

WESTERN CIVILIZATION I



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This text was compiled on 10/04/2026

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Introduction to the Volume

Rationale & Goals of This Edition

Over the past few years, I have watched the cost of textbooks, even history books, rise each year. And while prices have gone up, the actual content of the textbooks has not improved. Yes, they include testbanks and weekly online quizzes, which of course are helpful for the instructors. However, the books do not offer any new meaningful material, and even if they did many students skip the primary source excerpts, images, or optional activities. On the other hand many Open Access Texts, including the foundation for this book, are dry and attempt to cover too much too briefly. This is particularly true for open access “concise” editions that often have few images or primary source excerpts.

This edition attempts to bridge the gap between affordable textbooks and “concise” editions. I have added details, stories, documents, images, and more to help bring history alive for students

The Approach of This Book (with Caveats)

This textbook follows the contours of the basic Western Civilization narrative in terms of chronology and, to an extent, geography because it was written to be compatible with most Western Civilization courses as they exist today. It deliberately breaks, however, from the “triumphalist” narrative that describes Western Civilization as the most successful, rational, and enlightened form of civilization in human history. It casts a wider geographical view than do traditional Western Civilization textbooks, focusing in many cases on the critical historical role of the Middle East, not just Europe. It also abandons the pretense that the history of Western Civilization was generally progressive, with the conditions of life and understanding of the natural world of most people improving over time (as a matter of fact, they did not).

The purpose of this approach is not to disparage the genuine breakthroughs, accomplishments, and forms of “progress” that did originate in “the West.” Technologies as diverse and important as the steam engine and antibiotics originated in the West. Major intellectual and ideological movements calling for religious toleration, equality before the law, and feminism all came into being in the West. For better and for worse, the West was also the point of origin of true globalization (starting with the European contact with the Americas). It would be as misleading to dismiss the history of Western Civilization as unimportant as it is to claim that only the history of Western Civilization is important. Thus, this textbook attempts to present a balanced account of major events that occurred in the West over approximately the last 10,000 years. “Balance” is in the eye of the reader, however, so the account will not be satisfactory to all.

Finally, a note on the kind of history this textbook covers is in order. For the sake of clarity and manageability, historians distinguish between different areas of historical study: political, intellectual, military, cultural, artistic, social, and so on. Historians have made enormous strides in the last sixty years in addressing various areas that were traditionally neglected, most importantly in considering the histories of the people who were not in power, including the common people of various epochs, of women for almost all of history, and of slaves and servants. The old adage that “history is written by the winners” is simply untrue – history has left behind mountains of evidence about the lives of those who had access to less personal autonomy than did social elites. Those elites did much to author some of the most familiar historical narratives, but those traditional narratives have been under sustained critique for several decades.

This textbook tries to address at least some of those histories, but here it will be found wanting by many. Given the vast breadth of history covered in its chapters, the bulk of the consideration is on “high level” political history, charting a chronological framework of major states, political events, and political changes. There are two reasons for that approach. First, the history of politics lends itself to a history of events linked together by causality: first something happened, and then something else happened because of it. In turn, there is a fundamental coherence and simplicity to textbook narratives of political history (one that infuriates many professional historians, who are trained to identify and study complexity). Political history can thus serve as an accessible starting place for newcomers to the study of history, providing a relatively easy-to-follow chronological framework.

The other, related, reason for the political framing of this textbook is that history has long since declined as a subject central to education from the elementary through high school levels in many parts of the United States. It is no longer possible to assume that anyone who has completed high school already has some idea of major (measured by their impact at the time and since) events of the past. This textbook attempts to use political history as, again, a starting point in considering events, people,

movements, and ideas that changed the world at the time and continue to exert an influence in the present. To be clear, not all of what follows has to do with politics in so many words. Considerable attention is also given to intellectual, economic, cultural, gender, and to an extent, religious history.

The Original Version of the text was penned by Dr. Christopher Brooks from Portland Community College and published in March 2019. Revisions were made in February 2020 by Brooks. This forms the basic structure of the edition. My focus has been to add content, including extending the time frame to cover from Medieval Europe to the Renaissance, Age of Exploration, and the Reformation as all of these processes have their origins in Medieval Europe.

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Introduction to Western Civilization

The Idea of Western Civilization

What is “Western Civilization”? Furthermore, who or what is part of it? Like all ideas, the concept of Western Civilization itself has a history, one that coalesced in college textbooks and curriculums for the first time in the United States in the 1920s. In many ways, the very idea of Western Civilization is a “loaded” one, opposing one form or branch of civilization from others as if they were distinct, even unrelated. Thus, before examining the events of Western Civilization’s history, it is important to unpack the history of the concept itself.

Where is the West?

The obvious question is “west of what”? Likewise, where is “the east”? Terms used in present-day geopolitics regularly make reference to an east and west, as in “Far East,” and “Middle East,” as well as in “Western” ideas or attitudes. The obvious answer is that “the West” has something to do with Europe. If the area including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Israel – Palestine, and Egypt is somewhere called the “Middle” or “Near” East, does it then imply that it is just to the east of something else?

In fact, we get the original term from Greece. Greece is the center-point, east of the Balkan Peninsula was east, west of the Balkans was west, and the Greeks were at the center of their self-understood world. Likewise, the sea that both separated and united the Greeks and their neighbors, including the Egyptians and the Persians, is still called the Mediterranean, which means “sea in the middle of the earth” (albeit in Latin, not Greek – we get the word from a later “Western” civilization, the Romans). The ancient civilizations clustered around the Mediterranean treated it as the center of the world itself, their major trade route to one another and a major source of their food as well.

To the Greeks, there were two kinds of people: Greeks and barbarians (the Greek word is *barbaros*). Supposedly, the word barbarian came from Greeks mocking the sound of non-Greek languages: “bar-bar-bar-bar.” The Greeks traded with all of their neighbors and knew perfectly well that the Persians, the Egyptians and the Phoenicians, among others, were not their inferiors in learning, art, or political organization, but the fact remains that they were not Greek, either. Thus, one of the core themes of Western Civilization is that right from its inception, of the east being east of Greece and the west being west of Greece, and of the world being divided between Greeks and barbarians, there was an idea of who is central and superior, and who is inferior (or at least not part of the best version of culture).

In a sense, then, the Greeks invented the idea of west and east, but they did not extend the idea to anyone but themselves, certainly including the “barbarians” who inhabited the rest of Europe. In other words, the Greeks did not have a concept of “Western Civilization,” just Greek vs. barbarian. Likewise, the Greeks did not invent “civilization” itself; they inherited things like agriculture and writing from their neighbors. Neither was there ever a united Greek empire: there was a great Greek civilization when Alexander the Great conquered what he thought was most of the world, stretching from Greece itself through Egypt, the Middle East, as far as western India, but it collapsed into feuding kingdoms after he died. Thus, while later cultures came to look to the Greeks as their intellectual and cultural ancestors, the Greeks themselves did not set out to found “Western Civilization” itself.

Mesopotamia

While many traditional Western Civilization textbooks start with Greece, this one does not. That is because civilization is not Greek in its origins. The most ancient human civilizations arose in the Fertile Crescent, an area stretching from present-day Israel – Palestine through southern Turkey and into Iraq. Closely related, and lying within the Fertile Crescent, is the region of Mesopotamia, which is the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in present-day Iraq. In these areas, people invented the most crucial technology necessary for the development of civilization: agriculture. The Mesopotamians also invented other things that are central to civilization, including:

- Cities: note that in English, the very word “civilization” is closely related to the word “civic,” meaning “having to do with cities” as in “civic government” or “civic duty.” Cities were essential to sophisticated human groups because they allowed specialization: you could have some people concentrate all of their time and energy on tasks like art, building, religious

worship, or warfare, not just on farming.

- **Bureaucracy:** while it seems like a prosaic subject, bureaucracy was and remains the most effective way to organize large groups of people. Civilizations that developed large and efficient bureaucracies grew larger and lasted longer than those that neglected bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is, essentially, the substitution of rules in place of individual human decisions. That process, while often frustrating to individuals caught up in it, does have the effect of creating a more efficient set of processes than can be achieved through arbitrary decision-making. Historically, bureaucracy was one of the most important “technologies” that early civilizations developed.
- **Large-scale warfare:** even before large cities existed, the first towns were built with fortifications to stave off attackers. It is very likely that the first kings were war leaders allied with priests.
- **Mathematics:** without math, there cannot be advanced engineering, and without engineering, there cannot be irrigation, walls, or large buildings. The ancient Mesopotamians were the first people in the world to develop advanced mathematics in large part because they were also the most sophisticated engineers of the ancient world.
- **Astronomy:** just as math is necessary for engineering, astronomy is necessary for a sophisticated calendar. The ancient Mesopotamians began the process of systematically recording the changing positions of the stars and other heavenly bodies because they needed to be able to track when to plant crops, when to harvest, and when religious rituals had to be carried out. Among other things, the Mesopotamians were the first to discover the 365 (and a quarter) days of the year and set those days into a fixed calendar.
- **Empires:** an empire is a political unit comprising many different “peoples,” whether “people” is defined linguistically, religiously, or ethnically. The Mesopotamians were the first to conquer and rule over many different cities and “peoples” at once.

The Mesopotamians also created systems of writing, of organized religion, and of literature, all of which would go on to have an enormous influence on world history, and in turn, Western Civilization. Thus, in considering Western Civilization, it would be misleading to start with the Greeks and skip places like Mesopotamia, because those areas were the heartland of civilization in the whole western part of Eurasia.

Greece and Rome

Even if we do not start with the Greeks, we do need to acknowledge their importance. Alexander the Great was one of the most famous and important military leaders in history, a man who started conquering “the world” when he was eighteen years old. When he died his empire fell apart, in part because he did not say which of his generals was to take over after his death. Nevertheless, the empires he left behind were united in important ways, using Greek as one of their languages, employing Greek architecture in their buildings, putting on plays in the Greek style, and of course, trading with one another. This period in history was called the Hellenistic Age. The people who were part of that age were European, Middle Eastern, and North African, people who worshiped both Greek gods and the gods of their own regions, spoke many different languages, and lived as part of a hybrid culture. Hellenistic civilization demonstrates the fact that Western Civilization has always been a blend of different peoples, not a single encompassing group or language or religion.

Perhaps the most important empire in the ancient history of Western Civilization was ancient Rome. Over the course of roughly five centuries, the Romans expanded from the city of Rome in the middle of the Italian peninsula to rule an empire that stretched from Britain to Spain and from North Africa to Persia (present-day Iran). Through both incredible engineering, the hard work of Roman citizens and Roman subjects, and the massive use of slave labor, they built remarkable buildings and created infrastructure like roads and aqueducts that survive to the present day.

The Romans are the ones who give us the idea of Western Civilization being something ongoing – something that had started in the past and continued into the future. In the case of the Romans, they (sometimes grudgingly) acknowledged Greece as a cultural model; Roman architecture used Greek shapes and forms, the Roman gods were really just the Greek gods given new names (Zeus became Jupiter, Hades became Pluto, etc.), and educated Romans spoke and read Greek so that they could read the works of the great Greek poets, playwrights, and philosophers. Thus, the Romans deliberately adopted an older set of ideas and considered themselves part of an ongoing civilization that blended Greek and Roman values. Like the Greeks before them, they also divided civilization itself in a stark binary: there was Greco-Roman culture on the one hand and barbarism on the other, although they made a reluctant exception for Persia at times.

The Romans were largely successful at assimilating the people they conquered. They united their provinces with the Latin language, which is the ancestor of all of the major languages spoken in Southern Europe today (French, Italian, Spanish, Romanian, etc.), Roman Law, which is the ancestor of most forms of law still in use today in Europe, and the Roman form of government. Additionally, the Romans brought Greek and Roman science, learning, and literature. In many ways, the Romans believed that they were bringing civilization itself everywhere they went, and because they made the connection between Greek

civilization and their own, they played a significant role in inventing the idea of Western Civilization as something that was ongoing.

That noted, the Romans did not use the term “Western Civilization” and as their empire expanded, even the connection between Roman identity and Italy itself weakened. During the period that the empire was at its height the bulk of the population and wealth was in the east, concentrated in Egypt, Anatolia (the region corresponding to the present-day nation of Turkey) and the Levant. This shift to the east culminated in the move of the capital of the empire from the city of Rome to the Greek town of Byzantium, renamed Constantinople by the emperor who ordered the move: Constantine. Thus, while the Greco-Roman legacy was certainly a major factor in the development of the idea of Western Civilization much later, “Roman” was certainly not the same thing as “western” at the time.

The Middle Ages and Christianity

Another factor in the development of the idea of Western Civilization came about after Rome ceased to exist as a united empire, during the era known as the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages were the period between the “fall” of Rome, which happened around 476 CE, and the Renaissance, which started around 1300 CE. During the Middle Ages, another concept of what lay at the heart of Western Civilization arose, especially among Europeans. It was not just the connection to Roman and Greek accomplishments, but instead, to religion. The Roman Empire had started to become Christian in the early fourth century CE when the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. Many Europeans in the Middle Ages came to believe that, despite the fact that they spoke different languages and had different rulers, they were united as part of “Christendom”: the kingdom of Christ and of Christians.

Christianity obviously played a hugely important role in the history of Western Civilization. It inspired amazing art and music. It was at the heart of scholarship and learning for centuries. It also justified the aggressive expansion of European kingdoms. Europeans truly believed that members of other religions were infidels (meaning “those who are unfaithful,” those who worshipped the correct God, but in the wrong way, including Jews and Muslims, but also Christians who deviated from official orthodoxy) or pagans (those who worshipped false gods) who should either convert or be exterminated. For instance, despite the fact that Muslims and Jews worshiped the same God and shared much of the same sacred literature, medieval Europeans had absolutely no qualms about invading Muslim lands and committing horrific atrocities in the name of their religion. Likewise, medieval anti-Semitism (prejudice and hatred directed against Jews) eventually drove many Jews from Europe itself to take shelter in the kingdoms and empires of the Middle East and North Africa. Historically it was much safer and more comfortable for Jews in the predominantly Muslim Ottoman Empire or Moorish Southern Spain than it was in most of Christian Europe.

A major irony of the idea that Western Civilization is somehow inherently Christian is that Islam is unquestionably just as “Western.” Islam’s point of origin, the Arabian Peninsula, is geographically very close to that of both Judaism and Christianity. Its holy writings are also closely aligned to Jewish and Christian values and thought. Perhaps most importantly, Islamic kingdoms and empires were part of the networks of trade, scholarship, and exchange that linked together the entire greater Mediterranean region. Thus, despite the fervor of European crusaders, it would be profoundly misleading to separate Islamic states and cultures from the rest of Western Civilization.

The Renaissance and European Expansion

Perhaps the most crucial development in the idea of Western Civilization in the pre-modern period was the Renaissance. The idea of the “Middle Ages” was invented by thinkers during the Renaissance, which started around 1300 CE. The great thinkers and artists of the Renaissance claimed to be moving away from the ignorance and darkness of the Middle Ages – which they also described as the “dark ages” – and returning to the greatness of the Romans and Greeks. People like Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Christine de Pizan, and Petrarch proudly connected their work to the work of the Romans and Greeks, claiming that there was an unbroken chain of ideas, virtues, and accomplishments stretching all the way back thousands of years to people like Alexander the Great, Plato, and Socrates.

During the Renaissance, educated people in Europe roughly two thousand years after the life of the Greek philosopher Plato based their own philosophies and outlooks on Plato’s philosophy, as well as that of other Greek thinkers. The beauty of Renaissance art is directly connected to its inspiration in Roman and Greek art. The scientific discoveries of the Renaissance were inspired by the same spirit of inquiry that Greek scientists and Roman engineers had cultivated. Perhaps most importantly, Renaissance thinkers proudly linked together their own era to that of the Greeks and Romans, thus strengthening the concept of Western Civilization as an ongoing enterprise.

In the process of reviving the ideas of the Greeks and Romans, Renaissance thinkers created a new program of education:

“humanist” education. Celebrating the inherent goodness and potentialities of humankind, humanistic education saw in the study of classical literature a source of inspiration for not just knowledge, but of morality and virtue. Combining the practical study of languages, history, mathematics, and rhetoric (among other subjects) with the cultivation of an ethical code the humanists traced back to the Greeks, humanistic education ultimately created a curriculum meant to create well-rounded, virtuous individuals. That program of education remained intact into the twentieth century, with the study of the classics remaining a hallmark of elite education until it began to be displaced by the more specialized disciplinary studies of the modern university system that was born near the end of the nineteenth century.

It was not Renaissance ideas, however, that had the greatest impact on the globe at the time. Instead, it was European soldiers, colonists, and most consequentially, diseases. The first people from the Eastern Hemisphere since prehistory to travel to the Western Hemisphere (and remain – an earlier Viking colony did not survive) were European explorers who, entirely by accident, “discovered” the Americas at the end of the fifteenth century CE. It bears emphasis that the “discovery” of the Americas is a misnomer: millions of people already lived there, as their ancestors had for thousands of years, but geography had left them ill-prepared for the arrival of the newcomers. With the European colonists came an onslaught of epidemics to which the Native peoples of the Americas had no resistance, and within a few generations the immense majority – perhaps as many as 90% – of Native Americans perished as a result. The subsequent conquest of the Americas by Europeans and their descendants was thus made vastly easier. Europeans suddenly had access to an astonishing wealth of land and natural resources, wealth that they extracted in large part by enslaving millions of Native Americans and Africans.

Thanks largely to the European conquest of the Americas and the exploitation of its resources and its people, Europe went from a region of little economic and military power and importance to one of the most formidable in the following centuries. Following the Spanish and Portuguese conquest of Central and South America, the other major European states embarked on their own imperialistic ventures in the following centuries. “Trade empires” emerged over the course of the seventeenth century, first and foremost those of the Dutch and English, which established the precedent that profit and territorial control were mutually reinforcing priorities for European states. Driven by that conjoined motive, European states established huge, and growing, global empires. By 1800, roughly 35% of the surface of the world was controlled by Europeans or their descendants.

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Chapter 1: The Origins of Civilization

What is “civilization”? In English, the word encompasses a wide variety of meanings, often implying a culture possessing some combination of learning, refinement, and political identity. As described in the introductory chapter, it is also a “loaded” term, replete with an implied division between civilization and its opposite, barbarism, with “civilized” people often eager to describe people who are of a different culture as being “uncivilized” in so many words. Fortunately, more practical and value-neutral definitions of the term also exist. Civilization as a historical phenomenon speaks to certain foundational technologies, most significantly agriculture, combined with a high degree of social specialization, technological progress (albeit of a very slow kind in the case of the pre-modern world), and cultural sophistication as expressed in art, learning, and spirituality.

In turn, the study of civilization has been the traditional focus of history, as an academic discipline, since the late nineteenth century. As academic fields became specialized over the course of the 1800s CE, history identified itself as the study of the past based on written artifacts. A sister field, archaeology, developed as the study of the past based on non-written artifacts (such as the remains of bodies in grave sites, surviving buildings, and tools). Thus, for practical reasons, the subject of “history” as a field of study begins with the invention of writing, something that began with the earliest civilization itself, that of the Fertile Crescent (described below). That being noted, history and archaeology remain closely intertwined, especially since so few written records remain from the remote past that most historians of the ancient world also perform archaeological research, and all archaeologists are also at least conversant with the relevant histories of their areas of study.

Hominids

Human beings are members of a species of hominid, which is the same biological classification that includes advanced apes like chimpanzees. The earliest hominid ancestor of humankind was called *Australopithecus*: a biological species of African hominid (note: hominid is the biological “family” that encompasses great apes – *Australopithecus*, as well as *Homo Sapiens*, are examples of biological “species” within that family) that evolved about 3.9 million years ago. Our very earliest ancestor is known as *Australopithecus Afarensis*. The most famous example and/or specimen of *Australopithecus* is known as “Lucy”, a partial skeleton discovered by Donald Johanson in 1974 in Ethiopia. He purportedly named the skeleton Lucy because Johanson and his colleagues repeatedly played the Beatles song “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,” in celebration of the discovery.

Debate surrounds how Lucy and other *Australopithecus* moved, whether upright exclusively or on all fours. Anatomical studies point to both interpretations, but what is most important is that *Australopithecus* is the first known species to have spent time standing upright. *Australopithecus* was similar to present-day chimpanzees, loping across the ground on all fours rather than standing upright, with brains about one-third the size of the modern human brain. They were the first to develop tool-making technology, chipping obsidian (volcanic glass) to make knives. From *Australopithecus*, various other hominid species evolved, building on the genetic advantages of having a large brain and being able to craft simple tools.

One noteworthy descendent of *Australopithecus* was *Homo Erectus*, which gets its name from the fact that it was the first hominid to walk upright. Literally, *Homo Erectus* means “upright person.” It also benefited from a brain three-fourths the size of the modern human equivalent. *Homo Erectus* developed more advanced stone tool-making than had *Australopithecus*, and survived until about 200,000 years ago, by which time the earliest *Homo sapiens* – humans – had long since evolved alongside them.

Homo sapiens emerged in a form biologically identical to present-day humankind by about 300,000 years ago (fossil evidence frequently revises that number – the oldest known specimen was discovered in Morocco in 2017). Armed with their unparalleled craniums, *Homo sapiens* created sophisticated bone and stone implements, including weapons and tools, and also mastered the use of fire. They were thus able to hunt and protect themselves from animals that had far better natural weapons, and (through cooking) eat meat that would have been indigestible raw. Likewise, animal skins served as clothes and shelter, allowing them to exist in climates that they could not have settled otherwise.

Homo sapiens was split between two distinct types, physically different but able to interbreed, Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens sapiens* (the latter term means “the wisest man” in Greek). Neanderthals enjoyed a long period of existence between about 400,000 and 70,000 years ago, spreading from Africa to the Middle East and Europe. They were physically larger and stronger than *Homo sapiens sapiens* and were able to survive in colder conditions, which was a key asset during the long ice age that began around 100,000 years ago. Neanderthals congregated in small groups, apparently interacting only to exchange breeding partners or engage in warfare. Yet, they were some of the first humans to bury their dead usually with grave offerings (like flowers, animal bones, and flint) suggesting their capacity to mourn their losses and belief in some sort of an afterlife. They also engaged

in warfare against one another using their stone tools and then developed ways to heal said wounds inflicted during combat.

Homo sapiens sapiens were weaker and less able to deal with harsh conditions than Neanderthals, staying confined to Africa for thousands of years after Neanderthals had spread to other regions. They did enjoy some key advantages, however, having longer limbs and congregating in much larger groups of up to 100 individuals. A recent archaeological discovery (in 2019) demonstrated that Homo sapiens sapiens reached Europe and the Near East by 210,000 years ago, but that that wave of migrants subsequently vanished. As conditions warmed by about 70,000 years ago another wave of Homo sapiens sapiens spread to the Middle East and Europe and started both interbreeding with and – probably – slowly killing off the Neanderthals, who vanished soon after. By that time, Homo sapiens sapiens was already in the process of spreading all over the world. Yet to this day all or most individuals of European descent have approximately 2% Neanderthal DNA, demonstrating that extensive interbreeding took place.

Map of Human Settlements/Civilizations where Human and Neanderthal hybridization likely took place approximately 40,000 BCE. The largest red circle highlights Mesopotamia where the first Neolithic Civilizations emerged.

