder gods and the younger. In the beginning there was only water swirling in chaos and undifferentiated between fresh and bitter. These waters separated into two distinct principles: the male principle, Apsu, which was fresh water and the female principle, **Tiamat**, salt water. From the union of these two principles all the other gods came into being.

These younger gods were so loud in their daily concourse with each other that they came to annoy the elders, especially Apsu and, on the advice of his Vizier, he decided to kill them. Tiamat, however, was shocked at Apsu's plot and warned one of her sons, Ea, the god of wisdom and intelligence. With the help of his brothers and sisters, Ea put Apsu to sleep and then killed him. Out of the corpse of Apsu, Ea created the earth and built his home (though, in later myths 'the Apsu' came to mean the watery home of the gods or the realm of the gods).

Tiamat, upset now over Apsu's **death**, raised the forces of chaos to destroy her children herself. Ea and his siblings fought against Tiamat and her allies, her champion, Quingu, the forces of chaos and Tiamat's creatures, without success until, from among them, rose the great storm god **Marduk**. Marduk swore he would defeat Tiamat if the gods would proclaim him their king. This agreed to, he entered into **battle** with Tiamat, killed her and, from her body, created the sky. He then continued on with the act of creation to make human beings from the remains of Quingu as help-mates to the gods.

According to historian D. Brendan Nagle:

Despite the gods' apparent victory, there was no guarantee that the forces of chaos might not recover their strength and overturn the orderly creation of the gods. Gods and humans alike were involved in the perpetual struggle to restrain the powers of chaos, and they each had their own role to play in this dramatic battle. The responsibility of the dwellers of Mesopotamian **cities** was to provide the gods with everything they needed to run the world.

Cities, Temples, and Gods

The gods, in turn, took care of their human helpers in every aspect of their lives. From the most serious concerns of praying for continued health and prosperity to the simplest, the lives of the Mesopotamians revolved around their gods and so, naturally, the homes of the gods on earth: the temples.

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



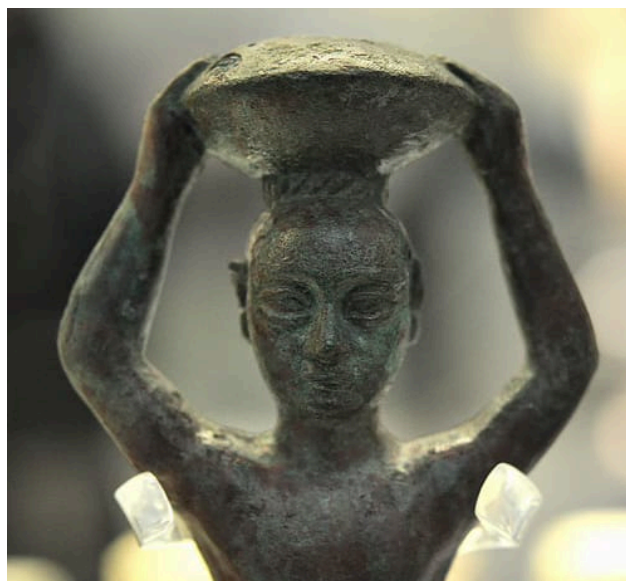
Every city had, as its center, the **temple** of the patron god of that city. The most famous holy city was Nippur where the god Enlil legitimized the rule of kings and presided over pacts. So important a center was Nippur that it survived, intact, into the Christian and then the Muslim periods and continued, until 800 CE, as an important religious center for those new faiths.

THE MOST FAMOUS HOLY CITY WAS NIPPUR WHERE THE GOD ENLIL LEGITIMIZED THE RULE OF KINGS.

The patron god or goddess of a city had the largest temple in the city, but there were smaller temples and shrines to other gods throughout. The god of a particular temple was thought to literally inhabit that building and most temples were designed with three rooms, all heavily ornamented, the innermost being the room of the god or goddess where that deity resided in the form of his or her statue. Every day the priests of the temple were required to tend to the needs of the god. According to Nagle:

“Daily, to the sound of **music**, hymns, and prayers, the god was washed, clothed, perfumed, fed and entertained by minstrels and dancers. In clouds of incense, meals of bread, cakes, fruit and honey were set before the deity, along with offerings of **beer**, wine and water...On feast days the statues of the deities were taken in solemn procession through the courtyard [and] the streets of the city accompanied by singing and dancing.”

The gods of every city were accorded this respect and, it was believed, they needed to make the rounds of the city at least once a year in the same way a good ruler would ride out from his **palace** to inspect his city regularly.



Foundation Figurine of Ur-Nammu Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin (CC BY-NC-SA)

The gods could even visit each other on occasion as in the case of the god **Nabu** whose statue was carried once a year from Borsippa to **Babylon** to visit his father Marduk. Marduk, himself, was honored greatly in this same way at the New Year Festival in Babylon when his statue was carried out of the temple, through the city, and to a special little house outside the city walls where he could relax and enjoy some different scenery. Throughout this procession, the people would chant the *Enuma Elish* in honor of Marduk's great victory over the forces of chaos.

Mesopotamian Underworld

The Mesopotamians not only revered their gods but also the souls of those who had gone on to the underworld. The Mesopotamian paradise (known as "Dilmun" to the **Sumerians**) was the land of the immortal gods and was not given the same sort of attention the underworld received. The Mesopotamian underworld, where the souls of departed humans went, was a dark and dreary land from which no one ever returned but, even so, a spirit who had not been honored properly in **burial** could still find ways to inflict misery on the living.

As the dead were often buried under or near the home, each house had a small shrine to the dead inside (sometimes a 'chapel' built on to the existing homes of the more affluent, as seen at **Ur**) where daily sacrifices of food and drink were made to the spirits of the departed. If one had done one's duty to the gods and others in the community, but still suffered some unfortunate fate, a Necromancer was consulted to see if perhaps one had offended the spirits of the dead in some way.

The famous Babylonian poem *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* of 1700 BCE (known as "the **Sumerian Job**" owing to its similarity to the Biblical *Book of Job*) makes mention of this when the speaker, Tabu-Utul-Bel (known in Sumerian as Laluralim) in questioning the cause of his suffering, says how he consulted the Necromancer, "but he opened not my understanding." Like the *Book of Job*, the *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* asks why bad things happen to good people and, in Laluralim's case, asserts that he did nothing to offend fellow man, gods or spirits to merit the misfortune he is suffering.

Divination

Divination was another important aspect of **Mesopotamian religion** and was developed to a high degree. A clay model of a sheep's liver, found at **Mari**, indicates in great detail how a Diviner was to go about interpreting the messages found in that organ of the sheep. To the Mesopotamians, divination was a scientific method of interpreting and understanding the messages from the gods in earthly contexts. If a certain type of bird acted in an unusual way it could mean one thing, while if it acted in another, the gods were saying something different.

A man suffering with certain symptoms would be diagnosed by a diviner in one way while a woman with those same symptoms in another, depending on how the diviner read the signs presented. The great rulers of the land had their own special diviners (as later kings and generals would have their personal doctors) while the less affluent had to rely on the care provided by the local diviner.



A Sumerian Wall Plaque Showing Libation Scenes Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin (CC BY-NC-SA)

Influence of Mesopotamian Myths

The people of Mesopotamia relied on their gods for every aspect of their lives, from calling on Kulla, the god of bricks, to help in the laying of the foundation of a house, to petitioning the goddess Lama for protection, and so developed many tales concerning these deities. The myths, legends, hymns, prayers and poems surrounding the Mesopotamian gods and their interaction with the people introduced many of the plots, symbols and characters which modern-day readers are acquainted with such as

- the story of the Fall of Man (*The **Myth of Adapa***),
- the tale of the Great Flood (*The Atrahasis*),
- the Tree of Life (***Inanna** and the Hulappu Tree*),
- the tale of a wise man/prophet taken up to heaven (*The **Myth of Etana***),
- the story of creation (*The Enuma Elish*),
- the quest for immortality (*The Epic of **Gilgamesh***),
- the Dying and Reviving god figure (a deity who dies or goes into the underworld and returns to life or the surface of the world to in some way benefit the people) who is famously depicted through *Inanna's Descent to the Underworld*.

These tales, among many others, became the basis for later myths in the regions the Mesopotamians traded and interacted with, most notably the land of **Canaan (Phoenicia)** whose people, in time, would produce the narratives which now comprise the scriptures known as the Old and New Testaments of the **Bible**.

Bibliography

- Black, J. *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*. University of Texas Press, 1992.
- Dalley, S. *Myths from Mesopotamia*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Foster, B.R. *From Distant Days*. Capital Decisions Ltd, 1995.
- Jacobsen, T. *The Treasures of Darkness*. Yale University Press, 1978.
- Nagle, D. B. *The Ancient World: A Social and Cultural History*. Pearson, 2009.
- Von Soden, W. *The Ancient Orient*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994.

Contributors and Attributions

Joshua J. Mark

A freelance writer and former part-time Professor of Philosophy at Marist College, New York, Joshua J. Mark has lived in Greece and Germany and traveled through Egypt. He has taught history, writing, literature, and philosophy at the college level.

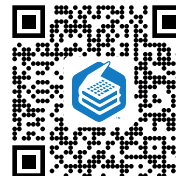
This page titled [3.4: Mesopotamian Religion](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

3.5: Mesopotamia Art History

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



3.6: What is Myth?

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



3.7: The Hero's Journey and the Monomyth

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



3.8: The Epic of Gilgamesh

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



4: ANCIENT EGYPT

- 4.1: Ancient Egypt - (Crash Course World History #4)
- 4.2: Khan Academy - Ancient Egypt and the Nile River Valley
- 4.3: Women in Ancient Egypt
- 4.4: Ancient Egyptian Religion
- 4.5: Egyptian Book of the Dead
- 4.6: Egyptian Art

4.1: Ancient Egypt - (Crash Course World History #4)

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



4.2: Khan Academy - Ancient Egypt and the Nile River Valley

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



4.3: Women in Ancient Egypt

https://www.worldhistory.org/article..._and_copyright

One of the central values of ancient **Egyptian civilization**, arguably the central value, was *ma'at* - the concept of harmony and balance in all aspects of one's life. This ideal was the most important duty observed by the **pharaoh** who, as mediator between the gods and the people, was supposed to be a role model for how one lived a balanced life. **Egyptian art, architecture**, religious practices, even governmental agencies all exhibit a perfect symmetry of balance and this can also be seen in gender roles throughout the history of ancient Egyptian civilization.



Egyptian Royal Woman bstorage (Copyright)

Women in ancient **Egypt** were the equals of men in every area except occupations. Historians Bob Brier and Hoyt Hobbs note how women were equal to men in almost every area except for jobs: "Men fought, ran the government, and managed the farm; women cooked, sewed, and managed the house" (89). Men held positions of authority such as king, governor, general, and a man was considered the head of the household but, within that patriarchy, women exercised considerable power and independence. Egyptologist Barbara Watterson writes:

In ancient Egypt a woman enjoyed the same rights under the **law** as a man. What her *de jure* [rightful entitlement] rights were depended upon her social class not her sex. All landed property descended in the female line, from mother to daughter, on the assumption, perhaps, that maternity is a matter of fact, paternity a matter of opinion. A woman was entitled to administer her own property and dispose of it as she wished. She could buy, sell, be a partner in legal contracts, be executor in wills and witness to legal documents, bring an action at court, and adopt children in her own name. An ancient Egyptian woman was legally *capax* [competent, capable]. In contrast, an ancient **Greek** woman was supervised by a *kyrios* [male guardian] and many Greek women who lived in Egypt during the **Ptolemaic Period**, observing Egyptian women acting without *kyrioi*, were encouraged to do so themselves. In short, an ancient Egyptian woman enjoyed greater social standing than many women of other societies, both ancient and modern. (16)

The respect accorded to women in ancient Egypt is evident in almost every aspect of the civilization from the religious beliefs to social customs. The gods were both male and female, and each had their own equally important areas of expertise. Women could marry who they wanted and divorce those who no longer suited them, could hold what jobs they liked - within limits - and travel at their whim. The earliest creation myths of the **culture** all emphasize, to greater or lesser degrees, the value of the feminine principle.

The Divine Feminine

In the most popular creation myth, the god Atum lights upon the primordial mound in the midst of the swirling waters of chaos and sets about creating the world. In some versions of this tale, however, it is the goddess **Neith** who brings creation and, even where Atum is the central character, the primordial waters are personified as Nu and Naunet, a balance of the male and female principles in harmony which combine for the creative act.

Following the creation and beginning of time, women continue to play a pivotal role as evidenced in the equally popular story of **Osiris** and **Isis**. This brother and sister couple were said to have ruled the world (that being Egypt) after its creation and to have taught human beings the precepts of civilization, the art of **agriculture**, the proper worship of the gods. Osiris is killed by his jealous brother Set, and it is Isis who brings him back to life, who gives birth to his child **Horus** and raises him to be king, and who, with her sister **Nephthys** and other goddesses such as **Serket** and Neith, helps to restore balance to the land.

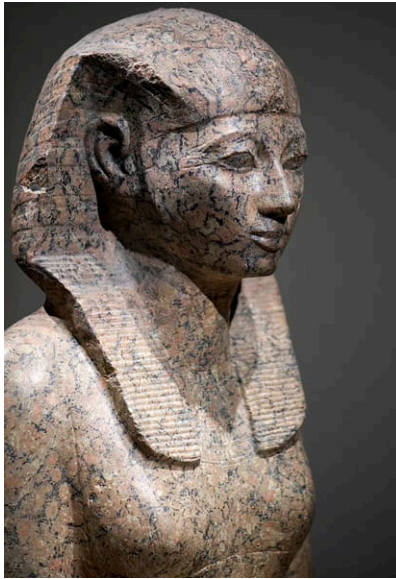


Isis Wall Painting The Yorck Project Gesellschaft für Bildarchivierung GmbH (GNU FDL)

The goddess **Hathor**, sent to earth as the destroyer Sekhmet to punish humans for their transgressions, becomes people's friend and close companion after getting drunk on **beer** and waking with a more joyful spirit. Tenehet was the goddess of beer, thought to be the drink of the gods, who provided the people with the recipe and oversaw successful brewing. Shay was the goddess of the written word and librarians, Tayet the goddess of weaving, Tefnut the goddess of moisture. Even the passage of the year was viewed as feminine as personified by Renpet who notched her palm branch to **mark** the passage of time. The goddess **Bastet**, one of the most popular in all of Egypt, was a protector of women, of the home, and of women's secrets. **Egyptian religion** honored and elevated the feminine, and so it is hardly surprising that women were important members of the clergy and **temple** life.

Women & Religion

The most important position a woman could hold, beginning in the **Middle Kingdom of Egypt** (2040-1782 BCE), was **God's Wife of Amun**. There were many "God's Wives" associated with different deities, and initially, in the **Middle Kingdom**, the God's Wife of **Amun** was simply one among many. The God's Wife was an honorary title given to a woman (originally of any class but later of the upper class) who would assist the high priest in ceremonies and tend to the god's statue. Throughout the **New Kingdom of Egypt** (1570-1069 BCE) the position increased in prestige until, by the time of the **Third Intermediate Period** (1069-525 BCE), the God's Wife of Amun was equal in power to a king and effectively ruled Upper Egypt. During the **New Kingdom** period, the most famous of the God's Wives was the female pharaoh **Hatshepsut** (1479-1458 BCE) but there were many other women to hold the office before and after her.



Portrait of Queen Hatshepsut Rob Koopman (CC BY-SA)

Women could be scribes and also priests, usually of a cult with a feminine deity. The priests of Isis, for example, were female and male, while cults with a male deity usually had only male priests (as in the case of Amun). The high prestige of the God's Wife of Amun is another example of the balance observed by the ancient Egyptians in that the position of the High Priest of Amun was balanced by an equally powerful female.

It must be noted that the designation 'cult' in describing ancient Egyptian religion does not carry the same meaning it does in the modern day. A cult in ancient Egypt would be the equivalent of a sect in modern religion. It is also important to recognize that there were no religious services as one would observe them in the present. People interacted with their deities most completely at festivals where women regularly played important roles such as the two virgins who would perform *The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys* at the festivals of Osiris. Priests maintained the temples and cared for the statue of the god, and the people visited the temple to ask for help on various matters, repay debts, give thanks, and seek counsel on problems, decisions, and dream interpretation.

Dreams were considered portals to the afterlife, planes on which the gods and the dead could communicate with the living; they did not always do so plainly, however. Skilled interpreters were required to understand the symbols in the dream and what they meant. Egyptologist Rosalie David comments on this:

In the **Deir el-Medina** texts, there are references to 'wise women' and the role they played in predicting future events and their causation. It has been suggested that such seers may have been a regular aspect of practical religion in the New Kingdom and possibly even earlier. (281)

These wise women were adept at interpreting dreams and being able to predict the future. The only extant accounts of dreams and their interpretation come from men, Hor of Sebennytyos and Ptolemaios, son of Glaukios, (both c. 200 BCE), but inscriptions and fragments indicate that women were primarily consulted in these matters. David continues, "Some temples were renowned as centres of dream incubation where the petitioner could pass the night in a special building and communicate with the gods or deceased relatives in order to gain insight into the future" (281). The most famous of these was attached to the Temple of Hathor at Dendera where the clergy was largely female.



The Temple of Hathor Steve F-E-Cameron (CC BY-SA)

Occupations of Women

The clergy of ancient Egypt enjoyed great respect and a comfortable living. History from the **Early Dynastic Period in Egypt** (c. 3150- c. 2613 BCE) through the **Late Period of Ancient Egypt** (525-332 BCE) abounds in records of the clergy, especially that of Amun, amassing land and wealth. In order to become a priest, one had to first be a scribe, which required years of dedicated study. Once a woman became a scribe she could enter the priesthood, go into teaching, or become a physician. Female doctors were highly respected in ancient Egypt, and the medical school in **Alexandria** was attended by students from many other countries. The Greek physician Agnodice, denied an education in **medicine** in **Athens** because of her sex, studied in Egypt c. 4th century BCE and then returned to her home **city** disguised as a man to practice.

As the course of study to become a scribe was long and hard, however, not many people - men or women - chose to pursue it. Further, scribes were usually from families of scribes, where great value was placed on literacy and children were expected to follow in their father's or mother's occupation. Women, therefore, were regularly employed as weavers, bakers, brewers, sandal-makers, basket weavers, cooks, waitresses, or as a "Mistress of the House," which today would be an estate owner. When a woman's husband died, or when they divorced, a woman could keep the home and run it as she liked. This aspect of gender equality is almost astounding when one compares it with women's rights over just the past 200 years. A widow living in America in the early 19th century CE, for example, did not have any rights in home ownership and had to depend on a male relative's intercession to keep her home after the **death** or departure of her husband. In ancient Egypt, a woman could decide for herself how she would make money and keep her estate in order. Scholar James C. Thompson writes:

There were many ways in which a 'Mistress of the House' could supplement her income. Some had small vegetable gardens. Many made clothing. One document shows an enterprising woman purchasing a slave for 400 deben. She paid half in clothing and borrowed the rest from her neighbors. It is likely the woman expected to be able to repay the loan by renting out the slave. Indeed, we have a receipt showing that one woman received several garments, a bull, and sixteen goats as payment for 27 days work by her slave. Those who could not raise the money on their own sometimes joined with neighbors to buy a slave. Women were often part of such a consortium. We know that a woman could inherit and operate a large, wealthy estate. A man who owned such an estate would hire a male scribe to manage it and it would seem reasonable that an heiress would do the same thing. We have little evidence of elite women with paying jobs whether full or part time. (3)

Especially talented women could also find work as concubines. A concubine was not simply a woman who was used for sex but needed to be accomplished in **music**, conversation, weaving, sewing, fashion, culture, religion, and the arts. This is not to say, however, that their physical appearance did not matter. A request for forty concubines from **Amenhotep III** (c. 1386-1353 BCE) to a man named Milkilu, Prince of **Gezer**, makes this clear. Amenhotep III writes:

Behold, I have sent you Hanya, the commissioner of the archers, with merchandise in order to have beautiful concubines, i.e. weavers. **Silver, gold**, garments, all sort of precious stones, chairs of ebony, as well as all good things, worth 160 deben. In total: forty concubines - the price of every concubine is forty of silver. Therefore, send very beautiful concubines without blemish. (Lewis, 146)

These concubines would have been kept by the pharaoh as part of his harem and, in the case of Amenhotep III, very well kept as his **palace** at Malkata was among the most opulent in Egypt's history. The king was considered deserving of many women as long as he remained faithful in caring for his Great Wife but, for most of the Egyptians, marriage was monogamous and for life.

Love, Sex, & Marriage

As noted above by Watterson, women were considered legally capable in every aspect of their lives and did not require the supervision, consultation, or approval of a man in order to pursue any course of action. This paradigm applied to marriage and sex as well as any other area of one's life. Women could marry anyone they chose to, marriages were not arranged by the males of the family, and they could divorce when they pleased. There was no stigma attached to divorce even though a life-long marriage was always regarded as preferable. Brier and Hobbs comment on this:

Whether rich or poor, any free person had the right to the joys of marriage. Marriage was not a religious matter in Egypt - no ceremony involving a priest took place - but simply a social convention that required an agreement, which is to say a contract, negotiated by the suitor on the family of his prospective wife. The agreement involved an exchange of objects of value on both sides. The suitor offered a sum called the "virginity gift" when appropriate, to compensate the bride for what she would lose, indicating that in ancient times virginity was prized in female brides. The gift did not apply in the case of second marriages, of course, but a "gift to the bride" would be made even in that case. In return, the family of the bride-to-be offered a "gift in order to become a wife". In many cases, these two gifts were never delivered since the pair soon merged households. However, in the event of divorce, either party could later sue for the agreed gift. (88)

Ancient Egyptian couples also entered into prenuptial agreements which favored the woman. If a man initiated the divorce, he lost all right to sue for the gifts and had to pay a certain sum in alimony to his ex-wife until she either remarried or requested he stop payment. The children of the marriage always went with their mother and the home, unless it had been owned by the husband's family, remained with her.



Sabu's Family Group Statue Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin (CC BY-NC-SA)

Birth control and abortions were available to married and unmarried women. The Ebers Medical Papyrus, c. 1542 BCE, contains a passage on birth control: "Prescription to make a woman cease to become pregnant for one, two, or three years. Grind together finely a measure of acacia dates with some honey. Moisten seed-wood with the mixture and insert into the vagina" (Lewis, 112).

Even though virginity might have been prized by men initiating marriage, it was not required that a woman be virgin on her wedding night. A woman's sexual experience before marriage was not a matter of great concern. The only admonitions concerning female sexuality have to do with women who tempt men away from their wives. This was simply because a stable marriage contributed to a stable community, and so it was in the best interests of all for a couple to remain together. Further, the ancient Egyptians believed that one's earthly life was only a part of an eternal journey and one was expected to make one's life, including one's marriage, worth experiencing forever.

Reliefs, paintings, and inscriptions depict husbands and wives eating together, dancing, drinking, and working the fields with one another. Even though Egyptian art is highly idealized it is apparent that many people enjoyed happy marriages and remained together for life. Love poems were extremely popular in Egypt praising the beauty and goodness of one's girlfriend or wife and swearing eternal love in phrases very like modern love songs: "I shall never be far away from you/While my hand is in your hand/ And I shall stroll with you/In every favourite place" (Lewis, 201). The speakers in these poems are both male and female and address all aspects of romantic love. The Egyptians took great joy in the simplest aspects of life and one did not have to be royalty to enjoy the company of one's lover, wife, family, or friends.

Egyptian Queens & the Lost Gifts of Isis

Still, there is no denying that Egyptian royalty lived well and the many queens and lesser wives who lived in the palace would have experienced enormous luxury. The palace of Amenhotep III at Malkata, mentioned above, extended over 30,000 square meters (30 hectares) with spacious apartments, conference rooms, audience chambers, a throne room and receiving hall, a festival hall, libraries, gardens, storerooms, kitchens, a harem, and a temple to the god Amun. The palace's outer walls gleamed brightly white, while the interior colors were a lively blue, golden-yellow, and vibrant green. The women who lived in such palaces experienced a life far above that of the lower classes but still had their duties to fulfill in keeping with *ma'at*.

Egyptologist Sally-Ann Ashton writes, "In a world that was dominated by the male pharaoh, it is often difficult to comprehend fully the roles of Egyptian queens. A pharaoh would have a number of queens but the most important would be elevated to "principal wife" (1). The role of the principal or great wife varied with the pharaoh. In the case of Queen **Tiye** (1398-1338 BCE), the wife of Amenhotep III, she regularly took part in the affairs of state, acted as a diplomat, and even had her name written in a cartouche, like a king. **Nefertiti** (c. 1370-1336 BCE), the wife of **Akhenaten**, cared for their family while also helping her husband run the country. When her husband essentially abandoned his duties as pharaoh to concentrate on his new monotheistic religion, Nefertiti assumed his responsibilities.

fig-ch01_patchfile_01.jpg

Queen Nefertiti Philip Pikart (CC BY-SA)

Great queens are recorded as far back as the **Early Dynastic** Period in Egypt with Queen Merneith (c. 3000 BCE) who ruled as regent for her son Den. Queen Sobeknefru (c. 1807-1802 BCE) took the throne during the Middle Kingdom of Egypt and ruled as a woman without regard for the trappings of tradition that only a male could reign over Egypt. Hatshepsut of the 18th Dynasty took Sobeknefru's example further and had herself crowned pharaoh. Hatshepsut continues to be considered one of the most powerful women of the ancient world and among the greatest pharaohs of Egypt.

Although female rulers are in the minority in ancient Egypt, powerful queens are not. Their duties and many of their activities remain undocumented or, at least, untranslated, but there is no doubt - based on the information that is available - that these women exerted considerable influence over their husbands, the court, and the country.

WOMEN'S STATUS IN EGYPT WAS INCREDIBLY ADVANCED FOR ANY TIME IN WORLD HISTORY, INCLUDING THE PRESENT.

In the beginning of time, when Osiris and Isis ruled over the world in peace and justice, Isis is said to have given gifts to humanity and, among them, the gift of equality between men and women. This Egyptian legend is exemplified by the high status women enjoyed throughout Egypt's history. Brier and Hobbs note how "the status of women in Egypt was incredibly advanced for the time" (89). This is no doubt true, but one could argue that women's status was incredibly advanced for any time in world history, including the present. A woman in ancient Egypt had more rights than many women living in the present day.

Equality and respect for women continued through the **Ptolemaic Dynasty** (323-30 BCE), the last to rule Egypt before it was annexed by **Rome**. **Cleopatra VII** (c. 69-30 BCE), the last queen of Egypt, is among the best representatives of women's equality

as she ruled the country far better than the males who preceded her or thought to co-rule with her. Women's status began to decline in Egypt with the rise of **Christianity** in the 4th century CE and its belief that sin had entered the world through Eve's disobedience and that women were of less value and less to be trusted than men. The Arab Invasion of the 7th century CE brought **Islam** to Egypt and effectively ended the kind of equality women had known in the country for almost 3,000 years.

Bibliography

- Ashton, S. *The Last Queens of Egypt*. Routledge, 2003.
- Brier, B & Hobbs, H. *Ancient Egypt: Everyday Life in the Land of the Nile*. Sterling, 2013.
- David, R. *Religion and Magic in Ancient Egypt*. Penguin Books, 2003.
- Graves-Brown, C. *Dancing for Hathor: Women in Ancient Egypt*. Continuum, 2010.
- Lewis, J. E. *The Mammoth Book of Eyewitness Ancient Egypt*. Running Press, 2003.
- Robins, G. *Women in Ancient Egypt*. Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Shaw, I. *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. Oxford, 2016.
- Tyldesley, J. *Daughters of Isis: Women of Ancient Egypt*. Penguin Books, 1995.
- Watterson, B. *The Egyptians*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1997.
- Watterson, B. *Women in Ancient Egypt*. Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994.

Contributors and Attributions

Joshua J. Mark

A freelance writer and former part-time Professor of Philosophy at Marist College, New York, Joshua J. Mark has lived in Greece and Germany and traveled through Egypt. He has taught history, writing, literature, and philosophy at the college level.

This page titled [4.3: Women in Ancient Egypt](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

4.4: Ancient Egyptian Religion

https://www.worldhistory.org/Egyptian_Religion/

Definition



Pyramidion of Ramose [Detail] Mark Cartwright (CC BY-NC-SA)

Egyptian religion was a combination of beliefs and practices which, in the modern day, would include **Egyptian mythology**, **science**, **medicine**, psychiatry, magic, spiritualism, herbology, as well as the modern understanding of 'religion' as belief in a higher power and a life after **death**.

Religion played a part in every aspect of the lives of the ancient Egyptians because life on earth was seen as only one part of an eternal journey, and in order to continue that journey after death, one needed to live a life worthy of continuance. During one's life on earth, one was expected to uphold the principle of **ma'at** (harmony) with an understanding that one's actions in life affected not only one's self but others' lives as well, and the operation of the universe. People were expected to depend on each other to keep balance as this was the will of the gods to produce the greatest amount of pleasure and happiness for humans through a harmonious existence which also enabled the gods to better perform their tasks.

By honoring the principle of **ma'at** (personified as a goddess of the same name holding the white feather of truth) and living one's life in accordance with its precepts, one was aligned with the gods and the forces of light against the forces of darkness and chaos, and assured one's self of a welcome reception in the Hall of Truth after death and a gentle judgment by **Osiris**, the Lord of the Dead.

The Gods

The underlying principle of **Egyptian** religion was known as **heka** (magic) personified in the god Heka. Heka had always existed and was present in the act of creation. He was the god of magic and medicine but was also the power which enabled the gods to perform their functions and allowed human beings to commune with their gods. He was all-pervasive and all-encompassing, imbuing the daily lives of the Egyptians with magic and meaning and sustaining the principle of **ma'at** upon which life depended.

Possibly the best way to understand Heka is in terms of money: one is able to purchase a particular item with a certain denomination of currency because that item's value is considered the same, or less, than that denomination. The bill in one's hand has an invisible value given it by a standard of worth (once upon a time the **gold** standard) which promises a merchant it

will compensate for what one is buying. This is exactly the relationship of Heka to the gods and human existence: he was the standard, the foundation of power, on which everything else depended. A god or goddess was invoked for a specific purpose, was worshipped for what they had given, but it was Heka who enabled this relationship between the people and their deities.

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



The gods of ancient **Egypt** were seen as the lords of creation and custodians of order but also as familiar friends who were interested in helping and guiding the people of the land. The gods had created order out of chaos and given the people the most beautiful land on earth. Egyptians were so deeply attached to their homeland that they shunned prolonged military campaigns beyond their borders for fear they would die on foreign soil and would not be given the proper rites for their continued journey after life. Egyptian monarchs refused to give their daughters in marriage to foreign rulers for the same reason. The gods of Egypt had blessed the land with their special favor, and the people were expected to honor them as great and kindly benefactors.

THE GODS OF ANCIENT EGYPT WERE SEEN AS THE LORDS OF CREATION & CUSTODIANS OF ORDER BUT ALSO AS FAMILIAR FRIENDS WHO WERE INTERESTED IN HELPING & GUIDING THE PEOPLE OF THE LAND.

Long ago, they believed, there had been nothing but the dark swirling waters of chaos stretching into eternity. Out of this chaos (*Nu*) rose the primordial hill, known as the *ben-ben*, upon which stood the great god Atum (some versions say the god was Ptah but many others that it was Ra who eventually was known as Atum-Ra) in the presence of Heka.

Atum-Ra looked upon the nothingness and recognized his aloneness, and so he mated with his own shadow to give birth to two children, Shu (god of air, whom Atum-Ra spat out) and Tefnut (goddess of moisture, whom Atum-Ra vomited out). Shu gave to the early world the principles of life while Tefnut contributed the principles of order. Leaving their father on the *ben-ben*, they set out to establish the world.

In time, Atum-Ra became concerned because his children were gone so long, and so he removed his eye and sent it in search of them. While his eye was gone, Atum-Ra sat alone on the hill in the midst of chaos and contemplated eternity. Shu and Tefnut returned with the eye of Atum-Ra (later associated with the Udjat eye, the Eye of Ra, or the All-Seeing Eye) and their father, grateful for their safe return, shed tears of joy. These tears, dropping onto the dark, fertile earth of the *ben-ben*, gave birth to men and **women**.

These humans had nowhere to live, however, and so Shu and Tefnut mated and gave birth to Geb (the earth) and Nut (the sky). Geb and Nut, though brother and sister, fell deeply in love and were inseparable. Atum-Ra found their behaviour unacceptable and pushed Nut away from Geb, high up into the heavens. The two lovers were forever able to see each other but were no longer able to touch. Nut was already pregnant by Geb, however, and eventually gave birth to Osiris, **Isis**, Set, **Nephthys**, and **Horus** – the five Egyptian gods most often recognized as the earliest (although **Hathor** is now considered to be older than Isis). These gods then gave birth to all the other gods in one form or another.



Horus Statuette Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin (CC BY-NC-SA)

The gods each had their own area of specialty. **Bastet**, for example, was the goddess of the hearth, home life, women's health and secrets, and of cats. Hathor was the goddess of kindness and love, associated with gratitude and generosity, motherhood, and compassion. According to one early story surrounding her, however, known as the **Book of the Heavenly Cow**, she was sent to earth to destroy humanity and became the goddess Sekhmet who, drunk on blood, almost destroyed the world until she was pacified and put to sleep by **beer** which the gods had dyed red to fool her.

When she awoke from her sleep, she was transformed into the gentler deity Hathor who pledged her eternal service to humanity. Although Hathor was associated with beer, Tenenet was the principal goddess of the beverage and also presided over childbirth. Beer was considered essential for one's health in ancient Egypt and a gift from the gods, and there were many deities associated with the drink which was said to have been first brewed by Osiris.

An early myth tells of how Osiris was tricked and killed by his brother Set and how Isis brought him back to life. He was incomplete, however, as a fish had eaten a part of him, and so he could no longer rule harmoniously on earth and was made Lord of the Dead in the underworld. His son, Horus the Younger, battled Set for eighty years and finally defeated him to restore harmony to the land. Horus and Isis then ruled together, and all the other gods found their places and areas of expertise to help and encourage the people of Egypt.

Among the most important of these gods were the three who made up the Theban Triad: **Amun**, Mut, and Khons (also known as Khonsu). Amun was a local fertility god of **Thebes** until the Theban noble Menuhotep II (2061-2010 BCE) defeated his rivals and united Egypt, elevating Thebes to the position of capital and its gods to supremacy. Amun, Mut, and Khons of Upper Egypt (where Thebes was located) took on the attributes of Ptah, Sekhmet, and Khonsu of Lower Egypt who were much older deities. Amun became the supreme creator god, symbolized by the sun; Mut was his wife, symbolized by the sun's rays and the all-seeing eye; and Khons was their son, the god of healing and destroyer of evil spirits.

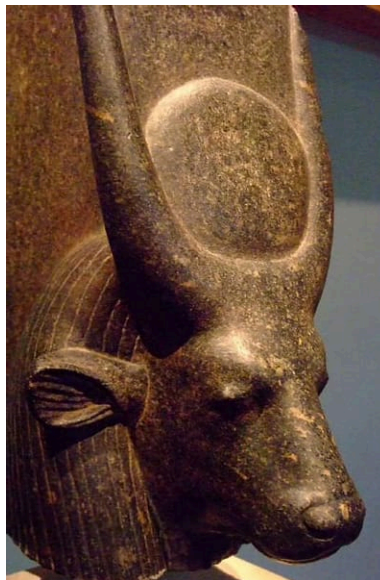
These three gods were associated with Ogdoad of Hermopolis, a group of eight primordial deities who "embodied the qualities of primeval matter, such as darkness, moistness, and lack of boundaries or visible powers. It usually consisted of four deities doubled to eight by including female counterparts" (Pinch, 175-176). The Ogdoad (pronounced OG-doh-ahd) represented the state of the cosmos before land rose from the waters of chaos and light broke through the primordial darkness and were also referred to as the Hehu ('the infinities'). They were Amun and Amaunet, Heh and Hauhet, Kek and Kauket, and Nun and Naunet each representing a different aspect of the formless and unknowable time before creation: Hiddenness (Amun/Amaunet), Infinity (Heh/Hauhet), Darkness (Kek/Kauket), and the Abyss (Nun/Naunet). The Ogdoad are the best example of the Egyptian's insistence on symmetry and balance in all things embodied in their male/female aspect which was thought to have engendered the principle of harmony in the cosmos before the birth of the world.

Harmony & Eternity

The Egyptians believed that the earth (specifically Egypt) reflected the cosmos. The stars in the night sky and the constellations they formed were thought to have a direct bearing on one's personality and future fortunes. The gods informed the night sky, even traveled through it, but were not distant deities in the heavens; the gods lived alongside the people of Egypt and interacted with them daily. Trees were considered the homes of the gods and one of the most popular of the Egyptian deities, Hathor, was sometimes known as "Mistress of the Date Palm" or "The Lady of the Sycamore" because she was thought to favor these particular trees to rest in or beneath. Scholars Oakes and Gahlin note that

Presumably because of the shade and the fruit provided by them, goddesses associated with protection, mothering, and nurturing were closely associated with [trees]. Hathor, Nut, and Isis appear frequently in the religious imagery and **literature** [in relation to trees]. (332)

Plants and flowers were also associated with the gods, and the flowers of the ished tree were known as "flowers of life" for their life-giving properties. Eternity, then, was not an ethereal, nebulous concept of some 'heaven' far from the earth but a daily encounter with the gods and goddesses one would continue to have contact with forever, in life and after death.



Hathor Mary Harrsch (Photographed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art) (CC BY-NC-SA)

In order for one to experience this kind of bliss, however, one needed to be aware of the importance of harmony in one's life and how a lack of such harmony affected others as well as one's self. The 'gateway sin' for the ancient Egyptians was ingratitude because it threw one off balance and allowed for every other sin to take root in a person's soul. Once one lost sight of what there was to be grateful for, one's thoughts and energies were drawn toward the forces of darkness and chaos.

This belief gave rise to rituals such as The Five Gifts of Hathor in which one would consider the fingers of one's hand and name the five things in life one was most grateful for. One was encouraged to be specific in this, naming anything one held dear such as a spouse, one's children, one's dog or cat, or the tree by the stream in the yard. As one's hand was readily available at all times, it would serve as a reminder that there were always five things one should be grateful for, and this would help one to maintain a light heart in keeping with harmonious balance. This was important throughout one's life and remained equally significant after one's death since, in order to progress on toward an eternal life of bliss, one's heart needed to be lighter than a feather when one stood in judgment before Osiris.

The Soul & The Hall of Truth

According to the scholar Margaret Bunson:

The Egyptians feared eternal darkness and unconsciousness in the afterlife because both conditions belied the orderly

transmission of light and movement evident in the universe. They understood that death was the gateway to eternity. The Egyptians thus esteemed the act of dying and venerated the structures and the rituals involved in such a human adventure. (86)

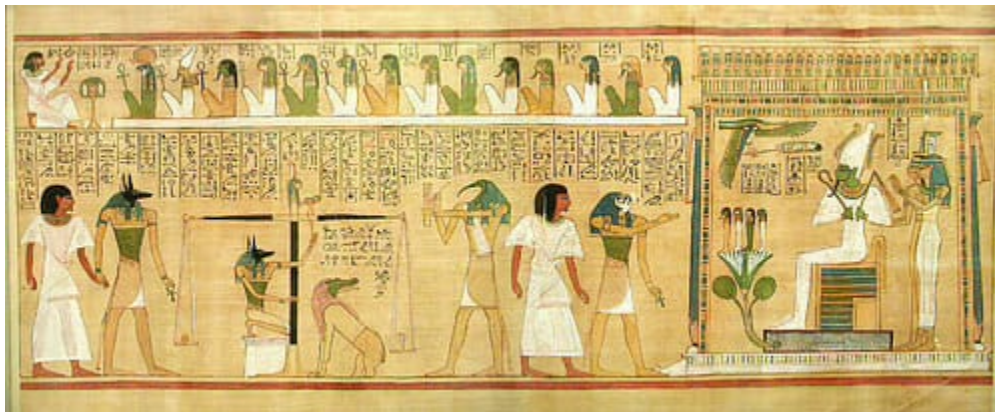
The structures of the dead can still be seen throughout Egypt in the modern day in the tombs and **pyramids** which still rise from the landscape. There were structures and rituals after life, however, which were just as important.

The soul was thought to consist of nine separate parts:

- *Khat* was the physical body
- *Ka* was one's double-form
- *Ba* was a human-headed bird aspect which could speed between earth and the heavens
- *Shuyet* was the shadow self
- *Akh* was the immortal, transformed self
- *Sahu* and *Sechem* were aspects of the *Akh*
- *Ab* was the heart, the source of good and evil
- *Ren* was one's secret name.

All nine of these aspects were part of one's earthly existence and, at death, the *Akh* (with the *Sahu* and *Sechem*) appeared before the great god Osiris in the Hall of Truth and in the presence of the **Forty-Two Judges** to have one's heart (*Ab*) weighed in the balance on a golden scale against the white feather of truth.

One would need to recite **the Negative Confession** (a list of those sins one could honestly claim one had not committed in life) and then one's heart was placed on the scale. If one's heart was lighter than the feather, one waited while Osiris conferred with the Forty-Two Judges and the god of wisdom, **Thoth**, and, if considered worthy, was allowed to pass on through the hall and continue one's existence in paradise; if one's heart was heavier than the feather it was thrown to the floor where it was devoured by the monster Ammut (the gobbler), and one then ceased to exist.



Weighing the Heart, Book of the Dead Jon Bodsworth (Public Domain)

Once through the Hall of Truth, one was then guided to the boat of Hraf-haf ("He Who Looks Behind Him"), an unpleasant creature, always cranky and offensive, whom one had to find some way to be kind and courteous to. By showing kindness to the unkind Hraf-haf, one showed one was worthy to be ferried across the waters of Lily Lake (also known as The Lake of Flowers) to the **Field of Reeds** which was a mirror image of one's life on earth except there was no disease, no disappointment, and no death. One would then continue one's existence just as before, awaiting those one loved in life to pass over themselves or meeting those who had gone on before.

The Clergy, Temples & Scripture

Although the **Greek** historian **Herodotus** claims that only men could be priests in ancient Egypt, the Egyptian record argues otherwise. Women could be priests of the cult of their goddess from the **Old Kingdom** onward and were accorded the same respect as their male counterparts. Usually a member of the clergy had to be of the same sex as the deity they served. The cult of Hathor, most notably, was routinely attended to by female clergy (it should be noted that 'cult' did not have the same meaning

in ancient Egypt that it does today. Cults were simply sects of one religion). Priests and Priestesses could marry, have children, own land and homes and lived as anyone else except for certain ritual practices and observances regarding purification before officiating. Bunson writes:

In most periods, the priests of Egypt were members of a family long connected to a particular cult or **temple**. Priests recruited new members from among their own clans, generation after generation. This meant that they did not live apart from their own people and thus maintained an awareness of the state of affairs in their communities. (209)

Priests, like scribes, went through a prolonged training period before beginning service and, once ordained, took care of the temple or temple complex, performed rituals and observances (such as marriages, blessings on a home or project, funerals), performed the duties of doctors, healers, astrologers, scientists, and psychologists, and also interpreted dreams. They blessed amulets to ward off demons or increase fertility, and also performed exorcisms and purification rites to rid a home of ghosts.

Their chief duty was to the god they served and the people of the community, and an important part of that duty was their care of the temple and the statue of the god within. Priests were also doctors in the service of Heka, no matter what other deity they served directly. An example of this is how all the priests and priestesses of the goddess **Serket** (**Selket**) were doctors but their ability to heal and invoke Serket was enabled through the power of Heka.

The temples of ancient Egypt were thought to be the literal homes of the deities they honored. Every morning the head priest or priestess, after purifying themselves with a bath and dressing in clean white linen and clean sandals, would enter the temple and attend to the statue of the god as they would to a person they were charged to care for.

The doors of the sanctuary were opened to let in the morning light, and the statue, which always resided in the innermost sanctuary, was cleaned, dressed, and anointed with oil; afterwards, the sanctuary doors were closed and locked. No one but the head priest was allowed such close contact with the god. Those who came to the temple to worship only were allowed in the outer areas where they were met by lesser clergy who addressed their needs and accepted their offerings.

Egyptian Temple

Egyptian Temple Georges Perrot and Charles Chipiez (1883) (Public Domain)

There were no official 'scriptures' used by the clergy but the concepts conveyed at the temple are thought to have been similar to those found in works such as the **Pyramid Texts**, the later **Coffin Texts**, and the spells found in the **Egyptian Book of the Dead**. Although the **Book of the Dead** is often referred to as 'The Ancient Egyptian Bible' it was no such thing. The *Book of the Dead* is a collection of spells for the soul in the afterlife. The *Pyramid Texts* are the oldest religious texts in ancient Egypt dating from c. 2400-2300 BCE. The *Coffin Texts* were developed later from the *Pyramid Texts* c. 2134-2040 BCE while the *Book of the Dead* (actually known as the *Book of Coming Forth by Day*) was set down sometime c. 1550-1070 BCE.

All three of these works deal with how the soul is to navigate the afterlife. Their titles (given by European scholars) and the number of grand tombs and statuary throughout Egypt, not to mention the elaborate **burial** rituals and mummies, have led many people to conclude that **Egyptian culture** was obsessed with death when, actually, the Egyptians were wholly concerned with life. The *Book of Coming Forth by Day*, as well as the earlier texts, present spiritual truths one would have heard while in life and remind the soul of how one should now act in the next phase of one's existence without a physical body or a material world. The soul of any Egyptian was expected to recall these truths from life, even if they never set foot inside a temple compound, because of the many religious festivals the Egyptians enjoyed throughout the year.

Religious Festivals & Religious Life

Religious festivals in Egypt integrated the sacred aspect of the gods seamlessly with the daily lives of the people. Egyptian scholar Lynn Meskell notes that "religious festivals actualized belief; they were not simply social celebrations. They acted in a multiplicity of related spheres" (Nardo, 99). There were grand festivals such as The Beautiful Festival of the Wadi in honor of the god Amun and lesser festivals for other gods or to celebrate events in the life of the community.

Bunson writes, "On certain days, in some eras several times a month, the god was carried on arks or ships into the streets or set sail on the **Nile**. There the oracles took place and the priests answered petitions" (209). The statue of the god would be removed from the inner sanctuary to visit the members of the community and take part in the celebration; a custom which may have developed independently in Egypt or come from **Mesopotamia** where this practice had a long history.

The Beautiful Festival of the Wadi was a celebration of life, wholeness, and community, and, as Meskell notes, people attended this festival and visited the shrine to "pray for bodily integrity and physical vitality" while leaving offerings to the god or goddess as a sign of gratitude for their lives and health. Meskell writes:

One may envisage a priest or priestess coming and collecting the offerings and then replacing the baskets, some of which have been detected archaeologically. The fact that these items of jewelry were personal objects suggests a powerful and intimate link with the goddess. Moreover, at the shrine site of Timna in the Sinai, votives were ritually smashed to signify the handing over from human to deity, attesting to the range of ritual practices occurring at the time. There was a high proportion of female donors in the **New Kingdom**, although generally **tomb** paintings tend not to show the religious practices of women but rather focus on male activities. (101)

The smashing of the votives signified one's surrender to the benevolent will of the gods. A votive was anything offered in fulfillment of a vow or in the hopes of attaining some wish. While votives were often left intact, they were sometimes ritually destroyed to signify the devotion one had to the gods; one was surrendering to them something precious which one could not take back.

There was no distinction at these festivals between those acts considered 'holy' and those which a modern sensibility would label 'profane'. The whole of one's life was open for exploration during a festival, and this included sexual activity, drunkenness, prayer, blessings for one's sex life, for one's family, for one's health, and offerings made both in gratitude and thanksgiving and in supplication.

Families attended the festivals together as did teenagers and young couples and those hoping to find a mate. Elder members of the community, the wealthy, the poor, the ruling class, and the slaves were all a part of the religious life of the community because their religion and their daily lives were completely intertwined and, through that faith, they recognized their individual lives were all an interwoven tapestry with every other.

Bibliography

- Allen, J. P. *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*. SBL Press, 2015.
- Bunson, M. *Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*. Gramercy Books, 1991.
- Champollion, J. *World of the Egyptians*. W.& G. Foyle Ltd, 1971.
- Gibson, C. *The Hidden Life of Ancient Egypt*. Fall River Press, 2009.
- Nardo, D. *Living in Ancient Egypt*. Greenhaven Press, 2004.
- Oakes, L. & Gahlin, L. *Ancient Egypt*. Anness Publishing, Ltd., 2008.
- Pinch, G. *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt*. Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Shaw, I. *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Wallis-Budge, E. A. *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. Dover Publications, 1967.
- Wilkinson, R. H. *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*. Thames & Hudson, 2017.

Contributors and Attributions

Joshua J. Mark

A freelance writer and former part-time Professor of Philosophy at Marist College, New York, Joshua J. Mark has lived in Greece and Germany and traveled through Egypt. He has taught history, writing, literature, and philosophy at the college level.

4.5: Egyptian Book of the Dead

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



4.6: Egyptian Art

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



5: ANCIENT GREECE

- 5.1: Overview of Ancient Greece
- 5.2: Persians and Greeks - Crash Course
- 5.3: Women in Ancient Greece
- 5.4: Greek Mythology
- 5.5: Philosophy - Plato
- 5.6: Plato on The Allegory of the Cave
- 5.7: Plato's Ladder of Love
- 5.8: Philosophy - Aristotle
- 5.9: Introduction to Greek Architecture
- 5.10: Greek Art History

5.1: Overview of Ancient Greece

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



5.2: Persians and Greeks - Crash Course

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



5.3: Women in Ancient Greece

<https://www.worldhistory.org/article...ncient-greece/>

Article

Women in the ancient **Greek** world had few rights in comparison to male citizens. Unable to vote, own land, or inherit, a woman's place was in the home and her purpose in life was the rearing of children. That is a general description and when considering Greek women one should remember our sources are incomplete and not always unbiased.

Unfortunately, information regarding specific **city**-states is often lacking regarding women and is almost always from male authors. Only in **Athens** can their status and role be described in any great detail. Neither are we sure of the practical and everyday application of the rules and laws that have survived from antiquity. We do know that Spartan women were treated somewhat differently than in other states. For example, they had to do physical training like men, were permitted to own land, and could drink wine.

There were also categories of women which are less well-documented than others such as professional women who worked in shops and as prostitutes and courtesans; the social rules and customs applied to them are even more vague than for the female members of citizen families. Finally, in contrast to the lot of most women, some exceptionally and exceptional, rose above the limitations of Greek society and gained lasting acclaim as poets (**Sappho of Lesbos**), philosophers (Arete of **Cyrene**), leaders (**Gorgo of Sparta** and Aspasia of Athens), and physicians (Agnodice of Athens).



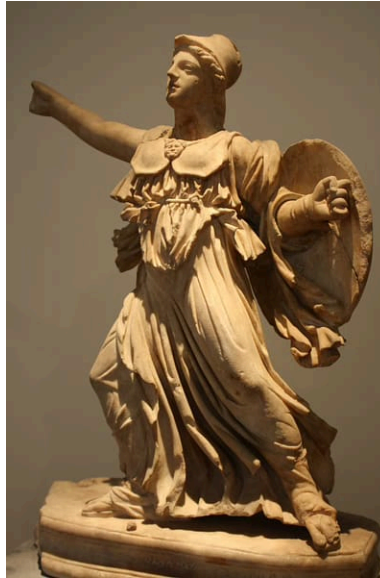
Symposiast & Hetaira SebastiÃ Giralt (CC BY-NC-SA)

Women in Mythology

Considering their limited role in actual society there is a surprisingly strong cast of female characters in **Greek religion** and mythology. **Athena**, the goddess of wisdom and patron of Athens stands out as a powerful figure blessed with intelligence, courage and honour. Again common to most ancient cultures where **agriculture** was crucial to the community, female fertility goddesses were extremely important and particularly venerated - **Demeter** and **Persephone** being the most revered for the Greeks.

As in other ancient male-dominated **literature**, women are often cast as troublemakers, from jealous **Hera** to **Aphrodite** employing her charms to make men lose their wits. Myths and literature abound with female characters

trying their best to derail the plans of male heroes, from the supreme witch **Medea** to the deadly, if lovely, Sirens. They can also be represented as ruled only by wild passion and ecstatic emotion such as the Maenads. In contrast, the ideal chaste woman loyal to her absent husband is epitomised by Penelope in **Homer's *Odyssey***. The **Muses** are another positive representation, celebrated not only for their physical beauty but also their wide-ranging skills in the arts. Whether these fictional characters had any bearing on the role of women in real life is an open question, as is the more intriguing one of what did Greek women themselves think of such male-created role-models? Perhaps we will never know.



Athena (after the East pediment of the Parthenon) Mark Cartwright (CC BY-NC-SA)

Girls

As in many other male-dominated and agrarian cultures, female babies were at a much higher risk of being abandoned at birth by their parents than male offspring. Children of citizens attended schools where the curriculum covered reading, **writing**, and mathematics. After these basics were mastered, studies turned to literature (for example, Homer), poetry, and **music** (especially the **lyre**). Athletics was also an essential element in a young person's education. Girls were educated in a similar manner to boys but with a greater emphasis on dancing, gymnastics, and musical accomplishment which could be shown off in musical competitions and at religious festivals and ceremonies. The ultimate goal of a girl's education was to prepare her for her role in rearing a family and not directly to stimulate intellectual development.

THE GOAL OF A GIRL'S EDUCATION WAS TO PREPARE HER FOR HER ROLE IN REARING A FAMILY & NOT TO STIMULATE INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT.

An important part of a girl's upbringing involved pederasty (it was not only practised by mature males and boys). This was a relationship between an adult and an adolescent which included sexual relations but in addition to a physical relationship, the older partner acted as a mentor to the youth and educated them through the elder's worldly and practical experience.

Young Women

Young women were expected to marry as a virgin, and marriage was usually organised by their father, who chose the husband and accepted from him a dowry. If a woman had no father, then her interests (marriage prospects and property management) were looked after by a guardian (*kyrios* or *kurios*), perhaps an uncle or another male relative. Married at the typical age of 13 or 14, love had little to do with the matching of husband and wife (*damar*). Of course, love may have developed between the couple, but the best that might be hoped for was *philia* - a general friendship/love sentiment; **eros**, the love of desire, was often sought elsewhere by the husband. All women were expected to marry, there was no provision and no role in Greek society for single mature females.



Greek Peplos Dress Mark Cartwright (CC BY-NC-SA)

Married Women

In the family home, women were expected to rear children and manage the daily requirements of the household. They had the help of slaves if the husband could afford them. Contact with non-family males was discouraged and women largely occupied their time with indoor activities such as wool-work and weaving. They could go out and visit the homes of friends and were able to participate in public religious ceremonies and festivals. Whether women could attend **theatre** performances or not is still disputed amongst scholars. More clear is that women could not attend public assemblies, vote, or hold public office. Even a woman's name was not to be mentioned in public – for good reasons or bad.

Married women were, at least in the eyes of the **law**, under the complete authority of their husbands. Such writers as **Aristotle** have no doubts that women were intellectually incapable of making important decisions for themselves. In practice, of course, individual couples may well have shared their lives more equitably. Women were expected to be faithful to their husbands, but the reverse was not the case as husbands could freely engage the services of prostitutes, live-in lovers, and courtesans. Any woman who did not preserve the honour of the family (and so protect the legitimacy of the male line) was guilty of the serious crime of *moicheia* which would lead to her being banned from practising in public religious ceremonies. A husband who discovered that their wife was engaging in sexual relations with another man could murder the lover without fear of prosecution.

If a woman's father died, she usually inherited nothing if she had any brothers. If she were a single child, then either her guardian or husband, when married, took control of the inheritance. In some cases when a single female inherited her father's estate, she was obliged to marry her nearest male relative, typically an uncle. Females could inherit from the **death** of other male relatives, providing there was no male relative in line. Women did have some personal property, typically acquired as gifts from family members, which was usually in the form of clothes and jewellery. Women could not make a will and, on death, all of their property would go to their husband.



Head of Penelope Carole Raddato (CC BY-SA)

Marriages could be ended on three grounds. The first and most common was repudiation by the husband (*apopempsis* or *ekpempsis*). No reason was necessary, only the return of the dowry was expected. The second termination cause was the wife leaving the family home (*apoleipsis*), and in this case, the woman's new guardian was required to act as her legal representative. This was, however, a rare occurrence, and the woman's reputation in society was damaged as a result. The third ground for termination was when the bride's father asked for his daughter back (*aphairesis*), probably to offer her to another man with a more attractive dowry. This last option was only possible, however, if the wife had not had children. If a woman was left a widow, she was required to marry a close male relative in order to ensure property stayed within the family.

Other Roles

Women, of course, were also present in the various other non-citizen classes. As slaves, they would have performed all manner of duties and they would also have worked in businesses such as shops and bakeries. The group for which we have most information is that of sex-workers. Women were here divided into two categories. The first and perhaps most common was the brothel prostitute (*pornē*). The second type was the higher-class prostitute (*hetaira*). These latter women were educated in music (especially the flute) and **culture** and often formed lasting relationships with married men. It was also this class of women that entertained men (in every sense) at the celebrated **symposium**, the private drinking party for male guests only.

Finally, some women participated in cults and performed as priestesses to certain female deities (Demeter and Aphrodite especially) and also **Dionysos**. Priestesses, unlike their male counterparts, did have the added restriction that they were often, but not always, selected because they were virgins or beyond menopause. Worshipers, on the other hand, could be both sexes, and those rituals with restrictions could exclude either men or women. The Thesmophoria fertility festival was the most widespread such event and was only attended by married women. Each year in Athens, four young women were selected to serve the priestess of Athena Polias and weave the sacred peplos robe which would adorn the cult statue of the goddess. Perhaps the most famous female religious role was the aged **Pythia** oracle at **Delphi** who interpreted the proclamations of **Apoll**

Bibliography

- Bagnall, R. et al. *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2012
- Boys-Stones et al. *The Oxford Handbook of Hellenic Studies*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Hornblower, S. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Kinzl, H. *A Companion to the Classical Greek World*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2016.

Contributors and Attributions

Mark Cartwright

Mark is a history writer based in Italy. His special interests include pottery, architecture, world mythology and discovering the ideas that all civilizations share in common. He holds an MA in Political Philosophy and is the Publishing Director at WHE.

This page titled [5.3: Women in Ancient Greece](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

5.4: Greek Mythology

https://www.worldhistory.org/Greek_Mythology/

Definition



The Birth of Venus by Bouguereau William-Adolphe Bouguereau (CC BY-SA)

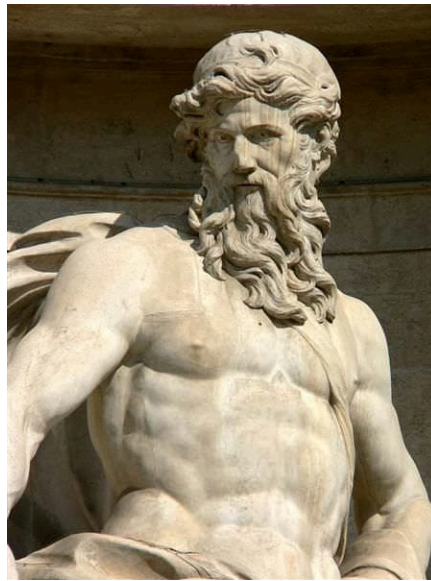
Greek mythology was used as a means to explain the environment in which humankind lived, the natural phenomena they witnessed and the passing of time through the days, months, and seasons. **Greek** myths were also intricately connected to **religion** and explained the origin and lives of the gods, where humanity had come from and where it was going after **death**.

Greek myths also gave people helpful advice on the best way to lead a happy life. Another purpose of myths was to re-tell historical events so that people could maintain contact with their ancestors, the wars they fought, and the places they explored.

The Telling of Myths

In modern usage the term 'myth' perhaps has negative connotations suggesting a lack of authenticity and reliability. However, it should not be assumed that myths were whole-heartedly believed in nor should it be assumed that the Greeks were wholly sceptical of them. Probably, the Greek myths, as with any religious or non-written sources, were believed by some and discounted by others. Myths were certainly used for religious and educational purposes but also may well have had a simple aesthetic function of entertainment. What is certain is that the myths were both familiar and popular with a wide section of Greek society through their common representation in art, whether that be **sculpture** on public buildings or scenes painted on **pottery**.

Without wide-spread literacy, the passing on of myths was first done orally, probably by **Minoan** and **Mycenaean** bards from the 18th century BCE onwards. This of course allows for the possibility that with each re-telling of a particular myth, it is embellished and improved upon to increase audience interest or incorporate local events and prejudices. However, this also is a modern interpretation, for it is also possible that the telling of myths followed certain rules of presentation, and a knowledgeable audience may not have willingly accepted *ad hoc* adaptations to a familiar tale. Over centuries though, and with increasing contact between **city**-states, it is difficult to imagine that local stories did not become mixed with others to create a myth with several diverse origins.



The Titan Oceanus Mary Harrsch (CC BY-NC-SA)

The next development in the presentation of myths was the creation of poems in **Ionia** and the celebrated poems of **Homer** and **Hesiod** around the 8th century BCE. For the first time **mythology** was presented in written form. Homer's *Iliad* recounts the final stages of the **Trojan War** - perhaps an amalgamation of many conflicts between Greeks and their eastern neighbours in the late **Bronze Age** (1800-1200 BCE) - and the *Odyssey* recounts the protracted voyage home of the hero **Odysseus** following the Trojan War. Hesiod's *Theogony* gives a genealogy of the gods, and his *Works and Days* describes the creation of man. Not only are gods described with typically human feelings and failings but also heroes are created, often with one divine parent and the other mortal, thus providing a link between man and the gods.

The next principal representation of myths was through pottery from the 8th century BCE onwards. A myriad of mythical scenes decorate ceramics of all shapes and function and must surely have spread the myths to a wider audience.

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)

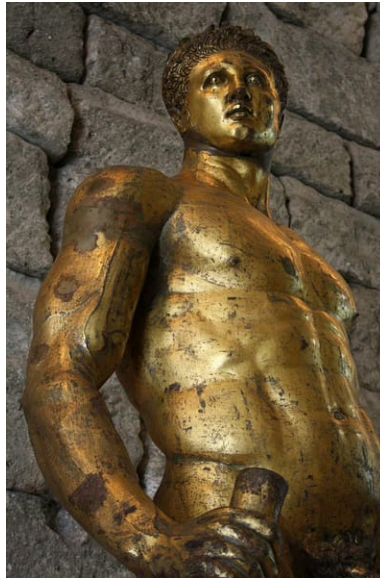


THE GREEKS CREATED MYTHS TO EXPLAIN JUST ABOUT EVERY ELEMENT OF THE HUMAN CONDITION.

The myths continued to be popular through the centuries, and major public buildings such as the **Parthenon** at **Athens**, the **Temple of Zeus** at **Olympia**, and the Temple to **Apollo** at **Delphi** were decorated with larger-than-life sculpture representing celebrated scenes from mythology. In the 5th century BCE the myths were presented in the new format of **theatre**, especially in the works of the three tragedians **Aeschylus**, **Sophocles**, and **Euripides**. At the same time, from the 6th century BCE the first documented scepticism and even rejection of the myths began with the **pre-Socratic philosophers** who searched for a more scientific explanation for phenomena and events. Finally, in the 5th century BCE the first historians **Herodotus** and **Thucydides** sought to document as accurately as possible and record for posterity a less subjective view of events and so the modern subject of history was born.

Greek Myths - An Overview

Broadly speaking, the imaginative Greeks created myths to explain just about every element of the human condition. The creation of the world is explained through two stories where a son usurps the place of his father - Cronus from Ouranos and Zeus from Cronus - perhaps referring to the eternal struggle which exists between different generations and family members. The Olympian gods led by Zeus twice defeated the sources of chaos represented by the Titans and the Giants. These gods then, rule man's destiny and sometimes directly interfere - favourably or otherwise. Indeed, the view that events are not human's to decide is further evidenced by the specific gods of Fate and Destiny. A further mythological explanation of the seemingly random nature of life is the blind god Pluto who randomly distributes wealth. The gods also illustrated that misdemeanours would be punished, e.g., **Prometheus** for stealing fire and giving it to man. The origin of other skills such as **medicine** and **music** are also explained as 'divine' gifts, for example, Apollo passing on to his son **Asklepios** medicinal knowledge for man's benefit. Finally, certain abstract concepts were also represented by specific gods, e.g., Justice (Dike), Peace (Eirene), and Lawfulness (Eunomia).



Gilded Bronze Hercules Mark Cartwright (CC BY-NC-SA)

The Heroes - the most famous being **Hercules**, **Achilles**, Jason, **Perseus**, and **Theseus** but including a great many more - all have divine parents and therefore bridge the gap between mortals and gods. They pursue fantastic adventures and epitomise ideal qualities such as perseverance e.g., Hercules' twelve labours, or fidelity e.g., Penelope waiting faithfully for Odysseus' return. Heroes also added prestige to a city by being credited as its founder, e.g., Theseus for Athens, Perseus for **Mycenae**, or Kadmus for **Thebes**. The heroes and events such as the Trojan War also represented a past golden age when men were greater and life was easier. Heroes then were examples to aspire to, and by doing great deeds a certain immortality could be reached, either absolutely (as in the case of Hercules) or through commemoration in myth and tradition.

In contrast, many mythological figures represent qualities to be avoided and their sad tales illustrate the dangers of bad behaviour. King **Midas**, for example, was granted his wish that everything he touched turned to **gold**, but when he found out that this included food and drink, his avarice almost resulted in his death from starvation and thirst. The myth of **Narcissus** symbolises the dangers of vanity after the poor youth fell in love with his own reflection and he lost the will to live. Finally, the story of **Croesus** warns that vast riches cannot guarantee happiness when the fabulously rich King misinterpreted the Delphic oracle and lost his kingdom to **Persia**.

Natural phenomena were explained with myth, e.g., earthquakes are created when **Poseidon** crashes his trident to the ground or the passage of the sun is **Helios** in his **chariot** riding across the sky. Myths such as **Persephone's** half year descent to **Hades** explained the seasons. Time itself had mythological explanations: Helios' seven herds of 350 cattle correlate to the days of the year, Selene's 50 daughters are the weeks, and Helios' twelve daughters the hours.

Greek mythology also includes a number of monsters and strange creatures such as the one-eyed **Cyclops** in the Odysseus story, a gigantic boar in the fabled Kalydonian hunt, sphinxes, giant snakes, fire-breathing bulls and more. These creatures

may represent chaos and lack of reason, for example, the centaurs - half-man and half-horse. Fierce and fantastic creatures often emphasise the difficulty of the tasks heroes are set, for example, the many-headed Hydra to be killed by Hercules, the gorgon **Medusa** whose look could turn you into stone and whom Perseus had to behead, or the Chimera - a fire-breathing mix of lion, goat and snake - which **Bellerophon** killed with the help of his winged-horse **Pegasus**. Alternatively, they may represent the other-worldliness of certain places, for example the three-headed dog Kerberos which guarded Hades or simply symbolised the exotic wildlife of distant lands visited by Greek travellers.



Artemis / Diana Timothy Tolle (CC BY)

Perhaps unfamiliar experiences were also explained in myth, for example, one can imagine that a Greek visiting King Minos' sophisticated and many-roomed **palace** at **Knossos** might have thought it a **labyrinth**, and the worship there of bulls and the sport of bull-leaping might be the source of the **Minotaur** - is it coincidence it was killed by the visiting Athenian, Theseus? Could Jason's expedition for the Golden Fleece be a reference to the rich gold of the Caucasus and a Greek expedition to plunder this resource? Do the Amazons represent an encounter with another **culture** where **women** were treated more equally than in the Greek world? Do the myths of the Sirens and **Charybdis** warn of the dangers of travel beyond familiar territory?

Such questions may well remain unanswered but starting with the discovery of **Troy** in the 19th century CE, archaeological finds have steadily contributed an ever-growing body of physical evidence which illustrates that the Greek myths had an origin and a purpose they were not previously credited with.

Interactive Content

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this Interactive Content online](#)



Bibliography

- Carabatea, M. *Greek Mythology*. Pergamos, Peania, 2007
- Carpenter, T.H. *Art and Myth in Ancient Greece*. Thames & Hudson, 2012.
- Hesiod. *Hesiod*. Loeb Classical Library, 2007.
- Homer. *The Iliad*. Penguin Classics, 1998.

- Hope Moncrieff, A.R. *Classical Mythology*. Senate, London, 1994
- National Geographic. *National Geographic Essential Visual History of World Mythology*. National Geographic, 2008.

Contributors and Attributions

Mark Cartwright

Mark is a history writer based in Italy. His special interests include pottery, architecture, world mythology and discovering the ideas that all civilizations share in common. He holds an MA in Political Philosophy and is the Publishing Director at WHE.

5.5: Philosophy - Plato

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)

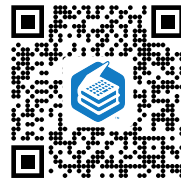


5.6: Plato on The Allegory of the Cave

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)

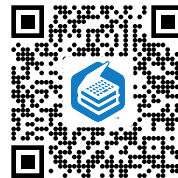


5.7: Plato's Ladder of Love

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)

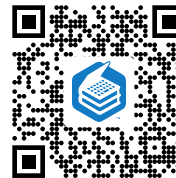


5.8: Philosophy - Aristotle

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



5.9: Introduction to Greek Architecture

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/greek-art/beginners-guide-greece/a/introduction-to-greek-architecture>

5.10: Greek Art History

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



6: ANCIENT ROME

- 6.1: Introduction to Ancient Rome
- 6.2: Overview of the Roman Empire
- 6.3: The Role of Women in the Roman World
- 6.4: Female Gladiators in Ancient Rome
- 6.5: Roman Religion
- 6.6: Epicurus
- 6.7: The Philosophy of Stoicism
- 6.8: Life Changing Stoic Ideas
- 6.9: Roman Art History

6.1: Introduction to Ancient Rome

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/roman/beginners-guide-rome/a/introduction-to-ancient-rome>

6.2: Overview of the Roman Empire

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



6.3: The Role of Women in the Roman World

<https://www.worldhistory.org/article...e-roman-world/>

Article

The exact role and status of **women** in the **Roman** world, and indeed in most **ancient societies**, has often been obscured by the biases of both ancient male writers and 19-20th century CE male scholars, a situation only relatively recently redressed by modern scholarship which has sought to more objectively assess women's status, rights, duties, representation in the arts, and daily lives; and all this from almost exclusively male source material dealing with a male-dominated Roman world.

Women In **Mythology**

Unlike some other ancient cultures such as the Greeks who had formed a creation myth where woman was a creature secondary to man and, more specifically, in the form of **Pandora**, a bringer of unhappiness and vices, the Romans had a more neutral approach where humanity, and not specifically the male, was created by the gods from earth and water. **Ovid's** *Metamorphoses*, for example, does not specify whether the first human was a man or a woman. At least in a physical sense then men and women were not regarded as belonging to a different species as in the **Greek** world, a view often reiterated in Roman medical treatises.



The Intervention of the Sabine Women Jacques-Louis David (CC BY-SA)

One of the most famous early episodes in **Roman mythology** that reveals much about attitudes to women is the Rape of the Sabine women. In the story, the first settlers of **Rome** abducted women from neighbouring tribes, taking them as their wives. One of the reasons for this action may have been a desire to form local alliances through blood ties. Naturally, these tribes sought to reclaim their women and so declared a state of **war**. However, the abducted women - led by Hersilia, the wife of **Romulus** - actually tried to intervene at this stage to prevent bloodshed. The story echoes the important role women played in linking families in Roman society - their family of birth and then of marriage.

Women & The Family

In many cases Roman women were closely identified with their perceived role in society - the duty of looking after the home and to nurture a family (*pietas familiae*), in particular, to bear legitimate children, a consequence of which was an early marriage, (sometimes even before puberty but typically around 20 years old), in order to ensure the woman had no sexual history which

might embarrass the future husband. The Roman family was male-dominated, typically headed by the most senior male figure (*paterfamilias*). Women were subordinate and this is reflected in Roman naming practice. Male citizens had three names: praenomen, nomen, and cognomen, whilst all women in the same family were referred to using the feminine version of the family name. A married woman could keep her maiden name or be referred to using her husband's name (e.g. **Cicero's** Terentia). Within the family women would attend to the home and its slave workforce, work on handicrafts, and upper class females might also study academic subjects such as **literature** and **philosophy**.

THIS CLOSE DEPENDENCE OF WOMEN ON THEIR MALE RELATIVES WAS REFLECTED IN SUCH MATTERS AS **LAW** & FINANCE WHERE WOMEN WERE LEGALLY OBLIGED TO HAVE A NOMINATED MALE FAMILY MEMBER ACT IN THEIR INTERESTS.

This close dependence of women on their male relatives was also reflected in such matters as law and finance where women were legally obliged to have a nominated male family member act in their interests (*Tutela mulierum perpetua*). The only exceptions to this arrangement were women with three children (from c. 17 BCE), freedwomen with four children, and Vestal Virgins. This rule was designed to keep property, especially inherited property, in the male-controlled family, even if male and female offspring had equal inheritance rights under **Roman law**. However, in actual practice families may not always have followed the letter of the law in this area, just as with many other matters, and there is evidence of women running their own financial affairs, owning businesses, running estates etc., especially in cases where the principal male of the family had died on military campaign.

Another, even more chauvinistic explanation of this rule which allowed women to inherit and own but not control property was that they were thought incapable of managing such affairs for themselves. This view that women had weak judgement (*infirmitas consilii*) was expounded by Cicero, for example. Roman law did, though, at least stipulate that a wife's property be kept separate from her husband's (excepting the dowry) and it could be reclaimed following a divorce. Separation by divorce was easily achieved by both parties under Roman law but any children of the couple legally belonged to the father or nearest male relative if he was no longer living. In the later **empire**, and especially following legislation imposed by **Constantine**, divorce became much more difficult, especially for the female party.



Fresco, Pompeii Mary Harrsch (Photographed at the Museo Archaeologico Nazionale di Napoli) (CC BY-SA)

Women In Wider Society

Roman women had a very limited role in public life. They could not attend, speak in, or vote at political assemblies and they could not hold any position of political responsibility. Whilst it is true that some women with powerful partners might influence public affairs through their husbands, these were the exceptions. It is also interesting to note that those females who have political power in **Roman literature** are very often represented as motivated by such negative emotions as spite and jealousy, and, further, their actions are usually used to show their male relations in a bad light. Lower class Roman women did have a public life because they had to work for a living. Typical jobs undertaken by such women were in **agriculture**, markets, **crafts**, as midwives and as

wet-nurses.

Roman religion was male-dominated but there were notable exceptions where women took a more public role such as the priestesses of **Isis** (in the Imperial period) and the Vestals. These latter women, the Vestal Virgins, served for 30 years in the cult of **Vesta** and they participated in many religious ceremonies, even performing sacrificial rites, a role typically reserved for male priests. There were also several female festivals such as the Bona Dea and some **city** cults, for example, of Ceres. Women also had a role to play in **Judaism** and **Christianity** but, once again, it would be men who debated what that role might entail.

The Other Women

Roman women could be separated (not always absolutely clearly) between those who were considered respectable and those who were not. Many Roman males had the somewhat hypocritical stance that their female relations should be honourable and chaste guardians of morality while at the same time they were more than willing to avail themselves of the services of lovers and prostitutes.



Sex in Pompeii CFCF (Public Domain)

To remind everyone of who was who clothes became a useful tool. Respectable women wore a long dress or *stola*, a mantle (*palla*) and had ties in their hair (*vittae*) whilst prostitutes wore a toga. If a respectable woman was found guilty of adultery, one of the punishments was to wear the toga. It is interesting that women were considered to belong either in one group or the other (there was no third category) but at the same time it was felt necessary to identify them with visual signs lest an embarrassing confusion occurred. The distinction between these two groups was not just a moral one for prostitutes and other lower class women had even fewer rights than women of a higher social status. Prostitutes and waitresses, for example, could not prosecute for rape and the rape of slaves was considered merely as property damage sustained by the owner.



Agrippina The Younger Mark Cartwright (CC BY-NC-SA)

Famous Roman Women

Some Roman women did rise above the limited role of family and household guardian that society prescribed and reached positions of real influence. Hortensia is one of the earliest. She, in 42 BCE, gave a famous speech in Rome's Forum in defiance of the triumvirate's proposal to tax the wealth of Rome's richest women to fund the war against **Caesar's** assassins. Other women who caused ripples in public waters were Cornelia (mother of the Gracchi brothers), Servilia (half-sister of Cato and mother of Brutus), and Fulvia (wife of **Mark Antony**). With the arrival of the emperors, their mothers, wives, sisters and even daughters could wield significant political influence and also large building projects often came to be sponsored by and dedicated to these women. One of the most celebrated wives of an emperor was Iulia Domna (170-217 CE), wife of **Septimius Severus** and mother of **Caracalla**. Iulia was given the title of Augusta and she was a noted patron of the arts, in particular, literature and philosophy. In her eventful life she had also been a priestess in **Syria**, travelled to **Britain** and, when Caracalla became emperor, she was given the impressive title of 'mother of the senate and of the fatherland'. In late antiquity there was the most famous female philosopher of ancient times, **Hypatia of Alexandria**. She wrote several treatises and became head of the Neoplatonic school in the **Egyptian** city but was brutally murdered by a Christian mob in 415 CE.

Conclusion

Roman law and social norms were, then, heavily weighted in favour of males but the full practical application of these laws and attitudes in specific cases is often difficult to determine, especially as almost all source material is from a male perspective, and an elite one at that. That women were regarded as inferior in legal terms seems clear but there are also countless texts, inscriptions, and even idealised portrait **sculpture** which point to the Roman male's appreciation, admiration and even awe of women and their role in everyday life. Roman males did not think women their equal but neither did they hate them. Perhaps the ambivalent attitude of Roman men to their women is best summarised by the words of Metellus Numidicus who was quoted in a speech by **Augustus** when the emperor addressed the assembly, 'nature has made it so that we can not live with them particularly comfortably, but we can't live without them at all'.

Interactive Content

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this Interactive Content online](#)



Bibliography

- Barchiesi, A. *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2010.
- Butterworth, A. *Pompeii*. St. Martin's Press, 2006.
- Grant, M. *The History of Rome*. Faber, 2000
- Hornblower, S. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2012.
- Potter, D.S. *A Companion to the Roman Empire*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Contributors and Attributions

Mark Cartwright

Mark is a history writer based in Italy. His special interests include pottery, architecture, world mythology and discovering the ideas that all civilizations share in common. He holds an MA in Political Philosophy and is the Publishing Director at WHE.

This page titled [6.3: The Role of Women in the Roman World](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

6.4: Female Gladiators in Ancient Rome

<https://www.worldhistory.org/article...-ancient-rome/>

Article

Female gladiators in ancient **Rome** – referred to by modern-day scholars as *gladiatrix* – may have been uncommon but they did exist. Evidence suggests that a number of **women** participated in the public games of Rome even though this practice was often criticized by **Roman** writers and attempts were made to regulate it through legislation.

Female gladiators are often referred to in ancient texts as *ludia* (female performers in a *ludi*, a festival or entertainment) or as *mulieres* (women) but not often as *feminae* (ladies) suggesting to some scholars that only lower-class women were drawn to the arena. There is a significant amount of evidence, however, that high-born women were as well. The term *gladiatrix* was never used in ancient times; it is a modern word first applied to female gladiators in the 1800's CE.



Female Gladiators Carole Raddato (CC BY-SA)

Women who chose a life in the arena – and it does seem this was a choice – may have been motivated by a desire for independence, a chance at fame, and financial rewards including remission of debt. Although it seems a woman gave up any claim to respectability as soon as she entered the arena, there is some evidence to suggest that female gladiators were honored as highly as their male counterparts.

Role of Women in Rome

Women in Rome – whether during time of the Republic or the later **Empire** – had few freedoms and were defined by their relationship to men. Scholar Brian K. Harvey writes:

Unlike men's virtues, women were praised for their home and married life. Their virtues included sexual fidelity (*castitas*), a sense of decency (*pudicitia*), love for her husband (*caritas*), marital concord (*concordia*), devotion to family (*pietas*), fertility (*fecunditas*), beauty (*pulchritude*), cheerfulness (*hilaritas*), and happiness (*laetitia*)...As exemplified by the power of the paterfamilias [husband or father, head of the house], Rome was a patriarchal society. (59)

Whether upper or lower class, women were expected to adhere to traditional expectations of behavior. Women's status is made clear through the many works by male writers which deal with the subject in depth and well as various legislative decrees. It is

not known how women felt about their position since almost all the extant **literature** from Rome is written by men. Harvey notes that “we have almost no literary source that reveals a woman's perspective on her own life or the role of women in general” (59).

The one exception to this is the poetry of Sulpicia (1st century BCE). In her first poem, celebrating falling in love, she says how she does not want to hide her love in “sealed documents” but will express it in verse and writes, “It is nice to go against the grain, as it is tiresome for a woman to constantly force her appearance to fit her reputation” (Harvey, 77). This reputation, of course, was forced upon a woman by males; first her father and then her husband.

INSCRIPTIONS MAKE CLEAR THAT SOME WOMEN CHOSE THEIR OWN PATH AS FEMALE GLADIATORS & IT SEEMS THIS OPTION WAS OPEN TO THEM OVER A CONSIDERABLE LENGTH OF TIME.

Sulpicia was the daughter of Servius Sulpicius Rufus (c. 106-43 BCE), an author, orator, and jurist who was famous for his eloquence. As a writer himself, his daughter's literary pursuits were most likely encouraged but this was hardly the case for most women. Even in her case, she was still under the control of her father and her uncle Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus (c. 64 BCE-8 CE). In her second poem, Sulpicia complains about Messalla's control over her in making birthday plans, **writing** that her uncle does “not allow me to live at my own discretion” (Harvey, 77).

Messalla Corvinus, like his brother, was also an author and an important patron of the arts. Sulpicia, then, was most likely brought up in an enlightened home where women could pursue literary endeavors and, based on her other poems, she also seems to have had the freedom to pursue a love affair with a man she calls Cerinthus who did not meet with the approval of her family. Even in this “liberated” environment, however, she still felt constrained and so it may be assumed a woman had far less freedom of choice in other more conservative homes.

Legislation Concerning Female Gladiators

It is due to the well-established patriarchy of Rome and women's place in it that scholars have had such difficulty accepting the concept of female gladiators. References to *ludia* are often interpreted to mean actresses in a religious festival – and this is an accurate interpretation – but the context of the term in some inscriptions makes clear that some women chose their own path as female gladiators and it seems this option was open to them over a considerable length of time.



The Colosseum or Flavian Amphitheatre Dennis Jarvis (CC BY-NC-SA)

In 11 CE the **Roman Senate** passed a **law** forbidding freeborn women under the age of 20 from participating in the games of the arena. This suggests the practice had been ongoing for some time previously. It should be noted that the decree specifies “freeborn females”, not female slaves, who are assumed to have still been able to participate. Emperor Septemus Severus (193-211 CE) outlawed participation of any woman in the arena in 200 CE, claiming that such spectacles encouraged a lack of respect for women in general.

He was also motivated by the concern that women, if allowed to train as athletes, would want to participate in the **Olympic Games** in **Greece**; a prospect he found distasteful and threatening to the social order. Interestingly, his decree seems to have been motivated by the participation of high-born free women in the games – those who would have had all their material needs provided – who may have preferred the life of a **gladiator** to having their choices limited by male relatives.

WOMEN WERE STILL FIGHTING IN THE ARENA LATER IN THE 3RD CENTURY CE AS EVIDENCED BY AN INSCRIPTION FROM **OSTIA**, THE PORT **CITY** NEAR ROME.