Map of western Eurasia showing areas and estimated dates of possible Neandertal-modern human hybridization (in red) based on fossil samples from indicated sites. Source: <https://www.mdpi.com/2079-7737/11/8/1163>

Most massive global emigration was complete by about 40,000 years ago (with the exception of the Americas, which lasted until about 15,000 years ago). During an ice age, humans traveled overland on the Bering Land Bridge, a chunk of land that used to connect eastern Russia to Alaska, and arrived in the Americas. Later, very enterprising ancient humans built seagoing canoes and settled in many of the Pacific Islands. Thus, well before ancient humans had developed the essential technologies that are normally connotated with civilization, they had already accomplished transcontinental and transoceanic voyages and adapted to almost every climate on the planet.

Paleolithic Man in the Old Stone Age

The absence of advanced technologies was not an impediment to the attempt to understand the world. One astonishing outgrowth of Homo sapiens sapiens' brain power was the creation of both art and spirituality. Early Homo sapiens sapiens painted on the walls of caves, most famously in what is today southern France and Northern Spain, and at some point also began the practice of burying the dead in prepared grave sites, indicating that they believed that the spirit survived physical death. We can see through cave paintings, carvings, and notations made on bone that humans were thinking about their environments and their experiences, perhaps even contemplating how they could transform them. Caves were especially significant for the Paleolithic Man as they provided excellent shelter from the elements, even remaining warmer during winter and cooler during summer months. Hence the common moniker of "caveman".

In addition to the art found in caves, many sculptures have been found including engravings on stone as well as ivory. But, likely the most famous sculpture is that of "Venus" (named after the Roman goddess of love) a figurine carved from limestone. It is about 4 and ½ inches tall and was found in present day Austria. Some theorize, due to the exaggerated breasts and pubic area of the statue, that it was meant to symbolize or have some power regarding fertility. It is a bit similar to future statues of the Roman goddess Venus, of love and sex. Artifacts that have survived from prehistory clearly indicate that Homo sapiens sapiens was not only creating physical tools to prosper, but creating art and belief systems in an attempt to make sense of the world at a higher level than mere survival. Beyond their artistic innovations, Paleolithic man also developed much more complex tools including those made from polished bone in addition to the stone tools that give this time period its name. Bone needles have also been found suggesting sewing, probably of animal skins for clothing in the cooler climes.

The presence of both art and activity specific tools suggests that there was a division of labor and skills in Paleolithic society. More than likely men were in charge of hunting, while women foraged for fruits or nuts and labored in the "home." Hunting, especially large animals like mammoths was a communal activity occupying the entire community, more than likely a clan or kin-ship group. Organization as large as a tribe may have existed, but Paleolithic societies were small out of necessity. Hunting and gathering did not support large or stable populations as groups moved according to season and access to food. Nonetheless even in these small groups there is evidence of hierarchies and social differentiation with some having higher status than others. This can best be seen in Paleolithic burials where some were buried with weapons, tools, beads, and other grave goods. Presence of grave goods also provides further evidence of religious beliefs and ideas of an afterlife. Grave goods have most often been found with deceased males, supporting the idea that Paleolithic societies were patriarchal, meaning that men held the majority of power.

Painting of a large red bison on the cave wall in northern Spain

Painting of a Bison in the Altamira Cave, Spain Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/en:Nat...er_of_Altamira

The Neolithic Revolution

Human beings have existed all over the world for many thousands of years. Human *civilization*, however, has not. The word civilization is tied to the Greek word for city, along with words like “civil” and “civic.” The key element of the definition is the idea that a number of people come together in a group that is too large to consist only of an extended family network. Once that occurred other discoveries and developments, from writing to mathematics to organized religion, followed.

Up until that point in history, however, cities had not been possible because there was never enough food to sustain a large group that stayed in a single place for long. Ancient humans were hunter-gatherers. They followed herds of animals on the hunt and they gathered edible plants as well. The problem with the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, however, is that it is extremely precarious: there is never a significant surplus of caloric energy, that is, of food, and thus population levels among hunting-gathering people were generally static. There just was not enough food to sustain significant population growth.

Starting around 9,500 BCE, humans in a handful of regions around the world discovered agriculture, that is, the deliberate cultivation of edible plants. People discovered that certain seeds could be planted and crops could be reliably grown. What brought about this discovery? First and foremost, climate change. Approximately 10-12 thousand years ago the long-term weather pattern of the Near east became milder and rainier prompting growth of abundant fields of wild cereal grains (wheat, hops, and barley for example). Similarly, research shows that increased rain in the Sahara desert in central Africa created lush grasslands or savannahs that attracted hunter-gathering nomads from the southern part of the continent.

With more available wild grains, food gathering became easier and a more abundant/regular supply of food led to higher fertility rates. As populations rose more people could dedicate their time to focusing on planting, eventually allowing for people to learn how to plant a portion of the seeds from one crop of grain to produce another. It is theorized that women, the gatherers, were the ones who discovered the secrets of agriculture while men were occupied with hunting. One of the earliest areas of domestication of plants and presence of agriculture is known as the Fertile Crescent located from present day Jordan to southern Iran. Concurrently agriculture was adopted in present day Egypt, along the Nile. Agriculture was developed in a few different places completely independently. According to archeological evidence, agriculture did not start in one place and then spread; it started in a few distinct areas and then spread from those areas, sometimes meeting in the middle. For example, agriculture developed independently in China by 5000 BCE, and of course agriculture in the Americas (starting in western South America) had nothing to do with its earlier invention in the Fertile Crescent.

Map of the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East highlighted in green extending from present day Iran to the Holy Land

The Fertile Crescent and its population centers circa 7500 BCE GFDL, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

Early agriculture, the kind of agriculture that made later advances in civilization possible, consisted of people simply planting seeds by hand or with shovels and picks. There were some important technological discoveries that took place over time that allowed much greater crop yields, however. They included:

1. Crop rotation, which people discovered sometime around 8000 BCE. Crop rotation is the process of planting a different kind of crop in a field each year, then “rotating” to the next field in the next year. Every few years, a field is allowed to “lie fallow,” meaning nothing is planted and animals can graze on it. This process serves to return nutrients to the soil that would otherwise be leached out by successive years of planting, and it greatly increases yields overall.
2. The metal plow, which people invented around 5000 BCE. Plows are hugely important; they opened up areas to cultivation that would be too rocky or the soil too hard to support crops normally.
3. Irrigation, which happened in an organized fashion sometime around the same time in Mesopotamia.

Sometime after the development of agriculture, people in the same regions began to domesticate animals. The first domesticated animals were dogs, followed quickly by cattle, goats, sheep, etc. Humans began keeping herds of cattle, pigs, sheep, and goats in controlled conditions, defending them from predators, as well as eating them and using their hides. It is impossible to overstate how important these changes were. Even fairly primitive agriculture can produce fifty times more caloric energy than hunting and gathering does. The very basis of human life is how much energy we can derive from food; with agriculture and animal domestication, it was possible for families to grow much larger and overall population levels to rise dramatically. These larger populations became sedentary in order to be able to harvest their crops at the correct time, and once harvested, to protect their stores of grain. Hence, cities began to form.

Civilization first arose in present day Iraq in the valley between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers, or Mesopotamia (between the rivers in Greek). Shortly thereafter civilization began in the valley of the Nile River in present day Egypt. They did develop

independently, but likely borrowed some things from one another. But why Mesopotamia and Egypt first? The short answer is geography. Both valleys have alluvial land, meaning relatively flat (spacious areas perfect for growing cities) and fertile soil deposited by nearby rivers. These same rivers also flooded regularly, providing both water and new supplies of fertile riverine soil. This is especially true for Egypt, less so for Mesopotamia where the river flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates could be erratic. This led to the advent of irrigation and drainage using channels, dikes, or dams to control the floodwaters and improve the fertility of the land. Mesopotamia also regularly experienced extreme heat and scorching winds. This quasi-hostile environment may very well have inspired the cooperation needed to begin civilization. The canals and irrigation systems necessary to prevent flooding and provide water for crops required constant maintenance by a large skilled group of workers. This promoted the growth of centralized authority in Mesopotamian cities. Recent archaeological evidence suggests other motives, however, including the need for protection from rival groups and access to natural resources that were concentrated in a specific area.

Of the areas in which agriculture developed, the Fertile Crescent enjoyed significant advantages. Many nutritious staple crops like wheat and barley grew naturally in the region. Several key animal species that were first domesticated by humans were also native to the region, including goats, sheep, and cows. The region was also much more temperate and fertile than it is today, and the transition from hunting and gathering to large-scale farming was possible in Mesopotamia in a way that it was not in most other regions of the ancient world.

The First Cities

The food surplus that agriculture made possible in the Fertile Crescent eventually led to the emergence of the first large settlements. Some of the earliest that were large enough to qualify as towns or even small cities were Jericho in Palestine, which existed by about 8000 BCE, and Çatal Höyük in Turkey, which existed by about 7500 BCE. There were certainly many others in the Fertile Crescent, but due to their antiquity the remains of only a few – Jericho and Çatal Höyük most importantly – have survived to be studied by archaeologists.

In 9,000 BCE Jericho was a very small village, but by 7,000 BCE it had grown to be a town surrounded by massive walls 10 feet thick and 13 or more feet high. The walls enclosed an area of about 10 acres. Within these walls up to 2,000 people lived, a large population at that time. But why the walls? As agriculture made people richer (surplus of food leading to further specialization of labor) they needed to protect their goods and settlements. Unfortunately, the accumulation of wealth also led to war and competition as other towns the size of Jericho, or bigger, began to pop up across Mesopotamia by 6,000 BCE. Here archaeologists have found artifacts such as woven fabrics, obsidian mirrors, and even makeup applicators. There is also evidence of long distance trade between villages in pottery and tools. Artwork shows men wearing loincloths and headdresses and women wearing pants and halter tops, with both sexes wearing jewelry.

Nearly concurrent with Jericho, was Çatal Höyük, a city established in 7400 BCE, in south central Turkey, in a marshland populated by a variety of fishes and birds. Farmlands and domestic livestock were cultivated in drier plains nearby. Within one thousand years, the city's population more than doubled to a population of up to eight thousand. Religious rituals and burial traditions became more complex as art and sculpture evolved in the town as the population grew.

The wealth and success of Neolithic cities were based on access to natural resources. Çatal Höyük was built on a site that had a large deposit of obsidian (also called volcanic glass). Obsidian could be chipped to create extremely sharp tools and weapons. Tools made from Çatal Höyük's obsidian have been discovered by archaeologists hundreds of miles from Çatal Höyük itself; thus, it is clear that Çatal Höyük was already part of long-distance trade networks, trading obsidian for other goods with distant towns and villages. In essence, Çatal Höyük's trade in obsidian proves that specialized manufacturing (in this case, of obsidian tools) and trade networks have existed since the dawn of civilization itself.

Photo of the archaeological site of Catal Hoyuk in the midst of being unearthed.

Ruins of Çatal Höyük Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%87...%C3%B6y%C3%BCK>

From the remains of Çatal Höyük it becomes possible to piece together certain facts about ancient societies on the cusp of civilization. First, it is clear that the earliest settlements (already) had significant social divisions. Hunter-gatherer societies have very few social divisions; there may be chiefs and shamans, but all members of the group are roughly equal in social power. One of the traits of civilization is the increasing complexity of social divisions, and with them, of social hierarchy. In Çatal Höyük, tombs have revealed that some people were buried with jewelry and weapons, while others were buried with practically nothing. It is very clear that even thousands of years ago, there were already major divisions between rich and poor.

In turn, the social divisions seen in Çatal Höyük's graves reveal another key aspect of civilization: specialization. Social divisions themselves are only possible when there is a food surplus. If everyone has to work all the time to get enough food, there is little

time left over for anyone to specialize in other activities. The reason that hunter-gatherer societies produce little in the way of scholarship or technology is that they do not have the resources for people to specialize in those areas. When agriculture made a food surplus possible for the first time in history, however, not everyone had to work on producing food, and soon, certain people managed to lay claim to new areas of expertise. Even in a settlement as ancient as Çatal Höyük, there were craftsmen, builders, and perhaps most interestingly, priests. In the ruins of the settlement archaeologists have found dozens of shrines to ancient gods and evidence of there being a priesthood.

The existence of a priesthood and organized worship in Çatal Höyük is striking, because it means that people were trying in a systematic way to understand how the world worked. In turn, priests were probably the world's first intellectuals, people who use their minds for a living. Priests probably directed the efforts to build irrigation systems and made the decisions about building and rebuilding the town since they had a monopoly on explaining the larger forces at work in human life. Especially in a period like the ancient past when natural forces – like floods and disease – were vastly more powerful than the ability of humans to control them, priests were the only people who could offer an explanation.

Not just in Mesopotamia, but all around the ancient world, there is significant evidence of religious belief systems centered on two major themes: fertility and death. One example of this are the “Venus figurines” depicting pregnant women with exaggerated physical features. Similar figures can be seen from all over the ancient Middle East and Europe, demonstrating that ancient peoples hoped to shape the forces that were most important to them. Early religions hoped to ensure fertility and stave off the many natural disasters that ancient peoples had no control over.

Statue of a robust women seated on a throne thronged by lions on either side. Her genitalia are purposefully large and highlighted, hence her name Venus.

A “Venus” of Çatalhöyük, flanked by large felines, Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara, Turkey, c. 6000 BC
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%87...%C3%B6y%C3%BCK>

The earliest surviving work of literature in the world, the Mesopotamian story known as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, was focused on the theme of human mortality. Ancient peoples already sensed that human beings were in the process of accomplishing things that had never been accomplished before, namely the construction of large settlements, the creation of new technologies, and the invention of organized religions, and yet they also sensed that the human experience could be fraught with misery, despair, and what seemed like totally unfair and arbitrary disasters. And, as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* demonstrates, ancient peoples were well aware that no matter how great the accomplishments of a person during life, that person would inevitably die. That concern – the challenge of making sense of human existence in the face of death – is sometimes referred to by philosophers as “the human condition,” and it is one that ancient peoples grappled with in their religious systems.

Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia, on the eastern end of the Fertile Crescent, was the cradle of Western Civilization. It has the distinction of being the very first place on earth in which the development of agriculture led to the emergence of the essential technologies of civilization. Many of the great scientific advances to follow, including mathematics, astronomy, and engineering, along with political networks and forms of organization like kingdoms, empires, and bureaucracy all originated in Mesopotamia. This included the mastering of the technology of making bronze (an alloy of copper and tin) frequently replacing stone for everyday use in cookware and weaponry.

Mesopotamia is a region in present-day Iraq. The word Mesopotamia is Greek, meaning “between the rivers,” and it refers to the area between the Tigris and Euphrates, two of the most important waterways in the ancient world. It is no coincidence that it was here that civilization was born: like nearby Egypt and the Nile river, early agriculture relied on a regular supply of water in a highly fertile region. The ancient Mesopotamians had everything they needed for agriculture, they just had to figure out how to cultivate cereals and grains and how to manage the sudden floods of both rivers.

Mesopotamia's climate was much more temperate and fertile than it is today. There is a great deal of evidence (e.g. in ancient art, in archeological discoveries of ancient settlements, etc.) that Mesopotamia was once a grassland that could support both large herds of animals and abundant crops. Thus, between the water provided by the rivers and their tributaries, the temperate climate, and the prevalence of the plant and animal species in the area that were candidates for domestication, Mesopotamia was better suited to agriculture than practically any other region on the planet.

While the Tigris and Euphrates provided abundant water, they were highly unpredictable and given to periodic flooding. The southern region of Mesopotamia, Sumer, has an elevation decline of only 50 meters over about 500 kilometers of distance,

meaning the riverbeds of both rivers would have shifted and spread out over the plains in the annual floods. Over time, the inhabitants of villages realized that they needed to work together to build larger-scale levees, canals, and dikes to protect against the floods. One theory regarding the origins of large-scale settlements is that, when enough villages got together to work on these hydrological systems, they needed some kind of leadership to direct the efforts, leading to systems of governance and administration. Thus, the earliest cities in the world may have been born not just out of agriculture, but out of the need to manage the natural resource of water.

The first settlements that straddled the line between “towns” and real “cities” existed around 4000 BCE, but a truly urban society in Mesopotamia was in place closer to 3000 BCE, wherein a few dozen city-states managed the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates. A note on the chronology: the town of Çatal Höyük discussed above existed over four *thousand* years before the first great cities in Mesopotamia. It is important to bear this in mind, because when considering ancient history (in this case, in a short chapter of a textbook), it can seem like it all happened quite rapidly, that people discovered agriculture and soon they were building massive cities and developing advanced technology. That simply was not the case: compared to the hundreds of thousands of years preceding the discovery of agriculture, things moved “quickly,” but from a modern perspective, it took a very long time for things to change.

One compelling theory about the period between the invention of agriculture and the emergence of large cities (again, between about 8,000 BCE and 4,000 BCE) is that a hybrid lifestyle of farming and gathering appears to have been very common in the large wetlands along the banks of the Euphrates and Tigris. Given the richness of dietary options in the region at the time, people lived in small communities for millennia without feeling compelled to build larger settlements. Somehow, however, a regime eventually emerged that imposed a new form of social organization and hierarchy, introducing taxation, large-scale building projects, and unfree labor (i.e. both slavery and forms of indentured labor). In turn, this appears to have occurred in the areas that grew cereal grains like wheat and barley extensively, because cereal grains were easy to collect and store, making them easy to tax.

The result of these new hierarchies were the first true cities that emerged in the southern region of Sumer. There, the two rivers join in a large delta that flows into the Persian Gulf. Farther up the rivers, the northern region of Mesopotamia was known as Akkad. The division is both geographical and lingual: ancient Sumerian is not related to any modern language, but the Akkadian family of languages was Semitic, related to modern languages like Arabic and Hebrew. Urban civilization eventually flourished in both regions, starting in Sumer but quickly spreading north.

One early Sumerian city was Uruk, which was a large city by 3500 BCE. Uruk had about 50,000 people in the city itself and the surrounding region. It was a major center for long-distance trade, with its trade networks stretching all across the Middle East and as far east as the Indus river valley of India, with merchants relying on caravans of donkeys and the use of wheeled carts. Trade linked Mesopotamia and Anatolia (the region of present-day Turkey) as well. The economy of Uruk was what historians call “redistributive,” in which a central authority has the right to control all economic activity, essentially taxing all of it, and then re-distributing it as that authority sees fit. Practically speaking, this entailed the collection of foodstuffs and wealth by each city-state’s government, which then used it to “pay” (sometimes in daily allotments of food and beer) workers tasked with constructing walls, roads, temples, and palaces.

Political leaders in ancient Mesopotamia appear to have been drawn from both priesthoods and the warrior elite, with the two classes working closely together in governing the cities. Each Mesopotamian city was believed to be “owned” by a patron god, a deity that watched over it and would respond to prayers if they were properly made and accompanied by rituals and sacrifices. The priests of Uruk predicted the future and explained the present in terms of the will of the gods, and they claimed to be able to influence the gods through their rituals. They claimed all of the economic output of Uruk and its trade network because the city’s patron god “owned” the city, which justified the priesthood’s control. They did not only tax the wealth, the crops, and the goods of the subjects of Uruk, but they also had a right to demand labor, requiring the common people (i.e. almost everyone) to work on the irrigation systems, the temples, and the other major public buildings.

The first kings were almost certainly war leaders who led their city-states against rival city-states and foreign invaders. They soon ascended to positions of political power in their cities, working with the priesthood to maintain control over the common people. The Mesopotamian priesthood endorsed the idea that the gods had chosen the kings to rule, a belief that quickly bled over into the idea that the kings were at least in part divine themselves. Kings superseded priests as the rulers by about 3000 BCE, although in all cases kings were closely linked to the power of the priesthood. In fact, one of the earliest terms for “king” was *ensis*, meaning the representative of the god who “really” ruled the city. Thus, the typical early Mesopotamian city-state, right around 2500 BCE, was engaged in long-distance trade, ruled by a king who worked closely with the city’s priesthood and who frequently made war against his neighbors.

Belief, Thought and Learning

The capstone achievement of the Uruk period was the development of writing. Before writing Mesopotamian people used tiny clay or stone tokens to represent objects being counted or traded. By 3500 BCE there were over 250 different types of tokens in play making the system unwieldy enough for people to start using signs to indicate tokens. From there it was a short step to dispensing with the tokens and replacing the signs on a clay tablet by making indentations in the clay with a reed stylus, ie. Writing. New words were added through pictographs (pictures that stand for particular objects). In the centuries that followed its introduction, Mesopotamian writing became standardized into what scholars refer to as *cuneiform* from the Latin word for “wedge-shaped.” In its first centuries cuneiform was used mainly for economic and commercial records/transactions. For example this tablet here describes the distribution of beer made from barley for a group of laborers.

Clay Tablet with images in boxes depicting the distribution of beer. The beer symbol appears multiple times and is similar to an upside down pyramid.

Cuneiform Tablet showing the distribution of beer Source:https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MET_DT847.jpg

In fact quite a few cuneiform pictograms were used simply to describe beer, including how to brew the beverage. Beer was likely one of the first alcoholic beverages available to mankind due to spoiling of excess grains. Eventually though cuneiform was adapted to make brief records of offerings to the gods. But by 2350 cuneiform had evolved into a mixed system of about 600 signs, most of them phonetic (syllabic) with few pictograms. Cuneiform was used to record the spoken language, for poetry (including the famous epic poem of the king Gilgamesh), and for bookkeeping.

The first known author in history whose name and some of whose works survive was a Sumerian high priestess, Enheduanna. Daughter of the great conqueror Sargon of Akkad (described below), Enheduanna served as the high priestess of the goddess Innana and the god of the moon, Nanna, in the city of Ur after its conquest by Sargon's forces. Enheduanna wrote a series of hymns to the gods that established her as the earliest poet in recorded history, praising Innana and, at one point, asking for the aid of the gods during a period of political turmoil.

Enheduanna did not record the first known work of prose, however, whose author or authors remain unknown. Remembered as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the earliest surviving work of literature, it is the best known of the surviving Mesopotamian stories. The Epic describes the adventures of a partly-divine king of the city of Uruk, Gilgamesh, who is joined by his friend Enkidu as they fight monsters, build great works, and celebrate their own power and greatness. Enkidu is punished by the gods for their arrogance and he dies. Gilgamesh, grief-stricken, goes in search of immortality when he realizes that he, too, will someday die. In the end, immortality is taken from him by a serpent, and humbled, he returns to Uruk a wiser, better king.

Like Enheduanna's hymns, which reveal at times her own personality and concerns, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a fascinating story in that it speaks to a very sophisticated and recognizable set of issues: the qualities that make a good leader, human failings and frailty, the power and importance of friendship, and the unfairness of fate. Likewise, a central focus of the epic is Gilgamesh's quest for immortality when he confronts the absurdity of death. Death's seeming unfairness is a distinctly philosophical concern that demonstrates an advanced engagement with human nature and the human condition present in Mesopotamian society. It also reveals a great deal about Sumerian religious beliefs and conceptions of the afterlife.

The Mesopotamians believed that the gods were generally cruel, capricious, and easily offended. Humans had been created by the gods not to enjoy life, but to toil, and the gods would inflict pain and suffering on humans whenever they (the gods) were offended. A major element of the power of the priesthood in the Mesopotamian cities was the fact that the priests claimed to be able to soothe and assuage the gods, to prevent the gods from sending yet another devastating flood, epidemic, or plague of locusts. It is not too far off to say that the most important duty of Mesopotamian priests was to beg the gods for mercy.