In spite of the Severan decree, women were still fighting in the arena later in the 3rd century CE as evidenced by an inscription from Ostia, the port city near Rome. This inscription notes that the magistrate of the city, one Hostilianus, was the first to allow women to fight in the arena since Ostia's founding. The wording of the inscription specifies that Hostilianus allowed *mulieres* to fight, not *feminae* and so it may be that Hostilianus was able to get around Severus' law by some legal loophole whereby free born ladies of the upper class were still prohibited but lower-class women and female slaves could still participate in the games.

Gladiators & the Games

The gladiatorial games began as an aspect of funeral services. Following the interment and funerary rituals, paid fighters would engage in games where they would enact scenes from popular literature and legend – or from the life of the deceased – as a tribute. Harvey notes that “the term for these games was *munus* (plural *munera*), which connoted a duty or obligation as well as a gift” (309). These games became increasingly popular entertainment with the people and eventually lost their association with funeral rites. Aristocrats – especially those running for office – would sponsor games to win support and these events eventually grew to include official celebrations of an emperor's birthday, coronation, or other state events.



Retiarius Gladiator Mosaic Carole Raddato (CC BY-SA)

The first gladiatorial games were held in 264 BCE by the sons of the senator Brutus Pera to honor their father after his funeral. They would continue for the next few centuries until finally outlawed under Honorius in 404 CE. During this time, thousands of people and animals would die in the arena for the entertainment of the people.

Contrary to popular opinion and depictions in film, gladiators were not sent into the arena to die and most contests did not end in **death**. Convicted criminals (*damnati*) were executed in the arena but most of those who fought there were slaves who had been highly trained and were quite valuable to their owners.

The Roman writer **Seneca** (4 BCE-65 CE) describes a noon show at the arena which took place during the intermission between the morning and evening spectacles. This would have been the time of day when criminals were executed. These would include those convicted of serious crimes, deserters from the army, and those who incited sedition or were guilty of blasphemy or various other crimes against the state. Christians would eventually be included in the noon intermission spectacles:

These noon fighters are sent out with no armor of any kind; they are exposed to blows at all points, and no one ever strikes in vain...The crowd demands that the victor who has slain his opponent shall face the man who will slay him in turn; and the last conqueror is reserved for another butchering. The outcome for the combatants is death; the fight is waged with sword and fire. (*Moral Epistles* VII.3-5)

Seneca's description has become ingrained in the popular imagination as the paradigm of the games in the arena. Actual gladiatorial games (*Ludum gladiatorium*) were significantly different and the outcome was not always death. The opponents were evenly matched and would fight until one of them dropped shield and weapon, lifting a finger to signal surrender. The individual who sponsored the games (known as the *munerarius*) would then pause the fight. At this point, the famous *pollice verso* ("with thumb turned") was given.

GLADIATORS CERTAINLY COULD BE KILLED IN THEIR FIRST FIGHT IN THE ARENA BUT THERE ARE MEMORIALS & INSCRIPTIONS WHICH SHOW THAT MANY FOUGHT & LIVED FOR YEARS.

It is unclear whether the "thumbs down" meant death and it has been suggested the gesture was the *munerarius*' thumb drawn across his throat. The *munerarius* would consider the opinion of the crowd before rendering a decision and could easily grant *missio* (allowing the gladiator to live) and call the contest with a decision of *stans missus* ("sent away standing") which meant a draw. More gladiators were spared at this moment than killed because, if the *munerarius* chose death, he would have to compensate the *lanista* (owner of the gladiator) for the loss.

Gladiators certainly could be killed in their first fight in the arena but there are memorials and inscriptions which show that many fought and lived for years. It has been suggested, in fact, that female gladiators were often the daughters of retired gladiators who trained them. Gladiatorial schools abounded in Rome since their founding in c. 105 BCE and more schools proliferated in the colonies and provinces as the empire expanded.

Upon entering a Gladiatorial school, the novice took a vow to allow himself (or herself) to be whipped, burned and killed with steel and gave up all rights to his - or her - own life. The gladiator became the property of the master of the school who regulated everything in that person's life, from diet to daily exercise and, of course, trained the person to fight.



Gladiator Relief Carole Raddato (CC BY-SA)

At the same time, it does not seem that women trained with men in the schools and there is no record of a woman fighting a man in any of the shows. Female gladiators were most likely trained by their fathers or in private lessons with a *lanista*. Wooden swords were used in training by both men and women following the revolt of the gladiator **Spartacus** (73-71 BCE) who had used the iron weapons of his school to launch the insurrection. Men and women were trained in different types of combat and there were four types of gladiator:

- **The Myrmillo** (Murmillo) had a helmet (with a fish crest), oblong shield and sword.

- **The Retiarius** (who usually fought a Myrmillo): lightly armed with a net and trident or dagger.
- **The Samnite** had a sword, visored helmet, and oblong shield.
- **The Thracian** (Thrax): armed with a curved blade (a *sica*) and round shield.

Each gladiator was taught to fight in one of these four disciplines and the reward for excellence in combat could be fame, fortune, and a lifestyle which "respectable" women in Rome could never dream of. In a later passage from the *Moral Epistles* cited above, Seneca complains that the people always needed to have some form of entertainment going on at the arena besides the standard shows and this need may have initially been met by female entertainers fighting dwarves (Adkins & Adkins, 348). In time, however, women left off participating in these kinds of shows to become gladiators.

Physical Evidence for Female Gladiators

Discovered in 1996 CE and announced in September 2000 CE, the Remains of Great Dover Street Woman (also referred to as "Gladiator Girl") provided physical evidence to back up the substantial literary evidence from antiquity that women fought as gladiators in the arena. The woman's pelvis was all that remained of the body after cremation but the abundance of expensive oil lamps, together with other evidence of a large and luxurious feast and the presence of pine cones (burned at the arena to purify it after the games) all contribute to the conclusion that this was the grave of a respected gladiator who was a woman.

Aside from the Great Dover Street Woman, physical evidence for female gladiators comes from a c. 2nd century CE relief found in Bodrum, [Turkey](#) which clearly depicts two of them, the above-mentioned inscription found at Ostia, a ceramic shard (thought to have been a pendant), found in Leicester, England, and a statue of a female gladiator (of unknown origin but in the style of the Italian peninsula) currently housed at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg, Germany.

The relief depicts two women – clearly gladiators – and gives their stage names under their feet as [Amazon](#) and Achillia. They were most likely gladiators who enacted the famous story of [Achilles](#) and the Amazon queen Penthesilea (from *Bibliotheca* of Pseudo Apollodorus, 2nd century CE) in which Achilles slays the queen in [battle](#) at [Troy](#) and then falls in love with her and regrets his actions.



Penthesilea & Achilles Mark Cartwright (CC BY-NC-SA)

Above the two figures is the inscription indicating *stans missus*, meaning the women had fought to an honorable draw. These two would have been Myrmillo or Samnite gladiators based on their shields and swords. The two round objects by each of the figures' feet are thought to be their helmets; but what type of helmet is unclear. The women in the relief must have been popular performers to have merited the expense of the work.

The ceramic shard is inscribed *Verecunda Ludia Lucius Gladiator* which translates as "Verecunda the performer and Lucius the Gladiator". As noted, *ludia* can be interpreted as "female gladiator" and this ceramic has been claimed as proof that this

Verecunda performed as one. Conversely, it could be interpreted to mean that she was simply an actress who was Lucius the gladiator's girlfriend.

The statue in Hamburg, which for years was interpreted as a woman cleaning herself with a *strigil* (a curved implement for scraping the body during bathing) is now understood as more likely a female gladiator holding a raised *sica*. The figure stands in a triumphant pose with the *sica* held high, bare-chested, in only a loincloth. This depiction fits the descriptions of female gladiators who, like their male counterparts, fought topless in only a loincloth, minimal armor protecting the shins and arms, and a helmet.

The statue is thought to represent a female thrax gladiator who has discarded her helmet in victory (as was common practice) and raised her weapon in **triumph**. Critics of this interpretation note that the figure is not wearing a *greave* (shin armor) and so is probably not a gladiator; but the band around the figure's left knee could be a *fascia*, a band worn to protect the knee under the greave.

Literary Evidence for Gladiatrix

There is also ample literary evidence to support the existence of female gladiators. The Roman satirist **Juvenal** (1st/2nd century CE), medical author Celsus (2nd century CE), historian **Tacitus** (54-120 CE), historian **Suetonius** (69-130 CE), and historian **Cassius Dio** (155-235 CE), among others, wrote on the subject and always critically.

In his *Satires*, Juvenal wrote:

What sense of shame can be found in a woman wearing a helmet, who shuns femininity and loves brute force...If an auction is held of your wife's effects, how proud you will be of her belt and arm-pads and plumes, and her half-length left-leg shin-guard! Or, if instead, she prefers a different form of combat how pleased you will be when the girl of your heart sells off her greaves! Hear her grunt while she practices thrusts as shown by the trainer, wilting under the weight of the helmet. (VI.252)

Tacitus notes:

Many ladies of distinction, however, and senators, disgraced themselves by appearing in the **Amphitheatre**. (*Annals*, XV.32)

Cassius Dio expands on Tacitus' description:

There was another exhibition that was at once most disgraceful and most shocking, when men and women not only of the equestrian but even of the senatorial order appeared as performers in the orchestra, in the **Circus**, and in the [**Colosseum**], like those who are held in lowest esteem. Some of them played the flute and danced in pantomimes or acted in tragedies and comedies or sang to the **lyre**; they drove horses, killed wild beasts and fought as gladiators. (*Roman History* (LXI.17.3))

Conclusion

Scholarly consensus on the existence of female gladiators is far from uniform but the evidence from Roman sources weighs heavily on the side of accepting them as historical reality. The arguments against this claim largely hinge on interpreting ancient Latin texts and what certain terms – such as *ludia* – may or may not have referred to. Even so, it is difficult to understand how one can dismiss the relief of Amazon and Achillia or the literary and legal works which clearly indicate women's participation in the games as gladiators.

Women may have been considered second-class citizens by the patriarchy but this does not mean every woman accepted that status. Many high-born women were able to exert considerable control over their husbands, homes, and even at court. Juvenal, in the same book of his *Satires* noted above, makes clear exactly how powerful women could be, in fact, in controlling men who still believed they were the masters. In the case of female gladiators, it seems some women were not content even with that level of autonomy, however, and sought to control their own fate in the arena.

Bibliography

- Adkins, L. & Adkins, R. A. *Handbook to Life in Ancient Rome*. Oxford University Press, 1998.

- [Archaeologists May Have Found Woman Gladiator's Grave](#) Accessed 16 Mar 2018.
- Crowther, N.B. *Sport in Ancient Times*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2010.
- Dio Cassius. *Dio Cassius Roman History*. Harvard University Press, 1927.
- [Female Gladiators of the Ancient Roman World](#) by Steven Murray Accessed 16 Mar 2018.
- [Female Gladiators? Tantalizing New Evidence from Ancient Rome](#) by James Owen Accessed 19 Mar 2020.
- Ferrero, G. *Characters and Events of Roman History*. Barnes & Noble Press, 2005.
- Gavorse, J., editor. *The Lives of The Twelve Caesars by Suetonius*. The Modern Library, 2016.
- Harvey, B. K. *Daily Life in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook*. Focus, 2016.
- Jenkins, I. *Greek and Roman Life*. Harvard University Press, 1990.
- [Juvenal's Satires VI: The Ways of Women](#) Accessed 16 Mar 2018.
- Juvenal. *Juvenal's Works*. Bristol Classical Press, 1991.
- Lewis, J. E. *The Mammoth Book of Eyewitness Ancient Rome*. Running Press, 2003.
- Lewis, N. & Reinhold, M. *Roman Civilization, Sourcebook II: The Empire*. Harper Torchbooks, 1966.
- Lucius Annaeus Seneca. *Seneca's Moral Epistles*. Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2001.
- Nardo, D. *Living in Ancient Rome*. Greenhaven Press, 2004.
- Tacitus. *The Annals of Tacitus*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- [The Language of the Arena](#) by Shelby Brown Accessed 19 Mar 2020.

Contributors and Attributions

Joshua J. Mark

A freelance writer and former part-time Professor of Philosophy at Marist College, New York, Joshua J. Mark has lived in Greece and Germany and traveled through Egypt. He has taught history, writing, literature, and philosophy at the college level.

This page titled [6.4: Female Gladiators in Ancient Rome](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

6.5: Roman Religion

https://www.worldhistory.org/Roman_Religion/

Definition



Roman Sacrificial Altar Mark Cartwright (CC BY-NC-SA)

In many societies, ancient and modern, **religion** has performed a major role in their development, and the **Roman Empire** was no different. From the beginning **Roman religion** was polytheistic. From an initial array of gods and spirits, **Rome** added to this collection to include both **Greek** gods as well as a number of foreign cults. As the **empire** expanded, the Romans refrained from imposing their own religious beliefs upon those they conquered; however, this inclusion must not be misinterpreted as tolerance - this can be seen with their early reaction to the Jewish and Christian population. Eventually, all of their gods would be washed away, gradually replaced by **Christianity**, and in the eyes of some, this change brought about the decline of the western empire.

Early Beliefs & Influences

Early forms of the **Roman** religion were animistic in nature, believing that spirits inhabited everything around them, people included. The first citizens of Rome also believed they were watched over by the spirits of their ancestors. Initially, a Capitoline Triad (possibly derived from a Sabine influence) were added to these "spirits" - the new gods included **Mars**, the god of **war** and supposed father of **Romulus and Remus** (founders of Rome); Quirinus, the deified **Romulus** who watched over the people of Rome; and lastly, **Jupiter**, the supreme god. They, along with the spirits, were worshipped at a **temple** on Capitoline Hill. Later, due to the **Etruscans**, the triad would change to include Jupiter who remained the supreme god; **Juno**, his wife and sister; and **Minerva**, Jupiter's daughter.

Due to the presence of Greek colonies on the Lower Peninsula, the Romans adopted many of the Greek gods as their own. Religion and myth became one. Under this Greek influence, the Roman gods became more anthropomorphic - with the human characteristics of jealousy, love, hate, etc. However, this transformation was not to the degree that existed in **Greek mythology**. In Rome individual expression of belief was unimportant, strict adherence to a rigid set of rituals was far more significant, thereby avoiding the hazards of religious zeal. **Cities** adopted their own patron deities and performed their own rituals. Temples honoring the gods would be built throughout the empire; however, these temples were considered the "home" of the god; worship occurred outside the temple. While this fusion of Roman and Greek deities influenced Rome in many ways, their religion remained practical.

ROMAN RELIGION ABSORBED MANY OF THE GODS AND CULTS OF CONQUERED NATIONS.

Even though there were four colleges for priests, there was no priestly class; it would always remain a public office. This practice would even extend to the imperial **palace**. From the time of Emperor **Augustus** the emperor would assume the title of *pontifex maximus* or chief priest. Other than the *pontifexes* there were *augures*, individuals who read the entrails of animals and the flight of birds to interpret omens, or in other words, the will of the gods. Elaborate rituals were performed to bring Roman victory in **battle**, and no declaration of war or major event was undertaken without the clear approval of the gods. Dating from the time of the Etruscans, a diviner or *haruspices*, was always consulted, and it was considered dangerous to ignore the omens. Spurinna, a Roman soothsayer, read animal entrails and foresaw **Julius Caesar's death** on the Ides of March. When Roman Commander Publius **Claudius** Pulcher ignored the omens - refusal of the sacred chickens to eat - before a battle during the **First Punic War**, he was defeated, as was his military career.

As the empire expanded across the Balkans, **Asia Minor** and into **Egypt**, Roman religion absorbed many of the gods and cults of conquered nations, but the primary influence would always remain **Greece**. With only a few exceptions, most of the Roman gods had their Greek counterparts. This **Roman mythology** would have a significant influence on the empire - politically and socially - as well as on the future of western **civilization**. One needs only to look at the names of the days and months (Tuesday, Saturday, January and June), the languages of European nations, and the names of the planets (Mars, Jupiter, **Saturn**, and Pluto) to realize this influence.

The Roman Pantheon

While the study of Roman **mythology** tends to emphasize the major gods - Jupiter, Neptune (god of the sea), Pluto (god of the underworld) and Juno - there existed, of course, a number of "minor" gods and goddesses such as Nemesis, the god of revenge; Cupid, the god of love; Pax, the god of peace; and the **Furies**, goddesses of vengeance.

However, when looking at the religion of Rome, one must examine the impact of the most important gods. Foremost among the gods were, of course, Jupiter, the Roman equivalent of **Zeus** (although not as playful), and his wife/sister Juno. He was the king of the gods; the sky god (the great protector) - controlling the weather and forces of nature, using thunderbolts to give warning to the people of Rome. Originally linked with farming as *Jupiter Elicius*, his role changed as the **city** grew, eventually obtaining his own temple on Capitoline Hill. Later, he became *Jupiter Imperator Invictus Triumphator* - Supreme General, Unconquered, and ultimately, *Jupiter Optimus Maximus* - Best and Greatest. His supremacy would be temporarily set aside during the reign of Emperor **Elagabalus** who attempted to replace the religion of Rome with that of the Syrian god Elagabal. After the emperor's assassination, his successor, **Alexander Severus**, returned Jupiter to his former glory. Next, Jupiter's wife/sister was Juno, for whom the month of June is named - she was the equivalent of the Greek **Hera**. Besides being the supreme goddess with a temple on Esquiline Hill, she was the goddess of light and moon, embodying all of the virtues of Roman matron hood - as Juno Lucina she became the goddess of childbirth and fertility.



Jupiter Mark Cartwright (CC BY-NC-SA)

After Juno comes Minerva, the Roman name for **Athena** (the patron goddess of **Athens**), and Mars, the god of war. According to legend, Minerva sprang from Jupiter's head fully formed. She was the goddess of commerce, industry, and education. Later, she would be identified as a war goddess as well as the goddess of doctors, musicians and craftsmen. Although no longer one of the Capitoline triad, Mars remained an important god to Rome - similar to **Ares**, the Greek god of war. As Mars the Avenger, this son of Juno and her relationship with a flower, had a temple dedicated to him by Emperor Augustus, honoring the death of **Julius Caesar's** assassins. Roman commanders would make sacrifices to him before and after battles and Tuesday (*Martes*) is named for him.

There are a number of lesser gods (all with temples built to them) - **Apollo**, Diana, Saturn, **Venus**, Vulcan, and **Janus**. Apollo had no Roman equal and he was simply the Greek god of poetry, **medicine**, **music**, and **science**. He was originally brought to the city by the Etruscans to ward off the **plague** and was rewarded with a temple on Palatine Hill. Diana, Apollo's Roman sister equivalent to the Greek **Artemis**, was not only the goddess of wild beasts and the harvest moon but also the goddess of the hunt. She was seen as a protector of **women** in childbirth with a temple at **Ephesus** in Asia Minor. Another god brought to the Rome by the Etruscans was Saturn, an agricultural god equal to the Greek Cronus and who had been expelled from heaven by Jupiter. A festival in his honor, the **Saturnalia**, was held yearly between the 17th and 23rd of December. His temple, at the foot of Capitoline Hill, housed the public treasury and decrees of the Senate. Another Roman goddess was Venus, who was born, according to myth, from the foam of the sea, equal to the Greek **Aphrodite**. According to **Homer**, she was the mother of Aeneas the hero of the **Trojan War**. Of course, the planet Venus is named for her. Next was Vulcan, also expelled from heaven by Jupiter, who was a lame (caused by his expulsion), ugly blacksmith and the god of fire. Lastly, there was Janus who had no Greek equal. He was the two-faced guardian of doorways and public gates. Janus was valued for his wisdom and was the first god mentioned in a person's prayer; because of his two faces he could see both the past and the future.

One cannot forget the Vestal Virgins who had no Greek counterpart. They were the guardians of the public hearth at the Atrium **Vesta**. They were girls chosen only from the **patrician** class at the tender age of six, beginning their service to the goddess Vesta at the age of ten and for the next thirty years they would serve her. While serving as a **Vestal Virgin**, a girl/woman was forbidden to marry and had to remain chaste. Some chose to remain in service to Vesta after serving their thirty years since, at the age of forty, they were considered too old to marry. Breaking the vow of chastity would result in death - only twenty would break the vow in over one thousand years. Emperor Elagabalus attempted to marry a vestal virgin but was convinced otherwise.



Gold Bacchus Statue Mark Cartwright (CC BY-NC-SA)

Cult Worship

Besides the worship of these gods there were several cults - Bacchus, **Cybele**, **Isis**, Sarapis, Sibyl, and most of all the Imperial Cult. Some were readily accepted by Roman society while others were feared by those in power. Bacchus was a Roman deity associated with both the Greek god Dionysus and the early Roman god Liber Patri, also a wine god. Bacchus is best remembered for his intoxicating festivals held on March 17, a day when a Roman male youth would supposedly become a man. As his cult

spread, the **Roman Senate** realized its dangerous potential and ordered its suppression in 186 BCE and afterwards, the cult went underground.

Another cult centered on Cybele, the “great mother” - a fertility goddess with a temple on Palatine Hill who was responsible for every aspect of a person's well-being. The goddess arrived in Athens in the fifth century BCE and first appeared in Rome during the **Punic Wars**. All of her priests were eunuchs, and many of her male followers would have themselves castrated. Next is Isis, the ancient goddess of Egypt who is best remembered in **Egyptian mythology** as the wife of **Osiris** and the mother of **Horus**. After becoming Hellenized, she became the protector of sailors and fishermen. Arriving in Rome from **Alexandria**, Sarpis was a healing god and the sick would travel to her temple to be cured. Sibyl was a priestess of the Greek and Roman god Apollo who came to Rome from the Greek colony of Cumae. She offered the **Etruscan** King Tarquin the nine Sibylline Books which were books of prophecy, but the price was considered too high, so he refused. After she had burned six of the books, he reconsidered and bought the remaining three; these three books were consulted by the Roman Senate in times of emergencies but they were lost during the barbarian invasions of the fifth century CE.

Lastly, there was the Imperial Cult. The idea of deification of the emperor came during the time of Emperor Augustus. He resisted the Senate's attempts to name him a god during his reign as he thought himself the son of a god, not a god. Upon his death, the Roman Senate rewarded him with deification which was an honor that would be bestowed upon many of his successors. Often, an emperor would request his predecessor to be deified. Of course there were a few exceptions, notably, **Tiberius**, **Caligula**, **Nero** and **Domitian**, who were considered too abhorrent to receive the honor. Caligula and Nero believed themselves living gods while Domitian thought himself the reincarnation of **Hercules**.



Commodus As Hercules Mark Cartwright (CC BY-NC-SA)

Roman Religion Challenged

Judaism and Christianity, while posing separate threats to the empire, had one thing in common - they both refused to participate in the worship of the Roman gods and make sacrifices at their temples. Although the Jews had firmly established themselves in the empire, they were often the target of the emperors, often blamed for any ills that befell the empire. Nero had them expelled from Rome, and **Titus**, the son of Emperor **Vespasian**, would continue his father's war against the Jews in the Jewish Wars, eventually destroying the city of **Jerusalem** and killing thousands of its citizens.

Although Christianity was initially seen as a sect of Judaism, Emperor Nero grew more suspicious as this small sect began to grow, especially after the Great Fire of Rome; he even blamed them for the fire. They returned the favor, calling him the anti-Christ. As time passed, Christianity continued to spread across the empire, appealing to women and slaves as well as intellectuals and the illiterate. Persecutions increased where Christian churches were burned and all of this continued under the reign of **Diocletian** (emperor in the east), ending in the Great Persecution. To many, Christians offended the *pax deorum* or “peace of the gods”.

Finally, under Diocletian's successor Emperor **Constantine**, Christianity would finally receive recognition in the Edict of Milan in 313 CE. Constantine's benevolence towards Christianity can be traced to the Battle of Milvan Bridge in 312 CE where he beheld a vision (a cross in the sky), enabling him to be victorious and become the emperor of a united Roman Empire. Later, in 325 CE he held the Council of Nicaea, reconciling the differences between the various Christian sects. He rebuilt the churches destroyed by Diocletian, and according to some sources, converted to Christianity on his deathbed (his mother was a Christian). After his death Christianity would continue to grow and eventually overshadow and replace the traditional Roman religion and Rome would even become the new center of Christianity. However, in the end, Christianity would still receive blame for the ills of the empire. In his book *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* Edward Gibbon blamed, in part, the fall of the empire on Christianity. In his eyes it absorbed the energy of the people making them unable to suffer through the adversities that plagued the empire. Yet, despite its highs and lows, from the days of the spirits inhabiting all things through the Roman/Greek gods and emperor deification to Christianity, religion always remained an important part of Roman society.

Bibliography

- Baker, S. *Ancient Rome*. BBC Books, 2007.
- Clark, G. *Late Antiquity*. Oxford University Press, 2011
- Grant, M. *The Roman Emperors*. Barnes and Noble, 1985
- Gwynn, D.M. *The Roman Republic*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2012.
- Hill, D. *Ancient Rome: From Republic to the Empire*. Parragon, 2007
- Rodgers, N. *Roman Empire*. Metro Books, 2008
- Scarre, C. *Chronicle of the Roman Emperors*. Thames & Hudson, 1995.
- Stapleton, M. *The Illustrated Dictionary of Greek and Roman Mythology*. Peter Bedrick Books, 1986.

Contributors and Attributions

Donald L. Wasson

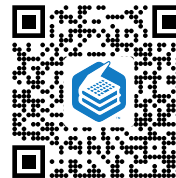
Donald has taught Ancient, Medieval and U.S. History at Lincoln College (Normal, Illinois) and has always been and will always be a student of history, ever since learning about Alexander the Great. He is eager to pass knowledge on to his students.

6.6: Epicurus

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)

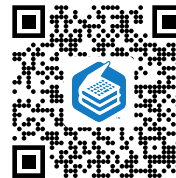


6.7: The Philosophy of Stoicism

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



6.8: Life Changing Stoic Ideas

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



6.9: Roman Art History

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



7: ANCIENT INDIA

- 7.1: Ancient India
- 7.2: Introduction to the Vedic Period
- 7.3: Sanskrit Connections to English
- 7.4: Ashoka the Great
- 7.5: Hinduism
- 7.6: Hindu Temples
- 7.7: Reading- Shiva As Lord of the Dance (Nataraja)
- 7.8: Buddhism
- 7.9: Mandala
- 7.10: Stupa
- 7.11: Buddhist Wheel of Life and Death
- 7.12: Bodh Gaya

7.1: Ancient India

<https://www.worldhistory.org/india/>

Definition



Map of the Indo-Saka Kingdoms World Imaging (GNU FDL)

India is a country in South Asia whose name comes from the Indus River. The name 'Bharata' is used as a designation for the country in their constitution referencing the ancient mythological emperor, Bharata, whose story is told, in part, in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*.

According to the writings known as the Puranas (religious/historical texts written down in the 5th century CE), Bharata conquered the whole subcontinent of India and ruled the land in peace and harmony. The land was, therefore, known as Bharatavarsha ('the subcontinent of Bharata'). Hominid activity in the Indian subcontinent stretches back over 250,000 years, and it is, therefore, one of the oldest inhabited regions on the planet.

Archaeological excavations have discovered artifacts used by early humans, including stone tools, which suggest an extremely early date for human habitation and technology in the area. While the civilizations of **Mesopotamia** and **Egypt** have long been recognized for their celebrated contributions to **civilization**, India has often been overlooked, especially in the West, though its history and **culture** is just as rich. The **Indus Valley Civilization** (c. 7000-c. 600 BCE) was among the greatest of the ancient world, covering more territory than either Egypt or Mesopotamia, and producing an equally vibrant and progressive culture.

It is the birthplace of four great world religions - **Hinduism**, **Jainism**, **Buddhism**, and Sikhism - as well as the philosophical school of **Charvaka** which influenced the development of scientific thought and inquiry. The inventions and innovations of the people of ancient India include many aspects of modern life taken for granted today including the flush toilet, drainage and sewer systems, public pools, mathematics, veterinary **science**, plastic surgery, board games, yoga and meditation, as well as many more. Prehistory of India

The areas of present-day India, Pakistan, and Nepal have provided archaeologists and scholars with the richest sites of the most ancient pedigree. The species **Homo heidelbergensis** (a proto-human who was an ancestor of modern **Homo sapiens**) inhabited the subcontinent of India centuries before humans migrated into the region known as **Europe**. Evidence of the existence of **Homo heidelbergensis** was first discovered in Germany in 1907 and, since, further discoveries have established fairly clear migration patterns of this species out of **Africa**.

Recognition of the antiquity of their presence in India has been largely due to the fairly late archaeological interest in the area as, unlike work in Mesopotamia and Egypt, western excavations in India did not begin in earnest until the 1920s. Though the ancient **city** of Harappa was known to exist as early as 1829, its archaeological significance was ignored and the later excavations corresponded to an interest in locating the probable sites referred to in the great Indian epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* (both of the 5th or 4th centuries BCE) while ignoring the possibility of a much more ancient past for the region.

The village of Balathal (near Udaipur in Rajasthan), to cite only one example, illustrates the antiquity of India's history as it dates to 4000 BCE. Balathal was not discovered until 1962 and excavations were not begun there until the 1990s CE. Even older is the **Neolithic** site of Mehrgarh, dated at c. 7000 BCE but showing evidence of even earlier habitation, which was not discovered until 1974.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS IN THE PAST 50 YEARS HAVE DRAMATICALLY CHANGED THE UNDERSTANDING OF INDIA'S PAST &, BY EXTENSION, WORLD HISTORY.

Archaeological excavations in the past 50 years have dramatically changed the understanding of India's past and, by extension, world history. A 4000-year-old skeleton discovered at Balathal in 2009 provides the oldest evidence of leprosy in India. Prior to this find, leprosy was considered a much younger disease thought to have been carried from Africa to India at some point and then from India to Europe by the **army of Alexander the Great** following his **death** in 323 BCE.

It is now understood that significant human activity was underway in India by the Holocene Period (10,000 years ago) and that many historical assumptions, based upon earlier work in Egypt and Mesopotamia, need to be reviewed and revised. The beginnings of the Vedic tradition in India, still practiced today, can now be dated, at least in part, to the indigenous people of ancient sites such as Balathal and their interaction and blending with the culture of **Aryan** migrants who arrived in the region between c. 2000-c. 1500 BCE, initiating the so-called Vedic Period (c. 1500-c.500 BCE) during which the **Hindu** scriptures known as **the Vedas** were committed to written form.

Mohenjo-daro & Harappan Civilization

The **Indus Valley** Civilization dates to c. 7000 BCE and grew steadily throughout the lower Gangetic Valley region southwards and northwards to Malwa. The **cities** of this period were larger than contemporary settlements in other countries, were situated according to cardinal points, and were built of mud bricks, often kiln-fired. Houses were constructed with a large courtyard opening from the front door, a kitchen/workroom for the preparation of food, and smaller bedrooms.

Family activities seem to have centered on the front of the house, particularly the courtyard and, in this, are similar to what has been inferred from sites in **Rome**, Egypt, **Greece**, and Mesopotamia. The buildings and homes of the Indus Valley peoples, however, were far more advanced technologically with many featuring flush toilets and "wind catchers" (possibly first developed in ancient **Persia**) on the rooftops which provided air conditioning. The sewer and drainage systems of the cities excavated thus far are more advanced than those of Rome at its height.



Excavation Site at Mohenjo-daro Grjatoi (CC BY-NC-SA)

The most famous sites of this period are the great cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa both located in present-day Pakistan (Mohenjo-daro in the Sindh province and Harappa in Punjab) which was part of India until the 1947 partition of the country which created the separate nation. Harappa has given its name to the Harappan Civilization (another name for the Indus Valley Civilization) which is usually divided into Early, Middle, and Mature periods corresponding roughly to 5000-4000 BCE (Early), 4000-2900 BCE (Middle), and 2900-1900 BCE (Mature). Harappa dates from the Middle period (c. 3000 BCE) while Mohenjo-Daro was built in the Mature period (c. 2600 BCE).

Harappa's buildings were severely damaged and the site compromised in the 19th century when British workers carried away a significant amount of material for use as ballast in constructing the railroad. Prior to this time, many buildings had already been dismantled by citizens of the local village of Harappa (which gives the site its name) for use in their own projects. It is therefore now difficult to determine the historical significance of Harappa save that it is clear it was once a significant **Bronze Age** community with a population of as many as 30,000 people.

Mohenjo-Daro, on the other hand, is much better preserved as it lay mostly buried until 1922. The name *Mohenjo-Daro* means 'mound of the dead' in Sindhi and was applied to the site by local people who found bones of humans and animals there, as well as ancient ceramics and other artifacts, emerging from the soil periodically. The original name of the city is unknown although various possibilities have been suggested by finds in the region, among them, the Dravidian name 'Kukkutarma', the city of the cock, a possible allusion to the site now known as Mohenjo-Daro as a center of ritual cock-fighting or, perhaps, as a breeding center for cocks.

Mohenjo-Daro was an elaborately constructed city with streets laid out evenly at right angles and a sophisticated drainage system. The Great Bath, a central structure at the site, was heated and seems to have been a focal point for the community. The citizens were skilled in the use of metals such as **copper**, **bronze**, lead, and tin (as evidenced by artworks such as the bronze statue of the Dancing Girl and by individual seals) and cultivated barley, wheat, peas, sesame, and cotton. **Trade** was an important source of commerce and it is thought that ancient Mesopotamian texts which mention Magan and Meluhha refer to India generally or, perhaps, Mohenjo-Daro specifically. Artifacts from the Indus Valley region have been found at sites in Mesopotamia though their precise point of origin in India is not always clear.



Harappa Ruins Hassan Nasir (CC BY-SA)

Decline of Harappan Civilization

The people of the Harappan Civilization worshipped many gods and engaged in ritual worship. Statues of various deities (such as **Indra**, the god of storm and **war**) have been found at many sites and, chief among them, terracotta pieces depicting the **Shakti** (the Mother Goddess) suggesting a popular, common worship of the feminine principle. In c. 2000 - c.1500 BCE it is thought another race, known as the **Aryans**, migrated into India through the Khyber Pass and assimilated into the existing culture, bringing their gods and the language of **Sanskrit** with them which they then introduced to the region's existing belief system. Who the Aryans were and what effect they had on the indigenous people continues to be debated but it is generally acknowledged that, at about the same time as their arrival, the Harappan culture began to decline.

Scholars cite climate change as one possible reason noting evidence of both drought and flood in the region. The Indus River is thought to have begun flooding the region more regularly (as evidenced by approximately 30 feet or 9 meters of silt at Mohenjo-Daro) and this destroyed crops and encouraged famine. It is also thought the path of the monsoon, relied upon for watering the crops, could have changed and people left the cities in the north for lands in the south. Another possibility is loss of trade relations with Mesopotamia and Egypt, their two most vital partners in commerce, as both of those regions were undergoing domestic conflicts at this same time.

Racialist writers and political philosophers of the early 20th century, following the lead of the German philologist Max Muller (l. 1823-1900), claimed the Indus Valley Civilization fell to an invasion of light-skinned Aryans but this theory has now long been discredited. Equally untenable is the theory that the people were driven south by extra-terrestrials. Among the most mysterious aspects of Mohenjo-daro is the vitrification of parts of the site as though it had been exposed to intense heat which melted the brick and stone. This same phenomenon has been observed at sites such as Traprain Law in Scotland and attributed to the results of **warfare**. Speculation regarding the destruction of the city by some kind of ancient atomic blast, however, (the work of aliens from other planets) is not generally regarded as credible.

The Vedic Period

Whatever the reason for the abandonment of the cities, the period that followed the decline of the Indus Valley Civilization is known as the Vedic Period, characterized by a pastoral lifestyle and adherence to the religious texts known as *The Vedas*. Society became divided into four classes (the *Varnas*) popularly known as 'the caste system' which were comprised of the *Brahmana* at the top (priests and scholars), the *Kshatriya* next (the warriors), the *Vaishya* (farmers and merchants), and the *Shudra* (laborers). The lowest caste was the *Dalits*, the untouchables, who handled meat and waste, though there is some debate over whether this class existed in antiquity.

At first, it seems this caste system was merely a reflection of one's occupation but, in time, it became more rigidly interpreted

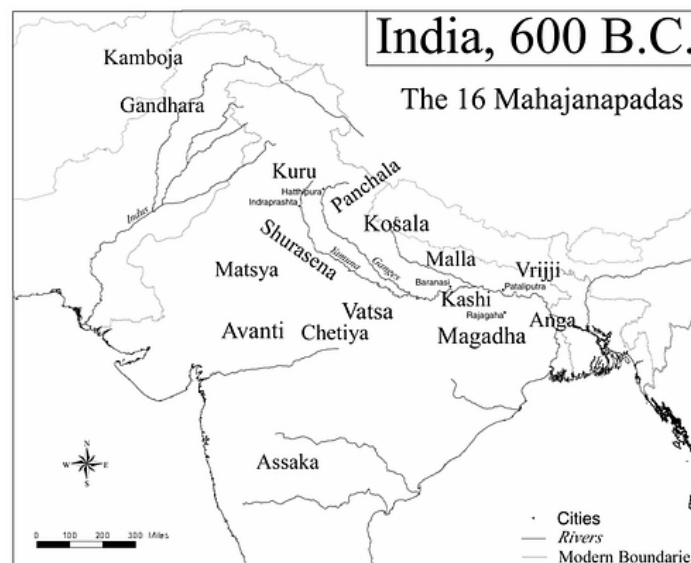
to be determined by one's birth and one was not allowed to change castes nor to marry into a caste other than one's own. This understanding was a reflection of the belief in an eternal order to human life dictated by a supreme deity.

SANATAN DHARMA HOLDS THERE IS ONE GOD, **BRAHMA**, WHO, CANNOT BE FULLY APPREHENDED SAVE THROUGH THE MANY ASPECTS WHICH ARE REVEALED AS THE DIFFERENT GODS OF THE HINDU **PANTHEON**.

While the religious beliefs which characterized the Vedic Period are considered much older, it was during this time that they became systematized as the **religion** of *Sanatan Dharma* ('Eternal Order') known today as Hinduism (this name deriving from the Indus (or Sindus) River where worshippers were known to gather, hence, 'Sindus', and then 'Hindus'). The underlying tenet of *Sanatan Dharma* is that there is an order and a purpose to the universe and human life and, by accepting this order and living in accordance with it, one will experience life as it is meant to be properly lived.

While *Sanatan Dharma* is considered by many a polytheistic religion consisting of many gods, it is actually monotheistic in that it holds there is one god, Brahman (the Self but also the Universe and creator of the observable universe), who, because of his greatness, cannot be fully apprehended save through the many aspects which are revealed as the different gods of the Hindu pantheon.

It is Brahman who decrees the eternal order and maintains the universe through it. This belief in an order to the universe reflects the stability of the society in which it grew and flourished as, during the Vedic Period, governments became centralized and social customs integrated fully into daily life across the region. Besides *The Vedas*, the great religious and literary works of the *Puranas*, the *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavad-Gita*, and the *Ramayana* all come from this period.



Map of India, 600 BCE Kmusser (CC BY-SA)

In the 6th century BCE, the religious reformers **Vardhamana Mahavira** (l. c. 599-527 BCE) and **Siddhartha Gautama** (l. c. 563-c. 483 BCE) developed their own belief systems and broke away from mainstream Sanatan Dharma to eventually create their own religions of Jainism and Buddhism, respectively. These changes in religion were a part of a wider pattern of social and cultural upheaval which resulted in the formation of city-states and the rise of powerful kingdoms (such as the **Magadha Kingdom** under the ruler **Bimbisara**) and the proliferation of philosophical schools of thought which challenged orthodox Hinduism.

Mahavira rejected the Vedas and placed the responsibility for salvation and enlightenment directly on the individual and the **Buddha** would later do the same. The philosophical school of Charvaka rejected all supernatural elements of religious belief and maintained that only the senses could be trusted to apprehend the truth and, further, that the greatest goal in life was pleasure and one's own enjoyment. Although Charvaka did not endure as a school of thought, it influenced the development of a new way of thinking which was more grounded, pragmatic, and eventually encouraged the adoption of empirical and scientific observation and method.

Cities also expanded during this time and the increased **urbanization** and wealth attracted the attention of **Cyrus II** (the Great, r.

c. 550-530 BCE) of the Persian **Achaemenid Empire** (c. 550-330 BCE) who invaded India in 530 BCE and initiated a campaign of **conquest** in the region. Ten years later, under the reign of his son, **Darius I** (the Great, r. 522-486 BCE), northern India was firmly under Persian control (the regions corresponding to Afghanistan and Pakistan today) and the inhabitants of that area subject to Persian laws and customs. One consequence of this, possibly, was an assimilation of Persian and Indian religious beliefs which some scholars point to as an explanation for further religious and cultural reforms.

The Great Empires of Ancient India

Persia held dominance in northern India until the conquest of **Alexander the Great** in 330 BCE who marched on India after Persia had fallen. Again, foreign influences were brought to bear on the region giving rise to the Greco-**Buddhist** culture which impacted all areas of culture in northern India from art to religion to dress. Statues and reliefs from this period depict Buddha, and other figures, as distinctly **Hellenic** in dress and pose (known as the **Gandhara School of Art**). Following **Alexander's** departure from India, the **Mauryan Empire** (322-185 BCE) rose under the reign of **Chandragupta Maurya** (r. c. 321-297 BCE) until, by the end of the third century BCE, it ruled over almost all of northern India.

Chandragupta's son, Bindusara (r. 298-272 BCE) extended the **empire** throughout almost the whole of India. His son was **Ashoka the Great** (r. 268-232 BCE) under whose rule the empire flourished at its height. Eight years into his reign, **Ashoka** conquered the eastern **city-state** of Kalinga which resulted in a death toll numbering over 100,000. Shocked at the destruction and death, Ashoka embraced the teachings of the Buddha and embarked on a systematic program advocating Buddhist thought and principles.