The Sumerians were polytheistic (had many gods) and they believed that their gods were human in form. They, like the Greeks, thought their gods were much like regular human beings in that they could be wise at times and foolish at times. The big difference between humanity and the divine was that the gods possessed superpowers and were immortal. Some gods originated in nature, like Enlil the god of the sky and air or Utu the sun god. Others embodied human passions or notions about the afterlife like Inanna the goddess of love and war or Ereshkigal the goddess of the underworld.

One can see the importance of religion to the Sumerians in the very layout of their cities. At the very center of every Mesopotamian city was the main temple complex or the *Ziggurat*. These were stepped towers. It is likely that they began as simple raised terraces, but grew into seven-stepped structures. Some soared up to 10 stories high. They were not tombs like Egypt's pyramids, but were “stairways” connecting humans and the gods. They were not just the centers of worship, but were also banks and workshops, with the priests overseeing the exchange of wealth and the production of crafts.

Photo of a crumbling Ziggurat/Pyramid in the middle of a desert.

The White Temple Ziggurat of Uruk By tobeytravels. Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=92851923>

Even though Sumerians believed in a relationship between humans and gods, they had a very pessimistic view of divine will and the afterlife. Perhaps it was due to the difficult natural environment in which they lived, but for whatever reason the Mesopotamians regarded the gods with fear and awe. Though gods could communicate with humans when they chose, their language was mysterious and often unintelligible to humans. To understand the divine will, the Mesopotamians engaged in different kinds of divination or the interpretation of dreams. They would examine the entrails of slaughtered/sacrificed animals and study the stars. They hoped that by building temples, offering prayers, and conducting animal sacrifices they could appease the gods and discern what they wanted. Most people had little hope for the afterlife. They viewed it as a dark, shadowy existence. They thought that with a person's last breath their spirit embarked on a long journey to the Netherworld, a place under the earth. The Netherworld was described as the "Land-of-no-return" and "the house wherein the dwellers are bereft of light, Where dust is their fare and clay their food, Where they see no light, residing in darkness." The dead had to reside there permanently.

As mentioned previously one can see this fear of death and the gods in the epic poem *Gilgamesh* where the King goes on a vain quest for immortality. Interestingly the Epic contains stories that predate the biblical Eden and Flood narratives; at this point there is little doubt that the Israelites borrowed the narratives for the Hebrew Bible from *Gilgamesh*. The eleventh tablet of the Epic, describes the meeting of Gilgamesh with Utnapishtim. Like Noah in the Hebrew Bible, Utnapishtim had been forewarned of a plan by the gods to send a great flood. He built a boat and loaded it with all his precious possessions, his kith and kin, domesticated and wild animals and skilled craftsmen of every kind. Utnapishtim survived the flood for six days while mankind was destroyed, before landing on a mountain called Nimush. He released a dove and a swallow but they did not find dry land to rest on, and returned. Finally a raven that he released did not return, showing that the waters must have receded. An excerpt of the Epic, including the Flood Story is linked below.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20060206220555/http://alexm.here.ru/mirrors/www.enteract.com/jwalz/Eliade/159.html>

However, by the end of the third millennium BCE (2100s.) the Kings of Ur seem to have had more hope in the afterlife. We can see this in the fact that the rulers began to be buried with rich grave goods and even with their servants, pointing to human sacrifice. So the Sumerians must have had some notion that there would be a use for such things in the afterlife. Death was no longer a dark, barren existence.

Alongside the development of religious beliefs, science made major strides in Mesopotamian civilization. The Mesopotamians were the first great astronomers, accurately mapping the movement of the stars and recording them in astrological charts. They invented functional wagons and chariots and, as seen in the case of both ziggurats and irrigation systems, they were excellent engineers. They also invented the 360 degrees used to measure angles in geometry and they were the first to divide a system of timekeeping that used a 60-second minute. Finally, they developed a complex and accurate system of arithmetic that went on to form the basis of mathematics as it was used and understood throughout the ancient Mediterranean world.

At the same time, however, the Mesopotamians employed "magical" practices. The priests did not just conduct sacrifices to the gods, they practiced the art of divination: the practice of trying to predict the future. To them, magic and science were all aspects of the same pursuit, namely trying to learn about how the universe functioned so that human beings could influence it more effectively. From the perspective of the ancient Mesopotamians, there was little that distinguished religious and magical practices from "real" science in the modern sense. Their goals were the same, and the Mesopotamians actively experimented to develop both systems in tandem.

War and Empire in the Early Dynastic Period

By this period, 2800-2350 BCE, Mesopotamian cities often covered 1,000 acres, surrounded by 5 miles of walls, and held up to 50,000 residents. At this point there were as many as 30 independent city-states that all shared a common culture, commerce, and often fought one another. While they shared one language, religion, and literature, they still competed with one another usually over the scarcity of fresh water. Disputes over resources often led to conflict. By 2800 BCE political power of Sumerian city-states were largely in the hands of its Council of Elders (likely the wealthiest of land owners). It is possible that the Council shared power or at least consulted with a popular assembly, creating a very primitive democracy. However evidence to support this idea is ambiguous leaving it debatable if regular Sumerians actually took part in their government. This seems even more unlikely due to the evidence of both semi-free people and slaves in Sumerian society. Most Sumerians were likely partially free, meaning that they did not own their own land and were forced to work others' land for at least part of the year as a form of taxation. They likely also worked to maintain the irrigation system. Then there was a population of slaves, ie. those who could be bought and sold. Most slaves came from abroad and had been taken as war booty. There were a few local slaves though, usually they ended up in

slavery to pay off debts. Some parents even sold their daughters into slavery to escape debt.

By around 2700 the political scene began to shift. Chronic warfare began to demand a strong leader. Slowly Kings, and less frequently Queens, took over governance of city states. Usually the monarchs were warriors first and foremost. Sumerian Kings were not only responsible for war. They also supervised and sponsored irrigation works, raised fortification walls, restored temples, and built palaces. They claimed to be the earthy representative of the gods, giving them general responsibility and power over their non-divine subjects. Sumerian kings controlled the justice system and made laws, at times harsh and at times to the ordinary peoples' benefit. One of the earliest Sumerian kings was Gilgamesh of Uruk, also the hero of the famous epic poem from 2500 BCE. Most leaders were men and Sumer was a patriarchal society. Still women did have legal standing and rights under law, something they would lose in later Mesopotamian cultures. We even see the first recorded Queen in this period. Her name was Kish and she ruled the Sumerian city-state of Ku-baba around 2450 BCE

Mesopotamia represents the earliest indications of large-scale warfare. Mesopotamian cities always had walls – some of which were 30 feet high and 60 feet wide, essentially enormous piles of earth strengthened by brick. The evidence (based on pictures and inscriptions) suggests, however, that most soldiers were peasant conscripts with little or no armor and light weapons. In these circumstances, defense almost always won out over offense, making the actual conquest of foreign cities very difficult if not impossible, and hence while cities existed for thousands of years (again, from about 3500 BCE), there were no *empires* yet. Cities warred on one another for territory, resources, captives, and riches, but they rarely succeeded in conquering other cities outright. War was instead primarily about territorial raids and perhaps noble combats meant to demonstrate strength and power.

Over the course of the third millennium BCE, chariots became increasingly important in warfare. Early chariots were four-wheeled carts that were clumsy and hard to maneuver. But, they were still very effective against hapless peasants with spears, however, so it appears that when rival Mesopotamian city-states fought actual battles, they consisted largely of massed groups of chariots carrying archers who shot at each other. Noble charioteers and archers could win glory for their skill, even though these battles were probably not very lethal (compared to later forms of war, at any rate).

The first time that a single military leader managed to conquer and unite many of the Mesopotamian cities was in about 2340 BCE, when the king Sargon the Great, also known as Sargon of Akkad (father of Enheduanna, described above), conquered almost all of the major Mesopotamian cities and forged the world's first true empire, in the process uniting the regions of Akkad and Sumer. His empire appears to have held together for about another century, until somewhere around 2200 BCE. Sargon also created the world's first standing army, a group of soldiers employed by the state who did not have other jobs or duties. One inscription claims that "5,400 soldiers ate daily in his palace," and there are pictures not only of soldiers, but of siege weapons and mining (digging under the walls of enemy fortifications to cause them to collapse).

Map of the Akkadian Empire at its height when it encompassed nearly all of Mesopotamia.

Map of the Akkadian Empire at its peak Source: <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/1...kadian-empire/>

Bronze War Mask once worn by Sargon of Akkad. The mask only as openings for the eyes, making it very intimidating.

War Mask of Sargon of Akkad Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:...\(frontal\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:...(frontal).jpg)

The Akkadians were originally a seminomadic people who lived on the edge of the desert. Shepherds, they moved their flocks with the seasons. Their language, Akkadian, belongs to the Semitic group of languages, which also includes Arabic and Hebrew. Scholars formerly believed that the Akkadians came directly from the desert to conquer Sumer, but it is now known that they had begun settling in the northern cities of Mesopotamia by the end of the Uruk Period. This northern portion of Mesopotamia was known as Akkad. From this group emerged the commander of one of history's first professional armies, Sargon, who conquered all of Mesopotamia (at least partially to acquire access to ore mines and already manufactured metal weapons, jewelry, etc.), and even extended his power/empire westward along the Euphrates and eastward into the Iranian Plateau.

Sargon himself was born an illegitimate child and was, at one point, a royal gardener who worked his way up in the palace, eventually seizing power in a coup. He boasted about his lowly origins and claimed to protect and represent the interests of common people and merchants. Sargon appointed governors in his conquered cities, and his whole empire was designed to extract wealth from all of its cities and farmlands and pump it back to the capital of Akkad, which he built somewhere near present-day Baghdad. While Sargon sought to control all economic resources in his empire, he also adopted many facets of Sumerian culture including Sumerian religion and cuneiform. While Akkadian became the official language of the empire, the Sumerian language survived. Poetry continued to be written in Sumerian. For example, Sargon's daughter (who he appointed as the priestess at Ur and Uruk) continued to write poetry in Sumerian, including poems describing the union of the Akkadians and Sumerians. Sargon not only adopted Sumerian religion, but even used the Sumerians' own religion to legitimize his rule. He claimed that he was the gods' representative on earth and that is why his army had triumphed. Once he even paraded a defeated enemy in a halter before the temple and priests of Enlil proclaiming that Enlil was on his side.

The Akkadian empire also continued to grow under Sargon's son and grandson, reaching its peak in 2220 BCE. At this point the Akkadians claimed that they reigned over "the peoples of all lands" or "the four quarters of the earth." Soon after the Empire fell apart, but it is here that we first saw the idea of a universal empire, something that future conquerors continued to try for and lay claim to. In addition the conquest of new territories served to spread Sumerian culture to distant lands. By 2200 BCE the Akkadian empire broke up into a series of smaller successor states as a result of Civil War. These smaller states would eventually become the Babylonians and the Syrians. But first, the Sumerians actually reclaimed glory in the 3rd Dynasty of Ur (2112-2004 BCE), during which they called themselves the "kings of Sumer and Akkad," so clearly the Akkadian Empire was not erased from Sumer's history. Just as Sargon had, the king Ur-Nammu conquered and united most of the city-states of Mesopotamia. The most important historical legacy of the Ur III dynasty was its complex system of bureaucracy, which was more effective in governing the conquered cities than Sargon's rule had been.

Bureaucracy (which literally means "rule by office") is one of the most underappreciated phenomena in history, probably because the concept is not particularly exciting to most people. The fact remains that there is no more efficient way yet invented to manage large groups of people: it was viable to coordinate small groups through the personal control and influence of a few individuals, but as cities grew and empires formed, it became untenable to have everything boil down to personal relationships. An efficient bureaucracy, one in which the individual people who were part of it were less important than the system itself (i.e. its rules, its records, and its chain of command), was always essential in large political units.

The Ur III dynasty is an example of an early bureaucratic empire. Historians have more records of this dynasty than any other from this period of ancient Mesopotamia thanks to its focus on codifying its regulations. The kings of Ur III were very adept at playing their civic and military leaders against each other, appointing generals to direct troops in other cities and making sure that each governor's power relied on his loyalty to the king. The administration of the Ur III dynasty divided the empire into three distinct tax regions, and its tax bureaucracy collected wealth without alienating the conquered peoples as much as Sargon and his descendants had (despite its relative success, Ur III, too, eventually collapsed, although it was due to a foreign invasion rather than an internal revolt).

What all of these ancient empires had in common beyond a common culture was that they were very precarious. Their bureaucracies were not large enough or organized enough to manage large populations easily, and rebellions were frequent. There was also the constant threat from what surviving texts refer to as "bandits," which in this context means the same thing as "barbarians." To the north of Mesopotamia is the beginning of the great steppes of Central Asia, the source of limitless and almost nonstop invasions throughout ancient history. Nomads from the steppe regions were the first to domesticate horses, and for thousands of years only steppe peoples knew how to fight directly from horseback instead of using chariots. Thus, the rulers of the Mesopotamian city-states and empires all had to contend with policing their borders against a foe they could not pursue, while still maintaining control over their own cities. This precarity was responsible for the fact that these early empires were not especially long-lasting, and were unable to conquer territory outside of Mesopotamia itself. What came afterwards were the first early empires that, through a combination of governing techniques, beliefs, and technology, were able to grow much larger and more powerful.

Chapter 2: Egypt

Hymn to the Nile

Verse 1

Hymn to the flood Hail flood!
emerging from the earth, arriving to bring Egypt to life,
hidden of form, the darkness in the day,
the one whose followers sing to him, as he waters the plants,
created by Ra to make every herd live,
who satisfies the desert hills removed from the water,
for it is his due that descends from the sky
– he, the beloved of Geb, controller of Nepri,
the one who makes the crafts of Ptah verdant.

Verse 13

When the Flood strikes,
they offer to you
they butcher cattle for you,
offering piles are made for you,
birds are slaughtered for you,
lions are snared for you in the desert,
goodness is returned to you.
They offer to every god
according to what the Flood has created,
in first quality incense, cattle large and small, birds for the flame.
The Flood in his cavern is the mighty one.
His name is not known in the underworld,
and the gods do not emerge with it.

Verse 14

All people raising the praise of the Ennead
Have fear for the awe made by his son the Lord of All to make the Two Riverbanks verdant
Verdant the spirit at your coming,
Verdant the spirit at your coming, O Flood
Verdant the spirit at your coming,
Come to Egypt,
make its happiness,
Make the Two Riverbanks verdant,
Verdant the spirit at your coming,
Verdant the spirit at your coming, O Flood
Verdant the spirit at your coming,
Men and herds are brought to life by your deliveries of the fields,
Verdant the spirit at your coming,
Verdant the spirit at your coming, O Flood
Verdant the spirit at your coming.

(<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static...oodtransl.html>)

The Ancient Egyptians were completely dependent upon the Nile, making it the very center of their culture and religion. The Nile's annual floods provided the Egyptians with fertile soil, irrigated their farmlands, and was pivotal for transportation of goods and people across the Kingdom. The river was so significant to the Egyptians it was often referred to as a God, as can be seen in the *Hymn to the Nile*.

As noted in the last chapter, the Mesopotamians regarded the gods as cruel and arbitrary and thought that human existence was

not a very pleasant experience. This attitude was not only shaped by all of the things that ancient people did not understand, like disease, weather, and death itself, but by the simple fact that it was often difficult to live next to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which flooded unpredictably and necessitated constant work in order to be useful for irrigation. Likewise, the threat of invasion from both rival cities and from foreigners (both “barbarians” and more organized groups) threatened to disrupt whatever stability existed. Life for most Mesopotamians, especially the vast majority who were common farmers, was not easy.

Things were a bit different in the other great ancient civilization of the eastern Mediterranean: Egypt, whose civilization developed along the banks of the Nile river. The Nile is the world’s longest river, stretching over 4,000 miles from its mouth in the Mediterranean to its origin in Lake Victoria in Central Africa. Because of consistent weather patterns, the Nile floods every year at just about the same time (late summer), depositing enormous amounts of mud and silt along its banks and making it one of the most fertile regions in the world. The essential source of energy for the Egyptians was thus something that could be predicted and planned for in a way that was impossible in Mesopotamia. There is a direct connection between this predictability and the incredible stability of Egyptian civilization, which (despite new kings and new dynasties and the occasional foreign invasion) remained remarkably stable and consistent for thousands of years.

The Egyptians themselves called the Nile valley “Kemet,” the Black Land, because of the annually-renewed black soil that arrived with the flood. For the most part, this was ancient Egypt: a swath of land between 10 and 20 miles wide (and in some places merely 1 or 2 miles wide) made up of incredibly fertile soil that relied on the floods of the Nile. This land was so agriculturally productive that Egyptian peasants could bring in harvests three times as bountiful of those in other regions like Mesopotamia. In turn, this created an enormous surplus of wealth for the royal government, which had the right to tax and redistribute it (as did the Mesopotamian states to the east). Beyond that strip of land were deserts populated by people the Egyptians simply dismissed as “bandits” – meaning nomads and tribal groups, not just robbers.

Map of Egypt’s Old Kingdom outlined in green, basically following the Nile River only expanding at the Delta before the river flows into the Mediterranean

Ancient Egypt’s Old Kingdom came into being with the unification of Lower Egypt, where the Nile empties into the Mediterranean, and Upper Egypt, where the Nile leads into Nubia (present-day Sudan). Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/ypt_map-en.svg

There were three major periods in ancient Egyptian history, the time during which Egypt was not subject to foreign powers and during which it developed its distinctive culture and built its spectacular examples of monumental architecture: the Old Kingdom (2680 – 2200 BCE), the Middle Kingdom (2040 – 1720 BCE), and the New Kingdom (1550 – 1150 BCE). There were also two “intermediate periods” between the Old and Middle Kingdoms (The First Intermediate Period, 2200 – 2040 BCE) and Middle and New Kingdoms (The Second Intermediate Period, 1720 – 1550 BCE). These were periods during which the political control of the ruling dynasty broke down and rival groups fought for control. The very large overarching story of ancient Egyptian history is that each of the different major kingdoms was quite stable and relatively peaceful, while the intermediary periods were troubled, violent, and chaotic. The remarkable thing about the history overall is the simple fact of its longevity; even compared to other ancient cultures (Mesopotamia, for instance), Egyptian politics were incredibly consistent.

The concept of these different periods was created by Manetho, an Egyptian priest who, in about 300 BCE, recorded the “definitive” history of the ancient kings and created the very notion of the old, middle, and new kingdoms. While that periodization overlooks some of the specifics of Egyptian history, it is still the preferred method for dating ancient Egypt to this day because of its simplicity and clarity.

Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt, 5000-2680 BCE

From about 5000 BCE onward smaller states/cities (similar to those in Mesopotamia) began to spring up around the Nile River. As the settlements grew, warfare and competition ensued, leading to the eventual formation of 2 larger states/kingdoms: Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. Upper Egypt was a long and narrow valley never more than about 14 miles wide ending near present day Cairo. Lower Egypt then was north of Cairo where the Nile branches out into a wide, low-lying delta before exiting into the Mediterranean Sea. Because of Egypt’s location, it was influenced by a larger variety of cultures than Sumer. Through archaeology and analysis of Egyptian religion and myths, we can see the influence of Africa, particularly Nubia or the area/peoples of modern Sudan.

Nubia was rich in gold, ivory, and slaves, seized from neighboring lands, making it a wealthy and powerful place in its own right. Egypt traded with Nubia, but also suffered from raids by warlike Nubian kingdoms. One of the key political posts in Egypt was the Keeper of the Gateway of the South, a military governor who tried to protect trade from these attacks. Some even argue that the idea of monarchy came from Nubia originally. In addition to borrowing from African populations to their south, Egyptians also felt the impact of Western Asia/the Near East. They imported ceramics, metallurgy, and new styles in art and architecture from Asia.

As far as physical appearances, the residents of Upper Egypt were probably of darker complexion, more resembling the residents of sub-Saharan Africa, while those of Lower Egypt were lighter skinned, but still darker than Northern Europeans.

Upper and Lower Egypt were politically distinct for centuries, but (according to both archaeology and the dating system created by Manetho) in roughly 3100 BCE Narmer, a king of Upper Egypt, conquered Lower Egypt and united the country for the first time. Narmer referred to himself as the King of the Two Lands. He therefore was the first Pharaoh (which means “Great House”) of a unified Egypt. Sadly, we actually know very little about Narmer beyond the fact that he was a warrior King. Numerous palettes and images show him slaying enemies with his own hands, with many depicting him fighting at the head of the army himself. Specifically he seems to have annexed Lower Egypt and expelled Libyans from Egyptian territory. Soon after began the Old Kingdom or the first Kingdom of a united Egypt. The Old Kingdom represented a long, unbroken line of kings that presided over the first full flowering of Egyptian culture, architecture, and prosperity.

Magnified Image of Narmer executing justice on a shield as he unified the Egyptian Kingdoms.

Narmer Palette <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9d/Narmer Palette.jpg>

The Old Kingdom, 2680-2200 BCE

The Old Kingdom united Egypt under a single ruling house, developed systems of record-keeping, and formed an all-important caste of scribes, the royal bureaucrats who mastered hieroglyphic writing. Likewise, the essential characteristics of Egyptian religion emerged during the Old Kingdom, especially the idea that the king was actually a god and that his rule ensured that the world itself would continue – the Egyptians thought that if there was no king or the proper prayers were not recited by the priests, terrible chaos and destruction would reign on earth.

The most important figure in Egyptian spiritual life was the king; he (or sometimes she) was believed to form a direct connection between the gods and the Egyptian people. The central theme among the great epic stories of Egyptian religion was that there was a certain order and harmony in the universe that the gods had created, but that it was threatened by forces of destruction and chaos. It was the job of humans, especially Egyptians and especially the king, to maintain harmony (ma’at) through proper rituals and making sure that Egyptian society was stable.

One peculiar aspect of the obsessive focus on the person of the king was the fact that the kings often married their sisters and daughters; the idea was that if one was a god, one did not want to pollute the sacred bloodline by having children with mere humans. An unfortunate side effect was, not surprisingly, that there were a lot of fairly deranged and unhealthy Egyptian royalty over the years, since the royal lines were, by definition, inbred. Fortunately for the Egyptian state, however, the backbone of day-to-day politics was the enormous bureaucracy staffed by the scribal class, a class that survived the entire period covered in this chapter.

Like their neighbors in Mesopotamia, the Egyptians lived in a redistributive economy, an economy in which crops were taken directly from farmers (i.e. peasants) by the agents of the king and then redistributed. Appropriately enough, many of the surviving documents from ancient Egypt are tax records. Peasants in Egypt were tied to the land they lived on and were thus serfs rather than free peasants. A serf is a farmer who is legally tied to the land he or she works on – they cannot leave the land to look for a better job elsewhere, living in a state very near to slavery. The peasants lived in “closed” villages in which people were not allowed to move in, nor were existing families supposed to move out.

Interestingly, unlike many other ancient societies, women in Egypt were nearly the legal equals of men. They had the legal right to own property, sue, and essentially exist as independent legal entities. This is all the more striking in that many of the legal rights that Egyptian women possessed were not available to women in Europe (or the United States) until the late 1800s CE, over three thousand years later. Likewise, Egyptian women enjoyed much more legal autonomy than did women in many other ancient societies, particularly that of the Greeks.

The Old Kingdom was stable and powerful, although its kings did not use that power to expand their borders beyond Egypt itself. Instead, all of Old Kingdom society revolved around the production of agricultural surpluses from the Nile, efficiently cataloged and taxed by the royal bureaucracy and “spent” on building enormous temples and, in time, tombs. The pyramids of Egypt were all built during the Old Kingdom, and their purpose was to house the bodies of the kings so that their spirits could travel to the land of the dead and join their fellow gods in the afterlife (thereby maintaining ma’at – harmony, sacred order, and balance).

A major factor in the stability of Old Kingdom Egypt was that it was very isolated. Despite its geographical proximity to Mesopotamia and Anatolia, Egypt at the time was largely separated from the civilizations of those regions. The Sinai Peninsula, which divides Egypt from present-day Palestine and Israel, is about 120 miles of desert. With a few violent exceptions, no major

incursions were able to cross over Sinai, and contact with the cultures of Mesopotamia and the Near East was limited as a result. Likewise, even though Egypt is on the Mediterranean, sailing technology was so primitive that there was little contact with other cultures via the sea.

Hieroglyphics

Scholars once thought that writing began in Mesopotamia and spread to Egypt. However, recent excavations have found examples of Egyptian writing dating from 3300 to 3200 BCE. So Egyptian writing likely developed completely independently from cuneiform. Here, similar to Sumer, writing was developed to meet economic needs. The earliest writing in Egypt includes records of the delivery of linen and oil as taxes to King/Pharaoh Scorpion I. The writing is a series of early hieroglyphs (meaning “sacred carvings” in Greek because the script was mainly used for religious inscriptions on buildings and sacred objects), a system of pictures and abstract signs that represent sounds or ideas, that eventually became standardized. There are about 700 different pictures in Egyptian hieroglyphics that generally fit into 3 categories: ideograms (signs indicating things or ideas), phonograms (signs indicating sounds), and determinatives (signs clarifying the meaning of the other signs). Hieroglyphics continued to be the dominant form of writing in Egypt until about 400 CE or AD.

As early as 3000 BCE at least one aspect of Egyptian writing surpassed that of Sumerian cuneiform, the material on which records were recorded. While cuneiform had to be inscribed or stamped on clay, a fairly clumsy process, Egyptians invented something similar to present day paper for their less sacred/economic records (sacred records were still inscribed largely on the walls of temples or pyramids). While today paper does come from wood (a technology developed in China around 100 BCE), Ancient Egyptians made it using the plant papyrus. Papyrus is a tall, reed like plant that grows along the Nile. When harvested it can be used to construct shelters and lightweight boats, burned for fuel, or as a writing surface. The word paper actually comes from papyrus. Papyrus was transformed into writing material by cutting the stalks into thin strips and laying them in a crosshatched fashion to form sheets, which were then glued together into rolls, in which form it was sold. It was durable and easy to write on, which facilitated the spread of written communication from paying taxes and legal contracts to philosophical works.

More writing survives from ancient Egypt than any other ancient civilization of the Mediterranean region. There are two major reasons for that survival. First, Egypt's dry climate ensured that records kept on papyrus had a decent chance of surviving since they were unlikely to rot away. Thousands of papyri documents have been discovered that were simply dumped into holes in the desert and left there; the sand and the climate conspiring to preserve them. Second, Egypt developed an important social class of scribes whose whole vocation was mastering the complex Egyptian writing systems, hieroglyphics, and keeping extensive records of almost every aspect of life, from religious ritual to mundane record-keeping. In all three of the great dynasties and during the Intermediate Periods, it was the scribes who provided continuity.

The Pyramids

Photo of the largest of the Pyramids of Giza, Khufu

Pyramid of Khufu https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0d/Pyramid_of_Khufu.jpg

As iconic as hieroglyphic writing, which remains famous because of the sheer amount of it that survived carved in stone in tombs and palaces, was the creation of monumental architecture by the Egyptian state, first exemplified by the pyramids. Sometime around 2660 BCE the first pyramid was built for the king Djoser. Djoser was renowned in the Egyptian sources for his wisdom, and centuries after his death he became a legendary figure to later Egyptians. The architect who designed the pyramid, Imhotep, was later deified as a son of Ptah, the god who created the universe.

The pyramids were constructed over a period of about 250 years, from 2660 to 2400 BCE. For a long time, historians thought that they were built by slaves, but it now seems very likely that they were built by free laborers employed by the king and paid by royal agents. Each building block weighed about 2.5 tons and had to be hauled up ramps with ropes and pulleys. As noted above, only Egypt's unique access to the bounty of the Nile provided enough energy for this to be viable. Egypt was the envy of the ancient world because of its incredible wealth, wealth that was the direct result of its huge surplus of grain, all fed by the Nile's floods. The pyramids were built year-round, but work was most intense in September, when the floods of the Nile were at their height and farmers were not able to work the fields. In short, nowhere else on earth could the pyramids have been built. There had to be a gigantic surplus of energy in the form of calories available to get it done.

Pyramid building itself was the impetus behind the massive expansion of bureaucracy in the Old Kingdom, since the state became synonymous with the diversion and redistribution of resources needed to keep an enormous labor force mobilized. The king could, in theory, requisition anything, mobilize anyone, and generally exercise total control, although practical limits were respected by the administration. Since there was no currency, “payment” to scribes usually took the form of fiefs (i.e. grants of land) that

returned to the royal holdings after the official's death, a practice that atrophied after the fall of the Old Kingdom.

The most dramatic symbol of the Pharaoh's divinity were the pyramids. The Egyptians built 35 major pyramids and countless smaller ones. The first type of pyramids to be built were Step pyramids, symbolizing the Pharaoh's ascent to his father, the sun God. These were more than likely quite similar to Sumerian Ziggurats. Initially the pyramids were likely built as a statement of the Pharaoh's indisputable power and to show his strength, remember this was fairly recently united Kingdom. The pyramids are justly famous as the ultimate example of Egyptian prosperity and ingenuity. The Great Pyramid of Khufu, the single largest pyramid of the period, contained over 2.5 million stone blocks, each weighing approximately 2.5 tons. The sheer amount of energy expended on the construction of the pyramids is thus staggering; it was only the incredible bounty of the Nile and its harvests that enabled the construction of the pyramids by providing the calories consumed by the workers and draught animals, the wealth used to employ the supporting bureaucracy, and the size of the population that sustained the entire enterprise. Likewise, while the details are now lost, the Old Kingdom's government must have been highly effective at tax collection and the distribution of food, supplies, and work teams. Pyramids on the scale of the Old Kingdom would have been all but impossible anywhere else in the world at the time.

But, the pyramids were not simply symbols of grandeur or monuments to appease the egos of the Pharaohs. They were temples where the king would continue to be worshipped and served in the afterlife. The Pharaoh had to be protected, preserved, and honored in death just as he had been in life. The Pharaohs spent huge amounts of money and resources on the pyramids to proclaim their divine status and to protect their mummified bodies in death. Both reinforcing the hierarchal structure of the Egyptian Kingdom, and ensuring that the Pharaoh would not be alone in the afterlife only princes, select officials, and of course the royal wives would have the privilege of being buried in the Pyramids.

The best known pyramids are those of Giza, three gigantic, perfectly symmetrical limestone tombs constructed during the 4th dynasty (2589-2532). To this day the pyramid of King Khufu (or Cheops, his Greek name) is still the largest all-stone building in human history. It stands taller than a 40 story skyscraper. It required more than 2 million blocks of limestone to construct, some of which weighed 15 tons a piece. According to the records free workers dragged the stones up ramps into position using rollers and sleds. Near the Great Pyramids stands the great Sphinx, a human-headed lion carved out of a huge rock outcropping, perhaps representing Khufu's son, King Khafre for whom the Second great pyramid was built. The Sphinx is the oldest monumental sculpture in the world, it is nearly 250 feet long and almost 70 feet high.

Photo of the giant Egyptian Sphinx with the Pyramids of Giza in the background.

Egyptian Sphinx https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4d/Pyramid_of_Khufu.jpg

The Pharaohs also prepared the inside of the pyramids elaborately, showing their strong belief in and preparation for the afterlife. As with the Sumerians, the Egyptians were polytheistic. They had a huge array of greater and lesser deities, including human, animal, and composite gods. Some of the most important gods included Ptah (creator-god), Osiris (the inventor of agriculture and lord of dead, also who the Pharaoh became in death), Horus (the son of Osiris and a sky-god, and the Pharaoh in life), and Isis (the wife of Osiris, mother of Horus, and the mother-goddess). Temples dedicated to the Gods were numerous.

For the Egyptians the afterlife could be a very pleasant continuation of life on earth, kind of like immortality. Commoners had the small assurance that there was no forced labor in death. Meanwhile, the wealthy (pinnacle being the Pharaohs), were more than well prepared for the afterlife as they placed a huge emphasis on the building and filling of tombs, decorating them with paintings and inscriptions, and stocking them with cherished possessions. Tombs of the royal family were filled with jewelry, gilded furniture, and even in one case at least two full sized cedar ships. These were meant to carry King Khufu on his journey into eternity. The body also had to be prepared for the afterlife, hence the practices of embalming and mummification. To make a mummy the brain was removed through the nose, next the internal organs were cut out and stored in separate stone jars. Once empty, the body was dried with mineral salts to the consistency of old leather. Finally the body was wrapped in linens soaked with various ointments.

Book of the Dead

During the Old Kingdom it was believed that only the Pharaoh and his retinue could attain immortality, even that it hinged upon burial in the pyramids. However this changed in successive kingdoms with even commoners having hope of eternity. We can see this in the evolution of the famous Book of the Dead written during the New Kingdom or around 1550 BCE. Scholars have found more than 25,000 copies, the oldest papyrus copy dating from around 1500 BCE. This is the first religious writing/text meant as a literal guide to the afterlife.

While the book became more wide spread in the New Kingdom, the manuscript has its origins in the Old Kingdom among the funerary manuscripts written on the walls of burial chambers within the pyramids. Many Books of the Dead have been discovered

among the belongings buried in the tombs of royalty and wealthier commoners. This is because by the New Kingdom, one could commission a Book of the Dead from the House of Life, an institution built alongside Temple Complexes, where the Books of the Dead were penned.

The book is a collection of coffin or temple inscriptions from across Egypt. The book contains magic spells intended to assist a dead person's journey through the Duat or the underworld and into the afterlife. Egyptians invented the idea that the suffering of the present life might be overcome in a more perfect world to come. After death, the soul would be brought before a judge of the gods, Anubis, who would weigh the heart on scales against the ideals of harmony and order. At this point, the heart might betray the soul, telling the god all of the sins its owner had committed in life. The lucky and virtuous person, though, would see their heart balance against the ideal of order (that of Ma'at or justice and truth) and the soul would be rewarded with eternal life. Otherwise, their heart would be tossed to a crocodile-headed demon, Ammit, and devoured, the soul perishing in the process.

The following images are of the Book of the Dead for Chantress Nauny, a chantress for the god Amun Re, who was given the title of "king's daughter," likely because she was the daughter of a high priest.

A page of the Book of the Dead on papyrus, this one featuring the weighing of Amun Nany's heart against the feather of Ma'at.

The Singer of Amun Nany's Funerary Papyrus, ca. 1050 B.C., the Weighing of the Heart. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collec.../search/548344>

Another page out of the Book of the Dead. This one features Nany having made it past the first test offering prayers to the Gods in the underworld.

Nany offering prayers to the Gods in Book of the Dead, 1050 BCE <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collec.../search/548344>

Perhaps most intriguing about the book is that it includes images and stories similar to those of Christianity. For example, the Goddess Isis and her son Horus (the pharaoh) are artistically portrayed very similarly to future portraits of Mary and baby Jesus. Additionally, Osiris, the God of the Underworld, was originally human and lived on the earth, but he suffered death when his evil brother Set murdered him. But, he was resurrected and became the god of the underworld. As we will see, perhaps the resemblances come from the time that the Israelites spent in Egypt.

First Intermediate Period to the Middle Kingdom, 2040-1720 BCE

Around 2200 BCE, two hundred years after the last pyramids were built, the Old Kingdom collapsed, leading to the First Intermediate Period. The reason for the collapse is not clear, but it probably had to do with the very infrequent occurrence of drought. There are written records from this period of instability that make it clear that Egyptians knew very well that things had been fundamentally upset and imbalanced, and they did not know what to do about it. The kings were supposed to oversee the harmony of life and yet the royal dynasty had collapsed without a replacement. This disrupted the entire Egyptian worldview. Rival dynasties emerged to challenge the Old Kingdom and their Pharaohs by 2190. The unrest resulted in a collapse of unity and the Old Kingdom, with governors declaring their independence.

In turn, this disruption prompted a development in Egyptian religion. The Egyptian religion of the Old Kingdom had emphasized life on earth; even though the pyramids were tombs built to house the kings and the things they would need on their journey to the afterlife, there were no records with clear details about how most people would fare after they died. This changed during the First Intermediate Period. Hence, the advent of the Book of the Dead, at least its foundations.

Monumental building ceased during the Intermediate Period – there were no more pyramids, palaces, or temples built. A major social change that occurred was that royal officials away from the capital started to inherit titles, and thus it was the first time there was a real noble class with its own inherited power and land. Some historians have argued that a major cause of the collapse of royal authority was the growth in power of the nobility: in other words, royal authority did not fall apart first and lead to elites seizing more power, elites seized power and thereby weakened royal authority. The irony of the period is that the economy of Egypt actually diversified and expanded. It seems to have been a time in which a new elite commissioned royal-inspired goods and hence supported emerging craftspeople.

The Middle Kingdom was the next great Egyptian kingdom of the ancient world. The governor of the city of Thebes reunified the kingdom and established himself as the new king (Mentuhotep II, r. 2060 – 2010 BCE). One major change in Egyptian belief is that the Middle Kingdom rulers still claimed to be at least partly divine, but they also emphasized their humanity. They wrote about themselves as shepherds trying to maintain the balance of harmony in Egypt and to protect their people, rather than just as lords over an immortal kingdom. Their nobles had more power than had the nobility of the Old Kingdom as well, playing important political roles in their lands.

Starting during the Middle Kingdom, the kings made a major effort to extend Egyptian power and influence beyond the traditional “core” of the kingdom in Egypt itself. Egypt exerted military power and extracted wealth from the northern part of the kingdom of Nubia (in present-day Sudan) to the south, and also established at least limited ongoing contact with Mesopotamia as well. The kings actively encouraged immigration from outside of Egypt, but insisted that immigrants settle among Egyptians. They had the same policy with war captives, often settling them as farmers in the midst of Egyptians. This ensured speedy acculturation and helped bring foreign talent into Egypt.

While no more pyramids were built – it appears that the nearly obsessive focus on the spirit of the king after death was confined to the Old Kingdom – the Middle Kingdom was definitely a period of stability and prosperity for Egypt as a whole. A fairly diverse body of literature survived in the form of writings on papyrus that suggests that commerce was extensive, Egyptian religion celebrated the spiritual importance of ordinary people, and fairness and justice were regarded as major ethical imperatives.

The Hyksos & the End of the Middle Kingdom

The Middle Kingdom came to violent and abrupt end around 1700 BCE when Semitic speaking immigrants from Canaan (present-day Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, and parts of Syria) began moving into Egypt in large numbers. The Egyptians labelled these newcomers as *Hyksos*, meaning foreigners. Initially, they settled and assimilated slowly into Egyptian society, however, by approximately 1650 BCE, a larger group of Hyksos invaded and conquered all of Lower Egypt. The question remains to this day who the Hyksos were. Many historians agree that they were likely the early Israelites due to remarkable coincidences or similarities in the Egyptian, Israelite, and archaeological records. For example Exodus 1:1-14 and the Egyptian Carnarvon Tablet seem to correlate in time with the rise of the Pharaoh Kamose and the defeat of the Hyksos. Then Amos 5:26 makes a reference to an ancient Hyksos leader, Khyan, as a possible cross reference of Hyksos culture being recognized by Israelites.

Whether or not they were the Israelites, the Hyksos possessed two significant advantages over the Egyptians; the use of the horse drawn chariot in battle and more powerful bronze bows. The most significant innovation introduced by the Hyksos was the use of bronze. There was very limited use of bronze in Egypt until the Second Intermediate Period, with both weapons and tools being crafted from copper or stone. Bronze, an alloy of copper and zinc or nickel, required technical skill and access to its component minerals to craft. The finished product was far harder and more durable than was copper alone, however, and with the advent of large-scale bronze use in Egypt thanks to the Hyksos, the possibilities for the growth of Egyptian power increased greatly. Bronze had already been in use for over a thousand years by the time it became common in Egypt, but when it finally arrived with Canaanite craftsmen it radically altered the balance of power. Up to that point, Egyptian technology, especially in terms of metallurgy, was quite primitive. Egyptian soldiers were often nothing more than peasants armed with copper knives, spears with copper heads, or even just clubs. Egypt’s relative isolation meant that it had never needed to develop more advanced weapons, a fact that the Hyksos were able to take advantage of, belatedly bringing the large-scale use of bronze with them.

Nonetheless, the Hyksos did not seek to drastically alter Egyptian society and culture. While they started as “foreigners,” the Hyksos quickly adopted the practices of the Egyptian kings they had overthrown, using Egyptian scribes to keep records in hieroglyphics, worshiping the local gods, and generally behaving like Egyptians. In addition to trying to join Egyptian society, the Hyksos also opened up Egypt to much greater contact with other Near East states, especially those in the Mediterranean like the Hittites and Minoans. Yet, as in many cases of colonization, most Egyptians did not admire their Hyksos overlords and sought independence.

The New Kingdom, 1550-1150 BCE

In 1550 BCE, the Second Intermediate Period ended when another Egyptian king, Ahmose I, expelled the Hyksos from Egypt. Thus began the New Kingdom, the most powerful to date. This was also when the Egyptian kings started calling themselves pharaohs, which means “great house,” lord over all things. Using the new bronze military technology, the New Kingdom was (at times) able to expand Egyptian control all the way into Mesopotamia. Bronze was the key factor, but also important was the adoption of composite bows: bows that are made from strips of animal bone and sinew, glued together. A composite bow was much more powerful than a wooden one, and they greatly enhanced the power of the Egyptian military. Likewise, again thanks to the Hyksos, the New Kingdom was able to employ chariots in war for the first time. One in ten men was impressed into military service, supplemented with auxiliaries from conquered lands as well as mercenary forces.

During this period the Pharaohs rebuilt central authority by restricting the power of local governors and promoting a new sense of Egyptian identity. To prevent invasions, the pharaohs followed up the Hyksos innovation in military technology by creating a standing army and formalizing diplomatic relationships with the kings of the Near East. Additionally, it was during the New Kingdom that they actively campaigned to take over foreign lands, engaging in imperial campaigns of conquest both to the North

and South, hugely expanding the boundaries of Egypt to include present day Syria and Palestine by 1457 BCE. The idea was that divine harmony existed only in Egypt and had to be brought to the rest of the world, by force if necessary. These expeditions earned the pharaohs of the New Kingdom the moniker of *warrior pharaohs*.

The New Kingdom pharaohs enlisted the leaders of the lands they had conquered as puppet kings, surrounded by Egyptian advisors. The pharaohs adopted the practice of bringing many foreign princes of the lands they had conquered back to Egypt. There, a prince would be raised as an Egyptian and educated to think of Egyptian civilization as both superior to others and their own. Thus, when they returned to rule after their fathers died, these princes would often be thoroughly assimilated into Egyptian culture and would naturally be more loyal to the pharaoh; using this technique, the New Kingdom was able to create several “puppet states,” places with their own rulers who were loyal to Egypt, in the Near and Middle East. Regional administrators did the important work of drafting laborers, extracting taxation, and making sure that agriculture was on track.

In addition to the New Kingdom’s expansionism, the governments pursued new forms of monumental architecture. While the construction of pyramids never occurred after the Old Kingdom, Egyptian kings remained focused on the creation of great buildings. They continued to build opulent tombs, but those were usually built into hillsides or in more conventional structures, rather than pyramids. The monumental architecture of the New Kingdom consisted of huge temples and statues, most notably the Great Temple at Abu Simbel in northern Nubia, built under the direction of the pharaoh Ramses II at some point around 1250 BCE. There, gigantic statues of the gods sit, and twice a year, the rising sun shines through the entrance and directly illuminates three of them, while the god of the underworld remains in shadow.

Image from within the Abu Simbel Temple, specifically the Rameses' Temple, featuring four statues of Pharaohs.

Abu Simbel temple, four statues of divinities inside the inner sanctuary https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/26-28_HDR.jpg

Detailed records of noteworthy pharaohs survive from the New Kingdom. The New Kingdom saw the only known female pharaoh, a woman who ruled from 1479 to 1458 BCE. Her name was Hatshepsut; she originally ruled as a regent (someone who is supposed to rule until a young king comes of age) for her stepson, but then claimed the title of pharaoh and ruled outright. Other Egyptian queens had exercised royal power before Hatshepsut, but she was the first to call herself King. Some statues show her wearing a false beard, and some of her inscriptions refer to Hatshepsut as “he” not “she”. She ruled for 20 years, waged war, and oversaw a period of ongoing prosperity. There were enormous building projects under her supervision, and it was also under her reign that large quantities of sub-Saharan African goods started to be imported from Nubia: gold, incense, live elephants, panther skins, and other forms of wealth. Although Hatshepsut dispatched Egyptian armies to fight, perhaps to try to keep up the warrior pharaoh tradition, she is best known for activities like temple rebuilding and exploration abroad including commercial expeditions into the Red Sea journeying as far south as Somalia in Eastern Africa. When she died, however, her stepson Thutmose III took the throne. Decades after he became pharaoh, for reasons that are unclear, he tried to erase the memory of his mother’s reign, perhaps driven by simple resentment over how long she had held power.

Another pharaoh of note was Amenhotep IV (r. 1353 – 1336 BCE). Amenhotep was infamous in his own lifetime for attempting an ill-considered full-scale religious revolution. He tried to focus all worship of the Egyptian people on an aspect of the sun god, Ra, called Aten. Aten was represented as a sun disc. He went so far as to claim that Aten was the only god, something that seemed absurd to the resolutely polytheistic Egyptians. He renamed himself Akhenaten, which means “the one useful to Aten,” moved the capital to a new city he had built, Tell Al Amarna, sacked the temples of other gods, and even had agents chisel off references to other gods from buildings and walls. All the while, he insisted that he and his queen, Nefertiti, be worshiped as gods themselves as the direct representatives of Aten as they alone could communicate with Aten. Historians do not know why he tried to bring about this religious revolution, but one reasonable theory is that he was trying to reduce the power of the priests, who had steadily become richer and more powerful over the centuries at the expense of the pharaohs themselves. Others have seen this as the first experiment in monotheism.

Hieroglyph from the Temple Simbal featuring Akhenaton and Queen Neferiti in conversation with the sun disc god Aten.

Akhenaton & Nefertiti under the rays of Aten <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/cropped%29.jpg>

Akhenaten’s attempted revolution was a disaster. In the eyes of common people and of later pharaohs, he had fundamentally undermined the very stability of Egypt. In the eyes of his subjects, the royal person was no longer seen as a reliable spiritual anchor – the pharaoh was supposed to be the great protector of the religious and social order, but instead one had tried to completely destroy it. This was the beginning of the end of the central position the pharaoh had enjoyed in the life of all Egyptians up until that point.