He established many monasteries, gave lavishly to Buddhist communities, and is said to have erected 84,000 stupas across the land to honor the Buddha. In 249 BCE, on pilgrimage to sites associated with the Buddha's life, he formally established the village of **Lumbini** as Buddha's birthplace, erecting a pillar there, and commissioned the creation of his famous **Edicts of Ashoka** to encourage Buddhist thought and values. Prior to Ashoka's reign, Buddhism was a small sect struggling to gain adherents. After Ashoka sent missionaries to foreign countries carrying the Buddhist vision, the small sect began to grow into the major religion it is today.



Ashoka Dharma (CC BY)

The Mauryan Empire declined and fell after Ashoka's death and the country splintered into many small kingdoms and empires (such as the Kushan Empire) in what has come to be called the Middle Period. This era saw the increase of trade with Rome (which had begun c. 130 BCE) following **Augustus Caesar's** incorporation of Egypt into the newly established **Roman Empire** in 30 BCE. Rome now became India's primary partner in trade as the Romans also had already annexed much of Mesopotamia. This was a time of individual and cultural development in the various kingdoms which finally flourished in what is considered the Golden Age of India under the reign of the **Gupta Empire** (320-550 CE).

The **Gupta** Empire is thought to have been founded by one Sri Gupta ('Sri' means 'Lord') who probably ruled between 240-280 CE. As Sri Gupta is thought to have been of the *Vaishya* (merchant) class, his rise to power in defiance of the caste system is unprecedented. He laid the foundation for the government which would so stabilize India that virtually every aspect of culture reached its height under the reign of the Guptas. **Philosophy, literature**, science, mathematics, **architecture**, astronomy, technology, art, engineering, religion, and astronomy, among other fields, all flourished during this period, resulting in some of the greatest of human achievements.



Bodhisattva Head, Gandhara Mary Harrsch (Photographed at The Art Institute of Chicago) (CC BY-NC-SA)

The *Puranas of Vyasa* were compiled during this period and the famous caves of **Ajanta** and Ellora, with their elaborate carvings and vaulted rooms, were also begun. Kalidasa the poet and playwright wrote his masterpiece *Shakuntala* and the *Kamasutra* was also written, or compiled from earlier works, by Vatsyayana. Varahamihira explored astronomy at the same time as Aryabhata, the mathematician, made his own discoveries in the field and also recognized the importance of the concept of zero, which he is credited with inventing. As the founder of the Gupta Empire defied orthodox Hindu thought, it is not surprising that the Gupta rulers advocated and propagated Buddhism as the national belief and this is the reason for the plentitude of Buddhist works of art, as opposed to Hindu, at sites such as Ajanta and Ellora.

The Decline of Empire & the Coming of **Islam**

The empire declined slowly under a succession of weak rulers until it collapsed around 550 CE. The Gupta Empire was then replaced by the rule of Harshavardhan (590-647 CE) who ruled the region for 42 years. A literary man of considerable accomplishments (he authored three plays in addition to other works) **Harsha** was a patron of the arts and a devout Buddhist who forbade the killing of animals in his kingdom but recognized the necessity to sometimes kill humans in **battle**.

He was a highly skilled military tactician who was only defeated in the field once in his life. Under his reign, the north of India flourished but his kingdom collapsed following his death. The invasion of the **Huns** had been repeatedly repelled by the Guptas and then by Harshavardhan but, with the fall of his kingdom, India fell into chaos and fragmented into small kingdoms lacking the unity necessary to fight off invading forces.



Ruins of Nalanda, Bihar Tushar Dayal (CC BY-NC-SA)

In 712 CE the Muslim general Muhammed bin Quasim conquered northern India, establishing himself in the region of modern-day Pakistan. The Muslim invasion saw an end to the indigenous empires of India and, from then on, independent city-states or communities under the control of a city would be the standard model of government. The Islamic Sultanates rose in the region of modern-day Pakistan and spread north-west.

The disparate world views of the religions which now contested each other for acceptance in the region and the diversity of languages spoken, made the unity and cultural advances, such as were seen in the time of the Guptas, difficult to reproduce. Consequently, the region was easily conquered by the Islamic Mughal Empire. India would then remain subject to various foreign influences and powers (among them the Portuguese, the French, and the British) until finally winning its independence in 1947.

Bibliography

- [Archaeological Ruins at Moenjodaro - UNESCO World Heritage Centre](#) Accessed 1 Dec 2016.
- [Archaeological Sites In India, Famous Archaeological Sites In India, Indian Archaeological Sites, Archaeology India - Indiasite](#) Accessed 1 Dec 2016.
- Keay, J. *India: A History*. Grove Press, 2010.
- Koller, J. M. *Asian Philosophies*. Prentice Hall, 2007.
- Kulke, H. & Rothermund, D. *A History of India*. Barnes & Noble Books, 2008.
- Long, J. D. *Historical Dictionary of Hinduism*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010.
- Long, J. D. *Jainism: An Introduction*. I.B. Tauris, 2009.
- [Mauryan Empire \(ca. 323–185 B.C.\) | Thematic Essay | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History | The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) Accessed 1 Dec 2016.
- Nagle, D. B. *The Ancient World*. Prentice Hall, 2008.
- Scarre, C. & Fagan, B. M. *Ancient Civilizations*. Routledge, 2008.

Contributors and Attributions

Joshua J. Mark

A freelance writer and former part-time Professor of Philosophy at Marist College, New York, Joshua J. Mark has lived in Greece and Germany and traveled through Egypt. He has taught history, writing, literature, and philosophy at the college level.

This page titled [7.1: Ancient India](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

7.2: Introduction to the Vedic Period

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



7.3: Sanskrit Connections to English

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



7.4: Ashoka the Great

Definition

https://www.worldhistory.org/Ashoka_the_Great/



Ashoka Dharma (CC BY)

Ashoka the Great (r. 268-232 BCE) was the third king of the **Mauryan Empire** (322-185 BCE) best known for his renunciation of **war**, development of the concept of *dhamma* (pious social conduct), and promotion of **Buddhism** as well as his effective reign of a nearly **pan**-Indian political entity. At its height, under **Ashoka**, the Mauryan **Empire** stretched from modern-day Iran through almost the entirety of the Indian subcontinent. Ashoka was able to rule this vast empire initially through the precepts of the political treatise known as the **Arthashastra**, attributed to the Prime Minister **Chanakya** (also known as **Kautilya** and Vishnugupta, l. c. 350-275 BCE) who served under Ashoka's grandfather **Chandragupta** (r. c. 321-c.297 BCE) who founded the empire.

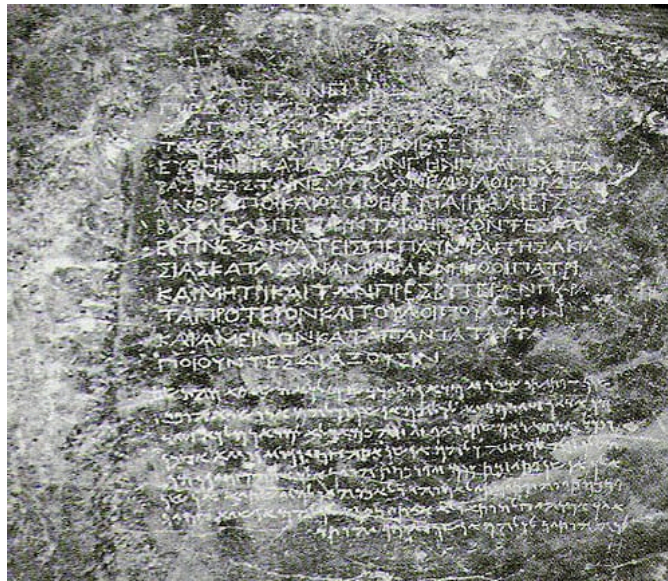
Ashoka means “without sorrow” which was most likely his given name. He is referred to in his edicts, carved in stone, as Devanampiya Piyadassi which, according to scholar John Keay (and agreed upon by scholarly consensus) means “Beloved of the Gods” and “gracious of mien” (89). He is said to have been particularly ruthless early in his reign until he launched a campaign against the Kingdom of Kalinga in c. 260 BCE which resulted in such carnage, destruction, and **death** that Ashoka renounced war and, in time, converted to Buddhism, devoting himself to peace as exemplified in his concept of *dhamma*. Most of what is known of him, outside of his edicts, comes from **Buddhist** texts which treat him as a model of conversion and virtuous behavior.

ASHOKA WALKED ACROSS THE KALINGA BATTLEFIELD, LOOKING UPON THE DEATH & DESTRUCTION, & EXPERIENCED A PROFOUND CHANGE OF HEART.

The empire he and his family built did not last even 50 years after his death. Although he was the greatest of the kings of one of the largest and most powerful empires in antiquity, his name was lost to history until he was identified by the British scholar and orientalist James Prinsep (l. 1799-1840 CE) in 1837 CE. Since then, Ashoka has come to be recognized as one of the most fascinating ancient monarchs for his decision to renounce war, his insistence on religious tolerance, and his peaceful efforts in establishing Buddhism as a major world **religion**.

Early Life & Rise to Power

Although Ashoka's name appears in the *Puranas* (encyclopedic [literature](#) of [India](#) dealing with kings, heroes, legends, and gods), no information on his life is given there. The details of his youth, rise to power, and renunciation of violence following the Kalinga campaign come from Buddhist sources which are considered, in many respects, more legendary than historical.



Greek and Aramaic inscriptions by king Ashoka World Imaging (Public Domain)

His birthdate is unknown, and he is said to have been one of a hundred sons of his father Bindusara's (r. 297-c.273 BCE) wives. His mother's name is given as Subhadrangi in one text but as Dharma in another. She is also depicted as the daughter of a Brahmin (the highest caste) and Bindusara's principal wife in some texts while a woman of lower status and minor wife in others. The story of the 100 sons of Bindusara is dismissed by most scholars who believe Ashoka was the second son of four. His older brother, Susima, was the heir apparent and crown prince and Ashoka's chances of ever assuming power were therefore slim and even slimmer because his father disliked him.

ACCORDING TO ONE LEGEND, BINDUSARA PROVIDED HIS SON ASHOKA WITH AN ARMY BUT NO WEAPONS; THE WEAPONS WERE PROVIDED LATER BY SUPERNATURAL MEANS.

He was highly educated at court, trained in martial arts, and was no doubt instructed in the precepts of the *Artashastra* – even if he was not considered a candidate for the throne – simply as one of the royal sons. The *Artashastra* is a treatise covering many different subjects related to society but, primarily, is a manual on political [science](#) providing instruction on how to rule effectively. It is attributed to Chanakya, Chandragupta's prime minister, who chose and trained Chandragupta to become king. When Chandragupta abdicated in favor of Bindusara, the latter is said to have been trained in the *Arthashastra* and so, almost certainly, would have been his sons.

When Ashoka was around the age of 18, he was sent from the capital [city](#) of Pataliputra to Takshashila ([Taxila](#)) to put down a revolt. According to one legend, Bindusara provided his son with an army but no weapons; the weapons were provided later by supernatural means. This same legend claims that Ashoka was merciful to the people who lay down their arms upon his arrival. No historical account survives of Ashoka's campaign at Taxila; it is accepted as historical fact based on suggestions from inscriptions and place names but the details are unknown.



Gandhara Buddha, Taxila Mark Cartwright (CC BY-NC-SA)

Having succeeded at Taxila, Bindusara next sent his son to govern the commercial center of Ujjain which he also succeeded in. No details are available on how Ashoka performed his duties at Ujjain because, as Keay notes, “what was thought most worthy of note by Buddhist chroniclers was his love affair with the daughter of a local merchant” (90). This woman's name is given as **Devi** (also known as Vidisha-mahadevi) of the city of Vidisha who, according to some traditions, played a significant part in Ashoka's attraction to Buddhism. Keay comments:

She was not apparently married to Ashoka nor destined to accompany him to Pataliputra and become one of his queens. Yet she bore him a son and a daughter. The son, Mahinda, would head the Buddhist mission to Sri Lanka; and it may be that his mother was already a Buddhist, thus raising the possibility that Ashoka was drawn to the **Buddha's** teachings [at this time]. (90)

According to some legends, Devi first introduced Ashoka to Buddhism, but it has also been suggested that Ashoka was already a nominal Buddhist when he met Devi and may have shared the teachings with her. Buddhism was a minor philosophical-religious sect in India at this time, one of the many heterodox schools of thought (along with Ajivika, **Jainism**, and **Charvaka**) vying for acceptance alongside the orthodox belief system of *Sanatan Dharma* (“Eternal Order”), better known as **Hinduism**. The focus of the later chronicles on Ashoka's affair with the beautiful Buddhist Devi, rather than on his administrative accomplishments, can be explained as an effort to highlight the future king's early association with the religion he would make famous.

Ashoka was still at Ujjain when Taxila rebelled again and Bindusara this time sent Susima. Susima was still engaged in the campaign when Bindusara fell ill and ordered his eldest son's recall. The king's ministers, however, favored Ashoka as successor and so he was sent for and was crowned (or, according to some legends crowned himself) king upon Bindusara's death. Afterwards, he had Susima executed (or his ministers did) by throwing him into a charcoal pit where he burned to death. Legends also claim he then executed his other 99 brothers but scholars maintain he killed only two and that the youngest, one Vitashoka, renounced all claim to rule and became a Buddhist monk.



Ashoka's pillar Undisclosed (CC BY-SA)

The Kalinga War & Ashoka's Renunciation

Once he had assumed power, by all accounts, he established himself as a cruel and ruthless despot who pursued pleasure at his subjects' expense and delighted in personally torturing those who were sentenced to his prison known as Ashoka's Hell or Hell-on-Earth. Keay, however, notes a discrepancy between the earlier association of Ashoka with Buddhism through Devi and the depiction of the new king as a murderous fiend-turned-saint, commenting:

Buddhist sources tend to represent Ashoka's pre-Buddhist lifestyle as one of indulgence steeped in cruelty. Conversion then became all the more remarkable in that by 'right thinking' even a monster of wickedness could be transformed into a model of compassion. The formula, such as it was, precluded any admission of Ashoka's early fascination with Buddhism and may explain the ruthless conduct attributed to him when Bindusara died. (90)

This is most likely true but, at the same time, may not be. That his policy of cruelty and ruthlessness was historical fact is borne out by his edicts, specifically his 13th Major Rock Edict, which addresses the Kalinga War and laments the dead and lost. The Kingdom of Kalinga was south of Pataliputra on the coast and enjoyed considerable wealth through [trade](#). The Mauryan Empire surrounded Kalinga and the two polities evidently prospered commercially from interaction. What prompted the Kalinga campaign is unknown but, in c. 260 BCE, Ashoka invaded the kingdom, slaughtering 100,000 inhabitants, deporting 150,000 more, and leaving thousands of others to die of disease and famine.

Afterwards, it is said, Ashoka walked across the battlefield, looking upon the death and destruction, and experienced a profound change of heart which he later recorded in his 13th Edict:

On conquering Kalinga, the Beloved of the Gods [Ashoka] felt remorse for, when an independent country is conquered, the slaughter, death, and deportation of the people is extremely grievous to the Beloved of the Gods and weighs heavily on his mind...Even those who are fortunate to have escaped, and whose love is undiminished, suffer from the misfortunes of their friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and relatives...Today, if a hundredth or a thousandth part of those people who were killed or died or were deported when Kalinga was annexed were to suffer similarly, it would weigh heavily on the mind of the Beloved of the Gods. (Keay, 91)

Ashoka then renounced war and embraced Buddhism but this was not the sudden conversion it is usually given as but rather a gradual acceptance of Buddha's teachings which he may, or may not, have already been acquainted with. It is entirely possible that Ashoka could have been aware of Buddha's message before Kalinga and simply not taken it to heart, not allowed it to in any way alter his behavior. This same paradigm has been seen in plenty of people – famous kings and generals or those whose names will never be remembered – who claim to belong to a certain faith while regularly ignoring its most fundamental vision.



Pillar of Ashoka Fragment Unspecified (GNU FDL)

It is also possible that Ashoka's knowledge of Buddhism was rudimentary and that it was only after Kalinga, and a spiritual journey through which he sought peace and self-forgiveness, that he chose Buddhism from among the other options available. Whether the one or the other, Ashoka would embrace Buddha's teachings in so far as he could as a monarch and establish Buddhism as a prominent religious school of thought.

The Path of Peace & Criticism

According to the accepted account, once Ashoka embraced Buddhism, he embarked on a path of peace and ruled with justice and mercy. Whereas he had earlier engaged in the hunt, he now went on pilgrimage and while formerly the royal kitchen slaughtered hundreds of animals for feasts, he now instituted vegetarianism. He made himself available to his subjects at all times, addressed what they considered wrongs, and upheld the laws which benefited all, not only the upper class and wealthy.

This understanding of Ashoka's post-Kalinga reign is given by the Buddhist texts (especially those from Sri Lanka) and his edicts. Modern-day scholars have questioned how accurate this depiction is, however, noting that Ashoka did not return the kingdom to the survivors of the Kalinga campaign nor is there any evidence he called back the 150,000 who had been deported. He made no effort at disbanding the military and there is evidence that military might continued to be used in putting down rebellions and maintaining the peace.

All of these observations are accurate interpretations of the evidence but ignore the central message of the *Artashastra*, which would have essentially been Ashoka's training manual just as it had been his father's and grandfather's. The *Artashastra* makes clear that a strong State can only be maintained by a strong king. A weak king will indulge himself and his own desires; a wise king will consider what is best for the greatest number of people. In following this principle, Ashoka would not have been able to implement Buddhism fully as a new governmental policy because, first of all, he needed to continue to present a public image of strength and, secondly, most of his subjects were not Buddhist and would have resented that policy.

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



Ashoka could have personally regretted the Kalinga campaign, had a genuine change of heart, and yet still have been unable to return Kalinga to its people or reverse his earlier deportation policy because it would have made him appear weak and encouraged other regions or foreign powers toward acts of aggression. What was done, was done, and the king moved on having

learned from his mistake and having determined to become a better man and monarch.

Conclusion

Ashoka's response to **warfare** and the tragedy of Kalinga was the inspiration for the formulation of the concept of *dhamma*. Dhamma derives from the concept, originally set down by Hinduism, of *dharma* (duty) which is one's responsibility or purpose in life but, more directly, from Buddha's use of *dharma* as *cosmic law* and *that which should be heeded*. Ashoka's *dhamma* includes this understanding but expands it to mean general goodwill and beneficence to all as "right behavior" which promotes peace and understanding. Keay notes that the concept is equated with "mercy, charity, truthfulness, and purity" (95). It is also understood to mean "good conduct" or "decent behavior".

After he had embraced Buddhism, Ashoka embarked on pilgrimages to sites sacred to Buddha and began to disseminate his thoughts on dhamma. He ordered edicts, many referencing dhamma or explaining the concept fully, engraved in stone throughout his empire and sent Buddhist missionaries to other regions and nations including modern-day Sri Lanka, **China**, Thailand, and **Greece**; in so doing, he established Buddhism as a major world religion. These missionaries spread Buddha's vision peacefully since, as Ashoka had decreed, no one should elevate their own religion over anyone else's; to do so devalued one's own faith by supposing it to be better than another's and so lost the humility necessary in approaching sacred subjects.



Sanchi Stupa Elleen Delhi (CC BY-NC-SA)

Buddha's remains, before Ashoka's reign, had been placed in eight *stupas* (tumuli containing relics) around the country. Ashoka had the relics removed and is said to have decreed the construction of 84,000 stupas throughout the country, each to have some part of the Buddha's remains inside. In this way, he thought, the Buddhist message of peace and harmonious existence between people and the natural world would be encouraged further. The number of these stupas is considered an exaggeration but there is no doubt that Ashoka did order construction of a number of them, such as the famous work at Sanchi.

Ashoka died after reigning for nearly 40 years. His reign had enlarged and strengthened the Mauryan Empire and yet it would not endure for even 50 years after his death. His name was eventually forgotten, his stupas became overgrown, and his edicts, carved on majestic pillars, toppled and buried by the sands. When European scholars began exploring Indian history in the 19th century, the British scholar and orientalist James Prinsep came across an inscription on the Sanchi **stupa** in an unknown **script** which, eventually, he came to understand as referencing a king by the name of Devanampiya Piyadassi who, as far as Prinsep knew, was referenced nowhere else.

In time, and through the efforts of Prinsep in deciphering **Brahmi Script** as well as those of other scholars, it was understood that the Ashoka named as a Mauryan king in the Puranas was the same as this Devanampiya Piyadassi. Prinsep published his work on Ashoka in 1837 CE, shortly before he died, and the great Mauryan king has since attracted increasing interest around the world; most notably as the only empire-builder of the ancient world who, at the height of his power, renounced warfare and **conquest** to

pursue mutual understanding and harmonious existence as both domestic and foreign policy.

Bibliography

- Baird, F.& Heimbeck, R. S. *Philosophic Classics: Asian Philosophy*. Routledge, 2005.
- Chanakya Kautilya & Shamasastri, R. & Patel, C. *Arthashastra, or, The Playbook of Material Gain*. Independently published, 2019.
- Keay, J. *India*. Grove Press, 2020.
- Koller, J. M. *Asian Philosophies*. Prentice Hall, 2007.
- Kulke, H. & Rothermund, D. *A History of India*. Barnes & Noble Books, 2006.
- Long, J. D. *Historical Dictionary of Hinduism*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2020.
- Stutley, M. & Stutley, J. *Harper's Dictionary of Hinduism*. Harper & Row, 1977.
- Trautmann, T. R. *Arthashastra: The Science of Wealth*. Penguin/Portfolio, 2016.

Contributors and Attributions

Joshua J. Mark

A freelance writer and former part-time Professor of Philosophy at Marist College, New York, Joshua J. Mark has lived in Greece and Germany and traveled through Egypt. He has taught history, writing, literature, and philosophy at the college level.

7.5: Hinduism

<https://www.worldhistory.org/hinduism/>

Definition



Shiva Nataraja (Lord of the Dance) Peter F (CC BY-SA)

Hinduism is the oldest **religion** in the world, originating in Central Asia and the **Indus Valley**, still practiced in the present day. The term Hinduism is what is known as an exonym (a name given by others to a people, place, or concept) and derives from the Persian term *Sindus* designating those who lived across the Indus River. Adherents of the faith know it as *Sanatan Dharma* (“eternal order” or “eternal path”) and understand the precepts, as set down in the scriptures known as **the Vedas**, as having always existed just as Brahman, the Supreme Over Soul from whom all of creation emerges, has always been. Brahman is the First Cause which sets all else in motion but is also that which is in motion, that which guides the course of creation, and creation itself.

Accordingly, one may interpret Hinduism as monotheistic (as there is one god), polytheistic (as there are many avatars of the one god), henotheistic (as one may choose to elevate any one of these avatars to supremacy), pantheistic (as the avatars might be interpreted as representing aspects of the natural world), or even atheistic as one might choose to replace the concept of Brahman with one's self in striving to be the best version of one's self. This belief system was first set down in **writing** in the works known as the **Vedas** during the so-called Vedic Period c. 1500 - c. 500 BCE but the concepts were transmitted orally long before.

There is no founder of Hinduism, no date of origin, nor – according to the faith – a development of the belief system; the scribes who wrote the Vedas are said to have been simply recording that which had always existed. This eternal knowledge is known as *shruti* (“what is heard”) and is set down in the Vedas and their various sections known as the *Samhitas*, *Aranyakas*, *Brahmanas*, and, most famously, the **Upanishads**, each of which addresses a different aspect of the faith.

THE PURPOSE OF LIFE IS TO RECOGNIZE THE ESSENTIAL ONENESS OF EXISTENCE, THE HIGHER ASPECT OF THE INDIVIDUAL SELF, THROUGH ADHERENCE TO ONE'S DUTY IN LIFE.

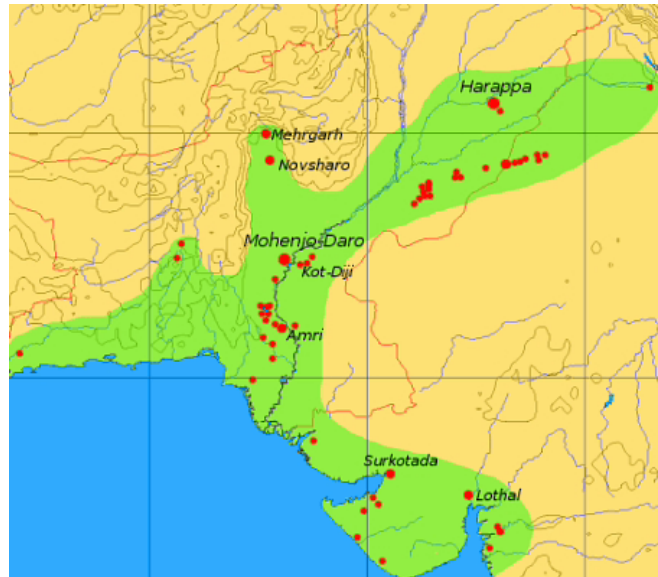
These works are complemented by another type known as *smritis* (“what is remembered”) which relate stories on how one is to practice the faith and include the Puranas, the epics **Mahabharata** and **Ramayana**, the Yoga Sutras, and the **Bhagavad Gita**. None of these, however, should be considered the “Hindu **Bible**” as there is no claim they are the “word of God”; they are, instead,

the revelation of the truth of existence which claims the universe is rational, structured, and controlled by the Supreme Over Soul/ Mind known as Brahman in whose essence all human beings take part.

The purpose of life is to recognize the essential oneness of existence, the higher aspect of the individual self (known as the *Atman*) which is a part of everyone else's self as well as the Over Soul/Mind and, through adherence to one's duty in life (*dharma*) performed with the proper action (*karma*), to slip the bonds of physical existence and escape from the cycle of rebirth and **death** (*samsara*). Once the individual has done so, the *Atman* joins with Brahman and one has returned home to the primordial oneness. That which keeps one from realizing this oneness is the illusion of duality – the belief that one is separate from others and from one's Creator – but this misconception (known as *maya*), encouraged by one's experience in the physical world, may be overcome by recognizing the essential unity of all existence – how alike one is to others and, finally, to the divine – and attaining the enlightened state of self-actualization.

Early Development

Some form of the belief system which would become, or at least influence, Hinduism most likely existed in the Indus Valley prior to the 3rd millennium BCE when a nomadic coalition of tribes who referred to themselves as **Aryan** came to the region from Central Asia. Some of these people, now referred to as Indo-Iranians, settled in the region of modern-day Iran (some of whom came to be known in the West as Persians) while others, now known as Indo-**Aryans**, made their home in the Indus Valley. The term “Aryan” referred to a class of people, not a race, and meant “free man” or “noble”. The long-standing myth of an “Aryan Invasion” in which Caucasians “brought **civilization**” to the region is the product of narrow-minded and prejudiced 18th- and 19th-century CE Western scholarship and has long been discredited.



Map of the Indus Valley Civilization Dbachmann (GNU FDL)

It is clear from the ruins of **cities** such as Mohenjo-daro and Harappa (to name only the two most famous) that a highly advanced civilization was already well developed in the Indus River Valley by c. 3000 BCE, having grown from **Neolithic Period** settlements dating to before 7000 BCE. This period is now referred to as the era of the **Indus Valley Civilization** or the Harappan Civilization (c. 7000 - c. 600 BCE) which would be influenced by and merge with the **culture** of the Indo-Aryans.

By c. 2000 BCE, the great **city** of Mohenjo-daro had brick streets, running water, and a highly developed industrial, commercial, and political system. It is almost certain they also had developed some sort of religious belief which included ritual bathing and other religious observances, but no written records exist to substantiate this. It is more certain that, whatever form this religion took, significant elements of it originated elsewhere as the basic Vedic thought (as well as the names and characters of many of the gods) correspond closely with the Early Iranian Religion of **Persia**.

The early Indus Valley religion developed through the influence of the new arrivals during the Vedic Period. During this time, the belief system known as Vedism was developed by the so-called Vedic peoples who wrote in **Sanskrit**, the language the Vedas are

composed in. Scholar John M. Koller writes:

The Sanskrit language, of which the Vedas are the oldest surviving expression, became dominant. Although the Sanskrit tradition reflects borrowing and accommodations from non-Vedic sources, it hides more of these contributions than it reveals. Thus, despite the grandeur of the ancient Indus civilization, it is to the Vedas that we must turn for an understanding of earliest Indian thought. (16)

The Vedas sought to understand the nature of existence and the individual's place in the cosmic order. In pursuing these questions, the sages created the highly developed theological system which would become Hinduism.



Excavation Site at Mohenjo-daro Grjatoi (CC BY-NC-SA)

Brahmanism

Vedism became Brahmanism, a religious belief focusing on the underlying Truth, the First Cause, of all observable phenomena as well as the unseen aspects of existence. The sages who developed Brahmanism began with the observable world which operated according to certain rules. They called these rules *rita* ("order") and recognized that, in order for *rita* to exist, something had to have existed previously to create it; one could not have rules without a rule-maker.

At this time, there were many gods in the **pantheon** of Vedism who could have been looked to as the First Cause but the sages went beyond the anthropomorphic deities and recognized, as Koller puts it, that "there is a wholeness, an undivided reality, that is more fundamental than being or non-being" (19). This entity was envisioned as an individual but one so great and powerful as to be beyond all human comprehension. The being they came to refer to as Brahman did not just exist in reality (another being like any others) nor outside of reality (in the realm of non-being or pre-existence) but was actual reality itself. Brahman not only caused things to be as they were; it was things as they were, had always been, and would always be. Hence the designation of *Sanatan Dharma* – Eternal Order – as the name of the belief system.



Brahman Worshipper James Blake Wiener (CC BY-NC-SA)

If that were so, however, an insignificant individual living briefly on the earth had no hope of connection with this ultimate source of life. Since Brahman could not be comprehended, no relationship could be possible. The Vedic sages turned their attention from the First Cause to the individual and defined the aspects of the self as the physical body, as the soul, and as the mind but none of these were adequate to make a connection to the Ultimate until they understood there had to be a higher self which directed one's other functions. Koller comments:

This Self is said to be “other than the known and other than the unknown” [Kena Upanishad I.4]. The question the sage is asking is: What makes possible seeing, hearing, and thinking? But the question is not about physiological or mental processes; it is about the ultimate subject who knows. Who directs the eye to see color and the mind to think thoughts? The sage assumes there must be an inner director, an inner agent, directing the various functions of knowledge. (24)

This “inner director” was determined to be the Atman – one's higher self – who is connected to Brahman because it is Brahman. Every individual carries within themselves the Ultimate Truth and the First Cause. There is no reason to seek this entity externally because one carries that entity inside of one's self; one only has to realize this truth in order to live it; as expressed in the Chandogya Upanishad in the phrase *Tat Tvam Asi* – “Thou Art That” – one is already what one seeks to become; one only has to realize it.

This realization was encouraged through rituals which not only celebrated Brahman but reenacted the creation of all things. The priestly class (Brahmins), in elevating the Ultimate Divine through the chants, hymns, and songs of the Vedas, elevated an audience by impressing upon them the fact that they already were where they wanted to be, they were not just in the presence of the Divine but were an integral part of it, and all they needed to do was be aware of this and celebrate it through performance of their divinely-appointed duty in life enacted according to that duty.

Classical Hinduism

THE CENTRAL FOCUS OF HINDUISM, WHATEVER FORM ONE BELIEVES IT TAKES, IS SELF-KNOWLEDGE; IN KNOWING ONE'S SELF, ONE COMES TO KNOW GOD.

Brahmanism developed into the system now known as Hinduism which, although generally regarded as a religion, is also considered a way of life and a **philosophy**. The central focus of Hinduism, whatever form one believes it takes, is self-knowledge; in knowing one's self, one comes to know God. Evil comes from ignorance of what is good; knowledge of what is good negates evil. One's purpose in life is to recognize what is good and pursue it according to one's particular duty (*dharma*), and the action involved in that proper pursuit is one's *karma*. The more dutifully one performs one's *karma* in accordance with one's *dharma*, the closer to self-actualization one becomes and so the closer to realizing the Divine in one's self.

The physical world is an illusion only in so far that it convinces one of duality and separation. One may turn one's back on the world and pursue the life of a religious ascetic, but Hinduism encourages full participation in life through the *purusharthas* – life goals – which are:

- *Artha* – one's career, home life, material wealth
- *Kama* – love, sexuality, sensuality, pleasure
- *Moksha* – liberation, freedom, enlightenment, self-actualization

The soul takes enjoyment in these pursuits even though it understands they are all temporal pleasures. The soul is immortal – it has always existed as part of Brahman and will always exist – therefore the finality of death is an illusion. At death, the soul discards the body and then is reincarnated if it failed to attain *Moksha* or, if it did, the *Atman* becomes one with Brahman and returns to its eternal home. The cycle of rebirth and death, known as *samsara*, will continue until the soul has had its fill of earthly experience and pleasures and concentrates a life on detachment and pursuit of eternal, rather than temporal, goods.



Ganesha Statue Swaminathan (CC BY)

Helping or hindering one in this goal are three qualities or characteristics inherent in every soul known as the *gunas*:

- *Sattva* – wisdom, goodness, detached enlightenment
- *Rajas* – passionate intensity, constant activity, aggression
- *Tamas* – literally “blown by the winds”, darkness, confusion, helplessness

The *gunas* are not three states one 'works through' from lowest to highest; they are present in every soul to greater or lesser degrees. An individual who is generally composed and lives a good life might still become swept away by passion or find themselves whirling in helpless confusion. Recognizing the *gunas* for what they are, however, and working to control the less desirable aspects of them, helps one to see more clearly one's *dharma* in life and how to perform it. One's *dharma* can only be performed by one's self; no one may perform another's duty. Everyone has arrived on the earth with a specific role to play and, if one chooses not to play that role in one's present life, one will come back in another and another until one does so.

This process is often related to the Caste System of Hinduism in which one is born to a certain station which one cannot in any way change, must perform one's designated function as part of that class for life, and will be reincarnated if one fails to perform correctly. This concept, contrary to popular thought, was not imposed on the people of **India** by the colonial government of **Britain** in the 19th century CE but was first suggested in the *Bhagavad Gita* (composed c. 5th-2nd centuries BCE) when **Krishna** tells **Arjuna** about the *gunas* and one's responsibility to one's *dharma*.



Krishna Manifesting His Full Glory to Arjuna Steve Jurvetson (CC BY)

Krishna says that one must do what one is supposed to do and relates the *varna* (caste) system as part of this in describing how an individual should live one's life according to Divine Will; anyone could be a Brahmin or a warrior or a merchant if that was their *dharma*; the caste system exists within each individual just as the *gunas* do. Krishna's words were later revised in the work known as *Manusmriti* ("The Laws of Manu"), written in the 2nd century BCE to the 3rd CE, which claimed a strict caste system had been ordained as part of the Divine Order in which one was destined to remain, for life, in the social class one was born into. The Laws of Manu manuscript is the first expression of this concept as it has now come to be understood.

Texts & Observance

Manu's later interference aside, the concept of Eternal Order is made clear through the texts which are regarded as the **Hindu** scriptures. These works, as noted, fall into two classes:

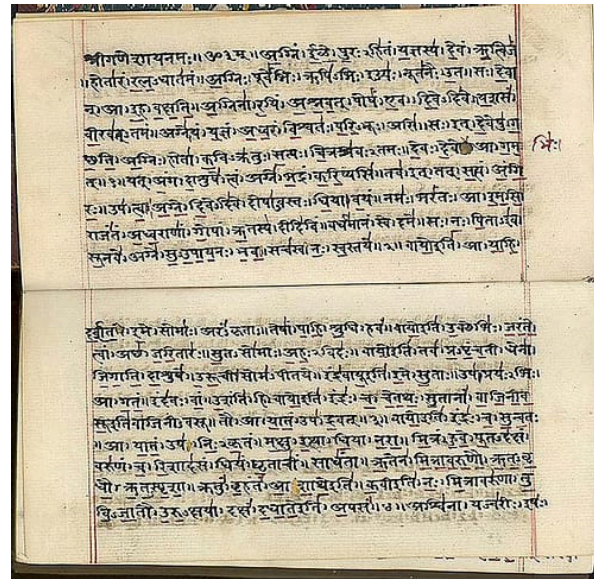
- *Shruti* ("what is heard") – the revelation of the nature of existence as recorded by the scribes who "heard" it and recorded it in the Vedas.
- *Smritis* ("what is remembered") – accounts of great heroes of the past and how they lived – or failed to live – in accordance with the precepts of Eternal Order.

The texts relating *Shruti* are the Four Vedas:

- Rig **Veda** – the oldest of the Vedas, a collection of hymns
- Sama Veda – liturgical texts, chants, and songs
- Yajur Veda – ritual formulas, mantras, chants
- Atharva Veda – spells, chants, hymns, prayers

Each of these is further divided into types of text:

- Aranyakas – rituals, observances
- Brahmanas – commentaries on said rituals and observances explaining them
- Samhitas – benedictions, prayers, mantras
- Upanishads – philosophical commentaries on the meaning of life and Vedas



The Vedas (Rig-veda) BernardM (CC BY-SA)

The texts relating *Smritis* are:

- Puranas – folklore and legend regarding figures of the ancient past
- *Ramayana* – epic tale of Prince **Rama** and his journey to self-actualization
- *Mahabharata* – epic tale of the five Pandavas and their **war** with the **Kauravas**
- *Bhagavad Gita* – popular tale in which Krishna instructs the prince Arjuna on *dharma*
- Yoga Sutras – commentary on the different disciplines of yoga and self-liberation

These texts allude to or specifically address numerous deities such as **Indra**, lord of the cosmic forces, thunderbolts, storms, war, and courage; Vac, goddess of consciousness, speech, and clear communication; **Agni**, god of fire and illumination; **Kali**, goddess of death; Ganesh, the elephant-headed god, remover of obstacles; Parvati, goddess of love, fertility, and strength and also the consort of **Shiva**; and **Soma**, god of the sea, fertility, illumination, and ecstasy. Among the most important of the deities are those who make up the so-called “Hindu **Trinity**”:

- **Brahma** – the creator
- **Vishnu** – the preserver
- Shiva – the destroyer

All of these gods are manifestations of Brahman, the Ultimate Reality, who can only be understood through aspects of Itself. Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are both these aspects and individual deities with their own characters, motivations, and desires. They may also be understood through their own avatars – as they themselves are also too overwhelming to be comprehended on their own entirely – and so take the form of other gods, the most famous of which is Krishna, the avatar of Vishnu, who comes to earth periodically to adjust humanity's understanding and correct error.

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna appears as the Prince Arjuna's charioteer because he knows Arjuna will have doubts about fighting

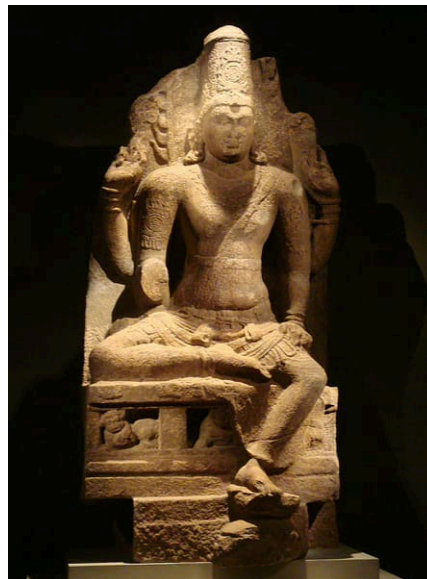
against his relatives at the **Battle** of Kurukshetra. He pauses time in order to instruct Arjuna on the nature of *dharma* and the illusion of the finality of death, elevating his mind above his interpretation of present circumstance, and allowing him to perform his duty as a warrior.

These texts inform the religious observances of adherents of *Sanatan Dharma* which, generally speaking, have two aspects:

- *Puja* – worship, ritual, sacrifice, and prayer either at a personal shrine or **temple**
- *Darshan* – direct visual contact with the statue of a deity

One may worship the Divine at one's home, a personal shrine, or a temple. In the temple, the clergy will assist an individual and their family by interceding on their behalf with the deity by instruction, chants, songs, and prayers. Song, dance, and general movement in expressing one's self before God often characterize a religious service. An important element of this is visual contact with the eyes of the deity as represented by a statue or figurine.

Darshan is vital to worship and communion in that the god is seeking the adherent as earnestly as the adherent seeks the deity and they meet through the eyes. This is the reason why Hindu temples are adorned with figures of the many gods both inside and externally. The statue is thought to embody the deity itself and one receives blessings and comfort through eye contact just as one would in a meeting with a friend.



Statue of Lord Vishnu PHGCOM (Copyright)

Conclusion

This relationship between a believer and the deity is most apparent through the many festivals observed throughout the year. Among the most popular is Diwali, the festival of lights, which celebrates the **triumph** of bright energies and light over the forces of negativity and darkness. In this festival, as in daily observance, the presence of a statue or figurine of a deity is important in making connection and elevating the mind and soul of an adherent.

Diwali is probably the best example of the discipline of Bhakti Yoga which focuses on loving devotion and service. People clean, renovate, decorate, and improve their homes in honor of the goddess of fertility and prosperity **Lakshmi**, and give thanks for all they have received from her. There are many other deities, however, who may be called upon at Diwali to take the place of Lakshmi depending on what an adherent needs and what has been received over the past year.

The individual deity does not finally matter because all the deities of the pantheon are aspects of Brahman as is the worshipper and the act of worship. The details of the observance do not matter as much as the observance itself which acknowledges one's place in the universe and reasserts one's commitment to recognizing the divine unity in every aspect of one's life and one's connection to others who are traveling the same path toward home.

Bibliography

- Baird, F. E. & Heimbeck, R. S. *Philosophic Classics: Asian Philosophy*. Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2009.
- Cavendish, R. *Mythology*. Barnes & Noble, 2003.
- Keay, J. *India*. Grove Press, 2018.
- Koller, J. M. *Asian Philosophies*. Prentice Hall, 2007.
- Kulke, H. & Rothermund, D. *A History of India*. Barnes & Noble Books, 2006.
- Long, J. D. *Historical Dictionary of Hinduism*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018.
- Ramanujan, A. K. *Speaking of Siva*. Penguin Classics, 2020.
- Swami Prabhavananda & Christopher Isherwood. *Bhagavad Gita: The Song of God*. GemsTone/Vedanta Press, 2005.
- Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester. *The Upanishads*. Ramakrishna Math Chennai, 2020.
- Swami Satya Prakash Saraswati. *The Four Vedas*. DAV Publication Division, 2020.