Akhenaten’s son restored all of the old religious traditions and abandoned Al Amarna. This was the young king Tutankhamun (“King Tut”) (r. 1336 – 1326), who is important for restoring the religion and, arguably, for the simple fact that his tomb was never looted by grave robbers before it was discovered by a British archaeologist in 1922 CE. It provided the single most significant

trove of artifacts from the New Kingdom yet found when it was discovered, sparking an interest in ancient Egyptian history all over the world.

Inside of King Tut's Burial Chamber with golden walls and a variety of scenes from daily life to animals.

Pharaoh Tutankhamun's Burial Chamber https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/th_dynasty.jpg

A new dynasty of pharaohs ruled the New Kingdom in the aftermath of Akhenaten's disastrous experiment, the most powerful of which was Ramses II (r. 1279 – 1213). Ramses campaigned against the growing power of an empire in the north called the Hittites, one of the major empires of the Bronze Age period (considered in more detail in the next chapter). He ruled for an astonishingly long time and reputedly sired some 160 children with wives and concubines. He also supervised the construction of the Great Temple of Abu Simbel noted above. Ramses was, however, the last of the great pharaohs, with all of those who followed working to stave off disaster more so than expand Egyptian power.

The New Kingdom collapsed in about 1150 BCE. This collapse was part of a much larger pattern across the ancient Middle East and North Africa: the collapse of the Bronze Age itself. In the case of Egypt, this began with a series of foreign invasions, that of the “Sea People,” whose origins have never been determined despite concentrated scholarship on the question. Later, invaders referred to as “gangs of bandits” from what is today Libya, to the west of Egypt, further undermined the kingdom, and it finally fell into a long period of political fragmentation. Civil war and conflict engulfed Egypt, and from that point on Egypt proved vulnerable to foreign conquest. In the course of the centuries that followed Assyria, Persia, the Greeks, and the Romans, one after the other, added Egypt to their respective empires.

Chapter 3: From Bronze to Iron or the International Age

Last we left Mesopotamia, civilization was around 1,000 years old and had taken the form of multiple city-states ruled by warrior kings. However, by approximately 2300 BCE, the city-states had to worry about competition and conflict with many more peoples than one another. Specifically they faced competition from the surrounding peoples of the larger desert who coveted Mesopotamia's wealth, specifically the growing wealth in metals and luxury goods (improved tools, weapons, etc. made from bronze instead of much softer copper). Some conquerors came from this hinterland, including the Akkadians.

The Bronze Age is a term used to describe a period in the ancient world from about 3000 BCE to 1100 BCE. That period saw the emergence and evolution of increasingly sophisticated ancient states, some of which evolved into the first real empires. It was a period in which long-distance trade networks and diplomatic exchanges between states became permanent aspects of political, economic, and cultural life in the eastern Mediterranean region. It was, in short, the period during which civilization itself spread and prospered across the area, or the first International Age.

The period is named after one of its key technological bases: the crafting of bronze. Bronze is an alloy of tin and copper. An alloy is a combination of metals created when the metals bond at the molecular level to create a new material entirely. Needless to say, historical peoples had no idea why, when they took tin and copper, heated them up, and beat them together on an anvil they created something much harder and more durable than either of their starting metals. Some innovative smith did figure it out, and in the process ushered in an array of new possibilities.

Bronze was important because it revolutionized warfare and, to a lesser extent, agriculture. The harder the metal, the deadlier the weapons created from it and the more effective the tools. Agriculturally, bronze plows allowed greater crop yields. Militarily, bronze weapons completely shifted the balance of power in warfare; an army equipped with bronze spears, arrowheads, and bronze armor was much more effective than one wielding wooden, copper, or obsidian implements.

An example of bronze's impact is, as noted in the previous chapter, the expansionism of the Egyptian New Kingdom. The New Kingdom of Egypt conquered more territory than any earlier Egyptian empire. The Egyptians were able to do this in part because of their mastery of bronze-making and the effectiveness of its armies as a result. The New Kingdom also demonstrates another noteworthy aspect of bronze: it was expensive to make and expensive to distribute to soldiers, meaning that only the larger and richer empires could afford it on a large scale. Bronze tended to stack the odds in conflicts against smaller city-states and kingdoms, because it was harder for them to afford to field whole armies outfitted with bronze weapons. Ultimately, the power of bronze contributed to the creation of a whole series of powerful empires in North Africa and the Middle East, all of which were linked together by diplomacy, trade, and (at times) war.

The Bronze Age States

There were four major regions along the shores of, or near to, the eastern Mediterranean that hosted the major states of the Bronze Age: Greece, Anatolia, Canaan and Mesopotamia, and Egypt. Those regions were close enough to one another (e.g. it is roughly 800 miles from Greece to Mesopotamia, the furthest distance between any of the regions) that ongoing long-distance trade was possible. While wars were relatively frequent, most interactions between the states and cultures of the time were peaceful, revolving around trade and diplomacy. Each state, large and small, oversaw diplomatic exchanges written in Akkadian (the international language of the time) maintaining relations, offering gifts, and demanding concessions as circumstances dictated. Although the details are often difficult to establish, we can assume that at least some immigration occurred as well.

Ancient Babylon

By 2200 BCE the Akkadian empire broke up into a series of smaller successor states as a result of Civil War. These smaller states would eventually become the Babylonians and the Syrians. But first, the Sumerians actually reclaimed glory in the 3rd Dynasty of Ur (2112-2004 BCE), during which they called themselves the "kings of Sumer and Akkad." This demonstrates that the Akkadian Empire was not erased from Sumer's history like that of the Hyksos in Egypt. Instead the use of this title, which continued to be used for the next 1500 years, recognized the existence of a composite, common Mesopotamian culture/society. Nevertheless, Mesopotamia remained politically unstable and the Ur Kings could not protect their people and dynasty from internal and external rivals. Again Civil War ripped apart the Sumerians, this time with attacks from Amorite marauders.

Turmoil dating from 2000 BCE ushered in new Kingdoms, among them the Amorite Kingdom (otherwise known as the

Babylonians, another Semitic people) in about 1900 BCE. The capital of the Amorites was Babylon. Perhaps one of the most important things to emerge from Babylonian society and culture is Hammurabi's Code (a legal code) written by King Hammurabi who ruled Babylon about 600 years after Sargon. Much of his 42 year reign was devoted to creating a Mesopotamian empire. He was a careful administrator who ushered in an era of prosperity and cultural flowering. But he is most famous for the law code. Upon a careful reading of the code, one quickly sees that it is less of an actual code and more of a collection listing various crimes and punishments, likely fairly recent offenses and punishments. On the other hand Hammurabi's Code is a kind of treatise on justice meant to glorify Hammurabi as an arbiter of justice, as a judge divinely appointed. In the opening of the code, Hammurabi states his goal for the law code is/was to support "the principles of truth and equity" for all. Upon close examination of the code, this goal appears less sincere.

In any case, Hammurabi's Code has become both a legal and literary classic as it paints a remarkable portrait of Mesopotamian society. The document contains nearly 300 rulings in court cases ranging from family to commercial law, from wage rates to murder. The administration of justice in Mesopotamia was entirely practical: one finds no notion of abstract absolutes or universal principles, not even a word for "law." Though actually less harsh than earlier law codes, the first one dating from 2100 BCE that prescribed death for nearly all crimes, Hammurabi's code is by no means lenient. Whereas other earlier codes were often satisfied with payment in silver as recompense for crimes, Hammurabi's Code was the first to stipulate such ruthless penalties as mutilations, drowning, and impaling. It also introduced the laws of retaliation for wounds: "If a man has destroyed the eye of a member of the aristocracy they shall destroy his eye. If he has broken his limb: they shall break the same limb." Moreover, children could be punished for the crimes of their fathers. The code, published approximately in 1750 BCE, was inscribed in 49 vertical columns on a stone stele about 7.5 feet high and displayed in a prominent public place, symbolizing the notion that the law belongs to and governs over everyone.

A tall black carved stone with script on most of the lower half with sculpted statues featuring Hammurabi and a Babylonian God at the top.

Stele of Hammurabi's Code in the Louvre Museum, photo by author Erin Stone

Despite the published idea of laws applying to everyone, Babylonian society was not egalitarian and the laws illustrate this clearly. Punishments were in most cases class-based; crimes against a free person received higher punishments than against a slave or semi-free person. Debt was another very important issue, with failure to pay said debt frequently leading to slavery. Though women could own land and testify in court, the code was patriarchal, as Babylonian society was turning more and more in that direction. The code enshrined the male as the head of the family. For example, a son who struck his father had his hand cut off, while a woman who brought about the death of her husband "because of another man" was impaled on stakes.

The Hittites

One state whose very existence coincided with the Bronze Age, vanishing afterwards, was that of the Hittites. Beginning in approximately 1700 BCE, the Hittites established a large empire in Anatolia, the landmass that comprises present-day Turkey. The Hittite Empire expanded rapidly based on a flourishing bronze-age economy, expanding from Anatolia to conquer territory in Mesopotamia, Syria, and Canaan, ultimately clashing with the New Kingdom of Egypt. The Hittites fought themselves to a stalemate against the Egyptians, after which they reached a diplomatic accord to hold on to Syria while the Egyptians held Canaan.

Unlike the Egyptians, the Hittites had the practice of adopting the customs, technologies, and religions of the people they conquered and the people they came in contact with. They did not seek to impose their own customs on others, instead gathering the literature, stories, and beliefs of their subjects. Their pantheon of gods grew every time they conquered a new city-state or tribe, and they translated various tales and legends into their own language. There is some evidence that it was the Hittites who formed the crucial link between the civilizations of Mesopotamia and the civilizations of the Mediterranean, most importantly of the Greeks. The Hittites transmitted Mesopotamian technologies (including math, astronomy, and engineering) as well as Mesopotamian legends like the Epic of Gilgamesh, the latter of which may have gone through a long process of translation and re-interpretation to become the Greek story of Hercules. Simply put, the Hittites were the quintessential Bronze Age civilization: militarily powerful, economically prosperous, and connected through diplomacy, trade, and war with the other cultures and states of the time.

Map of the expanse of the Hittite empire, covering present day Turkey, some of Greece, and spreading south into the Holy Land.

The Hittite Empire at its Height Source: <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/1...h-century-bce/>

While quintessentially of the Bronze Age, the Hittites were still unique for a few reasons. First and foremost, they were the first civilization who spoke an Indo-European language. Almost all the peoples discussed up to now spoke a language belonging to

the large Afro-Asiatic language family. But none of these languages survived antiquity in Europe. Instead, virtually every modern European language- as well as the dominant languages of Iran and India- are descendants of the long-lost proto-Indo-European language. These languages from English and Russian to Iranian and Hindi are said to belong to the Indo-European language family.

Indo-European speakers probably originated between 4500 and 2500 BCE in southern Russia, the Caucasus area between the Black and Caspian Seas. They were warlike and mobile, migrating to western Asia (where they became the Hittites) and finally to Anatolia around 1800 BCE. There the Hittites worked to control the trade travelling through their territory, expanding and growing their army as a result. The Hittites were absolute masters of the horse, which they harnessed to chariots in battle, like the Hyksos before them.

Excavated Hittite tablets show that the chariot's main use was as a weapon of surprise, of moving battles. The chariot was most effective while in motion, driving through enemy infantry. Thus, paired crews of driver and warrior were most common. The driver would be unarmed, while the warrior would be wearing heavy armor and sporting a bow, spear, or sword. Chariots would be at the center of the battlefield when the Hittites and Egyptians came to blows towards the end of the "International System" discussed below.

Competition between the Egyptians and Hittites eventually came to a climax in the Battle of Qadesh in northern Syria pitting Ramses II against the Hittites. The Egyptians could stand no further expansion southward on the part of the Hittites. At Qadesh in 1274 BCE 20,000 Egyptian troops faced 17,000 Hittite soldiers. They were literally evenly matched, so the battle basically ended in a stalemate, although King Ramses II claimed a victory publicly. However, the treaty shows that it was actually a stalemate or loss for the Egyptians. What is most amazing is that the treaty survived, and it stands as one of the first written treaties scripted to end a war ever documented. In it both the kings of the Egyptians and Hittites promised to be brothers forever, and indeed the Hittite King did give his daughter to Ramses II in marriage 13 years later. But the peace did not last for long. And when the empires again came to blows it was within the context of the much larger devastations of 1200-1000 BCE.

The First International/Mediterranean System

To the east of the Hittite Empire, Mesopotamia was not ruled by a single state or empire during most of the Bronze Age. The Babylonian empire founded by Hammurabi was overthrown by the Kassites (whose origins are unknown) in 1595 BCE. This conquest was followed by a Hittite invasion that sacked Babylon but did not stay to control it. Over the following centuries, the Kassites successfully ruled over Babylon and the surrounding territories, with the entire region enjoying a period of prosperity. To the north, beyond Mesopotamia (the land between the rivers) itself, a rival state known as Assyria both traded with and warred against Kassite-controlled Babylon. Eventually (starting in 1225 BCE), Assyria led a short-lived period of conquest that conquered Babylon and the Kassites, going on to rule over a united Mesopotamia before being forced to retreat against the backdrop of a wider collapse of the political and commercial network of the Bronze Age (described below). More on the Assyrians to come.

The Minoans

To the west, it was during the Bronze Age that the first distinctly Greek civilizations arose: the Minoans of the island of Crete and the Mycenaeans of Greece itself. Their civilizations, which likely merged together due to invasion after a long period of coexistence, were the basis of later Greek civilization and thus a profound influence on many of the neighboring civilizations of the Middle East in the centuries to come, just as the civilizations of the Middle East unquestionably influenced them. At the time, however, the Minoans and Mycenaeans were primarily traders and, in the case of the Mycenaeans, raiders, rather than representing states on par with those of the Hittites, Assyrians, or Egyptians.

The name Minoan comes from the archaeologist, Arthur Evans, who discovered some of the first ruins of Minoan society when he was searching the island of Crete for traces of the mythic king Minos in the 1940s. Supposedly King Minos built the first great navy and kept a half-human/half-bull or Minotaur in a labyrinth near his palace. In Greek mythology, Minos was a king of Crete, son of Zeus and Europa. Every nine years, he made King Aegeus pick seven young boys and seven young girls to be sent to the labyrinth, to be eaten by the Minotaur. After his death, Minos became a judge of the dead in the underworld.

Evans believed that he discovered Minos's palace (or perhaps the rulers residence on which the myth was based) in the palace site of Knossos, also the possible capital of the Minoan society. This was one of many palace sites, though one of the largest, which helped to identify the Minoan/Crete society as a Palace society. This categorization recognizes the social organization of the island, in which rulers built large palace complexes, each ruled fairly independently, with a population clustered around each palace. The palace complexes combined government, spiritual, and commercial centers in huge, sprawling areas of buildings that were interconnected and which housed thousands of people. Inside the palace complexes the ruler, their families, and their

servants lived while also administering to the economic, political, and religious needs of the very small states that they governed. In many ways these were similar to Sumerian city-states, but with the unique palace center. Additionally, we must not assume the complexes to have been small, Knossos for example had hundreds of rooms. While the centers of civilization may have been confined to one or two complexes, the actual palaces were enormous and capable of housing thousands of individuals.

Photo taken of the center of the palace complex of Knossos featuring a building rising from the ruins.

Center of Knossos Palace, photo by Erin Stone

In one such room within the Knossos palace lies the now famous wall painting of the Bull-Leaper. This depicts a young man very acrobatically somersaulting/tumbling/leaping over a charging bull. This painting, and others like it have led some scholars to speculate that the Minoans incorporated bull worshipping into their religion and that this might actually depict a real ceremony.

Mural from Knossos showing the Bull-leaping ritual with a blue background and earth tones.

Knossos Bull-Leaping Mural circa 1550 BCE https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0a/Knossos_Bull-Leaping_Mural.jpg

In addition to the prevalence of art featuring bulls, another unique characteristic of Knossos and other palace settlements was their lack of defensive walls. This has led some to believe that the Minoans were able to live in peace with one another, almost competition free. But, conflict and competition were present as is evidenced by burials including weapons. There is also evidence of a largescale Minoan navy. The Minoans were excellent seafarers. Whereas almost all of the other civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean were land empires, albeit ones who traded and traveled via waterways, the Greek civilizations were very closely tied to the sea itself. Perhaps, then, as a naval power the Minoans simply focused more on offense and less on defense, relying on their island location for protection. Either way the Minoans were not an isolated society but traded and interacted regularly with both the Egyptians and the Hittites. Minoan frescoes have even been found in the ruins of an Egyptian (New Kingdom) palace, indicating that Minoan art was valued outside of Crete itself.

The Minoans developed their own systems of bureaucracy and writing. They used a form of writing referred to by historians as Linear A that has never been deciphered. It is clear that the text is a pre-cursor for Mycenaean Linear B and eventually Greek script. However, it is still largely unintelligible. What historians do know is that the few documents they have been able to interpret are official and economically focused. Nothing resembling literature or poetry has survived or been discovered. The dearth of cultural scripts is more surprising because the Minoans seem to have had a vibrant culture, producing vivid paintings, lamps, clothes, and pottery for both practical use and decoration. This labor specialization was possible due to the Minoan discovery of Mediterranean polyculture or the cultivation of olives, grapes, and grains, in a single interrelated agricultural system.

Large Clay tablet featuring symbols.

Linear A Text Source: <https://greekcitytimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Linear-A-Tablet.jpg>

The Minoan civilization was very rich and powerful by about 1700 BCE and it continued to prosper for centuries. Starting in the early 1400s BCE, however, a wave of invasions carried out by the Mycenaeans to the north eventually extinguished Minoan independence. By that time, the Minoans had already shared artistic techniques, trade, and their writing system with the Mycenaeans, the latter of which served as the basis of Mycenaean record keeping in a form referred to as Linear B. Thus, while the Minoans lost their political independence, Bronze-Age Greek culture as a whole became a blend of Minoan and Mycenaean influences.

The Mycenaeans

The Mycenaeans arrived in the Greek Peninsula circa 1800 BC, and invaded and conquered the Minoans a few hundred years later. All the palace complexes on Crete were destroyed around 1550, except Knossos, suggesting some sort of violent conquest of the island by the Mycenaeans. Unlike the Minoans, we do know that the Mycenaeans were the earliest speakers of Greek. They were also vibrant traders, adopting technology, ideas, and art from Anatolia, Egypt, and Syria-Palestine. From Sicily to the Levant, they exported wine, scented oils, imported metals, ivory and perhaps slaves. They were also a warrior society, with warrior kings who fought their neighbors usually in an effort to collect booty. So the Mycenaeans were more like the Sumerian city states, both sharing a common culture and language, but also vying for resources, wealth, and power often violently.

The Mycenaeans displayed their wealth in the same style as had the Minoans, re-creating a palace economy. Mycenaean society was at its peak from 1400-1200 when Kings lived in palaces whose storerooms were filled with treasures. They traveled through their kingdoms on a network of good roads, and could muster rowers and ships. Like the Minoans, the Mycenaeans were also expert seafarers. However, in contrast, to the Minoans, the Mycenaeans were extremely warlike. They traded with their neighbors but they also plundered them when the opportunity arose. Centuries later, the culture of the Mycenaeans would be celebrated in

the epic poems (nominally written by the poet Homer) *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, describing the exploits of great Mycenaean heroes like Agamemnon, Achilles, and Odysseus. Those exploits almost always revolved around warfare, immortalized in Homer's account of the Mycenaean siege of Troy, a city in western Anatolia whose ruins were discovered in the late nineteenth century CE. Mycenaean society glorified noble warfare. As war is depicted in *The Iliad*, battles consisted of the elite noble warriors of each side squaring off against each other and fighting one-on-one, with the rank-and-file of poorer soldiers providing support but usually not engaging in actual combat.

The Mycenaeans relied on the sea so heavily because Greece was a very difficult place to live. Unlike Egypt or Mesopotamia, there were no great rivers feeding fertile soil, just mountains, hills, and scrubland with poor, rocky soil. There were few mineral deposits or other natural resources that could be used or traded with other lands. As it happens, there are iron deposits in Greece but its use was not yet known by the Mycenaeans. They thus learned to cultivate olives to make olive oil and grapes to make wine, two products in great demand all over the ancient world that were profitable enough to sustain seagoing trade. It is also likely that the difficult conditions in Greece helped lead the Mycenaeans to be warlike, as they raided each other and their neighbors in search of greater wealth and opportunity. From their ships, the Mycenaeans operated as both trading partners and raiders as circumstances would dictate; it is clear from the archeological evidence that they traded with Egypt and the Near East (i.e. Lebanon and Palestine), but equally clear that they raided and warred against both vulnerable foreign territories and against one another. There is even evidence that the Hittites enacted the world's first embargo of shipping and goods against the Mycenaeans in retaliation for Mycenaean meddling in Hittite affairs.

Beyond war, Mycenaean artists excelled at pottery making and fresco painting, gold inlay work, and ivory carving. Builders constructed palaces, fortifications, bridges, huge vaulted tombs, and sophisticated drainage works. Palace officials supervised considerable economic activity, often in minute detail, including agriculture, pasturage, and artisanry. Women and children as well as men were included in the labor force. Our knowledge of the palace economy comes from thousands of clay tablets inscribed by palace scribes around 1200 BCE. They are written in a script scholars call "Linear B," an early form of Greek consisting of a combination of syllabary and ideograms (symbols that stand for words or ideas). Linear B is an adaptation of the earlier Minoan Linear A script. The piece below contains information on the distribution of bovine, pig and deer hides to shoe and saddle-makers. It is a script made up of 90 syllabic signs, ideograms and numbers, a form earlier than that used for the Homeric poems. These clay tablets were fortuitously preserved when they were baked in the Mycenaean palace of Pylos fire 250 years later.

Broke tablet, partially clay colored and partially gray with symbols carved into it.

A sample of Linear B script, the earliest Greek writing, 1450 BC https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4d/Pylos_tablet_50.10.jpg

Golden mask with the mold of a Mycenaean ruler in it.

Gold Funerary Mask dating from 1500 BCE in Mycenae. Serves as an excellent example of Mycenaean gold work. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:M...fAgamemnon.jpg>

In the 13th century some unknown threat prompted the Mycenaean kings to fortify the palaces at Mycenae and elsewhere with stone walls. By 1200 BCE most of the fortified sites had been destroyed. Afterward, only a few people continued to live in the old towns. It appears likely that Mycenaean Greece suffered from a combination of internal weakness and foreign invasion similar to that experienced by most of the eastern Mediterranean around 1250-1100, the invasion of the Sea Peoples.

The Collapse of the Bronze Age

The Bronze Age at its height witnessed several large empires and peoples in regular contact with one another through both trade and war. The pharaohs of the New Kingdom corresponded with the kings and queens of the Hittite Empire and the rulers of the Kassites and Assyrians; it was normal for rulers to refer to one another as "brother" or "sister." Each empire warred with its rivals at times, but it also worked with them to protect trade routes. Certain Mesopotamian languages, especially Akkadian, became international languages of diplomacy, allowing travelers and merchants to communicate wherever they went. Even the warlike and relatively unsophisticated Mycenaeans played a role on the periphery of this ongoing network of exchange.

That said, most of the states involved in this network fell into ruin between 1200 – 1100 BCE. The great empires collapsed, a collapse that it took over 100 years to recover from, with new empires arising in the aftermath. There is still no definitive explanation for why this collapse occurred, not least because the states that had been keeping records stopped doing so as their bureaucracies disintegrated. The surviving evidence seems to indicate that some combination of events – some caused by humans and some environmental – probably combined to spell the end to the Bronze Age.

Around 1050 BCE, two of the victims of the collapse, the New Kingdom of Egypt and the Hittite Empire, left clear indications in their records that drought had undermined their grain stores and their social stability. In recent years archaeologists have presented strong scientific evidence that the climate of the entire region became warmer and more arid, supporting the idea

of a series of debilitating droughts. Even the greatest of the Bronze Age empires existed in a state of relative precarity, relying on regular harvests in order to not just feed their population, but sustain the governments, armies, and building projects of their states as a whole. Thus, environmental disaster could have played a key role in undermining the political stability of whole regions at the time.

Even earlier, starting in 1207 BCE, there are indications that a series of invasions swept through the entire eastern Mediterranean region. The New Kingdom of Egypt survived the invasion of the “sea people,” some of whom historians are now certain went on to settle in Canaan (they are remembered in the Hebrew Bible as the Philistines against whom the early Hebrews struggled), but the state was badly weakened in the process. In the following decades, other groups that remain impossible to identify precisely appear to have sacked the Mycenaean palace complexes and various cities across the Near East. While Assyria in northern Mesopotamia survived the collapse, it lost its territories in the south to Elam, a warlike kingdom based in present-day southern Iran.

The identity of the foreign invaders is not clear from the scant surviving record. One distinct possibility is that the “bandits” (synonymous in many cases with “barbarians” in ancient accounts) blamed for destabilizing the region might have been a combination of foreign invaders and peasants displaced by drought and social chaos who joined the invasions out of desperation. It is thus easy to imagine a confluence of environmental disaster, foreign invasion, and peasant rebellion ultimately destroying the Bronze Age states. What is clear is that the invasions took place over the course of decades – from roughly 1180 to 1130 BCE – and that they must have played a major role in the collapse of the Bronze Age political and economic system.

For roughly 100 years, from 1200 BCE to 1100 BCE, the networks of trade and diplomacy considered above were either disrupted or destroyed completely. Egypt recovered and new dynasties of pharaohs were sometimes able to recapture some of the glory of the past Egyptian kingdoms in their building projects and the power of their armies, but in the long run Egypt proved vulnerable to foreign invasion from that point on. Mycenaean civilization collapsed utterly, leading to a Greek “dark age” that lasted some three centuries. The Hittite Empire never recovered in Anatolia, while in Mesopotamia the most noteworthy survivor of the collapse – the Assyrian state – went on to become the greatest power the region had yet seen.

The decline of the Bronze Age led to the beginning of the Iron Age. Bronze was dependent on functioning trade networks: tin was only available in large quantities from mines in what is today Afghanistan, so the collapse of long-distance trade made bronze impossible to manufacture. Iron, however, is a useful metal by itself without the need of alloys (although early forms of steel – iron alloyed with carbon, which is readily available everywhere – were around almost from the start of the Iron Age itself). Without copper and tin available, some innovative smiths figured out that it was possible, through a complicated process of forging, to create iron implements that were hard and durable. Iron was available in various places throughout the Middle East and Mediterranean regions, so it did not require long-distance trade as bronze had. The Iron Age thus began around 1100 BCE, right as the Bronze Age ended.

One cautionary note in discussing this shift: iron was very difficult to work with compared to bronze, and its use spread slowly. For example, while iron use became increasingly common starting in about 1100 BCE, the later Egyptian kingdoms did not use large amounts of iron tools until the seventh century BCE, a full five centuries after the Iron Age itself began. Likewise, it took a long time for “weaponized” iron to be available, since making iron weapons and armor that were hard enough to endure battle conditions took a long time. Once trade networks recovered, bronze weapons were still the norm in societies that used iron tools in other ways for many centuries.

Outside of Greece, which suffered its long “dark age” following the collapse of the Bronze Age, a number of prosperous societies and states emerged relatively quickly at the start of the Iron Age. They re-established trade routes and initiated a new phase of Middle Eastern politics that eventually led to the largest empires the world had yet seen.

Iron Age Cultures and States

The Phoenicians

The region of Canaan, which corresponds with modern Palestine, Israel, and Lebanon, had long been a site of prosperity and innovation. Merchants from Canaan traded throughout the Middle East, its craftsmen were renowned for their work, and it was even a group of Canaanites – the Hyksos – who briefly ruled Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period. Along with their neighbors the Hebrews, the most significant of the ancient Canaanites were the Phoenicians, whose cities (politically independent but united in culture and language) were centered in present-day Lebanon.

Map of Phoenician territory in 1000. Map shows Phoenicia in green covering most of the Holy Land.

Phoenicia circa 1000 <https://static.wikia.nocookie.net/ro...20200704121134>

Phoenician is a term coined from the Greek word *phoinix*, which Greeks likely used to refer to the color of the purple dyes produced by the Phoenicians. The Phoenicians were not a particularly warlike people. Instead, they are remembered for being travelers and merchants, particularly by sea. They traveled farther than any other ancient people; sometime around 600 BCE, according to the Greek historian Herodotus, a Phoenician expedition even sailed around Africa over the course of three years (if that actually happened, it was an achievement that would not be accomplished again for almost 2,000 years). The Phoenicians established colonies all over the shores of the Mediterranean, where they provided anchors in a new international trade network that eventually replaced the one destroyed with the fall of the Bronze Age. Likewise, Phoenician cities served as the crossroads of trade for goods that originated as far away as England (metals were mined in England and shipped all the way to the Near East via overland routes). The most prominent Phoenician city was Carthage in North Africa, which centuries later became the great rival of the Roman Republic.

Around 800 BCE, Phoenicians began trading across the Mediterranean, primarily with Greeks and other groups in the Mediterranean. Some of the most prominent resources they traded were lumber from Lebanon and dyes created from the shells of sea snails (murex). One of the most prominent Phoenician trading colonies was Carthage, which was a stepping stone for Phoenicians trading for tin as far east as the Iberian peninsula. Carthaginians maintained linguistic and ethnic ties to the Phoenicians until the fall of Carthage in the Third Punic War circa 146 CE. The Phoenicians produced other goods, such as carved ivory, metalwork, and textiles. Sidon, a major Phoenician city, was renowned throughout the Mediterranean and its goods and wares were mentioned in Homer's *Illiad* in two different passages.

Phoenician trade was not, however, the most important legacy of their society. Instead, of their various accomplishments, none was to have a more lasting influence than that of their writing system. As early as 1300 BCE, building on the work of earlier Canaanites, the Phoenicians developed a syllabic alphabet that formed the basis of Greek and Roman writing much later. A syllabic alphabet has characters that represent sounds, rather than characters that represent things or concepts. These alphabets are much smaller and less complex than symbolic ones. It is possible for a non-specialist to learn to read and write using a syllabic alphabet much more quickly than using a symbolic one (like Egyptian hieroglyphics or Chinese characters). Thus, in societies like that of the Phoenicians, there was no need for a scribal class, since even normal merchants could become literate. Ultimately, the Greeks and then the Romans adopted Phoenician writing, and the alphabets used in most European languages in the present is a direct descendant of the Phoenician one as a result. To this day, the English word "phonetic," meaning the correspondence of symbols and sounds, is directly related to the word "Phoenician."

The Phoenician mastery of sailing and the use of the syllabic alphabet were both boons to trade. Another was a practice – the use of currency – originating in the remnants of the Hittite lands. Lydia, a kingdom in western Anatolia, controlled significant sources of gold (giving rise to the Greek legend of King Midas, who turned everything he touched into gold). In roughly 650 BCE, the Lydians came up with the idea of using lumps of gold and silver that had a standard weight. Soon, they formalized the system by stamping marks into the lumps to create the first true (albeit crude) coins, called staters. Currency revolutionized ancient economics, greatly increasing the ability of merchants to travel far afield and buy foreign goods, because they no longer had to travel with huge amounts of goods with them to trade. It also made tax collection more efficient, strengthening ancient kingdoms and empires.

The Assyrians

While the Phoenicians played a major role in jumpstarting long-distance trade after the collapse of the Bronze Age, they did not create a strong united state. Such a state emerged farther east, however: alone of the major states of the Bronze Age, the Assyrian kingdom in northern Mesopotamia survived. Around 1200 BCE the Assyrian state collapsed during the larger era of international crisis, but they held onto a small homeland of about 5,000 square miles, roughly the size of Connecticut. The survivors emerged with an aggressive, expansionist ideology. Assyria's greatest successes came in the 8th and 7th centuries. One by one Babylonia, Syria, the kingdom of Israel, and even much of Egypt fell to the Assyrians.

Assyria became the first state to rule the two great river valleys of the ancient Near East, the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates. Probably because of their extreme focus on militarism, the Assyrians were able to hold on to their core cities while the states around them collapsed. During the Iron Age, the Assyrians became the most powerful empire the world had ever seen. The Assyrians were the first empire in world history to systematically conquer almost all of their neighbors using a powerful standing army and go on to control the conquered territory for hundreds of years. The key to Assyria's success was its army-100,000 to 200,000 men strong-which made an unforgettable impression on observers and foes. The Israelite prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem said of Assyrian soldiers: "Their arrows are sharpened, and all their bows bent, their horses' hoofs are like flint, their chariot

wheels like the whirlwind. Their growling is like that of a lion.” In addition to this description, he might have added that Assyrian spearmen, archers, and cavalymen were equipped with weapons and armor of iron. They represented the pinnacle of military power and bureaucratic organization of all of the civilizations considered thus far.

An Assyrian King/warrior atop a galloping horse ready to shoot an arrow.

Ashurbanipal king of the world, king of Assyria https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ashurbanipal_king_of_the_world.jpg

The Assyrians were shaped by their environment. Their region in northern Mesopotamia, Ashur, has no natural borders, and thus they needed a strong military to survive; they were constantly forced to fight other civilized peoples from the west and south, and barbarians from the north. The Assyrians held that their patron god, a god of war also called Ashur, demanded the subservience of other peoples and their respective gods. Thus, their conquests were justified by their religious beliefs as well as a straightforward desire for dominance. Eventually, they dispatched annual military expeditions and organized conscription, fielding large standing armies of native Assyrian soldiers who marched out every year to conquer more territory.

The period of political breakdown in Mesopotamia following the collapse of the Bronze Age ended in about 880 BCE when the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II began a series of wars to conquer Mesopotamia and Canaan. Over the next century, the (Neo-)Assyrians became the mightiest empire yet seen in the Middle East. They combined terror tactics with various technological and organizational innovations. They would deport whole towns or even small cities when they defied the will of the Assyrian kings, resettling conquered peoples as indentured workers far from their homelands. They tortured and mutilated defeated enemies, even skinning them alive, when faced with any threat of resistance or rebellion. The formerly-independent Phoenician city-states within the Assyrian zone of control surrendered, paid tribute, and deferred to Assyrian officials rather than face their wrath in battle.

Carving of Assyrian warriors skinning alive their captives.

Assyrians Playing Captives Alive https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Assyrian_warriors_skinning_alive.jpg

The Assyrians were the most effective military force of the ancient world up to that point. They outfitted their large armies with well-made iron weapons (they appear to be the first major kingdom to manufacture iron weapons in large numbers). They invented a messenger service to maintain lines of communication and control, with messengers on horseback and waystations to replace tired horses, so that they could communicate across their empire. All of their conquered territories were obliged to provide annual tributes of wealth in precious metals and trade goods which funded the state and the military.

The Assyrians introduced two innovations in military technology and organization that were of critical importance: a permanent cavalry, the first of any state in the world, and a large standing army of trained infantry. It took until the middle of the eighth century BCE for selective breeding of horses to produce real “war horses” large enough to carry a heavily armed and armored man into and through an entire battle. The Assyrians adopted horse archery from the barbarians they fought from the north, which along with swords and short lances wielded from horseback made chariots permanently obsolete. The major focus of Assyrian taxation and bureaucracy was to keep the army funded and trained, which allowed them to completely dominate their neighbors for well over a century.

By the time of the reign of Assyrian king Tiglath-Pilezer III (r. 745 – 727 BCE), the Assyrians had pushed their borders to the Mediterranean in the west and to Persia (present-day Iran) in the east. Their conquests culminated in 671 BCE when king Esarhaddon (r. 681 – 668 BCE) invaded Egypt and conquered not only the entire Egyptian kingdom, but northern Nubia as well. This is the first time in history that both of the founding river valleys of ancient civilization, those of the Nile and of Mesopotamia, were under the control of a single political entity.

Map of the Assyrian Empire at its height covering all of Mesopotamia, into Greece, then south through the Holy Land and into Egypt.

The expansion of the Assyrian Empire, originating from northern Mesopotamia https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9a/Map_of_the_Assyrian_Empire.jpg

The style of Assyrian rule ensured the hatred of conquered peoples. They demanded constant tribute and taxation and funneled luxury goods back to their main cities. They did not try to set up sustainable economies or assimilate conquered peoples into a shared culture, instead skimming off the top of the entire range of conquered lands. Their style of rule is well known because their kings built huge monuments to themselves in which they boasted about the lands they conquered and the tribute they exacted along the way. The Assyrians also engaged in mass deportations. They uprooted the people of a conquered country, resettled them far away—often in central Assyria itself—and colonized their land with Assyrian loyalists. The so-called Ten Lost Tribes of Israel— the people of the northern Israelite kingdom were conquered by Assyria in 722 BCE. Many of them were transported to Mesopotamia. Assyrian policy was the result of careful calculation. The political goals were to punish rebellion, the economic goals to create a varied labor force. For example, although it is estimated that the Assyrians deported several million people, they

deported not whole populations but a carefully chosen cross section of professions. They also deported entire families together, to weaken deportees emotional ties to their former homes.

While their subjects experienced Assyrian rule as militarily-enforced tyranny, Assyrian kings were proud of the cultural and intellectual heritage of Mesopotamia and supported learning and scholarship. The one conquered city in their empire that was allowed a significant degree of autonomy was Babylon, out of respect for its role as a center of Mesopotamian culture. Assyrian scribes collected and copied the learning and literature of the entire Middle East. Sometime after 660 BCE, the king Assurbanipal ordered the collection of all of the texts of his kingdom, including the ones from conquered lands, and he went on to create a massive library to house them. Parts of this library survived and provide one of the most important sources of information that scholars have on the beliefs, languages, and literature of the ancient Middle East.

The Assyrians finally fell in 609 BCE, overthrown by a series of rebellions. Their control of Egypt lasted barely two generations, brought to an end when the puppet pharaoh put in place by the Assyrians rebelled and drove them from Egypt. Shortly thereafter, a Babylonian king, Nabopolassar, led a rebellion that finally succeeded in sacking Nineveh, the Assyrian capital. The Babylonians were allied with clans of horse-riding warriors in Persia called the Medes, and between them the Assyrian state was destroyed completely. Nabopolassar went on to found the “Neo-Babylonian” empire, which became the most important power in Mesopotamia for the next few generations.

Neo-Babylon

The Neo-Babylonians adopted some of the terror tactics of the Assyrians; they, too, deported conquered enemies as servants and slaves. The Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II (Nebuchadnezzar in the Hebrew bible) conquered the kingdom of Judah (in southern Palestine) in 598 and destroyed Jerusalem in 586. He deported many thousands of Judeans to Babylon, an event remembered by Christians and Jews as the Babylonian Captivity. Most of the rest of Western Asia also fell to Nebuchadnezzar’s troops.

The neo-Babylonian rulers tried to re-capture the days of glory of Hammurabi. And they succeeded for decades. Their most enduring accomplishment was rebuilding Babylon on a grand scale. In addition to the city’s numerous temples, shrines, and altars, he created the “Hanging Gardens” celebrated by later Greek authors. They described the structure as a large terraced complex that Nebuchadnezzar built for his queen, although it may have been a plant-covered Ziggurat.

A multi-tiered building featuring terraces full of plants.

Imagining of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon <https://www.britannica.com/art/Mesopotamia/1/47575/5827>

The Neo-Babylonians and Assyrians both made great strides in astronomy. Their primary motive was not scientific, but religious, as they believed that the movement of heavenly bodies influenced human affairs directly. Nonetheless, the study of astrology did lead to advances in scientific observations of the heavens. Assyrian priests produced relatively accurate circular diagrams that showed the positions of the major constellations, stars, and planets over the course of years. By 600 BCE Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian astronomers could predict solstices, equinoxes, and lunar eclipses. Astronomy in Mesopotamia reached its heights in the centuries after 500 BCE. For example, the zodiac, a diagram showing the movement of the sun and planets relative to the constellations, was invented in Persian-ruled Babylon in the 4th century BCE. In the third and second centuries BCE, when Babylonia was under Hellenistic Greek rule, Mesopotamian scientists made impressive advances in mathematical astronomy, composing tables that could be used to calculate movements of earth’s moon and nearby planets. More sophisticated mathematical astronomy would not be produced in the West until the Scientific Revolution of the 16th century CE.

But the Neo-Babylonians and Assyrians also differed in important ways. Most significantly, the Neo-Babylonians were much more focused on trade throughout the region. They built new roads and canals and encouraged long-distance trade throughout their lands. They were often at war with Egypt, which also tried to take advantage of the fall of the Assyrians to seize new land, but even when the two powers were at war Egyptian merchants were still welcome throughout the Neo-Babylonian empire. A combination of flourishing trade and high taxes led to huge wealth for the king and court, and among other things led to the construction of noteworthy works of monumental architecture to decorate their capital. The Babylonians inherited the scientific traditions of ancient Mesopotamia, becoming the greatest astronomers and mathematicians yet seen, able to predict eclipses and keep highly detailed calendars. In the end, however, they were the last of the great ancient Mesopotamian empires that existed independently. Less than 100 years after their successful rebellion against the Assyrians, they were conquered by what became the greatest empire in the ancient world to date: the Persians, described in a later chapter.

The Hebrews/Israelites

Of the Bronze and Iron-Age cultures, one played perhaps the most vital role in the history of Western Civilization: the Hebrews or the Israelites. The Hebrews, a people who first created a kingdom in the ancient land of Canaan, were among the most important cultures of the western world, comparable to the ancient Greeks or Romans. But, unlike the Greeks and Romans, the ancient Hebrews were not known for being scientists or philosophers or conquerors. It was their religion, Judaism, that proved to be of crucial importance in world history, both for its own sake and for being the religious root of Christianity and Islam. Together, these three religions are referred to as the “Religions of the Book,” because they share a set of beliefs first written down in Hebrew holy texts and they all venerate the same God. (Note: it should be emphasized that the approach taken here is that of secular historical scholarship: what is known about the historical origins of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam based on empirical research carried out by historians and archaeologists).

The Hebrews or Israelites argued that human achievement was meaningless, they said that only the power of divinity matters. There was/is only one god, they said; all other gods are false. The one true god had revealed himself not to the awesome, imperialistic Assyrians, but to the less powerful Hebrews, the ancient Jews. They founded Western tradition of religion. The God of ancient Israel eventually gave rise to the God of Christianity and of Islam as well as of modern Judaism. The most significant influence of the Israelites comes from the impact of the book that became their sacred scripture, otherwise known as the Hebrew Bible. This book not only affected Judaism but also Christianity and Islam. Unfortunately, the Bible only gives us hints at the origins and history of the Israelites, most of it being focused on God’s moral plan.

Thus, the history of the ancient Hebrews is a difficult subject. The most important source we have about it is the Hebrew Bible itself, which describes in detail the travails of the Hebrews, their enslavement, battles, triumphs, and accomplishments. The problem with using the Hebrew Bible as a historical source is that it is written in a mythic mode – like the literature of every other Iron Age civilization, many events affecting the Hebrews are explained by direct divine intervention rather than a more prosaic historical approach. Also, the Hebrew Bible was written some 400 – 600 years after the events it describes. Thus, what is known about the ancient Hebrews consists of the stories of the Hebrew Bible supplemented by the archaeological record and the information about the Hebrews available from other historical sources.

According to the Hebrew Bible, the first patriarch (male clan leader) of the Hebrews was Abraham, a man who led the Hebrews away from Mesopotamia in about 1900 BCE. The Hebrews left the Mesopotamian city of Ur and became wandering herders; in fact, the word Hebrew originally meant “wanderer” or “nomad.” Abraham had a son, Isaac, and Isaac had a son, Jacob, collectively known as the Patriarchs in the Hebrew Bible. The Mesopotamian origins of the Hebrews are unclear from sources outside of the Hebrew Bible itself; archaeological evidence indicates that the Hebrews may have actually been from the Levant, with trade contact with the Mesopotamians, rather than coming from Mesopotamia.

According to Jewish belief, by far the most important thing Abraham did was agree to the Covenant, the promise made between the God Yahweh (the “name” of God is derived from the Hebrew characters for the phrase “I am who I am,” the enigmatic response of God when asked for His name by the prophet Moses) and the Hebrews. The Covenant stated that in return for their devotion and worship, and the circumcision of all Hebrew males, the Hebrews would receive from Yahweh a “land of milk and honey,” a place of peace and prosperity of their own for all time.

Then, in about 1600 BCE, the Hebrews went to Egypt to escape famine and were welcomed by the Hyksos dynasty, if they were not the Hyksos to begin with (during the Second Intermediate Period of ancient Egypt). The Hyksos were fellow Canaanites, after all, and they appear to have encouraged the Hebrews to stay. According to the Hebrew Bible, with the rise of the New Kingdom and expulsion of the Hyksos the Hebrews were enslaved, with their leader Moses leading them away sometime around 1300 – 1200 BCE. There is little archaeological or Egyptian textual evidence to support the story of the complete enslavement of the Hebrews, besides references in Egyptian sources to Canaanite laborers. A pharaoh, Merneptah, makes a passing reference to a people he simply called “Israel” as living in Canaan in 1207 BCE, which is the strongest evidence of the Hebrews’ presence in Canaan in the late Bronze Age.

According to the Hebrew Bible, Moses was not only responsible for leading the Hebrews from Egypt, but for modifying the Covenant. In addition to the exclusive worship of Yahweh and the circumcision of all male Hebrews, the Covenant was amended by Yahweh to include specific rules of behavior: the Hebrews had to abide by the 10 Commandments in order for Yahweh to guarantee their prosperity in the promised land. Having agreed to the Commandments, the Hebrews then arrived in the region that was to become their first kingdom, Israel.

As noted above, the tales present in the Hebrew Bible cannot generally be verified with empirical evidence. They also bear the imprint of earlier traditions: many stories in the Hebrew Bible are taken from earlier Mesopotamian legends. The story of Moses

is very close to the account of Sargon the Great's rise from obscurity in Akkadian tradition, and the flood legend (described in the Bible's first book, Genesis) is taken directly from the Epic of Gilgamesh, although the motivation of the Mesopotamian gods versus that of Yahweh in those two stories is very different: the Mesopotamian gods are cruel and capricious, while the flood of Yahweh is sent as a punishment for the sins of humankind.

Archaeological evidence has established that the Hebrews definitely started settling in Canaan by about 1200 BCE. The Egyptian record from 1207 BCE noted above consists of the pharaoh boasting about his conquests in Canaan, including Israel. The story of Moses leading the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt could also have been based on the events associated with the collapse of the Bronze Age, the great century or so of upheaval in which nomadic raiders joined forces with oppressed peasants and slaves to topple the great empires of the Bronze Age. Some of those people, probably Canaanites who had been subjects of the pharaohs, did seize freedom, and they could well have included the Hebrews.