Contributors and Attributions

Joshua J. Mark

A freelance writer and former part-time Professor of Philosophy at Marist College, New York, Joshua J. Mark has lived in Greece and Germany and traveled through Egypt. He has taught history, writing, literature, and philosophy at the college level.

7.6: Hindu Temples

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



7.7: Reading- Shiva As Lord of the Dance (Nataraja)

A Sacred Object out of Context

The art of medieval India, like the art of medieval Europe, was primarily in the service of religion. The devotee's spiritual experience was enhanced by meditation inspired by works of art and architecture. Just as the luminous upper chapel of the Sainte Chapelle dazzled and overwhelmed worshipers in France, the looming bronze statues of Shiva and Parvati in, for example, the inner halls of the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, in south India would have awed a Hindu devotee.



Shiva As Lord of the Dance (Nataraja), c. 11th century, Copper alloy, Chola period, 68.3 x 56.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

It's important to keep in mind that the bronze *Shiva As Lord of the Dance* ("Nataraja"—nata meaning dance or performance, and raja meaning king or lord), is a sacred object that has been taken out of its original context—in fact, we don't even know where this particular sculpture was originally venerated. In the intimate spaces of the Florence and Herbert Irving South Asian Galleries in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Shiva Nataraja is surrounded by other metal statues of Hindu gods including the Lords Vishnu, Parvati, and Hanuman. It is easy to become absorbed in the dark quiet of these galleries with its remarkable collection of divine figures, but it is important to remember that this particular statue was intended to be movable, which explains its moderate size and sizeable circular base, ideal for lifting and hoisting onto a shoulder.

Made for Mobility

From the 11th century and onwards, Hindu devotees carried these statues in processional parades as priests followed chanting prayers and bestowing blessings on people gathered for this purpose. Sometimes the statues would be adorned in resplendent red and green clothes and gold jewelry to denote the glorious human form of the gods. In these processions The *Shiva Nataraja* may have had its legs wrapped with a white and red cloth, adorned with flowers, and surrounded by candles. In a religious Hindu context, the statue is the literal embodiment of the divine. When the worshiper comes before the statue and begins to pray, faith activates the divine energy inherent in the statue, and at that moment, Shiva is present.

A Bronze Shiva

Shiva constitutes a part of a powerful triad of divine energy within the cosmos of the Hindu religion. There is Brahma, the benevolent creator of the universe; there is Vishnu, the sagacious preserver; then there is Shiva, the destroyer. "Destroyer" in this

sense is not an entirely negative force, but one that is expansive in its impact. In Hindu religious philosophy all things must come to a natural end so they can begin anew, and Shiva is the agent that brings about this end so that a new cycle can begin.

The Metropolitan Museum's *Shiva Nataraja* was made some time in the eleventh century during the Chola Dynasty (9th–13th centuries C.E.) in south India, in what is now the state of Tamil Nadu. One of the longest lasting empires of south India, the Chola Dynasty heralded a golden age of exploration, trade, and artistic development. A great area innovation within the arts of the Chola period was in the field of metalwork, particularly in bronze sculpture. The expanse of the Chola empire stretched south-east towards Sri Lanka and gave the kingdom access to vast copper reserves that enabled the proliferation of bronze work by skilled artisans.

During this period a new kind of sculpture is made, one that combines the expressive qualities of stone temple carvings with the rich iconography possible in bronze casting. This image of Shiva is taken from the ancient Indian manual of visual depiction, the *Shilpa Shastras* (The Science or Rules of Sculpture), which contained a precise set of measurements and shapes for the limbs and proportions of the divine figure. Arms were to be long like stalks of bamboo, faces round like the moon, and eyes shaped like almonds or the leaves of a lotus. The *Shastras* were a primer on the ideals of beauty and physical perfection within ancient Hindu ideology.



A Dance within the Cosmic Circle of Fire

Here, Shiva embodies those perfect physical qualities as he is frozen in the moment of his dance within the cosmic circle of fire that is the simultaneous and continuous creation and destruction of the universe. The ring of fire that surrounds the figure is the encapsulated cosmos of mass, time, and space, whose endless cycle of annihilation and regeneration moves in tune to the beat of Shiva's drum and the rhythm of his steps.

In his upper right hand he holds the *damaru*, the drum whose beats syncopate the act of creation and the passage of time.



His lower right hand with his palm raised and facing the viewer is lifted in the gesture of the *abhaya mudra*, which says to the supplicant, “Be not afraid, for those who follow the path of righteousness will have my blessing.”

Shiva's lower left hand stretches diagonally across his chest with his palm facing down towards his raised left foot, which signifies spiritual grace and fulfillment through meditation and mastery over one's baser appetites.

In his upper left hand he holds the *agni* (image right), the flame of destruction that annihilates all that the sound of the *damaru* has drummed into existence.



Shiva's right foot stands upon the huddled dwarf, the demon Apasmara, the embodiment of ignorance.



Shiva's hair, the long hair of the yogi, streams out across the space within the halo of fire that constitutes the universe. Throughout this entire process of chaos and renewal, the face of the god remains tranquil, transfixed in what the historian of South Asian art Heinrich Zimmer calls, "the mask of god's eternal essence."

Beyond Grace There Is Perfection

The supple and expressive quality of the dancing Shiva is one of the touchstones of South Asian, and indeed, world sculpture. When the French sculptor Auguste Rodin saw some photographs of the 11th century bronze Shiva Nataraja in the Madras Museum around 1915, he wrote that it seemed to him the "perfect expression of rhythmic movement in the world." In an essay he wrote that was published in 1921 he wrote that the Shiva Nataraja has "what many people cannot see—the unknown depths, the core of life. There is grace in elegance, but beyond grace there is perfection." The English philosopher Aldous Huxley said in an interview in 1961 that the Hindu image of god as a dancer is unlike anything he had seen in Western art. "We don't have anything that approaches the symbolism of this work of art, which is both cosmic and psychological."

The eloquent bronze statue of the *Shiva Nataraja*, despite the impact of its formal beauty on Rodin who knew little of its background, is incomplete without an understanding of its symbolism and religious significance. Bronzes of the Chola period such as *Shiva as Lord of the Dance (Nataraja)* arose out of a need to transmute the divine into a physical embodiment of beauty.

CC licensed content, Shared previously

- Shiva As Lord of the Dance (Nataraja). **Authored by:** Farisa Khalid. **Provided by:** Khan Academy. **Located at:** <https://web.archive.org/web/20140215032311/http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/shiva-as-lord-of-the-dance-nataraja.html>. **License:** CC BY-NC-SA: Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike

7.8: Buddhism

<https://www.worldhistory.org/buddhism/>

Definition



Maya Giving Birth to the Buddha Cristian Violatti (Copyright, fair use)

Buddhism is a non-theistic **religion** (no belief in a creator god), also considered a **philosophy** and a moral discipline, originating in **India** in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. It was founded by the sage **Siddhartha Gautama** (the **Buddha** l. c. 563 - c. 483 BCE) who, according to legend, had been a **Hindu** prince before abandoning his position and wealth to become a spiritual ascetic and, finally, an enlightened being who taught others the means by which they could escape *samsara*, the cycle of suffering, rebirth, and **death**.

The Buddha developed the belief system at a time when India was in the midst of significant religious and philosophical reform. Buddhism was, initially, only one of many schools of thought which developed in response to what was perceived as the failure of orthodox **Hinduism** to address the needs of the people. It remained a relatively minor school until the reign of **Ashoka the Great** (268-232 BCE) of the **Mauryan Empire** (322-185 BCE) who embraced and spread the belief, not only throughout India, but through Southern, Eastern, and Central Asia.

Buddhism's central vision can be summed up in four verses from one of its central texts, the **Dhammapada**:

Our life is shaped by our mind; we become what we think. Suffering follows an evil thought as the wheels of a cart follow the oxen that draw it.

Our life is shaped by our mind; we become what we think. Joy follows a pure thought like a shadow that never leaves. (I.1-2)

From desire comes grief, from desire comes fear; one who is free from desire knows neither grief nor fear.

Attachment to objects of desire brings grief, attachment to objects of desire brings fear; one who is free of attachment knows neither grief nor fear. (XVI.212-213)

The Buddha came to understand that desire and attachment caused suffering and humans suffered because they were ignorant of the true nature of existence. People insisted on permanent states in life and resisted change, clung to what they knew, and

mourned what they lost. In his quest for a means to live without suffering, he recognized that life is constant change, nothing is permanent, but one could find inner peace through a spiritual discipline that recognized beauty in the transience of life while also preventing one from becoming ensnared by attachment to impermanent objects, people, and situations. His teaching centers on the **Four Noble Truths**, the Wheel of Becoming, and the Eightfold Path to form the foundation of **Buddhist** thought and these remain central to the different schools of Buddhism which continue in the modern day.

Historical Background

Hinduism (*Sanatan Dharma*, “Eternal Order”) was the dominant faith in India in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE when a wave of religious and philosophical reform swept the land. Scholar John M. Koller notes how, “a major social transformation from agrarian life to urban **trade** and manufacture was underway, leading to a questioning of the old values, ideas, and institutions” (46). Hinduism was based on acceptance of the scriptures known as **the Vedas**, thought to be eternal emanations from the universe which had been “heard” by sages at a certain time in the past but were not created by human beings.

The **Vedas** were “received” and recited by the Hindu priests in **Sanskrit**, a language the people did not understand, and various philosophical thinkers of the time began to question this practice and the validity of the belief structure. Many different schools of philosophy are said to have developed at this time (most of which did not survive), which either accepted or rejected the authority of the Vedas. Those which accepted the orthodox Hindu view and the resulting practices were known as *astika* (“there exists”) and those which rejected the orthodox view were known as *nastika* (“there does not exist”). Three of the *nastika* schools of thought to survive this period were **Charvaka**, **Jainism**, and Buddhism.

THE BUDDHA RECOGNIZED THAT THE PATHS OF CHARVAKA & JAINISM BOTH REPRESENTED EXTREMES & FOUND WHAT HE CALLED A “MIDDLE WAY” BETWEEN THEM.

Hinduism held the universe was governed by a supreme being known as Brahman who was the Universe itself and it was this being who had imparted the Vedas to humanity. The purpose of one's life was to live in accordance with the divine order as it had been set down and perform one's *dharma* (duty) with the proper **karma** (action) in order to eventually find release from the cycle of rebirth and death (*samsara*) at which point the individual soul would attain union with the oversoul (*atman*) and experience complete liberation and peace.

Charvaka rejected this belief and offered materialism instead. Its founder, Brhaspati (l. c. 600 BCE) claimed it was ridiculous for people to accept the word of Hindu priests that an incomprehensible language was the word of God. He established a school based on direct perception in ascertaining truth and the pursuit of pleasure as the highest goal in life. **Mahavira** (also known as **Vardhamana**, l. c. 599-527 BCE) preached Jainism based on the belief that individual discipline and strict adherence to a moral code led to a better life and release from *samsara* at death. The Buddha recognized that both of these paths represented extremes and found what he called a “middle way” between them.

Siddhartha Gautama

According to Buddhist tradition, Siddhartha Gautama was born in **Lumbini** (modern-day Nepal) and grew up, the son of a king. After a seer predicted he would either become a great king, or spiritual leader if he were to witness suffering or death, his father shielded from any of the harsh realities of existence. He married, had a son, and was groomed to succeed his father as king. One day, however (or, in some versions, over a succession of days), his coachman drove him out of the compound where he had spent his first 29 years and he encountered what are known as the Four Signs:

- An aged man
- A sick man
- A dead man
- An ascetic

With the first three, he asked his driver, “Am I, too, subject to this?”, and the coachman assured him that everyone aged, everyone grew sick at one point or another, and everyone died. Siddhartha became upset as he understood that everyone he loved, all his fine things, would be lost and that he, himself, would one day be as well.



Siddhartha Gautama, the Historical Buddha Cristian Violatti (CC BY-NC-SA)

When he saw the ascetic, a shaven-headed man in a yellow robe, smiling by the side of the road, he asked why he was not like other men. The ascetic explained he was pursuing a peaceful life of reflection, compassion, and non-attachment. Shortly after this encounter, Siddhartha left his wealth, position, and family to follow the ascetic's example.

He at first sought out a famous teacher from whom he learned meditation techniques, but these did not free him from worry or suffering. A second teacher taught him how to suppress his desires and suspend awareness, but this was no solution either as it was not a permanent state of mind. He tried to live as the other ascetics lived, practicing what was most likely Jain discipline, but even this was not enough for him. At last, he decided to refuse the needs of the body by starving himself, eating only a grain of rice a day, until he was so emaciated that he was unrecognizable.

According to one version of the legend, at this point, he either stumbled into a river and received a revelation of the middle way. In the other version of the story, a milkmaid named Sujata comes upon him in the woods near her village and offers him some rice milk, which he accepts, and so ends his period of strict asceticism as he glimpses the idea of a “middle way”. He goes and sits beneath a Bodhi tree, on a bed of grass, in the nearby village of Bodh [Gaya](#), vowing he will either come to understand how best to live in the world or will die.

THE BUDDHA UNDERSTOOD, IN A FLASH OF ILLUMINATION, THAT HUMANS SUFFERED BECAUSE THEY INSISTED ON PERMANENCE IN A WORLD OF CONSTANT CHANGE.

He understood, in a flash of illumination, that humans suffered because they insisted on permanence in a world of constant change. People maintained an identity which they called their “self” and which would not change, maintained clothing and objects they thought of as “theirs”, and maintained relationships with others which they believed would last forever – but none of this was true; the nature of life, all of life, was change and the way to escape suffering was to recognize this and act on it. At this moment he became the Buddha (“awakened one” or “enlightened one”) and was freed from ignorance and illusion.

Having attained complete enlightenment, recognizing the interdependent and transient nature of all things, he recognized that he could now live however he pleased without suffering and could do whatever he wanted. He hesitated to teach what he had learned to others because he felt they would just reject him but was finally convinced that he had to try and so preached his first sermon at the Deer Park in Sarnath at which he first described the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path which led one from illusion and suffering to enlightenment and joy.

It should be noted that this story of the Buddha's journey from illusion to awareness was later tailored to him following the establishment of the belief system and may, or may not, reflect the reality of Buddha's early life and awakening. Scholars Robert E. Buswell, Jr. and Donald S. Lopez, Jr. note that early Buddhists were “motivated in part by the need to demonstrate that what the Buddha taught was not the innovation of an individual, but rather the rediscovery of a timeless truth” in order to give the belief system the same claim to ancient, divine origins held by Hinduism and Jainism (149). Buswell and Lopez continue:

Thus, in their biographies, all of the buddhas of the past and future are portrayed as doing many of the same things. They all sit cross-legged in their mother's womb; they are all born in the "middle country" of the continent; immediately after their birth, they all take seven steps to the north; they all renounce the world after seeing the four sights and after the birth of a son; they all achieve enlightenment seated on a bed of grass. (149)

However this may be, the legend of Siddhartha's journey and spiritual awakening became well known in oral tradition and was alluded to or included in written works from around 100 years after his death through the 3rd century CE when it appears in full in the *Lalitavistara Sutra*. The story has been repeated since and, lacking an alternative, is accepted as true by the majority of Buddhists.

Teachings & Beliefs

As noted, what started Siddhartha on his quest was the realization that he would lose everything that he loved, and this would cause him suffering. From this realization, he understood that life was suffering. One suffered at birth (as did one's mother) and suffered then throughout one's life by craving what one did not have, fearing for the loss of what one did have, mourning the loss of what one once had, and finally dying and losing everything only to be reincarnated to repeat the process.



Gandhara Relief of Buddha Eating with Monks Mark Cartwright (CC BY-NC-SA)

In order for life to be anything other than suffering, one had to find a way to live it without the desire to possess and hold it in a fixed form; one had to let go of the things of life while still being able to appreciate them for the value they had. After attaining enlightenment, he phrased his belief on the nature of life in his Four Noble Truths:

- Life is suffering
- The cause of suffering is craving
- The end of suffering comes with an end to craving
- There is a path which leads one away from craving and suffering

The four truths are called "noble" from the original *arya* meaning the same but also "worthy of respect" and suggesting "worth heeding". The path alluded to in the fourth of the truths is The Eightfold Path which serves as a guide to live one's life without the kind of attachment that guarantees suffering:

- Right View
- Right Intention
- Right Speech
- Right Action
- Right Livelihood

- Right Effort
- Right Mindfulness
- Right Concentration

As Koller points out, the first three have to do with wisdom, the next two with conduct, and the last three with mental discipline. He continues:

The Noble Eightfold Path should not be thought of as a set of eight sequential steps, with perfection at one step required before advancing to the next. Rather, these eight components of the path should be thought of as guiding norms of right living that should be followed more or less simultaneously, for the aim of the path is to achieve a completely integrated life of the highest order...Wisdom is seeing things as they really are, as interrelated and constantly changing processes...moral conduct is to purify one's motives, speech, and action, thereby stopping the inflow of additional cravings...mental discipline works to attain insight and to eliminate the bad dispositions and habits built up on the basis of past ignorance and craving. (58)

By recognizing the Four Noble Truths and following the precepts of the Eightfold Path, one is freed from the Wheel of Becoming which is a symbolic illustration of existence. In the hub of the wheel sit ignorance, craving, and aversion which drive it. Between the hub and the rim of the wheel are six states of existence: human, animal, ghosts, demons, deities, and hell-beings. Along the rim of the wheel are depicted the conditions which cause suffering: birth, body-mind, consciousness, contact, feeling, thirst, grasping, volition, and so on.

By recognizing that these conditions cause suffering one can avoid it by disciplining one's self through the Eightfold Path so that one is no longer driven by ignorance, craving, and aversion and is free of the wheel of *samsara* which binds one to continual rebirth, suffering, and death. In adhering to this discipline, one could live in one's life but not be controlled and suffer by one's attachment to the things of that life and, when one died, one was not reborn but attained the liberation of the spiritual state of nirvana. This, then, is the "middle way" Buddha found between slavish attachment to material goods and personal relationships and the extreme asceticism practiced by the Jains of his time.



Dharma Wheel saamiblog (CC BY)

He called his teachings the *Dharma* which, in this case, means "cosmic [law](#)" as opposed to Hinduism which defines the same term as "duty". One could, however, interpret Buddha's *Dharma* as "duty" in that he believed one had a duty to one's self to take responsibility for one's life, that each individual was finally responsible for how much they wanted to suffer – or not, and that everyone, finally, could be in control of their lives. He discounted a belief in a creator god as irrelevant to the lives of human beings and a contributor to suffering in that one cannot possibly know God's will and believing that one can only leads to frustration, disappointment, and pain. No god is required in order to follow the Eightfold Path; all one needs is the commitment to taking full responsibility for one's own actions and their consequences.

Schools & Practices

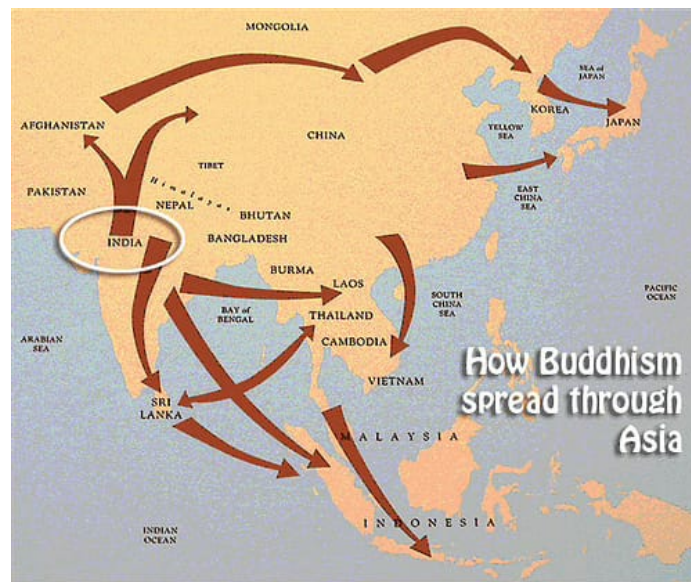
Buddha continued preaching his *Dharma* for the rest of his 80 years, finally dying at Kushinagar. He told his disciples that, after his death, they should have no leader and he did not want to be venerated in any way. He requested his remains be interred in a **stupa** and placed at a crossroads. This did not come to pass, however, since his followers had their own ideas, and so his remains were deposited in eight (or ten) stupas in different regions corresponding to important events in his life. They also chose a leader as they wished to continue his work and so, as humans do, held councils and debates and initiated rules and regulations.

At the First Council in c. 400 BCE, the teachings and monastic discipline were decided upon and codified. At the Second Council in 383 BCE, a dispute over proscriptions in monastic discipline led to the first schism between the Sthaviravada school (which argued for observing said proscriptions) and the **Mahasanghika** school ("Great Congregation") which represented the majority and rejected them. This schism would eventually result in the establishment of three different schools of thought:

- Theravada Buddhism (The School of the Elders)
- **Mahayana Buddhism** (The Great Vehicle)
- Vajrayana Buddhism (The Way of the Diamond)

Theravada Buddhism (referred to as *Hinayana* "little vehicle" by Mahayana Buddhists, considered a pejorative term by the Theravada) claims to practice the belief as it was originally taught by Buddha. Adherents follow the teachings in the Pali language and focus on becoming an *arhat* ("saint"). This school is characterized by a focus on individual enlightenment.

Mahayana Buddhism (which includes Zen Buddhism) follows the teachings in Sanskrit and adherents work toward becoming a *Bodhisattva* ("essence of enlightenment"), one who, like Buddha, has attained full awareness but puts off the peace of nirvana in order to help others shed their ignorance. Mahayana Buddhism is the most popular form practiced today and also claims to follow the Buddha's teachings faithfully.



The Spread of Buddhism Be Zen (CC BY-NC-SA)

Vajrayana Buddhism (also known as Tibetan Buddhism) dispenses with the concept of having to commit to Buddhist discipline and change one's lifestyle in order to begin a Buddhist walk on the Eightfold Path. This school advocates the belief illustrated by the phrase *Tat Tvam Asi* ("thou art that") that one already is a Bodhisattva, one only has to realize it. One need not, therefore, give up unhealthy attachments at the start of one's walk but, rather, just proceed along the path and those attachments will become less and less alluring. As with the others, Vajrayana also claims it is the most faithful to the Buddha's original vision.

All three schools adhere to the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, as do the many other minor schools, and none is objectively considered more legitimate than the others though, obviously, adherents of each would disagree.

Conclusion

Buddhism continued as a minor philosophical school of thought in India until the reign of **Ashoka** the Great who, after the Kalinga **War** (c. 260 BCE), renounced violence and embraced Buddhism. Ashoka spread the *Dharma* of the Buddha throughout India under the name *dharmma* which equates to “mercy, charity, truthfulness, and purity” (Keay, 95). He had the Buddha's remains disinterred and reinterred in 84,000 stupas all through the country along with edicts encouraging the Buddhist vision. He also sent missionaries to other countries – Sri Lanka, **China**, Thailand, **Greece** among them – to spread Buddha's message.

Buddhism became more popular in Sri Lanka and China than it had ever been in India and spread further from temples established in these countries. Buddhist art began appearing in both countries between the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE, including anthropomorphic depictions of Buddha himself. Earlier artists, during Ashoka's time, had refrained from depicting Buddha and only suggested his presence through symbols but, increasingly, Buddhist sites included statues and images of him, a practice first initiated by a sect of the Mahasanghika school.

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



In time, these statues became objects of veneration. Buddhists do not “worship” the Buddha but, at the same time, they do in that the statue representing Buddha becomes not only a focal point for concentration on one's own path but a way of expressing gratitude to the Buddha. Further, one who becomes a Buddha (and, according to Mahayana Buddhism, anyone can) does become a kind of “god” in that they have transcended the human condition and so deserve special recognition for that accomplishment. In the present day, there are over 500 million practicing Buddhists in the world, each following his or her own understanding of the Eightfold Path and continuing to spread the message that one only has to suffer in life as much as one wants to and there is a way which leads to peace.

Bibliography

- Baird, F. E. & Heimbeck, R. S. *Philosophic Classics: Asian Philosophy*. Routledge, 2005.
- Buddha. *The Dhammapada*. Royal Classics, 2010.
- Burt, E. A. *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*. Berkley, 2000.
- Buswell, R. E. jr & Lopez, D. S. jr. *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*. Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Ebrey, P. B. *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China edition*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Gaskell, G. A. *A Dictionary of the Sacred Language of All Scriptures and Myths*. Routledge, 2010.
- Harvey, P. *An Introduction to Buddhism*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Keay, J. *India: A History*. Grove Press, 2010.
- Koller, J. M. *Asian Philosophies*. Prentice Hall, 2007.
- Kulke, H. & Rothermund, D. *A History of India*. Barnes & Noble Books, 1995.
- Long, J. D. *Historical Dictionary of Hinduism*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010.
- Long, J. D. *Jainism: An Introduction*. I.B. Tauris, 2009.

Contributors and Attributions

Joshua J. Mark

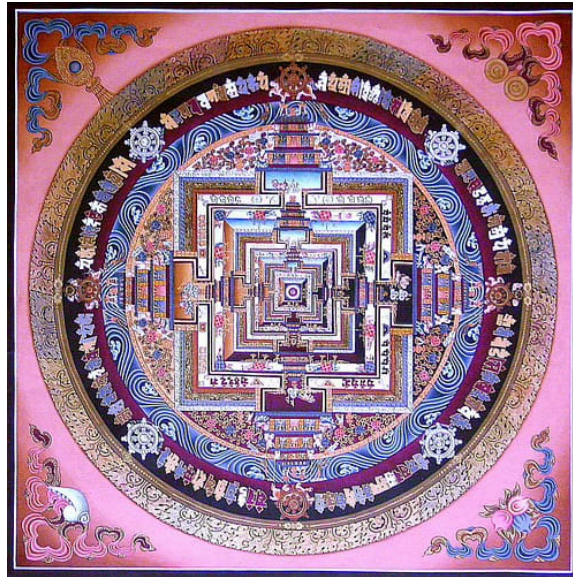
A freelance writer and former part-time Professor of Philosophy at Marist College, New York, Joshua J. Mark has lived in Greece and Germany and traveled through Egypt. He has taught history, writing, literature, and philosophy at the college level.

This page titled [7.8: Buddhism](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

7.9: Mandala

<https://www.worldhistory.org/mandala/>

Definition



Tibetan Mandala, Sera Monastery Kosi Gramatikoff (Public Domain)

A **mandala** (**Sanskrit** for “circle”) is an artistic representation of higher thought and deeper meaning given as a geometric symbol used in spiritual, emotional, or psychological work to focus one's attention. The image first appears in **India** via the **Hindu** text known as the *Rig Veda* c. 1500 - c. 500 BCE but has been used by cultures around the world in many different periods up to the present.

The details of the meaning of a given mandala depend on the individual creating or observing the image, but mandalas in every **culture** serve, more or less, the same purpose of centering an individual or community on a given narrative in order to encourage introspection and, ultimately, an awareness of one's place and purpose in the world; this awareness then allows for peace of mind.

There is no set definition for the meaning or even the form of a mandala, nor could there be, since it appears in the art and **architecture** – in one form or another – of various cultures around the world. The term and accompanying image first appear in India, as noted, in the *Rig Veda* where it is also the name of the books which comprise the work but this is simply the image's first appearance in written form, not its last, nor is the *Rig Veda* thought to be its origin, merely its first expression.

It was, and is, used as a meditative tool and spiritual exercise in the belief systems of **Jainism**, **Buddhism**, and Shintoism, appears in **Persian art**, as the **Ishtar** Star Symbol (and others) from **Mesopotamia**, figures in Mesoamerican architecture and Native American art, and was used by the **Celts** of the Iberian peninsula and Northern **Europe**, to name only a few cultures that have made use of it in the past or who do so in the present.

The image is usually defined as a circle decorated with imagery which directs the mind of the observer (or creator) inwards from the outer rim toward deeper reflection on the meaning and purpose of life, the nature of the universe, the substance and reality of God, the true nature of the self, the underlying form of reality, cosmological truths, and, actually, any other spiritual, psychological, or emotional aspect of one's life.

WHATEVER ELSE THE MANDALA MAY REPRESENT TO AN INDIVIDUAL, IT ESSENTIALLY REFLECTS ORDER & IS UNDERSTOOD AS AN ALMOST SELF-CREATED IMAGE OF THAT ORDER.

Although the circle is the most common form, a mandala may also be a square enclosing a circle or a series of circles, a square alone, a circle enclosing an image (such as a star or flower), and a rectangle enclosing a circle. Mandalas are defined in many different ways, however, and are not limited to any of these geometric shapes exclusively. The best example of this is the **Celtic Cross** which is considered by some scholars a mandala.

In the modern day, the most extensive, groundbreaking work on the meaning and purpose of the mandala was pioneered by the iconic Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (l. 1875-1961 CE) who devotes considerable time to the subject in a number of his works.

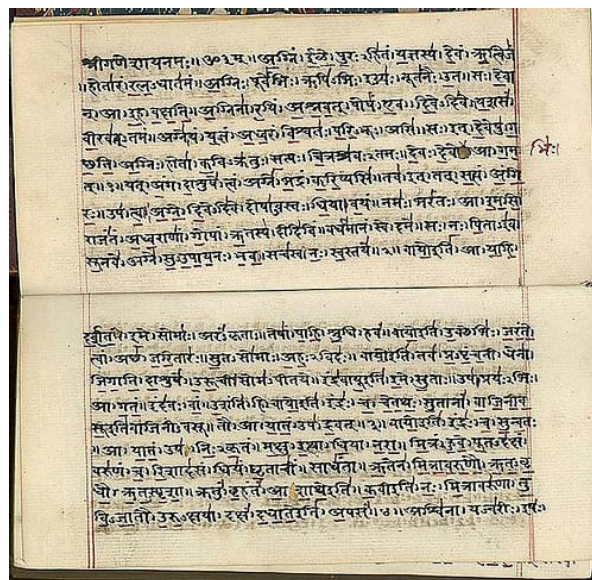
To Jung, the mandala was the key to self-understanding and self-acceptance; by creating mandalas, one could come to know one's self more completely, recognize unhealthy thoughts and behaviors, and move closer to the center of one's actual being, leaving behind the various illusions of the self which clouded and confined one's psychological and spiritual vision.

Jung's work opened up the possibility for the secular uses of the mandala – though he consistently emphasized its spiritual power and use – and popularized the image in the West. In the present day, mandalas appear in significant numbers around the world in both religious and secular contexts and have gained a significant following among those who use the image to manage stress.

Mandala in Hinduism

Whatever else the mandala may represent to an individual, it essentially reflects order – whether of the cosmos, nation, community, or self – but is understood as an almost self-created image of that order. The person who draws the mandala in paint or chalk or creates it with colored sand or yarn or any other material, is thought to be generating the image from some higher source. This source does not necessarily have to be a supernatural entity of any kind (it could be one's higher self) but, in the beginning, it definitely was.

Hinduism is known by adherents as *Sanatan Dharma* (“Eternal Order”), and the order it references was established by an all-powerful supernatural entity, too overwhelming for the human mind to comprehend, who created, maintained, and also was the Universe. At some point in the ancient past, Brahman “spoke” the eternal truths of existence which were “heard” by sages of India while in a deep, meditative state. This knowledge came to be regarded as *shruti* (“what is heard”) and retained in oral form until it was set down in **writing as the Vedas** during the Vedic Period (c. 1500 – c. 500 BCE), with the *Rig Veda* thought to have been written first.



The Vedas (Rig-veda) BernardM (CC BY-SA)

The Rig Veda is comprised of ten books, known as mandalas, containing 1,028 hymns of 10,600 verses relating to religious understanding and practice. Since Brahman was understood as beyond human comprehension, it was thought that the entity appeared to people as avatars – forms and aspects of itself – through which one could connect with the source of all life.

In time, this ideology developed the concept of a higher self within each individual known as the *Atman* which was a divine spark of Brahman linking one to all other living things and to the Universe itself. The purpose of life was to attain oneness with the *Atman* through adherence to one's duty (*dharma*) performed with the right action (*karma*) in order to liberate one's self from the cycle of rebirth and **death** (*samsara*) and achieve liberation (*moksha*).

The Rig Veda provided guidance toward this liberation through its mandalas which encouraged an audience to question perceived reality, reject illusion, and pursue true knowledge and wisdom concerning the self and the world. Each book of the Rig Veda is, in fact, a mandala as it leads one from the outer rim of understanding toward the center of meaning. The images which came to accompany the text – and which are the oldest mandalas in the world – served as illustrations of the truth of the vision as received by Brahman. This work established the basic use of the image of the mandala which has continued up through the present: a kind of self-teaching tool to elevate the mind from the mundane to the sublime.

The Nastika Schools

Toward the end of the Vedic Period, c. 600 BCE, there was a spiritual and cultural shift in India which encouraged various thinkers to question the Hindu vision. The **Vedas** were written, and recited, in Sanskrit by the priests – a language the people could not understand – and so were also interpreted by the clergy for the people. Objections to this practice encouraged questions concerning the validity of the entire belief system and so a number of philosophical schools arose which either supported the orthodox Hindu view or rejected it. Those schools who supported it were known as *astika* (“there exists”), and those who rejected Hindu thought were known as *nastika* (“there does not exist”). The best known *nastika* schools were **Charvaka**, Jainism, and Buddhism, all three of which came to use the mandala in their own systems.

Charvaka: The Charvaka mandala represents the central belief of the school that only perceivable reality of the four elements of air, earth, fire, and water exists. Charvaka was founded by the reformer Brhaspati (l. c. 600 BCE) who completely rejected any supernatural concepts and insisted on direct, personal experience as the only means of establishing truth. The Charvakan mandala reflects this as an image of the four elements each enclosed in a circle within a broader circle. The mandala, in this case, would have encouraged one's belief in materialism and the materialistic truth of the human condition and prevented the mind from wandering to speculative thought on higher powers or any other meaning in life other than pursuing one's own pleasure and recognizing the observable world as the only reality.



The Four Elements Mana Lesman (Copyright, fair use)

Jainism: Jainism was expounded by the sage **Vardhamana** (better known as **Mahavira**, l. c. 599-527 BCE). Although often referenced as Jainism's founder, he is known by adherents as the 24th *tirthankara* (“ford builder”), one in a long line of enlightened souls who recognized the illusory nature of existence and freed themselves (and then others) through adherence to a strict spiritual discipline which broke the cycle of *samsara* and led to liberation. Jains observe this same discipline in the hope of reaching the same goal. Jain mandalas illustrate this path and discipline through images of Mahavira (or an earlier *tirthankara*)

in the center of a circle enclosed by ever-widening squares in which representations of various divine spirits (*devas*) or life-conditions appear. The details of a Jain mandala vary but, frequently, Mahavira appears in the center and the observer is invited to travel the image from the outer rim of distraction and illusion toward the central truth revealed by Mahavira. An observer, in the stillness of contemplation, is thereby provided with a kind of spiritual map of the Jain path.



Vardhamana Mahavira Jules Jain (CC BY-NC-SA)

Buddhism: Buddhism was founded by **Siddhartha Gautama** (the **Buddha**, l. c. 563 - c. 483 BCE) who recognized that people suffered in life by insisting on permanent states of being in a world of constant change. After his enlightenment, he taught a spiritual discipline which encouraged detachment from craving for permanence and fear of loss as well as shedding one's ignorance of the true nature of existence which trapped the soul in the unending suffering of *samsara*. His **Four Noble Truths** and Eightfold Path, he taught, would lead one to the liberation of *nirvana*. His illustration of the cycle of *samsara*, The Wheel of Becoming, is a mandala which illustrates how the soul suffers through ignorance, craving, and fear and his teachings show one how to escape from the cycle of the wheel. The **Buddhist** mandalas are as varied as any other school of thought but provide one with a visual representation of the Buddhist vision. This vision can take many forms, from Buddha appearing at the center to a depiction of Buddhist cosmology, an illustration of one's progress along the Eightfold Path, or the story of Buddha's journey from illusion to enlightenment. Buddhists sometimes create a mandala from colored sand, carefully crafting the piece, only to then wipe it away in recognition of the impermanence of all things.



Tibetan Sand Mandala Lisette Barlow (CC BY-NC-ND)

All three of these schools used the mandala to reinforce their visions of the nature of life and one's place in it but, in time - or perhaps even from the very start - the mandala developed a life and power of its own through which, it is said, the act of creating the image directed the person doing so in the story it told and the truth it revealed. One was not, in other words, creating an image consciously the way one would draw a picture but was 'receiving' the image from some deeper or higher source.

Jung & the Mandala

Carl Jung was the first to explore this aspect of the mandala in the West and popularized its usage. In his autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, he describes his early experience with the mandala c. 1918-1919 CE:

It was only toward the end of the First World War that I gradually began to emerge from the darkness...I sketched every morning in a notebook a small circular drawing, a mandala, which seemed to correspond to my inner situation at the time. With the help of these drawings, I could observe my psychic transformations from day to day...Only gradually did I discover what the mandala really is: "Formation, Transformation, Eternal Mind's eternal recreation". And that is the self, the wholeness of the personality, which if all goes well is harmonious, but which cannot tolerate self-deceptions. My mandalas were cryptograms concerning the state of the self which were presented to me anew each day...When I began drawing the mandalas, I saw that everything, all the paths I had been following, all the steps I had taken, were leading back to a single point, namely, to the mid-point. It became increasingly plain to me that the mandala is the center. It is the exponent of all paths. It is the path to the center, to individuation. (195-196)

The concepts Jung expresses here are, essentially, the same as those presented by the mandalas of the Rig Veda and those of the later *nastika* schools. The mandala, whatever form it takes, encourages the individual to explore the nature of the self in relation to the self, to others, to circumstances, and to the wider world of experience. Whether one is focusing on an image of the Hindu deity **Ganesha** (remover of obstacles) at the center of a mandala, an image of the elements, Mahavira, Buddha, or a lotus flower, one is encouraged to reflect upon one's path in life, the choices one has made and their consequences, and what one might do differently or the same.



Tibetan Star Mandala Poke2001 (CC BY-SA)

It is hardly surprising that Jung should express the same concepts as the ancient belief systems of India, first, because he was well-versed in them but also because of his belief in what he called the Collective Unconscious, a broad body of universal knowledge shared, at an unconscious level, by all members of a species. Jung cited this Collective Unconscious to explain, for example, why the **pyramid** shape appears in so many ancient cultures which had no contact, why certain archetypes such as the Wise Sage, the Trickster, the Tree of Life, the Great Mother, the Shadow appear in the art, **literature**, scripture, and architecture of ancient cultures, independent of each other, the world over. In the same way, Jung felt, the mandala was an archetype which the individual responded to naturally because, at some deep level, the observer already recognized the image as a potent symbol of transformation and change, of a recognition of established order and one's place in it.

Conclusion

No matter how seemingly different the varied cultures of the world may be, the mandala appears – in one form or another – in virtually all of them. Jung defines it as “an instrument of contemplation” (*Archetypes*, 356) and notes the universal spiritual and psychological importance of moving from the outside – the external world – toward the center – the self – in order to achieve full individuation, in order to recognize, and become, the self. The externals depicted on the outside of the mandala are parts of that self, just as all the others drawing the observer toward the center are, but it is toward that center that one's attention is drawn, and toward which one naturally moves. Jung writes:

The energy of the central point is manifested in the almost irresistible compulsion and urge to *become what one is*, just as every organism is driven to assume the form that is characteristic of its nature, no matter what the circumstances. This center is not felt or thought of as the ego but, if one may so express it, as the self. (*Archetypes*, 357)

The mandala has appeared on the covers of the **Torah** and Tanakh, is regularly seen in depictions of Christian saints with a halo of light surrounding their heads and in other Christian iconography, decorates the covers of the Quran and elevates the mind as the colorful and intricate design of the ceilings of mosques. Native Americans of the north and south regions used the mandala, whether as direct representations of a deity or the cosmos or to symbolize a spiritual journey, state of mind, or to ward off bad spirits as with the circular hoop design known as a dreamcatcher.

Mandalas of the **Shinto religion** of **Japan** follow the same paradigm, and mandalas also appear in **Greek** works and designs, notably those featuring the “evil eye”, which deflect bad luck and curses. The **ancient Celts** made use of the circle within a circle, decorated with various designs, which corresponds to the mandala, as did the ancient Mesopotamians in symbols of their deities. The soapstone seals of the people of the **Indus Valley Civilization**, thought to correspond in usage to the Mesopotamian cylinder seals, can also be understood as a kind of mandala in that they depict a central image, toward which one's attention is drawn, accompanied by symbols enclosed in a circle.

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



The mandala has been a part of the human experience for thousands of years, but ever since the popularization of the works of Jung in the 1960s CE and, more so, after the widespread popularity of the work of the scholar Joseph Campbell (whose theories are informed by Jung) in the 1970s-1980s CE, the significance of the image has been recognized far more fully in the West. Spiritual centers, yoga classes, grief therapy counselors, and many more institutions and professional occupations utilize the mandala in helping their clientele.

Mandala coloring books for adults are bestsellers, recognized for their efficacy in reducing stress, and mandalas appear more and more frequently as posters or paintings in offices for the same reason. Whether one responds to the mandala on the **wall** as one walks into, say, a dentist's office, is entirely up to the individual; but the image is there to encourage one to remain calm, recognize there is an established order, and that all one need do is focus on the center to find one's peace.

Bibliography

- Buswell, R. E. jr & Lopez, D. S. jr. *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*. Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Campbell, J. *The Power of Myth*. Vintage Books, 1991.
- Farrokh, K. *Shadows in the Desert*. Osprey Publishing, 2007.
- Jung, C. G. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Vintage, 1989.
- Jung, C. G. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Keay, J. *India: A History*. Grove Press, 2010.
- Koller, J. M. *Asian Philosophies*. Prentice Hall, 2007.
- Kriwaczek, P. *Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization*. St. Martin's Griffin, 2012.
- Leach, M. & Fried, J. *Standard Dictionary of Folklore Mythology and Legend*. Funk & Wagnalls, 2000.
- Long, J. D. *Historical Dictionary of Hinduism*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010.
- Long, J. D. *Jainism: An Introduction*. I.B. Tauris, 2009.
- Tibetan Healing Mandala Accessed 6 Oct 2020.

Contributors and Attributions

Joshua J. Mark

A freelance writer and former part-time Professor of Philosophy at Marist College, New York, Joshua J. Mark has lived in Greece and Germany and traveled through Egypt. He has taught history, writing, literature, and philosophy at the college level.

7.10: Stupa

<https://www.worldhistory.org/stupa/>

Definition



Boudhanath Stupa Jun Wei Fan (CC BY-NC-SA)

A **stupa** (literally “heap” or “pile”) is a reliquary, a shrine containing the remains of a holy or sainted person and/or artifacts (relics) associated with them, originating in **India** prior to the 5th century BCE as tombs of holy men and evolving afterwards into sacred sites dedicated to the **Buddha** (l. c. 563 - c. 483 BCE) and, later, **Buddhist** *arhats* (saints), *bodhisattvas* (enlightened ones), other saintly figures, or local deities. It is a hemispherical structure, with a spire at the top, sometimes situated on a base that varies in shape and size (depending on the designated purpose of that particular stupa) surrounded by a walkway for visitors. Some stupas, such as the Great Stupa at Sanchi, India, or the Boudhanath Stupa at Kathmandu, Nepal, are large, ornate structures while others are more modest.

The construction of stupas, on a large scale and associated with **Buddhism**, began throughout India during the reign of **Ashoka the Great** (268-232 BCE) of the **Mauryan Empire** (322-185 BCE) after his conversion to Buddhism. Prior to **Ashoka's** reign, there were eight stupas (or ten, according to some scholars) dedicated to the Buddha (and containing his cremated remains) at different sites, which correlated to important events in his life. In an effort to spread Buddhism and encourage the enlightenment of his subjects, Ashoka had the remains disinterred and ordered the construction of many more (84,000, according to legend), each one receiving a certain allotment of the remains which empowered the structure with mystical energy.

WHICHEVER **CULTURE** RAISES A STUPA, ITS PURPOSE IS TO PROVIDE A SACRED SPACE FOR PEOPLE TO CENTER THEMSELVES ON HIGHER THOUGHTS & REVITALIZE THEMSELVES SPIRITUALLY.

Buddhist stupas are only one type, as there are also **Hindu** and Jain stupas, but Buddhist stupas remain the most popular, and their construction, worldwide, has been the most prolific. Stupas exist in countries around the world, from India to Sri Lanka, Nepal, **China**, European nations, Australia, the United States, and more. Whichever culture raises one of these structures, its purpose is always the same: to provide a sacred space for people to center themselves on higher thoughts and revitalize themselves spiritually.

The devotional act of building a stupa is thought to bring one good luck, health, good **karma**, and assure one of either an escape from the cycle of rebirth and **death** (*samsara*) which is a goal of **Hinduism**, Buddhism, and **Jainism** or, at least, a good rebirth in another life on earth in which one will attain this goal. Destruction of a stupa, conversely, brings bad luck, bad karma, and

condemns one to repeated life cycles in order to atone for the sin. Stupas are, therefore, highly regarded around the world and no expense is spared in their upkeep. They are regarded as vitally important sacred sites, marking a liminal space outside of time or circumstance, wherever they are constructed, and draw visitors – of all faiths or none – on a daily basis.

Early Stupas & the Buddha

The earliest stupas were tumuli erected over the remains of mystics, ascetics, teachers, or others who had displayed profound spiritual insight. These early structures were heaps of earth and stone which either covered the cremated remains of the individual or their corpse, which was buried in a seated, meditative, position. The mound was constructed to cover the body with a wide base tapering up toward the head. This shape was used even in cases where the person had been cremated in order to symbolize the meditative posture assumed by enlightened sages.



Chaukhandi Stupa, Sarnath Anindita Basu (CC BY-NC-SA)

The Buddha left instructions for his followers that his remains were to be honored in this same way, as described by scholars Robert E. Buswell, jr. and Donald S. Lopez, jr:

In the [text known as] the *Mahaparinibbanasutta*, the Buddha says that after he has passed away, his relics should be enshrined in a stupa at a crossroads, and that the stupa should be honored with garlands, incense, and sandalwood paste. Because of a dispute among his lay followers after his death, his relics were said to be divided into ten portions and distributed to ten groups or individuals, each of whom constructed a stupa to enshrine their share of the relics in their home region. (859)

These stupas followed the earlier shape but were more elaborate and more carefully constructed to represent the seated Buddha in the lotus position. The sites of these stupas were chosen to correlate to the most important events in the Buddha's life, including **Lumbini** (his birthplace), Bodh **Gaya** (where he attained enlightenment), the Deer Park at Sarnath (where he preached his first sermon), Kushingara (where he died). Buddhist adherents would make pilgrimages to the individual sites or, depending on their ability or level of devotion, to all of them along a sacred route whereby they would symbolically relive the Buddha's earthly existence.

Buddhism & Ashoka the Great

Buddhism was not a major **religion** in India even a hundred years after his death. It was a minor philosophical school which had developed, along with others, from the religious tradition of Hinduism. Hinduism is known to adherents as *Sanatan Dharma* ("Eternal Order" or "Eternal Path") and the "order" alluded to (known as *rita*) was divine, having been set down by the supreme Lord of the Universe (who was also the Universe itself), Brahman. The order was comprehensible through the texts known as **the Vedas** ("Knowledge") which were considered sacred emanations of the universe which had been "heard" by ancient sages

and set down in **writing**. The Hindu priests of Buddha's time (5th century BCE) understood these texts and interpreted them for the people, but the people themselves did not have access to them. Various sages of the time responded by challenging the orthodox view and practice of the religion which kept all the spiritual power and control in the hands of the clergy.

BUDDHISM REMAINED A MINOR PHILOSOPHICAL SCHOOL UNTIL THE REIGN OF ASHOKA THE GREAT.

This situation gave rise to a number of different schools of thought which either supported the orthodox Hindu understanding, modified it, or rejected it. The schools that supported the Hindu vision were known as *astika* ("there exists") because they accepted the existence of eternal order as set down in the **Vedas** and their interpretation by the priests. Schools that rejected Hindu orthodoxy were known as *nastika* ("there does not exist") and included Buddhism, **Charvaka**, and Jainism. Buddhism gained more ground earlier than Jainism, and both more than Charvaka, but it still remained a minor philosophical school until the reign of Ashoka the Great.

Ashoka was the third king of the Mauryan **Empire** who was described by later historians as completely ruthless and without mercy. Around 260 BCE, Ashoka decided to invade the smaller kingdom of Kalinga, which was surrounded by the Mauryan Empire and had been a long-standing partner in **trade**. No reason is known for the invasion since it seems both parties were benefitting equally from their relationship. For whatever reason, though, Ashoka launched a massive campaign, which destroyed Kalinga and resulted in the slaughter of 100,000 inhabitants, the deportation of 150,000 more, and the deaths of thousands of others from wounds, disease, and famine.



Sanchi Stupa Elleen Delhi (CC BY-NC-SA)

Ashoka took no delight in this victory, however, and was actually shocked by the carnage and senseless destruction. He renounced violence after the Kalinga campaign and, in time, devoted himself to the path of peace through Buddhism. He decreed edicts be carved throughout his empire relaying his concept of personal responsibility and Buddhist precepts and then had the Buddha's relics removed from the original stupas and enshrined in thousands of others erected all through the empire while, at the same time, sending Buddhist missionaries to other nations such as China, **Greece**, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. These missionaries brought the concept of the stupa to the various regions they ministered to and, once Buddhism found a place in many of these cultures, stupas were raised in Sri Lanka (known as *dagobas*) and China (known as *pagodas*) and eventually spread from these regions elsewhere.

Meaning & Function

The fundamental basis of Buddhism is that life is suffering: one suffers for want of what one does not have but, once one has that thing, suffers for fear of losing it and, once it is gone, suffers the loss. As long as one lives, one will suffer in this way but, the Buddha realized, there was a way to stop suffering, and this was to change the way one interpreted the world and one's self. Through an understanding of the **Four Noble Truths**, and practicing the precepts of the Eight-Fold Path, one could elevate one's

understanding of existence, control one's thoughts and actions, and live at peace with one's self and others. All that one desires, fears losing, and mourns for are ephemeral – they were not made to last – and so are without final meaning; one should, therefore, appreciate these aspects of life for what they are but not cling to them since it is their nature to appear for only a short time and then vanish. The Buddhist stupa is a physical manifestation of this understanding which invites adherents to both center and elevate themselves through various rituals or simply by gathering and focusing their energies at the site.



Dharmarajika Stupa (Taxila) Dr. Muhammad Kashif Ali (CC BY-NC-ND)

The physical appearance of the stupa is intended to elevate the mind. The top spire (*yasti*) symbolizes the *axis mundi* (axis of the world), the line through the center of the earth which the universe revolves around. It is also thought to represent the World Tree whose roots are deep within the earth and branches in heaven, a symbol common in many cultures around the world. The *yasti* is surrounded by a square gate known as the *harmika*, and over the *yasti* and *harmika* are parasols which symbolize protection, majesty, and the Buddha himself. The large hemisphere descends from the *yasti* to a platform or base, sometimes square, which is often surrounded by a **wall** with four gates (*toranas*) corresponding to the four cardinal directions. These directions, in turn, relate to four events in Buddha's life:

- East – Birth of Buddha
- South – Enlightenment of Buddha
- West – First Sermon of Buddha
- North – Nirvana/Release from Samsara of Buddha

Stupa - Labelled Isometric View

Stupa - Labelled Isometric View Muhammad Bin Naveed (CC BY-ND)

The whole effect is to create the impression of Mount Meru, the spiritual center of the universe in Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain cosmology. The stupa, then, is sacred space – no matter where it is located or what structures surround it – where one may commune with the bright and tranquil energies which infuse the structure. Scholars Buswell and Lopez comment:

Each of these architectural elements would evolve in form and eventually become imbued with rich symbolic meaning as the stupa evolved in India and across Asia. The relics enshrined in the stupa are considered by Buddhists to be living remnants of the Buddha (or the relevant saint) and pilgrimage to, and worship of, stupas has long been an important type of Buddhist practice. For all Buddhist schools, the stupa became a reference point denoting the Buddha's presence in the landscape. Although early texts and archaeological records link stupa worship with the Buddha's life, and especially the key sites in his career, stupas are also found at places that were sacred for other reasons, often through an association with a local deity. (860)

Visitors to the site will either prostrate themselves before the stupa multiple times, circumambulate clockwise around it on a walking path, do both, or do nothing at all. The circumambulation is the ritual most closely associated with images of stupas in the modern day. One enters the site through one of the four gates and then proceeds around the stupa, clockwise, reciting mantras, prayers, and chants, frequently touching the wall of the structure or placing written prayers into slots. There are sometimes ritual observances of this circumambulation a certain number of times in a 24-hour period at stupas. One must proceed clockwise (to the right around the stupa) to follow the natural course of the sun and its energy which produces light, life, and encourages growth and transformation; to proceed counterclockwise is to direct one's energy against the natural flow of life and, in essence, attempt to "unwind" the natural order and balanced state of existence. Proceeding counterclockwise at a stupa, therefore, is prohibited.

Famous Stupas & Their Purpose

The most famous stupa complex in India (and the one most often depicted in defining a stupa) is at Sanchi in the State of Madhya Pradesh. The complex features the Great Stupa (*Mahastupa*) commissioned by Ashoka the Great, temples, pillars, reliefs, and other stupas. Work on the Great Stupa is said to have been overseen by Ashoka himself who erected one of his pillars, inscribed with his edicts, on the site. The pillar of Ashoka at Sanchi can still be seen at the complex. The *toranas* of the Grand Stupa are intricately carved and ornamented but the Buddha himself, in physical form, is not depicted; his presence is suggested by reliefs showing his footprints, his eyes, the parasol symbolizing his protection, or by animals associated with his life and ministry. Spirits and earlier fertility deities are also depicted on the *toranas*, emphasizing the all-inclusive and welcoming nature of the site.

In Sri Lanka, the first region to embrace Buddhism on a large scale outside of India, there are a number of impressive stupas. The best-known is probably Ruwanwelisaya which attracts Buddhist adherents from all over the world because it contains the greatest amount of the Buddha's relics of any stupa anywhere else and so is thought to offer the greatest amount of spiritual energy and power.



Ruwanwelisaya Stupa Arian Zwegers (CC BY)

Nepal is the home to two of the other famous stupas – Boudhanath Stupa and Swayambhunath Stupa – both in Kathmandu. The Boudhanath Stupa is one of the largest in Nepal and in the world. It was built directly on a trade route from Tibet through the region and has become a religious center for Tibetan refugees fleeing Chinese persecution. It is said to hold the relics of a later Buddha and is continuously cared for. The structure was damaged in an [earthquake](#) in 2015 CE and restored at a cost of over 2,000,000 US dollars. The Swayambhunath Stupa is, according to tradition, self-created (emerging from the earth naturally) and home to powerful spiritual energies who keep the earth in balance. This stupa was also damaged in the 2015 CE earthquake and restored. A miniature model is among the exhibits of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, USA, with all of the features of the stupa reproduced perfectly including the four Buddhas around the top and the Eyes of the Buddha above them on all four sides – a central feature of many stupas.

The largest stupa complex in the world is [Borobudur](#) in Java, Indonesia, completed in the 9th century CE. Borobudur is a major

Buddhist pilgrimage site where visitors are welcome to circumambulate up nine levels of the immense structure, contemplating innumerable statues and reliefs relating to the life and vision of the Buddha, so that they are able to both physically and psychologically elevate themselves above the world of everyday life.



Borobudur Model Mark Cartwright (CC BY-NC-SA)

The above stupas date from the early centuries of the common era but many others have been built around the world in the last 100 years or even more recently. The tallest stupa in **Europe** is Benalmadena Stupa in Andalusia, Spain, completed in 2003 CE, and rising to a height of 108 feet (33 meters). In the United States, the largest stupa is The Great Stupa of Dharmakaya Which Liberates Upon Seeing in Red Feather Lakes, Colorado, completed in 2001 CE. Its name suggests a principal function of the stupa, no matter where it is raised, of elevating and liberating the soul from ignorance, selfishness, spiritual darkness, and the cycle of rebirth and death.

A more modest but no less impressive stupa was raised at the Amitabha Stupa and Peace Park in Sedona, Arizona in 2004 CE which attracts many visitors daily. Guests offer sacrifices for world peace and understanding as well as petitions for personal issues and prayers of gratitude. The grand vision of the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion in Victoria (Bendigo), Australia (consecrated in early 2020 CE) follows this same paradigm of raising a stupa and surrounding complex to encourage kindness, understanding, and empathy among people around the world.

Conclusion

All stupas, everywhere, no matter their age or surroundings, encourage this same concept of spiritual liberation, compassion for others, and loving respect for all living things. This vision is epitomized by the Ice Stupa Project of Ladakh, India, pioneered by the engineer Sonam Wangchuk (b. 1966 CE) which creates ice stupas in order to irrigate the land naturally. The structures are made by freezing water on a stupa-shaped frame in winter high on the mountainside and, when the ice stupa melts in spring, the water flows down to the fields below.

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



The project was initiated in 2013 CE and continues to the present in an effort to balance the effects of global warming in the region. The ice stupas serve the same purpose as their ancient stone counterparts in elevating the lives of those who build and benefit from them as well as nurturing the natural environment and encouraging greater care for the earth.

Bibliography

- [Artificial Glaciers of Ladakh: The Ice Stupa Project](#) Accessed 30 Aug 2020.
- [Asian Art Museum Online Collection: Svayambhu Stupa in Miniature](#) Accessed 30 Aug 2020.
- Baird, F. & Heimbeck, R. S. *Philosophic Classics: Asian Philosophy*. Routledge, 2005.
- [Borobudur Temple Compounds - UNESCO World Heritage Site](#) Accessed 30 Aug 2020.
- Buswell, R. E. jr & Lopez, D. S. jr. *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*. Princeton University Press, 2013.
- [Great Stupa of Dharmakaya - Atlas Obscura](#) Accessed 30 Aug 2020.
- [Great Stupa of Universal Compassion](#) Accessed 30 Aug 2020.
- [History of Stupas - Shambhala Mountain Center](#) Accessed 30 Aug 2020.
- Keay, J. *India: A History*. Grove Press / Atlantic Monthly Press, 2011.
- Koller, J. M. *Asian Philosophies*. Prentice Hall, 2007.
- Kulke, H. & Rothermund, D. *A History of India*. Barnes & Noble Books, 2008.
- Long, J. D. *Historical Dictionary of Hinduism*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010.
- Long, J. D. *Jainism: An Introduction*. I.B. Tauris, 2009.
- [Sedona Arizona Stupas: Amitabha Stupa and Peace Park](#) Accessed 30 Aug 2020.
- [The Art of Building Artificial Glaciers by Elizabeth Kolbert, New Yorker Magazine](#) Accessed 30 Aug 2020.
- [The Great Stupa at Sanchi](#) Accessed 30 Aug 2020.

Contributors and Attributions

Joshua J. Mark

A freelance writer and former part-time Professor of Philosophy at Marist College, New York, Joshua J. Mark has lived in Greece and Germany and traveled through Egypt. He has taught history, writing, literature, and philosophy at the college level.

7.11: Buddhist Wheel of Life and Death

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



7.12: Bodh Gaya

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



8: ANCIENT CHINA

8.1: History of Ancient China

8.2: Women in Ancient China

8.3: Religion in Ancient China

8.4: 2,000 Years of Chinese History! The Mandate of Heaven and Confucius- World History #7

8.5: Who Was Confucius

8.6: Eastern Philosophy - Confucius

8.7: Eastern Philosophy - Lao Tzu

8.8: Eastern Philosophy - Wu Wei

8.9: Be Humble - and other Lessons from the Philosophy of Water | Raymond Tang

8.10: The Tao of Pooh

8.1: History of Ancient China

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



8.2: Women in Ancient China

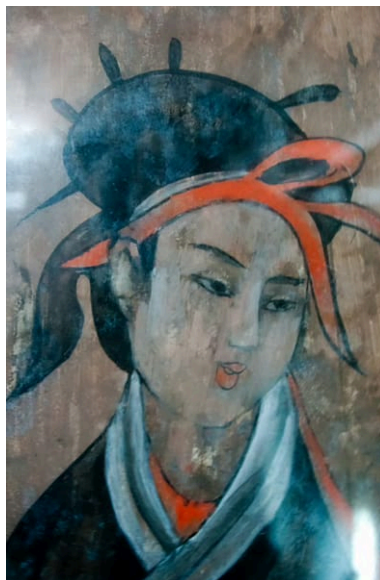
<https://www.worldhistory.org/article...ancient-china/>

Article

Women in ancient **China** did not enjoy the status, either social or political, afforded to men. Women were subordinate to first their fathers, then their husbands, and finally, in the case of being left a widow, their sons in a system known as the “three followings” or *sancong*. Often physically ill-treated, socially segregated, and forced to compete for their husband's affections with concubines, a woman's place was an unenviable one. Still, despite the harsh realities of living in a male-dominated society and being forever under the weight of philosophical and religious norms which were created by men to work for men, some women did break through these barriers. The practical realities of daily life meant many women could and did circumvent conventions, and some rose to live extraordinary lives producing great **literature**, scholarship, and even ruling the Chinese **empire** itself.

Theories on Women

At least in theoretical terms, women's contribution, indeed necessity, to society was recognised in the principle of **yin and yang**. Even here, though, the male (**yang**) with its associated qualities is the predominant and has associations subtly considered the superior to the female (ying): hard versus soft, forceful v. submissive, level v. curved, light v. dark, rich v. poor, and so on.



Han Woman, Dahuting Tomb Unknown Artist (Public Domain)

In China everyone knew it was better to be born a male, and even female characters in traditional literature sometimes stated that they had been a man in a previous life but had reappeared as a woman in this one as a punishment for past deeds. Another common introduction to a female character in such stories was the line “unfortunately she was born a woman”. A male child would grow up to contribute financially to the family, perform rituals such as those in ancestor worship, and perpetuate the family name. In contrast, a woman could not earn money and one day would leave the family and join her husband's. Consequently, many baby girls were abandoned shortly after birth. Those girls who did survive were given such names as Chastity, Pearl, Thrift, or the names of flowers and birds in the hope that the girl would live up to that name and receive attractive offers of marriage.

Bitter it is to have a woman's shape!

It would be hard to name a thing more base.

If it's a son born to the hearth and home
He comes to earth as if he's heaven sent,
Heroic heart and will, like the Four Seas,
To face ten thousand leagues of wind and dust!
To breed a girl is something no one wants,
She's not a treasure to her family.

(3rd century CE poem by Fu Hsuan, in Dawson, 272)

Women were expected to excel in four areas: fidelity, cautious speech, industriousness, and graceful manners. A woman's virtue was a particularly valued attribute in Chinese society. Women deemed especially virtuous such as chaste widows were sometimes given the honour of a shrine, monument, or commemorative tablet after **death** or had their names published in honorific obituaries. This practice was especially popular following the work of the Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi in the 12th century CE.

Marriage

Marriages in ancient China were usually arranged by both sets of parents. Not love but economic and social considerations were upmost in everybody's minds. There were even professional matchmakers to find suitable pairings who also considered astrology in guiding their selections. Neither did some parents wait until their children were of age as many marriages had been arranged when the couple were still young children or even babies. The typical marrying age was the early twenties for men and late teens for women, although child brides were not unknown despite the practice being forbidden by **law**. If a marriage had been arranged but the groom died close to the ceremony, the wedding might go ahead anyway and the bride joined her new family as a widow.



Chinese Female Figurine Liana Miate (CC BY-NC-SA)

The bride went to live with the groom in his house or that of his parents, keeping her family surname. Her transfer of abode became a great procession when she was carried on a red bridal chair and her feet never touched the ground between the homes in order to ward off evil spirits. On arrival she met her husband, often it was the couple's first meeting. A marriage feast was held and the ancestral tablets were "informed" of the new arrival. The historian R. Dawson continues the story:

The marriage was not registered with the civil authority, nor did the bride's family take any part in the ceremony or jollification, although the couple did go a few days later to pay a formal visit to the bride's home. The rites of marriage

symbolised the fact that the bride's body, fertility, domestic service, and loyalty had been handed over by one family to another. They also provided an opportunity for the groom's family to display its affluence and glory in its prestige in the community. The splendour of these occasions was a severe burden on a family's resources...An additional expense was the gifts to the bride's family, the betrothal presents, which were a thinly disguised price for the person of the daughter-in-law and a clear indication of her total subservience to her new family. (143)

That a wife was not much more than a physical piece of her husband's property is further illustrated in the ancient practice of **foot-binding**. Girls from aged three upwards had their feet crushed in bindings for years in the belief that the resulting small feet would appeal to her future husband.

IN CHINESE LAW, A MAN COULD DIVORCE HIS WIFE BUT SHE HAD NO SUCH RIGHT EXCEPT IF THE HUSBAND PARTICULARLY MISTREATED HIS WIFE'S FAMILY.

In Chinese law, a man could divorce his wife but she had no such right except if the husband particularly mistreated his wife's family. The accepted grounds for divorce were failure to bear a son, evidence of being unfaithful, lack of filial piety to the husband's parents, theft, suffering a virulent or infectious disease, jealousy, and talking too much. Some of these seem quite superficial to modern eyes, but it should be remembered that in Chinese society divorce was a serious action with negative social repercussions for both parties. Further, a wife could not be divorced if she had no family to return to or if she had gone through the three-year mourning period for her husband's dead parents. Consequently, in practice, divorce was not as common as these grounds might suggest.

Another social convention was that widows should not remarry. Many did anyway amongst the lower classes, but the idea that the Fates and astrological charts had ordained that a particular couple should live together in matrimony was a difficult hurdle to get over in the case of a second marriage. An even greater barrier was a financial one as a widow did not inherit the property of her dead husband and so she had nothing to offer a new husband in that department.

Family & Working Life

Marriage and children were the expected normal course for all adults, and only those men who could not afford a wife did not marry. During the **Han Dynasty**, for example, unmarried women brought a special tax on their family and women with babies were given a three-year exemption from tax and their husband a one-year exemption. Regarding the sex of children, sons were much more desired than daughters. As the old proverb went: "A boy is born facing in; a girl is born facing out", meaning that eventually a girl would ultimately leave the family and pay homage to the ancestors of another family. Having a son, then, greatly helped the wife to become accepted in her adopted family.



Women Checking Silk, Song China. Unknown Artist (Public Domain)

For upper-class women, their lives were perhaps more strictly controlled than at any other social level. Expected to remain within the inner chambers of the family home, they had only a very limited freedom of movement. Within the home, women did have significant responsibilities which included management of the household finances and the education of her children, but this did not mean they were the head of the family home.

Women of lower status, such as farmer's wives, were expected to work in the fields - especially in regions where rice was cultivated. As many farmers did not own their own land but worked it as tenants, their wives were, on occasion, subject to abuse from landowners. Many women were forced into prostitution in times of drought or crop failure. Women worked in the home weaving **silk** and caring for the silkworms that produced it. Some were called upon, like men, to perform the labour service which acted as a form of taxation in many periods of ancient China, but this was only in exceptional circumstances. By the **Song dynasty** (960-1279 CE) women had more freedom and were running inns and acting as midwives amongst other professions.

Concubines & Prostitutes

Although Chinese men usually had only one wife, they did openly make use of courtesans and invite concubines to live permanently in the family home. Prostitution was an open part of town and **city** life, with officials and merchants frequenting houses where prostitutes plied their **trade** for the purposes of corporate entertainment. Concubines, meanwhile, apart from the pleasures their charms might bring, often provided a family with the all-important male heir when the wife only produced daughters. They did not have the legal status of the wife as they were classed as servants and nor were the children of a concubine given equal status and inheritance rights as the children of the wife. The number of concubines in the household was only limited by the husband's means. The wife must never show any jealousy to her husband's concubines - it was, as we have seen, grounds for divorce, but also it was thought there was a particularly nasty corner of hell awaiting jealous wives.

Concubines usually came from the lower classes and entered the households of the wealthier families in society. A girl from a richer family would only have been given as a concubine to an even richer family or the royal **palace**. It was not uncommon, though, for a younger sister to accompany a bride and live in the marital home of her sibling as a concubine. This Eastern **Han** funeral stele for a concubine presents an interesting record of their duties:

When she entered the household,
She was diligent in care and ordered our familial Way,
Treating all our ancestors as lofty.
She sought good fortune without straying,
her conduct omitting or adding nothing.
Keeping herself frugal, she spun thread,
And planted profitable crops in the orchards and gardens.
She respected the legal wife and instructed the children,
Rejecting arrogance, never boasting of her kindnesses.
The three boys and two girls
Kept quiet within the women's apartments.
She made the girls submissive to rituals,
While giving the boys power.
Her chastity exceeded that of ancient times,
and her guidance was not oppressive.
All our kin were harmonious and close,

Like leaves attached to the tree.

(Lewis, 170-171)



Empress Wu Zetian Unknown (Public Domain)

Famous Chinese Women

Despite being restricted by the men and the male-created social conventions of the time, there were cases of Chinese women (both real and fictional) who defied convention to become celebrated poets, artists, calligraphers, historians, and even rulers. Below are some details of two such women, one the paradigm of virtue, the other more ambiguous and controversial.

Ban Zhao (41 - c. 115 CE) was one of the most famous female writers and scholars in early China. She wrote commentaries on Confucian classics, and her most famous work remains her *Nu* or “Instructions for Women” which expanded on the four virtues expected of women (speech, virtue, behaviour, and work) first outlined in the classic *Liji* ritual text. Although Zhao stressed that women should remain subservient to their husbands she did express a belief in the benefits of women educating themselves (to better help their husband's work). The *Nu* text was hugely influential, studied by countless generations of women and even recited to those unable to read.

Wu Zetian (aka **Wu Zhao**) lived from 623 or 625 to 705 CE. The concubine of **Tang dynasty** emperors **Taizong** (626-649 CE) and Gaozong (r. 649-683 CE), she was officially made empress by the latter in 655 CE. On the death of Gaozong, she reigned as regent for her son Zhongzong (684 CE) and his successor and elder brother Ruizong (r. 684-690 CE). In 690 CE Wu Zetian went one step further and took the throne by declaring herself emperor, set up her court at **Luoyang** and declared the beginning of a new dynasty, the **Zhou**. Her reign, at least in Chinese tradition (which gives yet another insight into attitudes to women), was one of despotic terror punctuated by family assassinations and beset by political intrigues. Nevertheless, her ruthless approach did lead to the expansion of the state bureaucracy, and she was a great patron of **Buddhist** art, seen notably at the Longmen caves. At the end of her reign, she was forced to reaccept the **Tang** dynasty line and select Zhongzong as her heir apparent.

Bibliography

- Dawson, R. *The Chinese Experience*. Phoenix Press - Orion, 2017.
- Dillon, M. *China*. Routledge, 1998.
- Ebrey, P.B. *East Asia*. Wadsworth Publishing, 2013.
- Feng, L. *Early China*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Lewis, M.E. *The Early Chinese Empires*. Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Rossabi, M. *A History of China*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

Contributors and Attributions

Mark Cartwright

Mark is a history writer based in Italy. His special interests include pottery, architecture, world mythology and discovering the ideas that all civilizations share in common. He holds an MA in Political Philosophy and is the Publishing Director at WHE.

This page titled [8.2: Women in Ancient China](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

8.3: Religion in Ancient China

<https://www.worldhistory.org/article...ancient-china/>

Article

Religious practices in ancient **China** go back over 7,000 years. Long before the philosophical and spiritual teachings of **Confucius** and **Lao-Tzu** developed or before the teachings of the **Buddha** came to China, the people worshipped personifications of nature and then of concepts like "wealth" or "fortune" which developed into a **religion**.



Yuantong Temple Henrik Berger Jorgensen (CC BY-NC-ND)

These beliefs still influence religious practices today. For example, the Tao te Ching of **Taoism** maintains that there is a universal force known as the Tao which flows through all things and binds all things but makes no mention of specific gods to be worshipped; still, modern Taoists in China (and elsewhere) worship many gods at private altars and in public ceremonies which originated in the country's ancient past.

Scholar Harold M. Tanner writes, "The gods, spirits, and ancestors could affect crops, the weather, childbirth, the king's health, **warfare**, and so on. It was, therefore, important to sacrifice to them" (43). The gods grew out of people's observance of natural phenomena which either frightened them and caused uncertainty or assured them of a benevolent world, which would protect them and help them succeed. As time passed, these beliefs became standardized and the gods were given names and personalities, and rituals developed to honor the deities. All of these practices were eventually standardized as "religion" in China just as similar beliefs and rituals were everywhere else in the ancient world.

Early Evidence of Religious Practice

In China, religious beliefs are evident in the Yangshao **Culture** of the Yellow River Valley, which prospered between 5000-3000 BCE. At the **Neolithic** site of **Banpo Village** in modern Shaanxi Province (dated to between c. 4500-3750 BCE) 250 tombs were found containing **grave** goods, which point to a belief in life after **death**. There is also a ritualistic pattern to how the dead were buried with tombs oriented west to east to symbolize death and rebirth. Grave goods provide evidence of specific people in the village who acted as priests and presided over some kind of divination and religious observance.



Banpo Village Tomb Shirley Sekarajasingham (CC BY-NC-SA)

The Yangshao Culture was matrilineal, meaning **women** were dominant, so this religious figure would have been a woman based on the grave goods found. There is no evidence of any high-ranking males in the burials but a significant amount of females. Scholars believe that the early religious practices were also matrilineal and most likely animistic, where people worship personifications of nature, and usually feminine deities were benevolent and male deities malevolent, or at least more to be feared.

These practices continued with the Qijia Culture (c. 2200-1600 BCE) who inhabited the Upper Yellow River Valley but whose culture could have been patriarchal. Examinations of the **Bronze Age** site of Lajia Village in modern-day Qinghai Province (and elsewhere) have uncovered evidence of religious practices. Lajia Village is often referred to as the "Chinese **Pompeii**" because it was destroyed by an **earthquake** which caused a flood and the resulting mudslides buried the village intact.

Among the artifacts uncovered was a bowl of noodles which scientists have examined and believe to be the oldest noodles in the world and precursors to China's staple dish "Long-Life Noodles". Even though not all scholars or archaeologists agree on China as the creator of the noodle, the finds at Lajia support the claim of religious practices there as early as c. 2200 BCE. There is evidence that the people worshipped a supreme god who was king of many other lesser deities.

Ghosts & Religion

By the time of the **Shang Dynasty** (1600-1046 BCE) these religious beliefs had developed so that now there was a definite "king of the gods" named Shangti and many lesser gods of other names. Shangti presided over all the important matters of state and was a very busy god. He was rarely sacrificed to because people were encouraged not to bother him with their problems. Ancestor worship may have begun at this time but, more likely, started much earlier.

Evidence of a strong belief in ghosts, in the form of amulets and charms, goes back to at least the Shang Dynasty and **ghost** stories are among the earliest form of **Chinese literature**. Ghosts (known as *guei* or *kuei*) were the spirits of deceased persons who had not been buried correctly with due honors or were still attached to the earth for other reasons. They were called by a number of names but in one form, *jiangshi* ("stiff body"), they appear as zombies.

Ghosts played a very important role in Chinese religion and culture and still do. The ritual still practiced in China today known as **Tomb** Sweeping Day (usually around 4 April) is observed to honor the dead and make sure they are happy in the afterlife. If they are not, they are thought to return to haunt the living. The Chinese visit the graves of their ancestors on Tomb Sweeping Day during the Festival of Qingming, even if they never do at any other time of the year, to tend the graves and pay their respects.

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

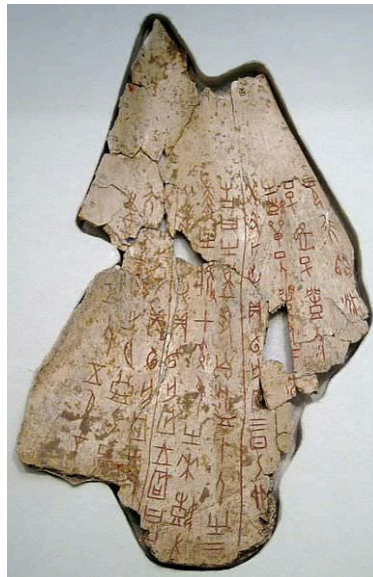
[View this YouTube Video online](#)



When someone died naturally or was buried with the proper honors, there was no fear of them returning as a ghost. The Chinese believed that, if the person had lived a good life, they went to live with the gods after death. These spirits of one's ancestors were prayed to so they could approach Shangti with the problems and praise of those on earth. Tanner writes:

Ancestors were represented by a physical symbol such as a spirit tablet engraved or painted with the ancestor's honorific name. Rituals were held to honor these ancestors, and sacrifices of millet ale, cattle, dogs, sheep, and humans were offered. The scale of the sacrifices varied, but at important rituals, hundreds of animals and/or human sacrifices would be slaughtered. Believing that the spirits of the dead continued to exist and to take an interest in the world of the living, the Shang elite buried their dead in elaborate and well-furnished tombs. (43)

The spirits of these ancestors could help a person in life by revealing the future to them. Divination became a significant part of Chinese religious beliefs and was performed by people with mystical powers (what one would call a "psychic" in the modern day) one would pay to tell one's future through **oracle bones**. It is through these oracle bones that **writing** developed in China. The mystic would write the question on the shoulder bone of an ox or turtle shell and apply heat until it cracked; whichever way the crack went would determine the answer. It was not the mystic or the bone which gave the answer but one's ancestors who the mystic communed with. These ancestors were in touch with eternal spirits, the gods, who controlled and maintained the universe.



Chinese Oracle Bone BabelStone (CC BY-SA)

The Gods

There were over 200 gods in the Chinese **pantheon** whose names were recorded during and after the Shang Dynasty. The early gods, before Shangti, were spirits of a place known as *Tudi Gong* ("Lord of the Place" or "Earth God"). These were earth spirits who inhabited a specific place and only had power in that locale. The *Tudi Gong* were sometimes thought to be an important member of the community who had died but remained in spirit as a guardian but, more often, they were ancient spirits who inhabited a certain area of land. These spirits were helpful if people acknowledged and honored them, and vengeful if they were ignored or

neglected. The Chinese concept of *Feng Shui* comes from the belief in the *Tudi Gong*.

These local earth spirits continued to be venerated even after gods developed who were more universal. One of the first deities acknowledged who probably began as a local spirit was the dragon. The dragon is one of the oldest gods of China. Dragon images have been found on the Neolithic **pottery** at Banpo Village and other sites. The Dragon King known as Yinglong was god of rain, both gentle rain for the crops and terrible storms, also as Lord of the Sea and protector of heroes, kings, and those who fought for right. Dragon statuary and imagery is routinely used in **Chinese art** and **architecture** to symbolize protection and success.

THERE WERE OVER 200 GODS IN THE CHINESE PANTHEON WHOSE NAMES WERE RECORDED DURING AND AFTER THE SHANG DYNASTY. ABOVE ALL WAS SHANGTI, THE GOD OF **LAW**, ORDER, JUSTICE, AND LIFE, KNOWN AS "THE LORD ON HIGH".

Some form of Nuwa, goddess of humankind, existed as early as the Shang Dynasty. Nuwa was a goddess part woman and part dragon who molded human beings from the mud of the Yellow River and blew her breath into them to bring them to life.

She continued making people and bringing them to life over and over again but grew tired of it finally and invented marriage so people could reproduce without her. She saw that people did not know how to do anything, though, so she asked her friend Fuxi for help.

Fuxi is the god of fire and the teacher of human beings. He brought fire to people and taught them how to control it to cook food, bring light, and keep warm. Fuxi also wove the first fishing nets for the people and taught them how to get food from the sea. Once their basic needs were taken care of, he gave them the gifts of **music**, writing, and divination. Nuwa and Fuxi were considered the mother and father of human beings and always were called on for protection.

Sun Wukong was the monkey god of mischief who caused so much trouble he was killed by the other gods and sent to the underworld. Once he got there, he erased his name from the book of the king of the underworld and not only came back to life but could never die again. His name did not develop until later but a mischievous monkey god appears on **bronze** inscriptions from the Shang Dynasty who appears to be this same deity.

Lei Shen was the god of thunder who was very unpleasant and beat on a large drum with a hammer whenever he became irritated. He could not tolerate anyone who wasted food and would hurl thunderbolts at them, killing them instantly. One time, he saw a woman who seemed about to throw out a bowl of rice and killed her with his thunderbolt. The gods determined that he had acted too quickly and so the woman, Dian Mu, was raised from death and became the goddess of lightning. She would flash her light to show Lei Shen where he should throw his thunderbolts so he would not make the same mistake again.

Above these gods and all the others was Shangti, the god of law, order, justice, and life known as "The Lord on High". Shangti decreed how the universe would run and the lives of all the people were under his constant watch. He was especially mindful of those who ruled over others and decided who should rule, how long, and who should succeed them.

Worship & Clergy

Chinese temples and shrines were cared for by priests and monks who were always male. Women were allowed to enter monasteries to devote themselves to the work of the gods but could not hold spiritual authority over men. Different types of religious services were held in temples for different religious beliefs. These services all had in common the sound of music, most often bells. The monastic prayers were said three times a day, at morning, noon, and night, to the sound of a small bell. Incense was burned regularly at services to cleanse the place of evil spirits and negative energies.

An important aspect of Chinese religion, whether Taoism, **Confucianism**, or **Buddhism**, was known as "hygiene schools" which instructed people on how to take care of themselves to live longer lives or even achieve immortality. Hygiene schools were part of the **temple** or monastery. The priests taught people how to eat healthy, exercise (the practice of *Tai Chi* developed through these schools), and perform rituals honoring the gods so the gods would bless them with a healthy long life.

Further Religious Developments

In the **Zhou Dynasty** (c. 1046-226 BCE) the concept of the **Mandate of Heaven** was developed. The Mandate of Heaven was the belief that Shangti ordained a certain emperor or dynasty to rule and allowed them to rule as long as they pleased him. When the rulers were no longer taking care of the people responsibly, they were said to have lost the Mandate of Heaven and were replaced by another. Modern scholars have seen this simply as a justification for changing a regime but the people at the time believed in

the concept.

The gods were thought to watch over the people and would pay special attention to the emperor. People continued a practice, which began toward the end of the Shang Dynasty, of wearing charms and amulets of their god of choice or their ancestors for protection or in the hope of blessings, and the emperor did this as well. Religious practices changed during the latter part of the **Zhou** Dynasty owing to its decline and eventual fall but the practice of wearing religious jewelry continued.

The Zhou Dynasty is divided into two periods: Western Zhou (1046-771 BCE) and Eastern Zhou (771-226 BCE). Chinese culture and religious practices flourished during the Western Zhou period but began to break apart during the Eastern Zhou. Religious practices of divination, ancestor worship, and veneration for the gods continued, but during the Spring and Autumn Period (772-476 BCE) philosophical ideas began to challenge the ancient beliefs.

Confucius (l. c. 551-479 BCE) encouraged ancestor worship as a way of remembering and honoring one's past but emphasized people's individual responsibility in making choices and criticized an over-reliance on supernatural powers. **Mencius** (l. c. 372-289 BCE) developed the ideas of Confucius, and his work resulted in a more rational and restrained view of the world. The work of Lao-Tzu (l. c. 500 BCE) and the development of Taoism might be seen as a reaction to Confucian principles if not for the fact that Taoism developed many centuries before the traditional date assigned to Lao-Tzu. It is much more probable that Taoism developed from the original nature/folk religion of the people of China than that it was created by a 6th-century BCE philosopher. Therefore, it is more accurate to say that the rationalism of Confucianism probably developed as a reaction to the emotionalism and spiritualism of those earlier beliefs.