The Kings and Kingdoms

While the early Hebrews were communalists, meaning they shared most goods in common within their clans (referred to as the twelve "tribes" in the Hebrew Bible), conflicts with the Philistines, another Canaanite people on the coast, led them to appoint a king, Saul, in about 1020 BCE. The Philistines were likely one of the groups of "Sea Peoples" who attacked the New Kingdom of Egypt. The Philistines were a small but powerful kingdom. They were armed with iron and they fought the Hebrews to a standstill initially – at one point they captured the Ark of the Covenant, containing the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written. Under the leadership of their kings, however, the Hebrews pushed back the Philistines and eventually defeated them completely.

Saul's successor was David, one of his former lieutenants, and David's was his son Solomon. The Hebrew kings founded a capital at Jerusalem, which had been a Philistine town. The kings created a professional army, a caste of scribes, and a bureaucracy. All of this being noted, the kingdom itself was not particularly large or powerful; Jerusalem at the time was a hill town of about 5,000 people. Israel emerged as one of the many smaller kingdoms surrounded by powerful neighbors, engaging in trade and waging small-scale wars depending on the circumstances.

Solomon was an effective ruler, forming trade relationships with nearby kingdoms and overseeing the growing wealth of Israel. He also lived in a manner consistent with other Iron Age kings, with many wives and a whole harem of concubines as well. Likewise, he taxed both trade passing through the Hebrew kingdom and his own subjects. His demands for free labor from the Hebrew people amounted to one day in every three spent working on palaces and royal building projects – an enormous amount from a contemporary perspective, but one that was at least comparable to the redistributive economies of nearby kingdoms. Thus, while his subjects came to resent aspects of his rule, neither was it markedly more exploitative than the norm in the region as a whole.

The most important building project under Solomon was the great Temple of Jerusalem, the center of the Yahwist religion. There, a class of priests carried out rituals and worship of Yahweh. Members of the religion believed that God's attention was centered on the Temple. Likewise, the rituals were similar to those practiced among various Middle Eastern religions, focusing on the sacrifice and burning of animals as offerings to God. David and Solomon supported the priesthood, and there was thus a direct link between the growing Yahwist faith and the political structure of Israel.

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A Peak inside of Solomon's Temple...

The northern kingdom of Israel was larger, richer, and more cosmopolitan. Israel's capital was the city of Samaria, and its people became known as Samaritans; they appear to have interacted with neighboring peoples frequently and many of them remained polytheists (people who worship more than one god) despite the growing movement to focus worship exclusively on Yahweh. The southern kingdom of Judah was poorer, smaller, and more conservative; it was in Judah that the Prophetic Movement (see below)

came into being. It is from Judah that we get the word Jew: the Jews were the people of Judah.

With its riches, Israel was more attractive to invaders. When the Assyrian Empire expanded beyond Mesopotamia, it first conquered Israel, then eventually destroyed it outright when the Israelites rose up against them (this occurred in 722 BCE). The inhabitants of Israel either fled to Judah or were absorbed into the Assyrian Empire, losing their cultural identity in the process. This tragedy was later remembered as the origin of the “lost tribes” of Israel – Hebrews who lost their identity and their religion because of the Assyrian enslavement. Judah was overrun by the Assyrians, but Jerusalem withstood a siege long enough to convince the Assyrians to accept bribes to leave, and instead became a satellite kingdom dominated by the Assyrians but still ruled by a Hebrew king. (Judah was saved in part due to a plague that struck the Assyrian army, but it still ended up a tributary of the Assyrians, paying annual tributes and answering to an Assyrian official.)

In Judah, there were two prevailing patterns: vassalage and rebellion. Judah was simply too small to avoid paying tribute to various neighboring powers, but its people were proud and defensive of their independence, so every generation or so there were uprisings. The worst case was in 586 BCE, when the Jews rose up against the Neo-Babylonian Empire that succeeded the Assyrians. The Babylonians burned Jerusalem, along with Solomon’s Temple, to the ground, and they enslaved tens of thousands of Jews. The Jews were deported to Babylon, just as the Israelites had been deported to Assyrian territory about 150 years earlier – this event is referred to as the “Babylonian Captivity” of the Jews.

Two generations later, when the Neo-Babylonian empire itself fell to the Persians, the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great allowed all of the enslaved people of the Babylonians to return to their homelands, so the Babylonian Captivity came to an end and the Jews returned to Judah, where they rebuilt the Temple. That being noted, what is referred to as the Jewish “diaspora,” meaning the geographical dispersion of the Jews, really began in 538 BCE, because many Jews chose to remain in Babylon and, soon, other cities in the Persian Empire. Since they continued to practice Judaism and carry on Jewish traditions, the notion of a people scattered across different lands but still united by culture and religion came into being.

After being freed by Cyrus, the Jews were still part of the Persian Empire, ruled by a Persian governor (called a “satrap”). For most of the rest of their history, the Jews were able to maintain their distinct cultural identity and their religion, but rarely their political independence. The Jews went from being ruled by the Persians to the Greeks to the Romans (although they did occasionally seize independence for a time), and were then eventually scattered across the Roman Empire. The real hammer-blow of the Diaspora was in the 130s CE, when the Romans destroyed much of Jerusalem and forced almost all of the Jews into exile – the word diaspora itself means “scattering,” and with the destruction of the Jewish kingdom by Rome there would be no Jewish state again until the foundation of the modern nation of Israel in 1948 CE.

The Yahwist Religion and Judaism

The Hebrew Bible claims that the Jews as a people worshipped Yahweh exclusively from the time of the Covenant, albeit with the worship of “false” gods from neighboring lands sometimes undermining their unity (and inviting divine retribution on the part of Yahweh for those transgressions). There is no historical or archaeological evidence that suggests a single unified religion in Israel or Judah during the period of the united Hebrew monarchy or post-Solomon split between Israel and Judah, however (the Hebrew Bible itself was written down centuries later). A more likely scenario is that the Hebrews, like every other culture in the ancient world, worshipped a variety of deities, with Yahweh in a place of particular importance and centrality. A comparable case would be that of the Assyrians, who emphasized the worship of Ashur but who acknowledged the existence of other gods (including Yahweh).

As the Hebrews became more powerful, however, their religion changed dramatically. A tradition of prophets, later remembered as the Prophetic Movement, arose among certain people who sought to represent the poorer and more beleaguered members of the community, calling for a return to the more communal and egalitarian society of the past. The Prophetic Movement claimed that the Hebrews should worship Yahweh exclusively, and that Yahweh had a special relationship with the Hebrews that set Him apart as a God and them apart as a people. The Prophetic Movement lasted from the period before the Assyrian invasion of Israel through the Babylonian Captivity of the Jews, from about 750 BCE – 550 BCE.

This new set of beliefs, regarding the special relationship of a single God to the Hebrews, is referred to historically as the Yahwist religion. It was not yet “Judaism,” since it did not yet disavow the belief that other gods might exist, nor did it include all of the rituals and traditions associated with later Judaism. Initially, most of the Hebrews continued to at least acknowledge the existence of other gods – this phenomenon is called henotheism, the term for the worship of only one god in the context of believing in the existence of more than one god (i.e. many gods exist, but we only worship one of them). Over time, this changed into true monotheism: the belief that there is only one god, and that all other “gods” are illusory.

The Prophetic Movement attacked both polytheism and the Yahwist establishment centered on the Temple of Jerusalem (they blamed the latter for ignoring the plight of the common people and the poor). The prophets were hostile to both the political power structure and to deviation from the exclusive worship of Yahweh. The prophets were also responsible for enunciating the idea that Yahweh was the only god, in part in reaction to the demands of Assyria that all subjects acknowledge the Assyrian god Ashur as the supreme god. In other words, the claim of the Prophetic Movement was not only that Yahweh was superior to Ashur, but that Ashur was not really a god in the first place.

This is, so far as historians know, the first instance in world history in which the idea of a single all-powerful deity emerged among any people, anywhere (although some scholars consider Akhenaten's attempted religious revolution in Egypt a quasi-monotheism). Up to this point, all religions held that there were many gods or spirits and that they had some kind of direct, concrete connections to specific areas. Likewise, the gods in most religions were largely indifferent to the actions of individuals so long as the proper prayers were recited and rituals performed. Ethical conduct did not have much influence on the gods ("ethical conduct" itself, of course, differing greatly from culture to culture), what mattered was that the gods were adequately appeased.

In contrast, early Judaism developed the belief that Yahweh was deeply invested in the actions of His chosen people both as a group and as individuals, regardless of their social station. There are various stories in which Yahweh judged people, even kings like David and Solomon, making it clear that all people were known to Yahweh and no one could escape His judgment. The key difference between this belief and the idea of divine anger in other ancient religions was that Yahweh only punished those who deserved it. He was not capricious and cruel like the Mesopotamian gods, for instance, nor flighty and given to bickering like the Greek gods.

The early vision of Yahweh present in the Yahwist faith was of a powerful but not all-powerful being whose authority and power was focused on the Hebrew people and the territory of the Hebrew kingdom only. In other words, the priests of Yahweh did not claim that he ruled over all people, everywhere, only that he was the God of the Hebrews and their land. That started to change when the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE. Many of the Hebrews regarded this disaster as proof of the corruption of the rich and powerful and the righteousness of the Prophetic Movement. Even though the loss of Israel was an obvious blow against the Hebrews as a people, the worship of Yahweh as the exclusive god of the Hebrews gained considerable support in Judah. Likewise, as the exclusive worship of Yahweh grew in importance among the Jews (now sundered from the other Hebrews, who had been enslaved), the concept of Yahweh's omnipotence and omnipresence grew as well.

The most important reforms of Hebrew religion occurred in the seventh century BCE. A Judean king, Josiah, insisted on the imposition of strict monotheism and the compilation of the first books of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah, in 621 BCE. In the process, the Yahwist priesthood added the book of Deuteronomy to older sacred writings (the priests claimed to have discovered Deuteronomy, but almost all historians of ancient religion believe that it was simply written at the time). When many Jews left the religion after Josiah's death, the prophet Jeremiah warned them that disaster would ensue, and when the Neo-Babylonians conquered Judah in 586 BCE, it seemed to validate his warning. Likewise, during the Babylonian Captivity, the prophet Ezekiel predicted the liberation of the Hebrews if they stuck to their faith, and they were indeed freed thanks to Cyrus (who admired older cultures like the Hebrews, since the Persians were originally semi-nomadic).

The sacred writings compiled during these events were all in the mode of the new monotheism. In these writings, Yahweh had always been there as the exclusive god of the Hebrew people and had promised them a land of abundance and peace (i.e. Israel) in return for their exclusive worship of Him. In these histories, the various defeats of the Hebrew people were explained by corruption from within, often the result of Hebrews straying from the Covenant and worshiping other gods.

These reforms were complete when the Neo-Babylonians conquered Judah in 586 BCE and enslaved tens of thousands of the Hebrews. The impact of this event was enormous, because it led to the belief that Yahweh could not be bound to a single place. He was no longer just the god of a single people in a single land, worshiped at a single temple, but instead became a boundless God, omnipotent and omnipresent. The special relationship between Him and the Hebrews remained, as did the promise of a kingdom of peace, but the Hebrews now held that He was available to them wherever they went and no matter what happened to them.

In Babylon itself, the thousands of Hebrews in exile not only arrived at this idea, but developed the strict set of religious customs, of marriage laws and ceremonies, of dietary laws (i.e. keeping a kosher diet), and the duty of all Hebrew men to study the sacred books, all in order to preserve their identity. Once the Torah was compiled as a single sacred text by the prophet Ezra, one of the official duties of the scholarly leaders of the Jewish community, the rabbis, was to carefully re-copy it, character by character, ensuring that it would stay the same no matter where the Jews went. The result was a "mobile tradition" of Judaism in which the Jews could travel anywhere and take their religion with them. This would become important in the future, when they were forcibly taken from Judah by the Romans and scattered across Europe and North Africa. The ability of the Jews to bring their religious tradition with them would allow them to survive as a distinct people despite ongoing persecution in the absence of a

stable homeland.

Another important aspect of Judaism was its egalitarian ethical system. The radical element of Jewish religion, as well as the Jewish legal system that arose from it, the Talmud, was the idea that all Jews were equal before God, rather than certain among them having a closer relationship to God. This is the first time a truly egalitarian element enters into ethics; no other people had proposed the idea of the essential equality of all human beings (although some aspects of Egyptian religion came close). Of all the legacies of Judaism, this may be the most important, although it would take until the modern era for political movements to take up the idea of essential equality and translate them into a concrete social, legal, and political system.

What all of the cultures considered in this chapter have in common is that they were more dynamic and, in the case of the empires, more powerful than earlier Mesopotamian (and even Egyptian) states. In a sense, the empires of the Bronze Age and, especially, the Iron Age represented different experiments in how to build and maintain larger economic systems and political units than had been possible earlier. The other major change is that it now becomes possible to discuss and examine the interactions between the various kingdoms and empires, not just what happened with them internally, since the entire region from Greece to Mesopotamia was now in sustained contact through trade, warfare, and diplomacy.

Likewise, some of the ideas and beliefs that originated in the Bronze and Iron Ages – most obviously Judaism – would go on to play a profound role in shaping the subsequent history of not just Western Civilization, but much of world history. Monotheism and the concept of the essential spiritual equality of human beings began as beliefs among a tiny minority of people in the ancient world, but they would go on to become enormously influential in the long run.

Chapter 4: The Rise of Greece and Persia

Many Western Civilization textbooks begin with the ancient Greeks. As noted in the introduction of this book, however, there are some problems with taking that approach, most importantly the fact that starting with the Greeks overlooks the fact that the Greeks did not invent the essential elements of civilization itself as we have seen in the previous three chapters.

That being noted, the Greeks were unquestionably historically important and influential. They can be justly credited with creating forms of political organization and approaches to learning that were and remain hugely influential. Among other things, the Greeks carried out the first experiments in democratic government, invented a form of philosophy and learning concerned with empirical observation and rationality, created forms of drama like comedy and tragedy, and devised the method of researching and writing history itself.

The Greek Dark Age

During the Bronze Age, as described in the last chapter, the Minoans and Mycenaeans were two of the civilizations that were part of the international trade and diplomacy networks of the Mediterranean and Middle East. The Minoans were a major seafaring civilization based on the island of Crete. They created huge palace complexes, magnificent artwork, and great wealth. They eventually vanished as a distinct culture, most likely after they were conquered and absorbed by the Mycenaeans, their neighbors to the north. The Mycenaeans developed as a civilization after the Minoans were already established in Crete. The Mycenaeans lived on the Greek mainland and the islands of the Aegean Sea and were known primarily as sea-going merchants and raiders. They were extremely warlike, attacking each other, their neighbors, and the people they also traded with whenever the opportunity existed to loot and sack.

Mycenaean culture continued to flicker before finally fading in the early 11th century. New people began to move into central and southern Greece at this point. They probably were the Dorians, speakers of a Greek dialect from northern Greece. Their material culture was rougher, less complex than the Mycenaeans. However, the Dorians were able to dominate central and southern Greece, including Crete. It is possible that the invasion of the Dorians is remembered as or at least inspired Homer's story of the Trojan War. The city of Troy did exist, it was a big, wealthy city strategically located near the entrance to the Hellespont (the Dardanelles), the straits leading to the Black Sea. The king of Troy was politically allied with the Hittite empire, and his city had strong trading relations with the Mycenaean Greeks. The people of Troy probably spoke Luvian, a language related to the Hittite Indo-European language. Troy was destroyed violently, possibly by the Dorians or as another victim of the "Sea Peoples" around 1100 BCE. Either way it is believed that Homer's rendition of the Trojan War (dating from 725 BCE), in which he details the trials of multiple characters during the last years of the war and its aftermath, did have historical links to the collapse of both the Mycenaeans and the Hittites.

The Mycenaeans vanished as a civilization at the end of the Bronze Age. The cause was probably a combination of foreign invasions and local rebellions and wars. A sustained civil war among the Mycenaean palace-settlements could have resulted in a fatal disruption to their economy. A bad enough war in Greece itself would have undermined harvests, already near subsistence level, and when they were destroyed by these conflicts, towns, fortresses and palaces could not be rebuilt. Whatever the cause, invasion or civil war, the decline of the Mycenaeans occurred around 1100 BCE, marking the beginning of what historians refer to as the Dark Age in Greek history.

Of all the regions and cultures affected by the collapse of the Bronze Age, Greece was among those hardest hit. First and foremost, foreign trade declined dramatically. Whereas the Mycenaeans had been seafaring traders, their descendants were largely limited to local production and trade. Agriculture reverted to subsistence levels, and trade with neighboring areas all but vanished. In turn, this reversion to local subsistence economies cut them off from important sources of nutrition and materials for daily life, as well as foreign ideas and cultural influences. The Greeks went from being a great traveling and trading culture to one largely isolated from its neighbors. The results were devastating: some scholars estimate that the population of Greece declined by as much as 90% in the centuries following the Bronze Age collapse.

Greece from roughly 1100 to 800 BCE was a poor and illiterate society of small towns and low-level agriculture and trade. Very few monumental buildings were constructed, palaces were actively destroyed, pottery was less complex/rudimentary. But after 800, a huge change came over Greece. First of all peace contributed to a sharp population rise, and the economy shifted from herding to farming, a more efficient source of food. Greek commerce, too, expanded, thanks in part to the impact of Phoenician traders. Under pressure from a rising population, Greeks followed the Phoenician model, founding colonies around the Mediterranean and

the Black Sea beginning around 750 BCE. Meanwhile, trade and colonization inspired change at home. Dramatic new experiments in politics, warfare, and culture were attempted. It was the dawn of the era of the Greek city-state.

The center of this rebirth was Athens, the only settlement to maintain its independence from the Dorians. Athens served as an asylum for Mycenaean refugees, while others migrated further east to Anatolia. It is at this point that Homer and other poets emerge as part of the cultural flowering of Ancient Greece. Homer was one of the first signs of cultural recovery. It is quite likely that Homer never actually existed, he/she could have been any poet who recorded epic poetry that was then passed down. Even if Homer was a real historical figure, he would have lived centuries after the end of Troy. But he would have also lived in a region and culture very affected by Troy and its neighbors. Homer lived in Ionia, a region of the central western coast of Anatolia. He was influenced by the earlier pre-Greek poets of Anatolia. The author of the *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey* worked in a poetic tradition going back to the Mycenaean Age. It is likely that Homer and his predecessors would have composed their poems as they sang them, making use of a stock of stories and formulaic expressions. It is even possible that Homer was illiterate. Oral tradition also gave Homer knowledge of a society that was long gone by his day. Although Homer's poems are studded with accurate details of Mycenaean palace life, the ideology of his characters generally reflects the beliefs of his own, post-Mycenaean society. We can see many of the most important aspects of Greek society in Homer's poems, from the character of Greek gods to the role of women or the basic instruments/foundations of government that led to the formation of democracy.

The Archaic Age and Greek Values

The Greek Dark Age began to come to an end around 800 BCE. The subsequent period of Greek history, from around 800 BCE – 490 BCE, is referred to as the “Archaic” (meaning “old”) Age. The Archaic Age saw the re-emergence of sustained contact with foreign cultures, starting with the development of Greek colonies on the Greek islands and western coast of Anatolia, otherwise known as Ionia. These Greeks reestablished long-distance trade routes, most importantly with the Phoenicians, the great traders and merchants of the Iron Age. Eventually, foreign-made goods and cultural contacts started to flow back to Greece once again.

Of the various influences the Ionian Greeks received from the Phoenicians, none was more important than their alphabet. Working from the Phoenician version, the Ionian Greeks developed their own syllabic alphabet (the earlier Greek writing system, Linear B, vanished during the Greek Dark Age). This system of writing proved flexible, nuanced, and relatively easy to learn. Soon, the Greeks started recording not just tax records and mercantile transactions, but their own literature, poetry, and drama. The earliest surviving Greek literature dates from around 800 – 750 BCE thanks to the use of this new alphabet (which, in turn, served as the basis of the Roman alphabet and from there to the alphabets used in all Latin European languages, including English).

Homer's epic poems – *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* – were written down in this period after being recited in oral form by traveling singers for centuries. They purported to recount the deeds of great heroes from the Mycenaean age, in the process providing a rich tapestry of information about ancient Greek values, beliefs, and practices to later cultures. Both poems celebrated *arete* – a Greek virtue which can be translated in English as “excellence” and “success,” but must be understood as a moral characteristic as much as a physical or mental one. *Arete* meant, among other things, fulfilling one's potential, which was almost always the highest goal espoused in Greek philosophy. Throughout the epics, men and women struggled to overcome both one another and their own limitations, while grappling with the limitations imposed by nature, chance, and the will of the gods.

The values on display in the Homeric poems spoke to the Greeks of the Archaic Age in how they determined what was good and desirable in human behavior in general. The focus of the Greeks was on the two ways that a man (and it was always a man in Greek philosophy) could dominate other men: through strength of arms and skill at words. The two major areas a man had to master were thus war and rhetoric: the ability to defeat enemies in battle and the ability to persuade potential allies in the political arena. What was important to the Greeks was the public performance of excellence, not private virtue or good intentions. What mattered was how a man performed publicly, in battle, in athletic competitions, or in the public forums of debate that emerged in the growing city-states of Archaic Greece. The fear of shame was a built-in part of the pursuit of excellence; Greek competitions (in everything from athletics to poetry) had no second-place winners, and the losers were openly mocked in the aftermath of the contests. This idea of public debate and competition was to have an enormous influence on the development of Greek culture, one that would subsequently spread around the entire Mediterranean region.

Greek values translated directly into Greece's unique political order. The Archaic Age was the era when major Greek political innovations took place. Of these, the most important was the creation of the polis (plural: poleis): a political unit centered on a city and including the surrounding lands. The English word “political” derives from “polis” – the polis was the center of Greek politics in each city-state, and Greek innovations in the realm of political theory have had an enormous historical legacy. From the Greek poleis of the Archaic and subsequent Classical Age, the notion of legal citizenship and equality, the practice of voting on laws, and a particular concept of political pride now referred to as patriotism all first took shape.

In the Archaic Age, Greek city-states shared similar institutions. Greek citizens could only be members of a single polis, and citizens had some kind of role in political decision-making. Citizens would gather in the agora, an open area that was used as a market and a public square, and discuss matters of importance to the polis as a whole. The richest and most powerful citizens became known as “aristocrats” – the “best people.” Eventually, aristocracy became hereditary. Other free citizens could vote in many cases on either electing officials or approving laws, the latter of which were usually created by a council of elders (all of whom were aristocrats) – the elders were called archons. At this early stage, commoners had little real political power; the importance was the precedent of meeting to discuss politics.

Even in poleis in which citizens did not directly vote on laws, however, there was a strong sense of community, out of which developed the concept of civic virtue: the idea that the highest moral calling was to place the good of the community above one's own desires. This concept was almost unparalleled elsewhere in the ancient world. While other ancient peoples certainly identified with their places of origin, they linked themselves to lineages of kings rather than the abstract idea of a community. Also, all Greek citizens were equal before the law, which was a radical break since most other civilizations had different sets of laws based on class identity (there were considerable ironies in Greek notions of “equality” however – see the next chapter on classical Greece). Civic virtue, very closely related to the modern concept of patriotism, was a powerful and influential idea because it continued through the Greek Classical Age, transmitted by Alexander the Great's conquests, and eventually became one of, if not the single most important ethical standard of the Roman Republic and Empire. It would ultimately go on to influence thinkers and politicians up to the present.