Confucius, Buddha and Lao-Tzu Lucas (CC BY)

Religious beliefs developed further during the next period in China's history, The **Warring States Period** (476-221 BCE), which was very chaotic. The seven states of China were all independent now that the Zhou had lost the Mandate of Heaven, and each one fought the others for control of the country. Confucianism was the most popular belief during this time, but there was another which was growing stronger. A statesman named Shang **Yang** (d. 338 BCE) from the region of Qin developed a **philosophy** called **Legalism** which maintained that people were only motivated by self-interest, were inherently evil, and had to be controlled by law. Shang Yang's philosophy helped the State of Qin overpower the six other states and the **Qin Dynasty** was founded by the first emperor, **Shi Huangti**, in 221 BCE.

Religion Banned and Revived

During the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE), Shi Huangti banned religion and burned philosophical and religious works. Legalism became the official philosophy of the Qin government and the people were subject to harsh penalties for breaking even minor laws. Shi Huangti outlawed any books which did not deal with his family line, his dynasty, or Legalism, even though he was personally obsessed with immortality and the afterlife, and his private library was full of books on these subjects. Confucian

scholars hid books as best as they could and people would worship their gods in secret but were no longer allowed to carry amulets or wear religious charms.

Shi Huangti died in 210 BCE while searching for immortality on a tour through his kingdom. The Qin Dynasty fell soon after, in 206 BCE, and the **Han Dynasty** took its place. The **Han** Dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE) at first continued the policy of Legalism but abandoned it under Emperor **Wu** (r. 141-87 BCE). Confucianism became the state religion and grew more and more popular even though other religions, like Taoism, were also practiced.

During the Han Dynasty, the emperor became distinctly identified as the mediator between the gods and the people. The position of the emperor had been seen as linked to the gods through the Mandate of Heaven from the early Zhou Dynasty but now it was his express responsibility to behave so that heaven would bless the people. Mount Tai became an important sacred site during this time and ancient rituals and festivals were revised. An example of this would be the Festival of the Five Elements which honored earth, fire, **metal**, water, and wood which was changed to the Festival of Heaven and Earth, honoring the people's relationship with the gods.

An important religious sect which gained popularity during this time was the cult of the Queen Mother of the West, Xi Wang Mu, goddess of immortality. She lived in the mountains of Kunlun, like the other gods, but in a castle of **gold**, with a moat around it, so sensitive that anything, even a hair, which fell upon it would sink. She walked every day in her Imperial Peach Orchard whose fruit held the divine juices of immortality. Scholar Patricia Buckley Ebrey comments on this cult:

During the Han period, the hope for deathlessness or immortality found expression in the cult of a goddess called the Queen Mother of the West. Her paradise was portrayed as a land of marvels where trees of deathlessness grew and rivers of immortality flowed...People of all social levels expressed their devotion to her, and shrines were erected under government sponsorship throughout the country. (71)

The Queen Mother of the West was sometimes represented as an old, unattractive woman with sharp teeth like a tiger's and a hunched back, and at other times as a beautiful woman with long hair. She jealously guarded the secrets of immortality in her garden and struck down people who tried to find their way in. She was kind to her followers, though, and blessed them as long as they pleased her.

The Arrival of Buddhism

In the 1st century CE, Buddhism arrived in China via **trade** through the **Silk Road**. According to the legend, the Han emperor Ming (r. 28-75 CE) had a vision of a golden god flying through the air and asked his secretary who that could be. The assistant told him he had heard of a god in **India** who shone like the sun and flew in the air, and so Ming sent emissaries to bring **Buddhist** teachings to China. Buddhism quickly combined with the earlier folk religion and incorporated ancestor worship and veneration of Buddha as a god.



White Horse Temple Guo Qi (CC BY-NC-ND)

Buddhism was welcomed in China and took its place alongside Confucianism, Taoism, and the blended folk religion as a major influence on the spiritual lives of the people. When the Han Dynasty fell, China entered a period known as The Three Kingdoms (220-263 CE) which was similar to the Warring States Period in bloodshed, violence, and disorder. The brutality and uncertainty of the period influenced Buddhism in China which struggled to meet the spiritual needs of the people at the time by developing rituals and practices of transcendence. The Buddhist schools of *Ch'an* (better known as Zen), Pure Land, and others took on form at this time.

Buddhism introduced a new kind of ghost to China, the *egui* ("Hungry Ghost"), which became one of the most feared. The modern day Ghost Festival in China (also known as the Hungry Ghost Festival) grew out of this belief. Hungry ghosts were spirits of those who had been murdered, improperly buried, or had sinned and not been forgiven. They could also be people who had never been satisfied with anything in life and were no happier in death. People would leave food out for them during Ghost Month to appease them and went to the graves of their ancestors to sacrifice food so they would not become hungry ghosts.

The Tang Dynasty & Religion in China

The major religious influences on Chinese culture were in place by the time of the **Tang** Dynasty (618-907 CE) but there were more to come. The second emperor, **Taizong** (626-649 CE), was a Buddhist who believed in toleration of other faiths and allowed Manichaeism, **Christianity**, and others to set up communities of faith in China. His successor, Wu Zeitian (r. 690-704 CE), elevated Buddhism and presented herself as a Maitreya (a future Buddha) while her successor, Xuanzong (r. 712-756 CE), rejected Buddhism as divisive and made Taoism the state religion.

Although Xuanzong allowed and encouraged all faiths to practice in the country, by 817 CE Buddhism was condemned as a dividing force which undermined traditional values. Between 842-845 CE Buddhist nuns and priests were persecuted and murdered and temples were closed. Any religion other than Taoism was prohibited, and persecutions affected communities of Jews, Christians, and any other faith. The emperor Xuanzong II (r. 846-859 CE) ended these persecutions and restored religious tolerance. The dynasties which followed the Tang up to the present day all had their own experiences with the development of religion and the benefits and drawbacks which come with it, but the basic form of what they dealt with was in place by the end of the Tang Dynasty.

Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and the early folk religion combined to form the basis of Chinese culture. Other religions have added their own influences but these four belief structures had the most impact on the country and the culture. Religious beliefs have always been very important to the Chinese people even though the People's Republic of China originally outlawed religion when it took power in 1949 CE.

The People's Republic saw religion as unnecessary and divisive, and during the Cultural Revolution temples were destroyed,

churches burned, or converted to secular uses. In the 1970's CE the People's Republic relaxed its stand on religion and since then has worked to encourage organized religion as "psychologically hygienic" and a stabilizing influence in the lives of its citizens.

Bibliography

- [Banpo Neolithic Culture by Marilyn Shea](#) Accessed 1 Dec 2016.
- [Benn, C. *Daily Life in Traditional China* "Daily Life Through History" Series\). Greenwood Press, 2001.](#)
- [Campbell, T. *Gods & Goddesses of Ancient China*. Rosen Publishing Group, 2015.](#)
- [Ebrey, P. B. *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.](#)
- [Excavating Quijia Culture](#) Accessed 1 Dec 2016.
- [How Were Noodles Invented in Ancient China by Benna Crawford](#) Accessed 1 Dec 2016.
- [Tanner, H. M. *China: A History Volume I, From Neolithic Cultures through the Great Qing Empire*. Hackett Publishing, 2010.](#)
- [Wintle, J. *The Timeline History of China*. Barnes & Noble Books, 2005.](#)

Contributors and Attributions

Emily Mark

Emily Mark studied history and philosophy at Tianjin University, China and English at SUNY New Paltz, NY. She has published historical essays and poetry. Her travel writing debuts in Timeless Travels Magazine. She graduated from SUNY Delhi in 2018.

8.4: 2,000 Years of Chinese History! The Mandate of Heaven and Confucius- World History #7

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)

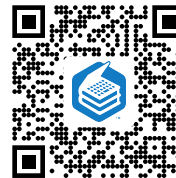


8.5: Who Was Confucius

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)

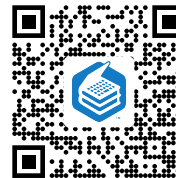


8.6: Eastern Philosophy - Confucius

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



8.7: Eastern Philosophy - Lao Tzu

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



8.8: Eastern Philosophy - Wu Wei

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



8.9: Be Humble - and other Lessons from the Philosophy of Water | Raymond Tang

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



8.10: The Tao of Pooh

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



9: JUDAISM

9.1: Judaism Explained

9.2: The Ancient Roots of Anti-Judaism

9.3: It's Time to Reclaim Religion

9.4: The Israel-Palestine Conflict

9.5: Writing a History of Jewish Architecture

9.6: The Golden Haggadah

9.7: Relief from the Arch of Titus

9.8: Diarna- Documenting the Place of a Vanishing Jewish History

9.1: Judaism Explained

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



9.2: The Ancient Roots of Anti-Judaism

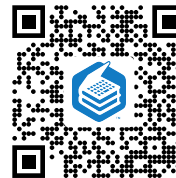
<https://www.facinghistory.org/resour...s-anti-judaism>

9.3: It's Time to Reclaim Religion

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)

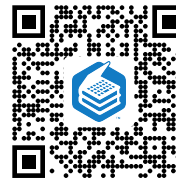


9.4: The Israel-Palestine Conflict

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



9.5: Writing a History of Jewish Architecture

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...h-architecture>

9.6: The Golden Haggadah

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...olden-haggadah>

9.7: Relief from the Arch of Titus

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...f-titus-relief>

9.8: Diarna- Documenting the Place of a Vanishing Jewish History

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...f-titus-relief>

10: CHRISTIANITY

10.1: A Multicultural Story

10.2: Ten Should-Be Famous Women of Early Christianity

10.3: Best Known Gospels

10.4: Jesus the Teacher

10.5: Early Christian Art History

10.1: A Multicultural Story

<https://humanjourney.us/ideas-that-s...ultural-story/>

10.2: Ten Should-Be Famous Women of Early Christianity

<https://www.worldhistory.org/article...-christianity/>

Article

Women feature prominently in **the gospels** and Book of Acts of the Christian New Testament as supporters of **Jesus'** ministry. The most famous of these is Mary Magdalene, most likely an upper-class woman of means instead of the prostitute label still wrongly attached to her, but there is also Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, Mary the mother of Jesus, the Woman at the Well in Samaria, the Woman Taken in Adultery, and many others who are referenced warmly at times in the epistles even when women, in general, are given second-class status.

The first people recorded as seeing the resurrected Christ were women, and women are integral to the first Christian community as depicted in the Book of Acts. Jesus himself has nothing to say about the equality of the sexes; he seems throughout the **gospels** to take it as self-evident that there is nothing inherently superior in either. **Saint Paul** (l. c. 5 - c. 67 CE), however, and other writers of the epistles which make up the New Testament, introduced the Christian misogyny which linked women with Eve and the Fall of Man.



Proba Sailko (Public Domain)

Eve, as **Paul** writes, was deceived and then tempted Adam to sin; left to his own devices, Paul implies, Adam would have remained happily in the **Garden of Eden** and so would have all his and Eve's descendants. Women were, therefore, not to be trusted, could not hold authority over men, and should learn from men in silence lest they tempt Adam's descendants further (I Timothy 2:11-14). Even so, Paul himself seems to echo Jesus' own view of the equality of the sexes when he writes:

There is neither Jew nor **Greek**, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female [in **Christianity**]: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

The many other passages from the New Testament, supporting male superiority, were – and still are – quoted far more often than the line from Galatians, and women are still denied leadership positions in a number of Christian denominations and sects. This was not always so, however, and there were many women in the early Church who held positions of authority, established religious orders, and wrote influential theological works prior to their suppression.

Women in Early Christianity

Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of Christianity has heard the term 'Church Fathers' but far less so 'Church Mothers' – and yet, in the early days of Christianity, women were at the forefront of the **religion**. **Roman** women were the first to take Christianity seriously and there are many stories – preserved in the writings of the Church Fathers themselves and in tales of martyrs – of strong women converting their households to the new faith.

Some of these early Church Mothers embraced Christianity so completely that they gave away whatever they had – often substantial sums of money and large estates – to help the poor, the sick, and the needy in compliance with Jesus' directive that "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40). Service to others, especially to those in need, was service to Christ himself.

THE IDEA FOR THE TRANSLATION OF THE **BIBLE** TO LATIN CAME FROM A WOMAN NAMED PAULA WHO NOT ONLY INSPIRED THE WORK BUT PROOFREAD & EDITED IT FOR PUBLICATION.

A number of these women came to be known as Desert Mothers, founders of monastic orders in the deserts of **Egypt**, **Syria**, **Persia**, and **Asia Minor**. Known as *Ammas* ('mothers'), they were the female counterpart to the better-known *Abbas* ('fathers') such as Saint Anthony the Great (also known as Saint Anthony of Egypt, 251-356 CE), credited with establishing Christian monasticism. Other women were famous writers who blended pre-Christian **literature** and **philosophy** with biblical precepts while still others contributed to building projects, social programs, and evangelical efforts while also supporting men whose contributions today are well known.

Any student of the Bible knows that Saint Jerome (l. 347-420 CE) translated the work from Hebrew and Greek to Latin, creating the Vulgate translation which would be used by the Church for well over the next 1,000 years; few people, however, know that the idea for that translation came from a woman named Paula who not only inspired the work but proofread and edited it for publication.

Shift in Power

Women's role in the Church remained more or less the same even after Christianity was elevated by **Constantine the Great** (l. 272-337 CE) in 313 CE through his Edict of Milan, which proclaimed tolerance for the new faith. After the Council of Nicaea of 325 CE, however, the situation changed. **Constantine** called the council at his villa at Nicaea to standardize Christian belief and practice. The most important issue was deciding on Christ's status as God, god-man, or prophet but there were many other aspects of Christianity which were far from uniform. There were, in fact, many different versions of the central religious concept of a One True God redeeming the world.



First Council of Nicaea Jjensen (Public Domain)

While standardizing the Christian vision, Constantine also wanted religious practice to reflect that uniformity. Pope Clement I (l. c. 35-99 CE) decreed that only men could serve as priests or hold authority in the Church because Christ had chosen only males as his apostles. The ecclesiastical writer Eusebius (l. 263-339 CE) records that the council, following Clement's lead (and most likely influenced by Paul's admonitions on female inferiority) decreed women as laypersons who could serve in subordinate positions but could have no authority over men. By the time of the Council of Nicaea, however, many women had already proven themselves capable and inspiring religious leaders and many more would prove so going forward.

Ten Should-Be Famous Early Christian Women

The ten women listed here are chosen from either end of the spectrum: those whose names might be familiar to some and those few or none have ever heard of. These ten are only a very small sample of the many women who contributed to the development of early Christianity and readers are encouraged to explore the subject more fully through the books listed in the bibliography below. The ten women are:

- Thecla the Apostle
- Perpetua the Martyr
- Amma Syncletica of [Alexandria](#)
- Saint Marcella
- Macrina the Younger
- Proba
- Saint Paula
- Melania the Elder
- Eudocia
- Egeria

Thecla (1st century CE) is known from the apocryphal work *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* which narrates her conversion to Christianity by Saint Paul and her subsequent travels with him, divine rescue from various persecutions and [death](#), and career as a healer, preacher, and inspiring religious leader. Thecla's story has been regularly dismissed in the past as Christian fiction, but modern scholars believe that, though there is no doubt some exaggeration of events, the account is based on an actual woman. In his epistles, Paul regularly mentions women who have helped him, and Thecla's story is not so very different from many others save for the repeated miraculous rescues from death. One aspect of her story known to be true of women of her time is her vow of chastity, which she kept from her conversion to the end of her life. Women choosing a chaste life, even if they were married, was a dramatic statement of individuality in claiming rights over their own bodies and, by extension, over the direction of their lives.



Saint Thecla Testus (Public Domain)

Perpetua (l. 181-203 CE) is famous as an early Christian martyr who, along with her slave Felicitas, refused to renounce her

faith and was executed for it. Scholar I. M. Plant notes that "in nearly every case, stories of Christian martyrs are fictional...the martyrdom of Perpetua, however, is generally taken to be an exception to this rule" (164). A citizen of **Carthage**, Perpetua was arrested during a persecution of Christians under the **Roman emperor** Septimus Severus c. 202-203 CE. She was 22 at the time and nursing her newborn when she was taken to prison. Her father, a pagan in good standing with authorities, begged her to renounce her faith, but she refused and was executed along with Felicitas. Based on details of the original narrative concerning motherhood, scholars believe the account was written by a woman – the early part, perhaps, by Perpetua herself – which, as I. M. Plant points out, would make her story "the earliest extant Christian literature written by a woman" (165).

Amma Syncletica of Alexandria (l. c. 270 - c. 350 CE) is one of the best-known Desert Mothers and an early founder of the monastic tradition. Syncletica was the daughter of wealthy parents in Alexandria, Egypt, whose beauty attracted many suitors. She refused them all, however, due to her devotion to Christ. After her parents' death, she cut her hair, gave her inheritance to the poor, and left the **city** with her younger sister (who was blind) to live a life of chastity, poverty, and solitude near the crypt of a relative. In solitude, she is said to have wrestled with demons who tried to convince her to resume her previous life of wealth and pleasure, but she remained true to her faith. Having attained the enlightenment and closeness to God she sought, she consented to teach others who sought her out and provided guidelines for this early monastic order of women. These rules, recorded by her biographer (possibly the bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, l. 296-373 CE), would later influence European monasticism.



Amma Syncletica of Alexandria Unknown Artist (Public Domain)

Saint Marcella (l. 325-410 CE) was a wealthy Roman Christian woman who, after her husband's death, devoted herself to her faith through a life of chastity and service to others. She opened her lavish home on the Aventine Hill of **Rome** to others seeking a life of self-denial, prayer, fasting, and mortification of the flesh. She was a friend of the future Saint Paula and correspondent with Saint Jerome. Marcella, formerly one of the wealthiest women in the city, gave away or sold her worldly goods, including all her clothes, jewelry, and expensive cosmetics to benefit the poor and to live free of possessions in communion with Christ. Like many early Christian women, Marcella reclaimed her identity through chastity, refusing to remarry even though the **law** dictated she should, and dedicated herself to her improvised monastic order which would inspire other women to follow her lead. She died in the **Visigoth** sack of Rome of 410 CE.

MACRINA ESTABLISHED A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY DEVOTED TO PERFECTING THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD
& WAS FREQUENTLY CONSULTED BY PILGRIMS WHO CAME TO SEEK HER COUNSEL.

Macrina the Younger (l. c. 330-379 CE) was a Christian ascetic whose devotion to God inspired the work and life of her far more famous younger brothers, Saint **Basil the Great** (l. c. 329-379 CE) and Saint Gregory of Nyssa (l. c. 335 - c. 395 CE). Macrina, like many of the others on this list, was born to wealthy parents in **Anatolia** (modern-day **Turkey**) and arranged to marry well. When her fiancé died, she refused to marry anyone else and chose a life of chastity and prayer, claiming (as many other mystics did) that Christ was her bridegroom and she needed no other. Macrina practiced a rigid asceticism and devoted herself to the education of others, especially her younger brothers. After her father's death, she and her mother moved to an estate on the River Iris in Pontus where she established a Christian community devoted to perfecting their relationship with God and was frequently

consulted by pilgrims who came to seek her counsel.

Proba (l. c. 322-370 CE) holds the distinction as the first female Christian writer solidly attested by documentation. She is known for the genre of literary work called a *cento* ('patchwork') in which an author used lines from established poetic works, woven with their own, to create a completely new work of art. In the present day, this would be 'sampling' in popular **music** where an artist borrows a well-known melody, in whole or in part, to inform their original piece. Proba came from a wealthy Roman family and was most likely raised in Roman pagan tradition before converting to Christianity sometime before embarking on her literary career. She combined the poetry of **Virgil** with biblical themes to emphasize the eternal and heroic aspects of Christianity. Her works were later used in Roman classrooms to teach upper-class children as they subtly combined the pagan history of the past with Christian ideals.

Saint Paula (l. 347-404 CE) was the close associate of Saint Jerome who encouraged him to translate the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, thus creating the Vulgate Translation which continued in use for the next 1,500 years as the authoritative scripture of Christianity. Paula was another wealthy Roman aristocrat who, after the death of her husband, was drawn to the monastic community of women established by Marcella on the Aventine Hill. She became acquainted with Saint Jerome through Marcella and traveled widely with him, establishing a religious center in Bethlehem and practicing strict asceticism including abstinence. She helped Jerome translate the Bible, proofread his work, and edited it for publication. When she died, her passing was deeply mourned by the Christian community and she was sainted within a year.



Saint Paula RickMorais (CC BY)

Melania the Elder (l. c. 350-410 CE) was a Desert Mother honored for her devotion to God and support of Christian orders. She was a member of one of the wealthiest families in Roman Hispania who moved with her *proconsul* husband and family back to Rome only to watch all but one son die of the **plague**. After losing her family, she converted to Christianity and renounced the world, traveling to Egypt to live in a monastery. Unlike other Christian converts, Melania did not give away her worldly goods and used her substantial wealth to support Christian communities and initiatives. When the monks of her order were exiled to **Palestine**, she went with them and supported them until they could return. She founded two monastic orders in **Jerusalem**, which she administrated, and is regarded as a Desert Mother for her strict asceticism and devotion to solitary prayer.

Eudocia (l. c. 400-460 CE) was one of the most prolific writers of her time who created numerous works on Christian themes which, like Proba's work, drew on pre-Christian literature. She was born in **Athens** and named Athenais before converting to Christianity around the age of 20 and taking the name Aelia Eudocia following her baptism. Her works were quite popular and ranged from a *cento* drawing on **Homer** to poetry about her husband's life and military victories, to saints' lives and Church history. She is probably best known for her work *The Martyrdom of St. Cyprian* which tells the story of the chaste Christian Justa, the attempts by the pagan sage Cyprian to seduce her, his conversion to Christianity, and martyrdom for his faith.



Aelia Eudocia Pitichinaccio (Public Domain)

Egeria (also known as Etheria, l. c. 380's CE) was a Christian traveler and writer known only from her work *Itinerarium* (also known as the *Itinerarium Egeriae* = Travels of Egeria). Based on the text, she was a woman of the upper class who went on pilgrimage to significant sites mentioned in the Bible. She traveled through the regions of modern-day Turkey, Egypt, **Israel**, Lebanon, **Jordan**, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi **Arabia**, and back to the region of Anatolia. Her work was popular enough to be copied and is recognized in the modern-day as completely unique for its time as it is a deeply personal account of Egeria's travels while also providing insight into the condition of the sites she visited, travel at the time, and – since it is written in Latin – how that language was written at the time.

Conclusion

The contributions of these women were recognized by their male contemporaries who included accounts of their lives in their works on male saints. Amma Syncletica was so highly regarded she was given her own biography, and Saint Jerome praised Paula in his works. The works of Proba and Eudocia seem to have been widely read, judging from copies, and even though Egeria's work was not discovered until the 19th century CE, it was recognized then as appearing in excerpt form in other works from shortly after her time.

Why these women were erased from official Church history is debated by various scholars with the answer always depending on the political, religious, or gender values of the writer making the claim. In almost every case, the arguments in these debates say far more about the modern-day writer than they do about the subject at hand. Scholar Laura Swan, however, sums up the situation succinctly, **writing**:

Women's history has often been relegated to the shadow world: felt but not seen. Many of our Church *fathers* became prominent because of *women*. Many of these fathers were educated and supported by strong women, and some are even credited with founding movements that were actually begun by the women in their lives. (3)

As the Church developed from its legitimization by Constantine through the Middle Ages, women lost more and more ground in equal rights and basic dignity. The **medieval Church** considered women dangerous temptresses to be avoided by any pious man, stained by the original sin of duplicitous Eve, and even their association with the Virgin Mary could not fully redeem their nature. The most probable cause for the exclusion of women of great merit from Church history is simply that they did not fit the Church's narrative of devout and pious men vs. devious, sinful women and, when faced with the choice of changing that narrative or changing history, the past was quietly erased.

Bibliography

- Amma Syncletica: A Spirituality of Experience Accessed 19 Mar 2020.
- Brooke, R & C. *Popular Religion in the Middle Ages*. Barnes & Noble Books, 1996.
- Cantor, N. F. *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*. Harper Perennial, 1994.
- Deanesley, M. *A History of the Medieval Church 590-1500*. Obscure Press, 2010.
- Deen, E. *All of the Women of the Bible*. HarperOne, 1988.
- Eusebius. *Eusebius' History of the Church*. Kregel Academic & Professional, 2007.
- Gies, F. & J. *Women in the Middle Ages*. Ty Crowell Co, 2019.
- Kateusz, A. *Mary and Early Christian Women: Hidden Leadership*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- McManners, J. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*. Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Plant, I. M. *Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2004.
- Power, E. *Medieval Women*. Cambridge University Press (1997-10-13), 2019.
- Schmitt-Pantel, P. *A History of Women: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints*. Harvard University Press,, 1992.
- Swan, L. *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women*. Paulist Press, 2001.
- Various Ancient Authors. *The Bible, King James Translation*. Nelson Bibles, 2011.

Contributors and Attributions

Joshua J. Mark

A freelance writer and former part-time Professor of Philosophy at Marist College, New York, Joshua J. Mark has lived in Greece and Germany and traveled through Egypt. He has taught history, writing, literature, and philosophy at the college level.

10.3: Best Known Gospels

<https://humanjourney.us/ideas-that-s...known-gospels/>

10.4: Jesus the Teacher

<https://humanjourney.us/ideas-that-s...s-the-teacher/>

10.5: Early Christian Art History

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



11: BYZANTINE CIVILIZATION

11.1: Fall of the Roman Empire

11.2: Christianity in the Roman Empire

11.3: Justinian and the Byzantine Empire

11.4: The Silk Road

11.5: The Princess who Rewrote History

11.6: Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy

11.7: A Beginner's Guide to Byzantine Art

11.8: Iconoclastic Controversies

11.9: Hagia Sofia

11.10: Theotokos Mosaic

11.1: Fall of the Roman Empire

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



11.2: Christianity in the Roman Empire

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...d-christianity>

11.3: Justinian and the Byzantine Empire

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



11.4: The Silk Road

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)

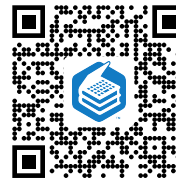


11.5: The Princess who Rewrote History

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



11.6: Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



11.7: A Beginner's Guide to Byzantine Art

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...ntine-artintro>

11.8: Iconoclastic Controversies

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...-controversies>

11.9: Hagia Sofia

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...ophia-istanbul>

11.10: Theotokos Mosaic

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...ia-sophia-apse>

12: ISLAM

12.1: Introduction to Islam

12.2: Contextualization of the Development of Islam

12.3: What it's like to be a Muslim in America

12.4: Judaism and Christianity in the Qur'an

12.5: Muhammad the Messenger

12.6: What does the Qur'an really say about a Muslim Woman's Hijab?

12.7: Islamic Art

12.8: Arts of the Islamic World

12.1: Introduction to Islam

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...ction-to-islam>

12.2: Contextualization of the Development of Islam

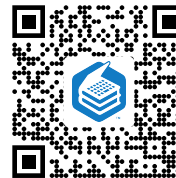
<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...y-khan-academy>

12.3: What it's like to be a Muslim in America

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



12.4: Judaism and Christianity in the Qur'an

<https://humanjourney.us/judaism-and-...-in-the-quran/>

12.5: Muhammad the Messenger

<https://humanjourney.us/ideas-that-s...the-messenger/>

12.6: What does the Qur'an really say about a Muslim Woman's Hijab?

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



12.7: Islamic Art

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



12.8: Arts of the Islamic World

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...-islamic-world>

13: MIDDLE AGES

- 13.1: Introduction to the Middle Ages
- 13.2: The Dark Ages...How Dark Were They?
- 13.3: Golden Age of Islam
- 13.4: Introduction to the Crusades
- 13.5: An Overview of the Crusades
- 13.6: Women in the Middle Ages
- 13.7: Hildegard of Bingen
- 13.8: The Medieval Church
- 13.9: Chivalry in the Middle Ages
- 13.10: Pilgrimage Routes and the Cult of the Relic
- 13.11: Thomas Aquinas
- 13.12: Medieval Art History
- 13.13: Pentecost and Mission to the Apostles
- 13.14: Chartres Cathedral
- 13.15: Making Manuscripts

13.1: Introduction to the Middle Ages

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...he-middle-ages>

13.2: The Dark Ages...How Dark Were They?

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



13.3: Golden Age of Islam

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...n-age-of-islam>

13.4: Introduction to the Crusades

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...o-the-crusades>

13.5: An Overview of the Crusades

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...rusades-part-2>

13.6: Women in the Middle Ages

<https://www.worldhistory.org/article...e-middle-ages/>

Article

The lives of **women** in the Middle Ages were determined by the Church and the aristocracy. The **medieval Church** provided people with the 'big picture' of the meaning of life and one's place in it; the aristocracy ensured that everyone stayed in their respective places through the feudal system of government which divided society into three classes: clergy, nobility, and serfs.

Women's place in the clergy was restricted to the nunnery. Noble women's positions were dictated by how much land they brought to marriage because land equaled power; therefore the quality of life and opportunities for autonomy could vary significantly among the upper class. Women of the lowest class actually had more freedom of expression than the other two because life was uniformly difficult for the serfs – male or female – and women worked alongside men in the fields and in the **medieval guilds** as equals or near-equals.



Medieval Women Stuart (CC BY-NC-ND)

Women's rights and opportunities in the Middle Ages were not uniform, however, even though those of the lower class had the least amount of variation. Scholars divide the Middle Ages into three periods:

- Early Middle Ages – 476-1000 CE
- High Middle Ages – 1000-1300 CE
- Late Middle Ages – 1300-1500 CE

The rights of women from the earliest era through the last grew significantly owing largely to two distinct factors: the increasing popularity of the Cult of the Virgin Mary and the development of the concepts of **courtly love** and chivalry. Women's status and opportunities would also expand after the outbreak of the **Black Death** pandemic of 1347-1352 CE which killed so many that women were allowed to assume ownership an operation of their late husband's businesses. Women's rights would reach their apex in the Late Middle Ages at which time more restrictions were implemented by the patriarchal system primarily because women's social positions threatened the status quo.

Changing Attitudes Toward Women

The Cult of the Virgin Mary was not new to the Middle Ages. Mary had been declared the Mother of God by the Church in 431 CE at the Third Ecumenical Council. Mary's high standing, however, did little to elevate women's status in society. The Church both demonized and elevated women through the dichotomy of the biblical tale of Eve – who caused humanity's fall from grace in the **Garden of Eden** – and that of the Virgin Mary whose son was believed to have redeemed that fall. Women were simultaneously considered the source of all the ills of the world and the means of that world's redemption through the birth of **Jesus Christ**.

THE VIEW OF WOMEN AS EITHER EVIL TEMPTRESSES OR VIRGINAL GODDESSES LEFT NO MIDDLE GROUND FOR A REASONED PERCEPTION.

Accordingly, women were at once denied the same social status as men while legally being recognized as a man's partner, helpmate and, under certain conditions, even his equal. The view of women as either evil temptresses or virginal goddesses left no middle ground for a reasoned perception of woman-as-individual. In the Early Middle Ages, the woman-as-temptress model prevailed as clergy emphasized Eve's role in the fall of man. From the 12th century CE during the High Middle Ages onwards to the end, the Cult of Mary was more popular and so the perception of women improved.

Even so, women were still collectively demonized even at the height of the cult's popularity for failing to mirror the Virgin Mary's perfection. Women were certainly seen in a better light than they had been previously but this did not mean the clergy, aristocracy, or males in general were interested in seeing them elevated above their supposed God-given place as made clear in the **Bible** in such passages as I Corinthians 11:3 where it states that man is the head of the woman or I Timothy 2:11-15 which makes clear that women are subordinate to men and Eve was the first sinner. Women were therefore always linked to Eve while, at the same time, they were elevated by association with Mary. Scholar Eileen Power comments:

In considering the characteristic medieval ideas about woman, it is important to know not only what the ideas themselves were but also what were the sources from which they spring. The expressed opinion of any age depends on the persons and the classes who happen to articulate it; and for this reason alone it often represents the views of a small but vocal minority. In the early Middle Ages, what passed for contemporary opinion came from two sources – the Church and the aristocracy. (9)

Power goes on to point out that these two sources – the one celibate and the other regarding women as an 'ornamental asset' – were the least qualified to write on women. In spite of the 'official' view of women as second-class citizens found in these sources – especially sermons and other ecclesiastical works – household records, legal documents, guild records, and other documents show that women throughout most of the Middle Ages made a living in the same trades as men, frequently took over a business following their husband's **death**, and were valued merchants, artists, and artisans.

Women's Rights

Throughout the Middle Ages, lower-class women were bakers, brewers, milkmaids, barmaids, artisans, weavers and, primarily, tenant farmers who worked alongside their husbands and children in the fields. The feudal system dictated that the land belonged to the lord, who rented it to his tenants – the serfs – who were bound to that land. The lord controlled every aspect of the **serf's** life and this extended to a man's wife and daughters.

The lord decided who a girl would marry, not the girl's father, because the daughter of a serf was essentially property of the lord just as her father and mother were. Once the girl was married, her husband controlled her interests and was responsible for her behavior and, for this reason, women are not mentioned as often as men in legal matters in the Early Middle Ages. The woman's husband would be sued if a woman transgressed, not the woman herself. The woman's job was to take care of the home, help her husband at his work, and produce children. Power writes, “the great majority of women lived and died wholly unrecorded as they labored in the field, the farm, and the home” (Loyn, 346).



Medieval Tenant Farmers e-codices (CC BY-NC-SA)

The hierarchy of medieval society was rigidly maintained, and one very rarely rose above the station one was born into. There was no middle class and the only hope for a woman to better her situation, without marrying, was to enter a nunnery. It is possible, as some scholars have suggested, that there were women who chose this route in hopes of education, but if so they were largely disappointed.

Priests, for the most part, saw no benefit in literate nuns. Even Ende (10th century CE), the famous female manuscript illuminator from Spain, was most likely illiterate. Nuns learned their prayers and devotions by memory, not from books, although it is thought that many young women of means learned to read from the popular devotional work known as the *Book of Hours*.

Legal & Economic Status

An emphasis on **trade** during the High Middle Ages provided greater opportunity for women. During this period, in Spain and France initially, the middle class began to emerge as merchants amassed enough wealth to be able to influence political matters. The medieval guild had a great deal to do with the emergence of the middle class and also was responsible for increased rights and responsibilities for women.

HIGHER-CLASS WOMEN HAD MORE MOBILITY BUT WERE STILL EXPECTED TO REMAIN IN THEIR SOCIALLY ACCEPTED NICHE.

Women of the new bourgeoisie could work with their husbands and fathers in a given trade and frequently succeeded the male as head of the business upon his death. Woman-as-cheap-labor was a concept already well-established through the feudal system and was perpetuated by the guild system because women were legal non-entities and so could be paid less than a man. At the same time, many women during this period appear in legal documents as having been fined for various trespasses instead of their husbands, a significant departure from the precedent of the Early Middle Ages.

The lowest class of the serfs and the upper-class noble women continued to live more or less as women had before them and both were tied to the land in one way or another. Power writes:

Among the nobility, marriage was a critical factor in the transmission of land and fiefs and was arranged by families with great care, often with little consideration for the preferences of the parties involved, one or both of whom might be children. Only in periods and places where women had personal rights over land did they exercise much independence. (Loyn, 346)



Artist's Impression of a Medieval Wedding (Copyright)

Higher-class women had more mobility but were still expected to remain in their socially accepted niche and perform the duties associated with that position. Exceptions to this rule in the Early Middle Ages are notable because they were so rare: **Aethelflaed, Lady of the Mercians** (r. 911-918 CE) who led Mercia's resistance against **Viking** raids and ruled her kingdom after her husband's death or the theologian St. **Hilda of Whitby** (c. 614-680 CE) who founded the famous monastery of Whitby in Northumbria. Other famous women of this time were Clotilde (475-545 CE), wife of Clovis, king of the **Franks** who converted her husband to **Christianity**; Theodora (497-548 CE), wife of the emperor Justinian of the **Byzantine Empire** who was equal to her husband in influence, and Brunhilda of Austrasia (r. 567-613 CE) who ruled her country as sole monarch.

Depiction & Involvement in Art

By the time of the High Middle Ages, when the Cult of the Virgin Mary was increasing in popularity, more noble women were exercising power and some to such an extent as to significantly change their **culture's** perception of women. Two of the most powerful women of this era were **Eleanor of Aquitaine** (l. c. 1122-1204 CE) and her daughter Marie de Champagne (l. 1145-1198 CE). Eleanor was one of the most powerful political figures – male or female – in the Middle Ages as a whole. She was the wife of Louis VII of France (r. 1137-1180 CE) from 1137 CE until the marriage's annulment in 1152 CE when she married **Henry II of England** (r. 1154-1189 CE). Eleanor took part in the **Second Crusade** along with her ladies-in-waiting, managed her own estates and finances, and was an important patron of the arts, especially of romantic **literature**.

Scholars continue to debate Eleanor's role in the development of the concept of courtly love and the chivalric code, but there is no doubt that many of the major French authors of the best-known works on this subject (such as Wace, Andreas Cappellanus, Bernard de Ventadorn) enjoyed her patronage. Her daughter Marie is said to have either helped her mother develop these concepts at Poitiers or was inspired by her mother's earlier efforts to establish the so-called 'courts of love' at her estate in southern France.



Eleanor of Aquitaine g0ng00zlr (CC BY)

The courts of love were allegedly convened to discuss matters relating to romantic love and relationships between men and women. Among the topics discussed and debated was whether romantic love could exist in marriage (it was decided it could not) and which was worse: to lose a lover to death or infidelity (infidelity was considered worse because the lover took not only the future but also the memories of the past). Marie was the patroness of one of the greatest writers of the Middle Ages, **Chretien de Troyes**, whose Arthurian Romances popularized the concept of courtly love and chivalry.

Previously, a woman was the possession of a man and his inferior; the romantic poetry of the 12th century reversed this paradigm by encouraging the elevation of women who were to be protected and served by a refined and sophisticated gentleman – the chivalric knight. These works had a dramatic effect upon the aristocracy of medieval **Europe** as scholar Norman Cantor observes:

By making feminine qualities heroic, the romantic poets enhanced the dignity of woman and made her a being with distinctive and valuable qualities. (348)

Eleanor and Marie were both associated with the medieval religious heresy of Catharism which revered a goddess of wisdom (Sophia) and departed from orthodox Catholicism on a number of significant points. It has therefore been suggested that the romantic poetry of courtly love was actually created as a kind of “scripture” for adherents of the sect who would otherwise have been persecuted by the Church. The great lady who appears in the poems under various names is Sophia and the devoted knight who serves her is the Cathar. This claim, while supported by considerable evidence, is still challenged by many modern-day scholars and far from universally accepted.

Whether the poems were religious allegories or simple entertainment, they combined with the economic and social climate of the High Middle Ages to endow upper-class and middle-class women with greater respect and more equality. Women had always had the responsibility of taking over their husband's financial affairs after his death or when he was called away to transact some business or go to **war** but this practice becomes more prevalent during the High Middle Ages.

Women's lives in the Late Middle Ages continued along the lines of this same paradigm with, once again, the upper and lower classes remaining fairly steady and the middle class experiencing the most dramatic changes. Even so, the new model of women as individuals of value gained increasing momentum, which resulted in more upper-class women expressing themselves in literary and religious works.



Christine de Pizan Leinad-Z (Public Domain)

The most dramatic departure from the old paradigm is exemplified in the great French-Italian author **Christine de Pizan** (also known as Christine de Pisan, l. 1364-1430 CE). Born in Venice, Pizan moved to **Paris** when her scholarly father was appointed astrologer at the court of Charles V (1364-1380 CE). According to Pizan's own works, her father encouraged her literary interests while her mother felt she should restrict herself to 'women's work' such as learning to spin and weave cloth. Left with no means of supporting her family after both her father and husband died, Pizan turned to **writing**, becoming the first female professional writer in European history.

This paradigm extended to the church, which had denied women access to education, through the lives and works of such notable authors as **Julian of Norwich** (l. 1342-1416 CE), Catherine of Sienna (1347-1380 CE), and St. Therese d'Avila (l.1515-1582 CE), among others.

Role in Society

While women in abbeys, nunneries, and at court in the Late Middle Ages were finding new freedom in expression and greater acceptance among men, women of the bourgeoisie were facing renewed restrictions. Women in guilds in the Late Middle Ages found less and less work as guilds began to deny them membership and male co-workers made their lives more difficult. Women were still paid less than men and so it was more profitable overall for a shop to hire a female rather than a male. As this practice became more common, men were threatened by loss of work and retaliated; guilds increasingly were restricted to men.

It is unclear whether more women entered nunneries during this period but it is known that nuns were illuminating manuscripts as early as the 10th century CE, there were female scribes by at least 1274 CE, and more women seem to have been involved in book production in the 14th century CE than before. Female religious orders seem to have remained stable, but a new order, the Beguines, started in the 13th century CE in France, quickly gained a significant number of adherents.



Beguinaige Charles Hutchins (CC BY)

The Beguines were all devoted women who lived lives of poverty, good works, and charity but were not nuns and could leave the group whenever they chose to. These women took care of each other and the surrounding community through the manufacture of goods and by providing services and so were able to get around the new strictures of the guilds and live life according to their own values without having to marry or join a religious order.

Married women of the middle-class in the High Middle Ages routinely took care of their husband's business accounts and took over after his death. This practice became more widespread following the Black Death pandemic of 1347-1352 CE when women regularly operated their late husband's or son's business, gained title to their lands, and had greater autonomy than before. Noble women, who had been expected to manage their husband's estate and vassals when he was called away on business or to war, now became solely responsible for operations and transactions following the death of their husband and sons.

Conclusion

Women in medieval times were not the passive victims of the religious and political patriarchy, no matter how often that claim is repeated. Women frequently found ways around the obstacles placed in their path or forged new paths when a challenge proved too great. They took over their husband's businesses and ran them successfully, continued to work in guilds, or even formed their own guilds as the textile guilds of **Italy** attest.

The Church, while upholding and encouraging the understanding that women were of less value than men, made some important concessions in recognizing the value of women like the authors mentioned above and, equally important, ruling that women were individuals of value and not just a man's possession. In Denmark, in the 12th century CE, the church ruled that rape was a crime against a woman and not – as had previously been held – a crime only against her father or husband. Even so, women's success and advances in the Late Middle Ages could not overturn the status quo supported by the patriarchy of the Church and aristocracy. Further restrictions were placed on women even as society entered the more enlightened era of the Renaissance.

Bibliography

- Cantor, N. F. *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*. Harper Collins, 1993.
- De Hamel, C. *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*. Phaidon Press, 1997.
- Gies, F. & J. *Women in the Middle Ages*. Harper Perennial, 2018.
- Julian of Norwich. *Revelations of Divine Love*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Loyn, H. R. *The Middle Ages: A Concise Encyclopedia*. Thames & Hudson, 1991.
- *Medieval Woman Artist Unmasked by her Teeth* by Andrew Curry Accessed 19 Mar 2020.
- Nardo, D. *Living in the Middle Ages*. Thomson/Gale, 2004.

- Power, E. *Medieval Women*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Singman, J. L. *The Middle Ages: Everyday Life in Medieval Europe*. Sterling, 2013.
- Staines, D. *The Complete Romances of Chretien de Troyes*. Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Teresa of Avila. *The Interior Castle*. Riverhead Books, 2004.
- The Church Changed the Perception of Rape by Niels Ebdrup Accessed 12 Mar 2019.
- Trapp, J. B. *Medieval English Literature*. Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Willard, C. C. *Christine de Pizan: Her Life and Works*. Persea, 1990.

Contributors and Attributions

Joshua J. Mark

A freelance writer and former part-time Professor of Philosophy at Marist College, New York, Joshua J. Mark has lived in Greece and Germany and traveled through Egypt. He has taught history, writing, literature, and philosophy at the college level.

This page titled [13.6: Women in the Middle Ages](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

13.7: Hildegard of Bingen

https://www.worldhistory.org/Hildegard_of_Bingen/

Definition



Depiction of Hildegard of Bingen in the St. Foy Church Ralph Hammann (CC BY-SA)

Hildegard of Bingen (also known as Hildegarde von Bingen, l. 1098-1179 CE) was a Christian mystic, Benedictine abbess, and polymath proficient in **philosophy**, musical composition, herbology, **medieval literature**, cosmology, **medicine**, biology, theology, and natural history. She refused to be defined by the patriarchal hierarchy of the church and, although she abided by its strictures, pushed the established boundaries for **women** almost past their limits.

Along with her impressive body of work and ethereal musical compositions, Hildegard is best known for her spiritual concept of *Viriditas* – “greenness” – the cosmic life force infusing the natural world. For Hildegard, the Divine manifested itself and was apparent in nature. Nature itself was not the Divine but the natural world gave proof of, existed because of, and glorified God. She is also known for her writings on the concept of *Sapientia* – Divine Wisdom – specifically immanent Feminine Divine Wisdom which draws close to and nurtures the human soul.

From a young age, she experienced ecstatic visions of light and sound, which she interpreted as messages from God. These visions were authenticated by ecclesiastical authorities, who encouraged her to write her experiences down. She would become famous in her own lifetime for her visions, wisdom, writings, and musical compositions, and her counsel was sought by nobility throughout **Europe**.

Early Life & Education

Hildegard came from an upper-class German family, the youngest of ten children. She was often ill as a child, afflicted with headaches which accompanied her visions, from around the age of three. Whether her parents consulted physicians about her health issues is unknown, but at the age of seven, they sent her to be enrolled as a novice in the convent of Disibodenberg.

HILDEGARD HAD FEARED & RESISTED HER VISIONS BUT WAS SUPPORTED & ENCOURAGED TO ACCEPT THEM BY VOLMAR.

Hildegard was placed under the care of Abbess Jutta von Sponheim (l. 1091-1136 CE), head of the order, an aristocrat and

daughter of a count who had chosen the monastic life for herself. Jutta was only six years older than Hildegard in 1105 CE when the latter entered the convent and the two would become close friends. Jutta taught Hildegard to read and write, how to recite the prayers, and introduced her to **music** by teaching her to play the psalter (a stringed instrument like a zither). Jutta may also have instructed the younger girl in Latin (though this claim has been challenged) and encouraged her to read widely.

During this time, she was also instructed by a monk named Volmar (d. 1173 CE) who served as prior to the convent and the nuns' confessor (since women were not allowed to hear confession, celebrate Mass, or preside over any official assembly other than meetings of other women regarding the day-to-day upkeep of their community). Hildegard had told Jutta about her visions, and Jutta felt it her duty to inform Volmar. Volmar encouraged Hildegard to believe in the authenticity of the visions and to write about them. He may have also been the one to teach her Latin and introduce her to various forms of **literature**. After seven years of tutelage and service, at the age of fourteen, Hildegard made her profession of faith and was accepted into the order.



St. Hildegard Meeting St. Jutta of Sponheim Kurt Wichmann (CC BY)

Hildegard and Jutta were typical of the nuns at this time in that they came from upper-class, aristocratic families who could afford to pay the Church to take their daughters. Although it was officially forbidden to accept money from parents, nunneries required a substantial 'dowry' for a girl to be accepted, claiming it would go to her upkeep. These dowries took the form of deeds to lands, cash, expensive clothing, and similar valuables. Daughters of poor families could not afford the dowry and, if they wanted to participate in convent life, it was as maids or cooks. Scholars Frances and Joseph Gies comment on the attraction of the convent for young **women in the Middle Ages**:

For upper-class women, the convent filled several basic needs. It provided an alternative to marriage by receiving girls whose families were unable to find them husbands. It provided an outlet for nonconformists, women who did not wish to marry because they felt a religious vocation, because marriage was repugnant, or because they saw in the convent a mode of life in which they could perform and perhaps distinguish themselves. The nunnery was a refuge of female intellectuals. (64)

Hildegard certainly fit this paradigm of the female intellectual, distinguishing herself by her vast learning, devotion to God, and service to others. When Jutta died in 1136 CE, Hildegard, then 38 years old, was unanimously chosen to succeed her.

Visions & Move to Rupertsberg

From the time she was young, Hildegard had feared and resisted her visions but was supported and encouraged to accept them by Volmar. A few years after becoming abbess, she began receiving the visions more vividly than before and with such frequency that she became bed-ridden. She had confessed her visions to the Abbot Kuno, who presided over her order, and he encouraged her to write about them, but she refused.

The visions themselves then became insistent that she write them down and interpret them for an audience. Hildegard resisted until she fell into delirium in which the visions, constantly recurring, demanded she express them in **writing**. She relates:

In this affliction I lay thirty days while my body burned as with fever...And throughout those days I watched a procession of angels innumerable who fought alongside Michael against the dragon and won the victory. And one of them called out to me, 'Eagle! Eagle! Why Sleepest thou? Arise! For it is dawn – and eat and drink!' Instantly my body and my senses came back into the world and, seeing this, my daughters [fellow nuns] who were weeping around me lifted me from the ground and placed me on my bed and thus I began to get my strength back. (Gies, 78)

Encouraged by Volmar and Abbot Kuno and inspired by the visions themselves, Hildegard began to write her best-known work, the *Scivias* (shortened form of the Latin *Scito vias Domini* – “Know the Way of the Lord” – , composed c. 1142-1151 CE) which, in accordance with her visions' instructions, related what she saw and what she felt they meant. By this time, she was a well-established visionary, renowned for her wisdom, and much sought after for counsel. Pope Eugenius (served 1145-1153 CE) read parts of the *Scivias*, approved the visions as authentic revelations, and encouraged Hildegard to continue the work. People would visit Disibodenberg to seek her out and, afterwards, would have been gently reminded by Abbot Kuno to leave a donation before they departed.



Ruins of Disibodenberg Monastery E-W (CC BY-SA)

In 1147 CE, Hildegard requested leave to found her own convent in Rupertsberg, 65 miles (105 km) to the south-east. Her request sparked a dispute with Abbot Kuno who denied her permission and suggested she accept the position of Prioress at Disibodenberg and place herself under his authority. His reasons for refusal are never recorded but most likely he was reluctant to lose so great an asset as Hildegard who not only brought in significant revenue but managed to keep the convent running efficiently and conduct correspondence with important figures who might be inclined to donate further.

Hildegard refused to accept Kuno's decision, repeated her request, and when Kuno denied her a second time, she took the matter to the Archbishop of Mainz who approved it. Kuno still would not release her or the nuns until Hildegard, bed-ridden (possibly due to her visions), informed him that God himself was punishing her for not following his will in moving the nuns to Rupertsberg. Hildegard was stricken with a paralysis so severe that no one could move her arms or legs and, after witnessing this, Kuno relented and allowed the nuns to leave. Hildegard established the convent at Rupertsberg c. 1150 CE with 18 nuns and her friend the monk Volmar as their confessor.

Works & Beliefs

Hildegard's vision is all-encompassing in scope, far transcending the common vision of the **medieval Church** while still remaining within the bounds of orthodoxy. She claimed the Divine was as female in spirit as male and that both these elements were essential for wholeness. Her concept of *Viriditas* elevated the natural world from the Church's view of a fallen realm of Satan

to an expression and extension of the Divine. God was revealed in nature, and the grass, flowers, trees, and animals bore witness to the Divine simply by their existence.

HILDEGARD'S *ORDO VIRTUTUM* IS THE OLDEST MEDIEVAL MORALITY PLAY & THE ONLY MEDIEVAL MUSICAL EXTANT.

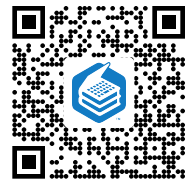
Her first major work, the *Scivias*, relates 26 of her visions in three sections – six visions in the first, seven in the second, thirteen in the third – along with her interpretation and commentary on the nature of the Divine and the role of the Church as an intermediary between God and humanity. She depicts God as a cosmic egg, both male and female, pulsing with love; the male aspect of the Divine is transcendent while the female is immanent. It is this immanence which invites rapport with the Divine.

Hildegard believed that, prior to the Fall of Man, God was worshipped by celestial song which, after the Fall, was approximated by music as humans now heard and understood it. Music, then, was the best expression of one's love for, devotion to, and worship of God. In keeping with this belief, she ends the *Scivias* with the text of her morality play *Ordo Virtutum* and her *Symphony of Heaven*, one of her earliest musical compositions.

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



Throughout her time at Disibodenberg, Hildegard routinely practiced what is known today as “holistic healing” using resonant spiritual energies and natural remedies to maintain health and cure illness and injury. Between 1150-1158 CE she composed her *Liber Subtilatum* (“Book of Subtleties of the Diverse Qualities of Created Things”) comprised of two sections, her *Physica* (“Medicine”) and *Causae et Curae* (“Causes and Cures of Disease”). She argues that human beings are the pinnacle of God's creation and the natural world exists in harmony with humanity; humans should care for nature and nature will do the same.

Her concept of health was based on the prevailing understanding, derived from ancient **Greek medicine**, of a human body's health depending on the balance of four humors of the body: sanguine/peaceful/dry (blood), choleric/angry/hot (yellow bile), phlegmatic/apathetic/moist (phlegm), melancholy/depressed/cold (black bile). Hildegard's conception of the humors differed slightly but still conformed to the traditional understanding. When these humors were in balance, the body was in optimum health; sickness indicated imbalance. Hildegard recommended herbal remedies, hot baths, proper sleep patterns, a healthy diet, and a positive attitude to keep one in balance or bring a sick person back to a balanced, healthy state.

An essential aspect of health was virtuous conduct and Hildegard addressed this in her morality play *Ordo Virtutum* (“Order of the Virtues”), completed in 1151 CE. The play depicts the struggle of the soul, trapped in the flesh, between the call of the virtues and the temptations of the devil. This work was performed by Hildegard and her nuns as the chorus of virtues and the soul (a female voice), male clergy singing the roles of the patriarchs and prophets, and most likely Volmar in the role of Satan – the only character in the play who does not sing since Satan is incapable of producing music, the true praise of God. *Ordo Virtutum* is the oldest medieval morality play and the only medieval musical extant.



Illustration of Hildegard of Bingen from Scivias Eisenacher~commonswiki (Public Domain)

Hildegard was especially proficient at Rupertsberg and next produced her *Liber Vitae Meritorum* ("Book of Life's Merits") between 1158-1163 CE. This work expands and develops the theme of her earlier play as it discusses the struggle of the soul between virtue and vice, the true nature and final rewards of both, the reason for the soul's struggle, and the immanence of God's presence and redeeming love. In this work she also wrote on human sexuality, specifically female sexuality, describing a woman's orgasm as the spiritual force which enfolds the man's seed in the womb and holds it there. The depth of the passion the parents felt for each other during sex would determine the child's character; if they were in love, then the orgasm of both would be strong and the child would be healthy and happy; if they were not, then the child would be bitter and imbalanced.

She then wrote her grand theological opus, *Liber Divinorum Operum* ("Book of Divine Works") between 1164-1174 CE, which drew together the themes of her previous works but elevated all through the grand scale of her further visions and explication of the nature of the Divine Love (*Caritas*) and Divine Wisdom (*Sapientia*) represented as feminine energies radiating light.

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



Her concept of *Viriditas* is also explored more fully in this work. The 'greenness' of the natural world is reflected in the 'greenness' of the human soul receptive to the Divine, which blooms to life once connected to the cosmic life force. Cut off from Divine Love, the soul is at the mercy of vice which leads only to misery and **death**. The natural and life-affirming choice is to embrace the Divine as the essential and enduring energy of existence, recognizing that the virtues call one toward an elevated, transcendent reality. Music, of course, is intertwined with this concept of 'greenness' as it elevates the soul in praising the source of all life.

Correspondences & Controversies

While composing her written works and musical scores (still popular and performed in the present day), Hildegard also kept up a correspondence with kings, queens, ecclesiastical authorities, and many others. She exchanged letters, still extant, with such medieval luminaries as Bernard of Clairvaux (l. 1090-1153 CE), **Thomas Becket** (l. 1118-1170 CE), Henry II (l. 1133-1189 CE), **Eleanor of Aquitaine** (l. c. 1122-1204 CE), Holy **Roman Emperor** and King of Germany Frederick Barbarossa (l. 1122-1190 CE).

CE), and many others. She was never afraid of controversy or criticism and never failed to stand up to patriarchal ecclesiastical or secular authority for what she believed was right.

EVEN IN HER EARLY EIGHTIES, HILDEGARD REFUSED TO BE BULLIED OR COWED BY MALE AUTHORITY FIGURES.

She went on four speaking tours which included stops in Cologne, Trier, Wurzburg, Frankfurt, and Rothenburg as well as trips into Flanders. These tours were expressly to deliver sermons to predominantly male audiences in spite of St. **Paul**'s injunction against women speaking in the presence of men, having authority over men, or teaching men (I Timothy 2:12-14, I Corinthians 11:3, I Corinthians 14:34) and a central focus of her sermons was the corruption of the church and the need for immediate and drastic reform.

Even in her early eighties, Hildegard refused to be bullied or cowed by male authority figures. The Archbishop of Mainz ordered her to exhume the body of a young man, buried in holy ground at Rupertsberg, who had died excommunicated. Hildegard refused, claiming that the man had sought absolution and received grace and it was only the Archbishop's personal stubbornness and pride which prevented him from recognizing this. She traveled twice to Mainz to plead her case but was denied, and her convent was placed under interdict. Only when the Archbishop died was the interdict lifted and Hildegard and her nuns regarded as having been returned to a state of grace in the Church.

Conclusion

Aside from her contributions to theology, philosophy, music, medicine, and the rest, Hildegard invented the constructed **script** of the *Litterae ignotae* (alternate **alphabet**), which she used in her hymns for concise rhyming and, possibly, to lend to her text a sense of another dimension and higher plane. She also invented the *Lingua ignota* (unknown language), her own philological construct of 23 letters which served to separate and elevate her order from the mundane world.

In spite of her accomplishments and fame, the Church continued to regard women not only as second-class citizens but dangerous temptations and obstacles to virtue. The highly influential Bernard of Clairvaux claimed that a man could not associate with a woman without desiring sex with her and the canonical order of the Premonstratensians banned women from their order claiming to have recognized "that the wickedness of women is greater than all the other wickedness in the world" (Gies, 87). It was precisely this kind of misogynistic mindset that Hildegard struggled against not only within the Church but in medieval society at large.

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



Even so, the significance of her work was recognized by the Church and she was singled out as a woman of note. Four attempts to canonize her were mounted and, although she is often referred to as Saint Hildegard of Bingen, none succeeded. She was only beatified, not canonized, in 2012 CE, although regarded by many as fitting the criterion of a saint. Her famous visions are today interpreted as symptoms of a migraine sufferer but this has in no way detracted from her reputation.

In 1979 CE, the artist Judy Chicago included Hildegard of Bingen in her installation artwork *The Dinner Party* (currently on display at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, USA), an ornate triangular table with settings for 39 women from history and literature celebrating their contributions to world **culture** and knowledge. The names of another 999 women are engraved on the floor the table rests on. Hildegard would no doubt enjoy her place at the table between Eleanor of Aquitaine and accused-witch Petronilla de Meath (1300-1324 CE), executed for heresy; two of the many women celebrated in the work for who they were and the message they continue to offer the world.

Bibliography

- [Brooklyn Museum: The Dinner Party by Judy Chicago](#) Accessed 29 May 2019.

- Cantor, N. F. *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*. Harper Perennial, 1994.
- Coulton, G.G. *Medieval Village, Manor, And Monastery*. Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2010.
- Deanesley, M. *A History of the Medieval Church, 590-1500*. Methuen, 1969.
- Gies, F. & J. *Women in the Middle Ages*. Harper Perennial, 2018.
- Hildegard of Bingen (translated by Bruce W. Hoeski). *The Book of the Rewards of Life*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Hildegard of Bingen (translated by Priscilla Throop). *Hildegard von Bingen's Physica*. Healing Arts Press, 1998.
- Loyn, H. R. *The Middle Ages: A Concise Encyclopedia*. Thames & Hudson, 1991.
- Power, E. *Medieval Women*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Wise Bauer, S. *The History of the Medieval World*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.

Contributors and Attributions

Joshua J. Mark

A freelance writer and former part-time Professor of Philosophy at Marist College, New York, Joshua J. Mark has lived in Greece and Germany and traveled through Egypt. He has taught history, writing, literature, and philosophy at the college level.

13.8: The Medieval Church

https://www.worldhistory.org/Medieval_Church/

Definition



Vladimir I Converting to Christianity Viktor Mikhailovich Vasnetsov (Public Domain)

Religious practice in medieval **Europe** (c. 476-1500 CE) was dominated and informed by the Catholic Church. The majority of the population was Christian, and “Christian” at this time meant “Catholic” as there was initially no other form of that **religion**. The rampant corruption of the **medieval Church**, however, gave rise to reformers such as John Wycliffe (l. 1330-1384 CE) and Jan Hus (l. c. 1369-1415 CE) and religious sects, condemned as heresies by the Church, such as the Bogomils and **Cathars**, among many others. Even so, the Church maintained its power and exercised enormous influence over people's daily lives from the king on his throne to the peasant in the field.

The Church regulated and defined an individual's life, literally, from birth to **death** and was thought to continue its hold over the person's soul in the afterlife. The Church was the manifestation of God's will and presence on earth, and its dictates were not to be questioned, even when it was apparent that many of the clergy were working far more steadily toward their own interests than those of their god.

A dramatic blow to the power of the Church came in the form of the **Black Death** pandemic of 1347-1352 CE during which people began to doubt the power of the clergy who could do nothing to stop people from dying or the **plague** from spreading. Even so, the Church repeatedly crushed dissent, silenced reformers, and massacred heretical sects until the Protestant Reformation (1517-1648 CE) which broke the Church's power and allowed for greater freedom of thought and religious expression.

Church Structure & Beliefs

The Church claimed authority from God through **Jesus Christ** who, according to the **Bible**, designated his apostle Peter as “the rock upon which my church will be built” to whom he gave the keys of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 16:18-19). Peter was therefore regarded as the first Pope, the head of the church, and all others as his successors endowed with the same divine authority.

By the time of the Middle Ages, the Church had an established hierarchy:

- Pope – the head of the Church
- Cardinals – advisors to the Pope; administrators of the Church
- Bishops/Archbishops – ecclesiastical superiors over a cathedral or region
- Priests – ecclesiastical authorities over a parish, village, or town church
- Monastic Orders – religious adherents in monasteries supervised by an abbot/abbess

The Church maintained the belief that **Jesus** Christ was the only begotten son of the one true God as revealed in the Hebrew scriptures and that those works (which would become the Christian Old Testament) prophesied Christ's coming. The date of the earth and history of humanity was all revealed through the scriptures which made up the Christian Bible – considered the word of God and the oldest book in the world – which was consulted as a handbook on how to live according to divine will and gain everlasting life in heaven upon one's death.



Urban II at the Council of Clermont Jean Colombe (Public Domain)

Interpretation of the Bible, however, was too great a responsibility for the average person, and so the clergy was a spiritual necessity. In order to talk to God or understand the Bible correctly, one relied on one's priest as that priest was ordained by his superior who was, in turn, ordained by another, all under the authority of the Pope, God's representative on earth.

The Church hierarchy maintained the social hierarchy. One was born into a certain class, followed the profession of one's parents, and died as they had. Social mobility was extremely rare to nonexistent since the Church taught that it was God's will one had been born into a certain set of circumstances and attempting to improve one's lot was tantamount to claiming God had made a mistake. People, therefore, accepted their lot and made the best of it.

Church in Daily Life

The lives of the people of the Middle Ages revolved around the Church. People, especially **women**, were known to attend church three to five times daily for prayer and at least once a week for services, confession, and acts of contrition for repentance. The Church paid no taxes and was supported by the people of a town or **city**. Citizens were responsible for supporting the parish priest and Church overall through a tithe of ten percent of their income. Tithes paid for baptism ceremonies, confirmations, and funerals as well as saint's day festivals and holy day festivals such as **Easter** celebrations.

THE TEACHINGS OF THE CHURCH WERE A CERTAINTY TO THE PEOPLE OF THE MIDDLE AGES. THERE WAS NO ROOM FOR DOUBT & QUESTIONS WERE NOT TOLERATED.

The center of a congregation's life in a small-town church or city cathedral was not the altar but the baptismal font. This was a free-standing stone receptacle/basin used for infant or adult baptism – often quite large and deep – which also served to determine a person's guilt or innocence when one was charged with a crime. To clear one's name, a person would submit to an

ordeal in which one was bound and dropped into the font. If the accused floated, it was a clear indication of guilt; if the accused sank, it meant innocence but the accused would often drown.

Under the reign of the English king Athelstan (r. 924-939 CE), the procedure for the ordeal was codified as [law](#):

If anyone pledges to undergo the ordeal, he is then to come three days before to the mass-priest whose duty it is to consecrate it [the ordeal], and live off bread and water and salt and vegetables until he shall go to it, and be present at mass on each of those three days, and make his offering and go to communion on the day on which he shall go to the ordeal, and swear then the oath that he is guiltless of that charge according to the common law, before he goes to the ordeal. (Brooke, 107)

There was also the ordeal of iron in which the accused was forced to hold or carry a hot poker. If the person could hold the red-hot iron without burning and blistering their hands, they were innocent; there are no records of anyone being found innocent. The ordeal of water was also carried out by streams, rivers, and lakes. Women accused of witchcraft, for example, were often tied in a sack with their cat (thought to be their demonic familiar) and thrown into a body of water. If they managed to escape and come to the surface, they were found guilty and then executed, but they most often drowned.

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



Ordeals, like executions, were a form of public entertainment and, as with festivals, marriages, and other events in community life, were paid for by the people's tithe to the Church. The lower class, as usual, bore the brunt of the Church's expenses but the nobility was also required to donate large sums to the Church to ensure a place for themselves in heaven or to lessen their time in purgatory.

The Church's teachings on purgatory – an afterlife realm between heaven and hell where souls remained trapped until they had paid for their sins – generated enormous wealth for various clergy who sold writs known as indulgences, promising a shorter stay in purgatory for a price. Relics were another source of income, and it was common for unscrupulous clerics to sell fake splinters of Christ's cross, a saint's finger or toe, a vial of water from the Holy Land, or any number of objects, which would allegedly bring luck or ward off misfortune.



Dante, Florence Cathedral Vitosmo (CC BY-NC-SA)

The teachings of the Church were a certainty to the people of the Middle Ages. There was no room for doubt, and questions were not tolerated. One was either in the Church or out of it, and if out, one's interactions with the rest of the community were limited. Jews, for example, lived in their own neighborhoods surrounded by Christians and were regularly treated quite poorly. The French king Charles Martel (r. 718-741 CE), defeated the Muslim invasion of Europe at the **Battle** of Tours (also known as the Battle of Poitiers, 732 CE), and so Muslims in Europe were rare at this time outside of Spain and the traveling merchants conducting **trade**. A citizen of Europe, therefore – who did not belong to either of these faiths – had to adhere to the orthodox vision of the Church in order to interact with family, community, and make a living. If one found one could not do so (or at least appear to do so), the only option was a so-called heretical sect.

Corruption & Heresy

The heretical sects of the Middle Ages were uniformly responses to the clear corruption and greed of the Church. The immense wealth of the Church, accrued through tithes and lavish gifts, only inspired a desire for even greater wealth which translated as power. An archbishop could, and frequently did, threaten a noble, a town, or even a monastery with excommunication – by which one was exiled from the Church and so from the grace of God and commerce with fellow citizens – for any reason. Even well-known and devout religious figures – such as **Hildegard of Bingen** (l. 1098-1179 CE) – were subject to 'discipline' along these lines for disagreeing with an ecclesiastical superior.



Depiction of Hildegard of Bingen in the St. Foy Church Ralph Hammann (CC BY-SA)

The priests were notoriously corrupt and, in many cases, illiterate parasites who only held their position due to family influence and favor. Scholar G. G. Coulton cites a letter of 1281 CE in which the writer warns how “the ignorance of the priests precipitates the people into the ditch of error” (259) and later cites the correspondence of one Bishop Guillaume le Marie de Angers, who writes:

The Priesthood includes innumerable contemptible persons of abject life, utterly unworthy in learning and morals, from whose execrable lives and pernicious ignorance infinite scandals arise, the Church sacraments are despised by the laity, and in very many districts the lay folk hold the priests as [vile]. (259)

The medieval mystic **Margery Kempe** (l. C. 1342-1438 CE) challenged the wealthy clerics to reform their corruption while, almost 200 years before, Hildegard of Bingen had done the same as had men like John Wycliffe and Jan Hus. The Church was not interested in reform, however, because it had the last word on any subject as God's voice on earth.

Those who found the abuses of the Church too intolerable and were seeking an honest spiritual experience instead of an unending pay-to-pray scheme, which not even death could halt, joined religious sects outside the Church and attempted to live peacefully in their own communities. The best-known of these were the Cathars of Southern France who, while they interacted with the Catholic communities they lived near or in, had their own services, rituals, and belief system.

These kinds of communities were routinely condemned by the Church and destroyed, their members massacred, and whatever lands they had confiscated as Church property. Even an orthodox community which adhered to Catholic teachings – such as the Beguines – was condemned because it was begun spontaneously as a response to the needs of the people and was not initiated by the Church. The Beguines were laywomen who lived as nuns and served their community, holding all possessions in common and living a life of poverty and service to others, but they were not approved by the Church and were therefore condemned; they were disbanded along with their male counterparts, the Beghards, in the 12th century CE.



Pope Innocent III & the Albigensian Crusade Unknown Artist (Public Domain)

These groups, and others like them, attempted to assert spiritual autonomy based on the scriptural authority of the Bible, without any of the Church's trappings or elaborate ritual. The Cathars believed that Christ never died on the cross and was therefore never resurrected but that, instead, the son of God had been spiritually offered for the sins of humanity on a higher plane. The gospel stories, they claimed, should be understood as allegories using symbolic language rather than static histories of a past event. They further advocated for the feminine principle in the divine, revering a goddess of wisdom known as Sophia, to whom they devoted their lives.

Living simply and serving the surrounding community, the Cathars amassed no wealth, their priests owned nothing and were highly respected as holy men even by Catholics, and Cathar communities offered worthwhile goods and services. The Beguines, while never claiming any beliefs outside of orthodoxy, were equally devout and selfless in their efforts to help the poor and, especially, poor single mothers and their children. Both of these movements, however, offered people an alternative to the Church, and the medieval Church found that intolerable. Any change in people's attitudes toward religion threatened the power of the Church, and the Church had enough power to crush such movements even in cases where sects such as the Cathars had significant support and protection.

Reformation

John Wycliffe and his followers (known as Lollards) had been calling for reformation since the 14th century CE, and it might be difficult for a modern-day reader to fully understand why no serious attempts were made at reform, but this is simply because the modern era offers so many different legitimate avenues for religious expression. In the Middle Ages, it was inconceivable that there could be any valid belief system other than the Church.

Heaven, hell, and purgatory were all very real places to the people of the Middle Ages, and one could not risk offending God by criticizing his Church and damning one's self to an eternity of torment in a lake of fire surrounded by demons. The wonder is not so much why more people did not call for reform as that anyone was brave enough to try.

The Protestant Reformation did not arise as an attempt to overthrow the power of the Church but began simply as yet another effort at reforming ecclesiastical abuse and corruption. Martin Luther (l. 1483-1546 CE) was a highly-educated German priest and monk who moved from concern to outrage over the abuses of the Church. He criticized the sale of indulgences as a money-making scheme having no biblical authority and no spiritual worth in his famous Ninety-Five Theses (1517 CE) and opposed the Church's teachings on a number of other matters.



Martin Luther Sergio Andres Segovia (Public Domain)

Luther was condemned by Pope Leo X in 1520 CE who demanded he renounce his criticism or face excommunication. When Luther refused to recant, Pope Leo moved ahead with the excommunication in 1521 CE, and Luther became an outlaw. Like Wycliffe, Hus, and others before him, Luther was only stating the obvious in calling for an end to rampant abuse and corruption. Like Wycliffe, he translated the Bible from Latin into the vernacular (Wycliffe from Latin to Middle English and Luther from Latin to German), opposed the concept of sacerdotalism whereby a priest is necessary as an intermediary between a believer and God, and maintained that the Bible and prayer were all one needed to commune directly with God. In making these claims, of course, he not only undermined the authority of the Pope but rendered that position – as well as those of the cardinals, bishops, archbishops, priests, and others – ineffectual and obsolete.

According to Luther, salvation was granted by the grace of God, not by the good deeds of human beings, and so all of the works the Church required of people were of no eternal use and only served to fill the Church's treasury and build their grand cathedrals. Owing to the political climate in Germany, and Luther's own charisma and intelligence, his effort at reform became the movement which would break the power of the Church. Other reformers such as Huldrych Zwingli (l. 1484-1531 CE) and John Calvin (l. 1509-1564 CE) broke new ground in their own regions and many others followed suit.

Conclusion

The monopoly the Church held on religious belief and practice was broken, and a new era of greater spiritual freedom was begun, but it was not without cost. In their zeal to throw off the oppression of the medieval Church, the newly liberated protestors destroyed monasteries, libraries, and cathedrals, the ruins of which still dot the European landscape in the present day.

The Church had certainly become increasingly corrupt and oppressive and its clergy was frequently characterized far more by a love of worldly goods and pleasures than spiritual pursuits but, at the same time, the Church had initiated hospitals, colleges and universities, social systems for the care of the poor and the sick, and maintained religious orders which allowed women an outlet for their spirituality, imagination, and ambitions. These institutions became especially important during the Black Death pandemic of 1347-1352 CE which killed millions of people in Europe and significantly impacted people's faith in the vision of the Church.

The Protestant Reformation, unfortunately, destroyed much of the good the Church had done in reacting to the corruption it had fallen into and its perceived failure to meet the challenge of the plague outbreak. Eventually, the different movements would organize into the Christian Protestant sects recognizable today – Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and so on – and set up their own institutes of higher learning, hospitals, and social programs. When the Reformation began, there was only the Church, the monolithic powerhouse of the Middle Ages, which afterwards became only one option for religious expression among many.

Bibliography

- Brooke, R & C. *Popular Religion in the Middle Ages*. Barnes & Noble Books, 1996.
- Cantor, N. F. *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*. Harper Perennial, 1994.
- Coulton, G.G. *Medieval Village, Manor, and Monastery*. Harper & Row, 1960.
- Deanesley, M. *A History of the Medieval Church 590-1500*. Methuen & Co, 2019.
- Loyn, H. R. *The Middle Ages: A Concise Encyclopedia*. Thames & Hudson, 1991.
- Margery Kempe (translated by Barry Windeatt). *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Penguin Classics, 2000.

Contributors and Attributions

Joshua J. Mark

A freelance writer and former part-time Professor of Philosophy at Marist College, New York, Joshua J. Mark has lived in Greece and Germany and traveled through Egypt. He has taught history, writing, literature, and philosophy at the college level.

13.9: Chivalry in the Middle Ages

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



13.10: Pilgrimage Routes and the Cult of the Relic

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...t-of-the-relic>

13.11: Thomas Aquinas

<https://www.theschooloflife.com/theb...homas-aquinas/>

13.12: Medieval Art History

YouTube Video

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



13.13: Pentecost and Mission to the Apostles

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...mpanum-v-zelay>

13.14: Chartres Cathedral

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...tres-cathedral>

13.15: Making Manuscripts

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humaniti...ng-manuscripts>

INDEX

No index terms found.

GLOSSARY

S

Sample Word 1 | Sample Definition 1

DETAILED LICENSING

Overview

Title: HUM 300: Classical Humanities Textbook (Collom)

Webpages: 137

Applicable Restrictions: Noncommercial

All licenses found:

- Undeclared: 83.9% (115 pages)
- CC BY-NC-SA 4.0: 16.1% (22 pages)

By Page

- HUM 300: Classical Humanities Textbook (Collom) - Undeclared
 - Front Matter - Undeclared
 - TitlePage - Undeclared
 - InfoPage - Undeclared
 - Table of Contents - Undeclared
 - Licensing - Undeclared
 - 1: Introduction - Undeclared
 - 1.1: Historical Bias - Undeclared
 - 1.2: Our Moral Endowment - Undeclared
 - 1.3: What is History For? - Undeclared
 - 1.4: What is Philosophy For? - Undeclared
 - 1.5: What is Art For? - Undeclared
 - 2: Prehistory - Undeclared
 - 2.1: Prehistory - Crash Course Big History #6 - Undeclared
 - 2.2: Khan Academy - Neolithic Revolution - Undeclared
 - 2.3: The Evolution of Language - Undeclared
 - 2.4: Paleolithic Beginnings - Undeclared
 - 2.5: The Roots of Religion - Undeclared
 - 2.6: Gobekli Tepe - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
 - 2.7: Stone Age Art - Undeclared
 - 2.8: Ted- A Darwinian Theory of Beauty - Undeclared
 - 3: Ancient Mesopotamia - Undeclared
 - 3.1: Mesopotamia Crash Course - Undeclared
 - 3.2: Mesopotamia - Undeclared
 - 3.3: Love, Sex, and Marriage in Ancient Mesopotamia - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
 - 3.4: Mesopotamian Religion - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
 - 3.5: Mesopotamia Art History - Undeclared
 - 3.6: What is Myth? - Undeclared
 - 3.7: The Hero's Journey and the Monomyth - Undeclared
 - 3.8: The Epic of Gilgamesh - Undeclared
 - 4: Ancient Egypt - Undeclared
 - 4.1: Ancient Egypt - (Crash Course World History #4) - Undeclared
 - 4.2: Khan Academy - Ancient Egypt and the Nile River Valley - Undeclared
 - 4.3: Women in Ancient Egypt - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
 - 4.4: Ancient Egyptian Religion - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
 - 4.5: Egyptian Book of the Dead - Undeclared
 - 4.6: Egyptian Art - Undeclared
 - 5: Ancient Greece - Undeclared
 - 5.1: Overview of Ancient Greece - Undeclared
 - 5.2: Persians and Greeks - Crash Course - Undeclared
 - 5.3: Women in Ancient Greece - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
 - 5.4: Greek Mythology - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
 - 5.5: Philosophy - Plato - Undeclared
 - 5.6: Plato on The Allegory of the Cave - Undeclared
 - 5.7: Plato's Ladder of Love - Undeclared
 - 5.8: Philosophy - Aristotle - Undeclared
 - 5.9: Introduction to Greek Architecture - Undeclared
 - 5.10: Greek Art History - Undeclared
 - 6: Ancient Rome - Undeclared
 - 6.1: Introduction to Ancient Rome - Undeclared
 - 6.2: Overview of the Roman Empire - Undeclared
 - 6.3: The Role of Women in the Roman World - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
 - 6.4: Female Gladiators in Ancient Rome - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
 - 6.5: Roman Religion - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
 - 6.6: Epicurus - Undeclared
 - 6.7: The Philosophy of Stoicism - Undeclared
 - 6.8: Life Changing Stoic Ideas - Undeclared
 - 6.9: Roman Art History - Undeclared
 - 7: Ancient India - Undeclared

- 7.1: Ancient India - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
- 7.2: Introduction to the Vedic Period - *Undeclared*
- 7.3: Sanskrit Connections to English - *Undeclared*
- 7.4: Ashoka the Great - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
- 7.5: Hinduism - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
- 7.6: Hindu Temples - *Undeclared*
- 7.7: Reading- Shiva As Lord of the Dance (Nataraja) - *Undeclared*
- 7.8: Buddhism - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
- 7.9: Mandala - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
- 7.10: Stupa - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
- 7.11: Buddhist Wheel of Life and Death - *Undeclared*
- 7.12: Bodhi Gaya - *Undeclared*
- 8: Ancient China - *Undeclared*
 - 8.1: History of Ancient China - *Undeclared*
 - 8.2: Women in Ancient China - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
 - 8.3: Religion in Ancient China - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
 - 8.4: 2,000 Years of Chinese History! The Mandate of Heaven and Confucius- World History #7 - *Undeclared*
 - 8.5: Who Was Confucius - *Undeclared*
 - 8.6: Eastern Philosophy - Confucius - *Undeclared*
 - 8.7: Eastern Philosophy - Lao Tzu - *Undeclared*
 - 8.8: Eastern Philosophy - Wu Wei - *Undeclared*
 - 8.9: Be Humble - and other Lessons from the Philosophy of Water | Raymond Tang - *Undeclared*
 - 8.10: The Tao of Pooh - *Undeclared*
- 9: Judaism - *Undeclared*
 - 9.1: Judaism Explained - *Undeclared*
 - 9.2: The Ancient Roots of Anti-Judaism - *Undeclared*
 - 9.3: It's Time to Reclaim Religion - *Undeclared*
 - 9.4: The Israel-Palestine Conflict - *Undeclared*
 - 9.5: Writing a History of Jewish Architecture - *Undeclared*
 - 9.6: The Golden Haggadah - *Undeclared*
 - 9.7: Relief from the Arch of Titus - *Undeclared*
 - 9.8: Diarna- Documenting the Place of a Vanishing Jewish History - *Undeclared*
- 10: Christianity - *Undeclared*
 - 10.1: A Multicultural Story - *Undeclared*
 - 10.2: Ten Should-Be Famous Women of Early Christianity - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
 - 10.3: Best Known Gospels - *Undeclared*
 - 10.4: Jesus the Teacher - *Undeclared*
 - 10.5: Early Christian Art History - *Undeclared*
- 11: Byzantine Civilization - *Undeclared*
 - 11.1: Fall of the Roman Empire - *Undeclared*
 - 11.2: Christianity in the Roman Empire - *Undeclared*
 - 11.3: Justinian and the Byzantine Empire - *Undeclared*
 - 11.4: The Silk Road - *Undeclared*
 - 11.5: The Princess who Rewrote History - *Undeclared*
 - 11.6: Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy - *Undeclared*
 - 11.7: A Beginner's Guide to Byzantine Art - *Undeclared*
 - 11.8: Iconoclastic Controversies - *Undeclared*
 - 11.9: Hagia Sofia - *Undeclared*
 - 11.10: Theotokos Mosaic - *Undeclared*
- 12: Islam - *Undeclared*
 - 12.1: Introduction to Islam - *Undeclared*
 - 12.2: Contextualization of the Development of Islam - *Undeclared*
 - 12.3: What it's like to be a Muslim in America - *Undeclared*
 - 12.4: Judaism and Christianity in the Qur'an - *Undeclared*
 - 12.5: Muhammad the Messenger - *Undeclared*
 - 12.6: What does the Qur'an really say about a Muslim Woman's Hijab? - *Undeclared*
 - 12.7: Islamic Art - *Undeclared*
 - 12.8: Arts of the Islamic World - *Undeclared*
- 13: Middle Ages - *Undeclared*
 - 13.1: Introduction to the Middle Ages - *Undeclared*
 - 13.2: The Dark Ages...How Dark Were They? - *Undeclared*
 - 13.3: Golden Age of Islam - *Undeclared*
 - 13.4: Introduction to the Crusades - *Undeclared*
 - 13.5: An Overview of the Crusades - *Undeclared*
 - 13.6: Women in the Middle Ages - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
 - 13.7: Hildegard of Bingen - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
 - 13.8: The Medieval Church - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
 - 13.9: Chivalry in the Middle Ages - *Undeclared*
 - 13.10: Pilgrimage Routes and the Cult of the Relic - *Undeclared*
 - 13.11: Thomas Aquinas - *Undeclared*
 - 13.12: Medieval Art History - *Undeclared*
 - 13.13: Pentecost and Mission to the Apostles - *Undeclared*
 - 13.14: Chartres Cathedral - *Undeclared*
 - 13.15: Making Manuscripts - *Undeclared*
- Back Matter - *Undeclared*
 - Index - *Undeclared*
 - Glossary - *Undeclared*
 - Detailed Licensing - *Undeclared*