One area of Archaic Greek culture bears additional focus: gender. Greek society was explicitly patriarchal, with men holding all official positions of political power. Likewise, both the Greek myths and epic tales are both rife with hostility and suspicion of assertive, intelligent women, celebrating instead women who dutifully served their husbands or fathers (Penelope, wife of the Greek hero Odysseus, is described as waiting faithfully for twenty years for Odysseus to return from the invasion of Troy despite a legion of suitors trying to win her and Odysseus's lands). Women were expected to be sexually monogamous with their husbands while men's sexual liaisons with female slaves as well as other men of their own social rank were perfectly acceptable behaviors.

That being noted, it is clear that women in the Archaic Age did enjoy both social influence and some access to economic power, being able to inherit property and receiving social approval for the skillful management of households. Likewise, women were not generally secluded from men in normal social discourse, with various Greek tales including moments of casual interaction between men and women. Practically speaking, women were invaluable to the Greek economy, providing almost all of the domestic labor and contributing to farming and commerce as well. Their status, however, grew more fraught over time: as the Archaic Age evolved into the Classical Age (considered in a following chapter,) restrictions on women's lives and freedoms increased, especially in key poleis like Athens, culminating in some of the most misogynistic gender standards in the ancient world.

Archaic Greek Culture and Trade

The Greek poleis were each distinct, fiercely proud of their own identity and independence, and they frequently fought small-scale wars against one another. Even as they did so, they recognized each other as fellow Greeks and therefore as cultural equals. All Greeks spoke mutually intelligible dialects of the Greek language. All Greeks worshiped the same pantheon of gods. All Greeks shared political traditions of citizenship. Finally, the Greeks took part in a range of cultural practices, from listening to traveling storytellers who recited the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* from memory to holding drawn-out drinking parties called symposia.

The poleis also invented institutions that united the cities culturally, despite their political independence, the most important of which was the Panhellenic games. “Panhellenic” literally means “all Greece,” and the games were meant to unite all of the Greek poleis, including those founded by colonists and located far from Greece itself. The games were a combination of religious festival and athletic competition in which aristocrats from each city competed in various sports, including javelin, discus, footraces, and a brutal form of unarmed combat called *pankration*.

The most significant of these games was the Olympics, named after Olympia, the site in southern Greece where they were held every four years. They started in 776 BCE and ended in 393 CE – in other words, they lasted for over 1,000 years. Thanks to the Olympics, the date 776 BCE is usually used as the definitive break between the Dark and Archaic ages of Greek civilization.

Greek men engaged in wrestling/pankratiasts fighting pictured on a vase.

Pankratiasts fighting under the eyes of a judge. Side B of a Panathenaic prize amphora, c. 500 BCE https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pankration#/media/File:Panathenaic_prize_amphora_-_Side_B_-_Inv_1616.jpg

The Olympics were extraordinary not just in their longevity, but because Greeks from the entire Greek world came to them,

traveling from as far away as Sicily and the Black Sea. Wars were temporarily suspended and all Greek poleis agreed to let athletes travel with safe passage to take part in the games, in part because the Olympics were dedicated to Zeus, the chief Greek god, who, in certain renditions of Greek mythology, won the original Olympics when he wrestled his father, Kronos, for control of Olympus. Reverence for the gods was entrenched in nearly every ritual that Greek athletes performed. Greek culture was hugely competitive; the defeated were humiliated and the winners totally triumphant, there were no second place prizes. In the games, they sought, in the words of one Greek poet, “either the wreath of victory or death” (granted, that poet was indulging in some hyperbole, as there is no evidence that defeated athletes actually committed suicide). Therefore, athletes trained for the games for months or even years prior. Pictured below, is the *palaestra*, where Greeks trained in martial arts including boxing, wrestling, and jumping. The *gymnasium* was where athletes trained for events such as track, javelin, and discus. They typically did this naked, hence the name “gymnasium” derived from “gymnos” referring to the unclothed state of an athlete.

Ruins of Olympia, including a dozen or more columns in a field.

Palaestra, a center for wrestling, at Olympia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympi...a,_Greece2.jpg

Within the Olympics we can also see Greek gender ideals. Only men attended the games, women would be put to death if they were seen there. However, women did have their own separate games dedicated to the goddess Hera, but only unmarried women could compete. The need for separate games was to prevent Greeks from seeing strangers of the opposite gender in the nude. Leaders were particularly concerned that women would be unable to control their sexual desires before the display of male nudity and athletic prowess. Additionally, we can see a developing trend in Grecian society: democracy. The Greeks were more and more open to allow any Greek male possessing the means and talent to compete in the games. These rules represent the beginning steps toward a concept of collective Greek identity, and even towards democracy. Finally, the Olympic games not only inspired military and athletic competition, but included political meetings that resulted in alliances along with the sharing of literature, astronomy, religious beliefs, and philosophy.

As in all other civilizations examined thus far, the Greeks were polytheistic, and each Polis was recognized as a religious community with their own particular honored God or Goddess. This one God would serve as the protector of the city. For example, Athena protected Athens. The twelve most important Greek gods all lived atop Mount Olympus. They included Zeus, his wife Hera, Aphrodite (goddess of Love), Apollo (the sun god), Ares (the war god), Artemis (the moon goddess), Athena (goddess of wisdom and war), Demeter (earth goddess), Dionysus (god of pleasure, wine, and disorder), Hephaestus (fire god), Hermes (messenger god), and Poseidon (sea god). Like human beings the gods were competitive, had specific personalities, and experienced feelings. But while they could interact with mankind, they were immortal.

As can be seen with the Olympic games, the Greeks believed that they needed to honor their gods, who in return would favor those who had honored and not offended them. Gods could also punish those who failed to please them by sending famines, earthquakes, disease, or war. Poleis honored their gods by sacrificing animals (like cattle, sheep, goats, pigs), decorating their sanctuaries, and holding dances/festivals. The Greek's main concern was how to avoid offending the Gods, obvious crimes like murder aside. Oracles, dreams, divination, and other interpretations by prophets were sought to provide clues about what man may have done to anger the gods. The most important oracle was at Delphi, in central Greece, where a priestess in a trance provided the God Apollo's answers-in the form of riddles that had to be interpreted- to questions posed by city-states as well as individuals who paid a fee for the information.

The Temple of Delphi from the mountain above.

Remnants of the Temple of Delphi, photo by Erin Stone

Toward the Greek Golden Age

With the end of the Dark Age, population levels in Greece recovered. This led to emigration as the population outstripped the poor, rocky soil of Greece itself and forced people to move elsewhere. Eventually, Greek colonies stretched across the Mediterranean as far as Spain in the west and the coasts of the Black Sea in the north. Greeks founded colonies on the North African coast and on the islands of the Mediterranean, most importantly on Sicily. Greeks set up trading posts in the areas they settled, even in Egypt. The colonies continued the mainland practice of growing olives and grapes for oil and wine, but they also took advantage of much more fertile areas away from Greece to cultivate other crops.

Greek colonists sometimes intermarried with local peoples on arrival, an unsurprising practice given that many expeditions of colonists were almost all young men. In other cases, however, colonists found relatively isolated areas appropriate for shipping and built settlements, maintaining close connections with their home polis as an economic outpost. The one factor that was common to all Greek colonies was that they were rarely far from the sea. They were so closely tied to the idea of a shared Greek civilization and the need for sea trade routes was so strong that colonists were not generally interested in trying to push inland.

Greek colonies far from Greece were as important as the older poleis in Greece itself, since they created a common Greek civilization across the entire Mediterranean world. Greek civilization was not an empire united by a single ruler or government. Instead, it was united by culture rather than a common leadership structure. That culture went on to influence all of the cultures to follow in a vast swath of territory throughout the Mediterranean region and the Middle East.

During this period Greek commerce was also expanding. The Greeks first established a trading post in Syria at the terminus of the chief caravan route from Mesopotamia. Shortly afterward, Greeks from the island of Euboea established another trading post in the west, on an island in the Bay of Naples, Italy. In both east and west, Greek merchants sought iron and luxury goods. What they offered in return was probably silver, of which ancient Greece had rich deposits, and slaves. From commerce it was a short step to colonization, likely in order to send their growing population to other lands. In colonization as in trade, the Greeks may have followed the example of the Phoenicians, who had colonies in Spain and Carthage by the 800s. Between 750 and 500 BCE the Greeks founded colonies throughout the Mediterranean and Black Seas, planting nearly as many cities as existed in Greece.

Map showing the expansion of Greek colonies across the Mediterranean

Colonization in Italy and Sicily began in earnest around 750 BCE in the northeast Aegean, moving into North Africa by 630 and into the Black Sea by 610. In the west, Massalia (modern day Marseilles) was added around 600 BCE along with areas of Southern Italy and Sicily (especially intense areas of settlement later known by the Romans as Magna Grecia). In the long run Greek colonization proved to be of great importance for the spread of urban civilization westward, especially into Italy.

As the Greeks spread into the larger Mediterranean they gained more than the Phoenician alphabet and land. They were also introduced to new military technology, which their increased wealth/prosperity allowed them to adopt and then develop even further. Social changes furthermore, fostered new tactics on the battlefield. All resulted in the development of the Hoplite Phalanx, a tightly ordered unit of heavily armed, pike-bearing infantrymen. The phalanx not only became the dominant military force in Archaic Greece but with relatively few changes in equipment and tactics, remained supreme on land in Greece, western Asia, and other Mediterranean regions for centuries until its defeat by the Roman army in 197 BCE.

The phalanx emerged through a process of evolution rather than one giant leap. Before 800 BCE single combat among elites seems to have decided battles. Around 800-750 armies began to include more men, fighting in close formation. Around 700 came new armaments which brought about the phalanx. The heavily armed infantryman (hoplites) of the fighting unit (phalanx) wore bronze armor on his shins and chest and a bronze helmet slit with a narrow opening for his eyes and mouth. He carried a heavy wooden shield in his left hand. The shield covered half his body and half of the man next to him. The overlapping of shields was key. His weapons were a pike- a heavy wooden, iron-tipped thrusting spear at least 9 feet long- and a short, iron stabbing sword. The men of the phalanx were arranged in close ranks, normally 4-8 men deep. Soldiers stood together in line, each man's shield overlapping his neighbor's. Hoplite combat involved set battles- head-to-head, army-against-army, all or nothing affairs- rather than individual skirmishes or guerrilla raids. Too unwieldy for Greece's mountains, the phalanx fought only in the plains. Battle usually consisted of an initial charge, followed by a grueling contest. The men in the front line pounded the enemy with their pikes, while the men in the rear pushed forward. Finally, one side would give way and run. The victors stayed and erected a trophy. They would then allow the losers time to gather their dead for a proper burial and peace terms would be negotiated.

A Closer Look at Hoplites

The most noteworthy military innovation represented by the hoplites was that their form of organization provided one solution to the age-old problem of how to pay for highly-trained and motivated soldiers: rather than a state paying for a standing army, the hoplites paid for themselves and were motivated by civic virtue. Greek hoplite warfare rested on deep societal roots. Each hoplite had to be a free Greek citizen of his polis and had to be able to pay for his own weapons and armor. He also had to be able to train and drill regularly with his fellow hoplites, since maneuvering in the densely-packed phalanx required a great deal of practice and coordination. Thanks to the spread of the family farm, such men of means were common in Greece by 700 BCE. Hoplites were amateur soldiers. Most were full-time farmers outside of the fighting season, which only lasted the summer months. The notion of the farmer-soldier, independent and free has had a lasting impact on Western political thought. And while hoplites had to have means and be independent, they were not all wealthy. In fact hoplites were significantly political because they were not always aristocrats, despite the fact that they had to be free citizens capable of paying for their own arms. Because they defended the poleis and proved extremely effective on the battlefield, the hoplites went on to demand better political representation, something that had a major impact on Greek politics and the move towards democratization as a whole.

In the hoplite phalanx we also see the beginning of the idea that men should fight for their community in Ancient Greece. As we have seen the concept of arete was central to Greek society. While in Homer's epics a warrior mainly fought for his family and personal honor, by 650 BCE the idea of arete had come to refer to one's community as well. The ideal soldier not only fought bravely but "heartens his neighbor by his words." Should he die his death brings glory not only to his father, but also to his city

and his countrymen. As conflict and war pitted one Greek polis against another, it became common that EVERY male citizen of the polis belonged to the Polis's army as the phalanx required a lot of people to be effective.

The Polis

Beyond style of warfare, most Greek city-states shared much in common, and most of their culture and life was based around the polis or city-state. Still, Greeks were loyal to and identified with their polis, not Greek culture in general. The term polis came to denote not just a city but the community as a whole, corresponding roughly to a country or nation. One crude gauge of the centrality of the polis is the number, not to mention the significance, of words the Greeks derived from it: among them *polites* (citizens), *politeia* (constitution), *politeo* (to govern), *ta politika* (politics), and *politikos* (politician). Most poleis were small, many less than 100 square miles in size. Athens was one of the largest covering 1,000 square miles (about the size of Rhode Island).

The polis consisted of 2 parts, the urban area, which was usually tiny, and the surrounding countryside, where most people lived. From the earliest times the urban public space included both a defensible hill (preferably with a natural water supply) called a "high city" or acropolis and a "gathering place" or agora used as a marketplace. The Acropolis was the religious center, with at least one temple usually serving as a focal point, while the agora was the political/legal center of the polis. Assemblies would have met in the agora. After around 500 BCE stone buildings, including council houses, theaters, covered porticoes, gymnasia, and baths became a common part of the urban center.

A plaza in modern Athens with the Parthenon rising above the buildings
Modern Athens, from within the Agora looking up to the Acropolis, photo by Erin Stone

What was unique about the Greek polis was the spirit or idea of the polis. The Greeks came to call the polis a "Common Thing." It was a shared commonwealth, it belonged to its people, not to a few nobles or to a king or a god. As early as 700 BCE important public documents were inscribed in stone in a public place, acts of state were attributed not to a personified polis or ruler, but to the community. The emphasis was on equality as well. The early polis developed an ethos of measure and moderation. The ideal citizen was thought to be neither rich nor poor, but of moderate means. In theory, all citizens were supposed to be roughly similar, but this was not always true in practice, as the politics of the early polis makes clear. For example, women were generally not considered citizens and were excluded from taking any part in politics.

Isolationist Sparta

Sparta, however, was distinct from the rest of the Greek poleis. Sparta was a very militaristic and hierarchical society. They absolutely mastered the Hoplite Phalanx and possessed the most powerful army. Here the ideal citizen/leader was not the farmer-soldier per Athens, but instead a small group of Spartan men who devoted themselves to military service leaving agricultural activity to captured "helot" slaves. The dearth of free laborers and the need for a large, trained army was due to the high number of slaves. In 725 BCE Sparta conquered the territory of the Messenians, and by 700 BCE the entire peninsula called the Peloponnesus. Although the Messenians were Greeks, they were forced to work for the conquerors as the helot slaves. This was to Sparta's benefit until the helots began to grow restive in the mid-7th century. They revolted between 675 and 650 and almost succeeded in expelling the Spartans. This event led Sparta to focus more and more on training a professional set of soldiers. After the helot rebellion all Spartan hoplites became "Similars" or full citizens based upon their successfully navigating the arduous military training required of all Spartan citizens.

The Similars of Sparta governed the polis, but not democratically. Their government was a mixture of a monarchy, oligarchy, and popular government. And in reality the Assembly of Similars had little power in comparison to the Kings and Elders of Sparta, men belonging to the wealthiest of Spartan families. Two kings ruled supremely over a smaller council that issued laws and both ruled over the larger council of Similars. From approximately 600 BCE – 450 BCE, the Spartans were unique in the ancient world in placing total emphasis on a super-elite, and very small, citizenship of warriors.

Map of the Peloponnesian peninsula divided into city states allied with Sparta
Ancient Peloponnese <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...eloponnese.svg>

Spartan culture was among the most extreme forms of militarism the world has ever seen. Spartan boys were taken from their parents when they were seven to live in barracks. They were regularly beaten, both as a form of discipline and to make them unafraid of pain. Children with deformities of any kind were left in the elements to die, as were children maimed by the training regimen. Spartan boys were trained constantly in combat, maneuvering, and physical endurance. Spartan girls were allowed to stay with their parents, but were trained in martial skills as children as well, along with the knowledge they would need to run a

household. When a man reached the age of twenty, assuming he was judged worthy, he would be elevated to the rank of “Equal” – a full Spartan citizen – and receive a land grant that ensured that he could concentrate on military discipline for the rest of his life without having to worry about making a living.

Even activities like courtship and acquiring nourishment were designed to test Spartans. When it was time for young Spartan to marry, the young man would brawl his way into the family home of his bride-to-be, fighting her relatives until he could “kidnap” her – this was as close to courtship as the Spartans got. Married couples were not allowed to live together before the age of 30; up till then, the man was expected to sneak out of his bunker to see his wife, then sneak back in again before morning. In addition, Spartans in training were often forced to steal food (from their own slave-run farms); they were punished if caught, but the infraction was being caught, not the theft – the idea was that the future warrior had failed to live up to the required level of skill at stealth.

The reason for this militaristic focus was simple: Sparta was a slave society. Approximately 90% of the population of the area under Sparta’s control were helots, enslaved peoples descended from the population conquered by Sparta in the eighth century. Early Spartan conquests of their region of Greece resulted in a very large area under their control, populated by people who were not Spartan. Rather than extend any kind of political representation to these subjects, the Spartans instead maintained absolute control over them, up to the right of killing them at will with no legal consequence.

Every year, the Spartans would “declare war” on the helots, rampaging through their river valley, and part of the training of young Spartans was serving on the *Krypteia*, the Spartan secret police that infiltrated Helot villages to watch for signs of rebellion. Adolescent Spartans in training would even be dispatched to simply murder any helots they encountered. All of this was to ensure that the helots would be too terrified and broken-spirited to resist Spartan domination. There were never more than 8,000 Spartan Similars, along with another 20,000 or so free noncitizens (inhabitants of towns near Sparta who were not considered helots, but instead free though subservient subjects), overseeing a much larger population of helots. Simply put, Spartan society was a military hierarchy that arose out of the fear of a massive slave uprising.

Likewise, despite the famous, and accurate, accounts of key battles in which the Spartans were victorious, or at least symbolically victorious, they were loathe to be drawn into wars, especially ones that involved going more than a few days’ march from Sparta. They were so preoccupied with maintaining control over the helots that they were very hesitant to engage in military campaigns of any kind, and hence rarely engaged in battles against other poleis before the outbreak of war against Athens in the fourth century BCE.

The only area in which Spartan society was less repressive than the rest of the Greek poleis was in gender roles. According to Greeks from outside of Sparta, free Spartan women were much less restricted than women elsewhere in Greece. They were trained in war (running, wrestling, and throwing the discus), they could speak publicly, received a public education, and they could own land. Spartan women scandalized other Greeks by participating in athletics and public life, types of freedom other Greek women could not imagine – of course, this would have been a social necessity since the men of Sparta lived in barracks until they were 30, leaving the women to run household estates.

Sparta also recognized the risk of maternity. Like Spartan men who died in battle, Spartan women who died in childbirth were allowed to have their names inscribed on their tombstones. All other burials were anonymous. Spartan women were also more independent, they ran the day-to-day operations of life controlling the helot farmworkers/slaves, the servants, and raising girls and boys until they left for military training. Even after marriage Spartan men and women were not to spend too much time with one another, only to produce offspring, so they lived very independently. Spartan women could even inherit property.

With men and women living separately most of their lives, many Spartan Similars embraced the practice of pederasty, or sexual/romantic relationships between men and younger boys. The *erastês* was the older sexual actor, seen as the active or dominant participant. The word *erômenos*, or “beloved” was viewed as the passive or subordinate sexual participant. An *erômenos* can also be called *pais*, “child.” The Greek practice of pederasty came suddenly into prominence at the end of the Archaic period of Greek history. A brass plaque from Crete, about 650–625 BCE, was one of the first such representations of pederasty, but by a century later, pederastic representations appear all over Greece. Literary sources show it as being established custom in many cities by the 5th century BCE. The age range when boys entered into such relationships was aligned with that of Greek girls given in marriage, often to adult husbands many years their senior. Boys, however, usually had to be courted and were free to choose their mate, while marriages for girls were arranged for economic and political advantage at the discretion of father and suitor. Typically, after their sexual relationship had ended and the young man had married a woman, the older man and his protégé would remain close friends or mentors/mentees.

Two nude Greek men cuddle one another in bed whilst holding rackets of some sort.

A pederastic couple at a symposium, Paestum, Italy 470 BCE <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:031834652.jpg>

One nude man fondles the other's genitalia while seducing him.

Traditional pederastic courtship showing the fondling of the young man while also grasping his chin to look him the eye, 540 BCE
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:F...ungen_1468.jpg

While a part of the Greek world, Sparta remained relatively isolated from the rest of Greece. They were a closed society, contemptuous of book learning, suspicious of foreigners, and secretive toward the outside world. They lived in purposeful austerity, partially to be able to control the helots, partially for general obedience. For example, Spartans' diet was famous for its simplicity. Their preferred food was a black broth of pork cooked in its own blood and spiced with salt and vinegar. To discourage over consumption, Sparta issued no coins; the official currency consisted of heavy and clumsy iron skewers. The outside world was viewed as corrupt, so Sparta engaged in very little trade and admitted few foreigners into its territory. Those who were admitted were subject to expulsion at will.

Athens Turns toward Democracy

Starting early in the Archaic Age, Athens witnessed a series of struggles and compromises between the aristocrats – wealthy land-owning families who controlled most of the land and most of the political power – and everyone else, particularly the free citizens and farmers of Athens who were not aristocrats. One key development in Athenian politics arose from the fact that merchants and prosperous farmers could afford arms and armor, so serve as hoplites, but were shut out of political decision-making. As the years passed the hoplites became increasingly angry with the political domination of the aristocracy.

In 621 BCE things came to a head and a loose coalition formed to oppose the rule of the patriarchal elders. They forced a codification of the laws, which would then be issued in writing, preventing illegal modification of oral laws as was common. This new series of laws became known as the Code of Draco, named for its main drafter. Historically, the code has become infamous for its harsh provisions and in fact, is where we get the term draconian from today. But this was the just the beginning of change in Athens. A wealthy non-aristocratic elite of hoplites was emerging, who had grown rich exporting olive oil. Some were merchants, many more were prosperous farmers. And now, they wanted political power that matched their growing wealth. As for ordinary Athenians, they typically worked small family farms. Over the years, bad harvests and soil exhaustion had sent many into debt. Some farmers sunk so far into debt that they had to sell themselves and their children into slavery. Sometimes they were even sold abroad. Because both rich and poor Athenians had grievances against the Aristocratic council/leaders, revolution was in the air.

To prevent civil war, the Athenians appointed Solon (638 – 558 BCE), an aristocratic but fair-minded politician, an Eupatrid, but also a merchant. He was appointed, in 594 BCE, as the chief officer of Athens for one year, an emergency position. Solon understood both the old and new elite, and he was sympathetic to ordinary Athenians as well. Solon was a moderate, he preferred to be a mediator, allowing neither side to win a clear victory to the detriment of the other. During his reign Solon enacted comprehensive reforms, spanning both economics and politics. His most important step in restoring order was to cancel debts and to eliminate debt-slavery itself. He used public money to buy Athenian slaves who had been enslaved abroad and bring them back to Athens. He enacted other legal reforms that reduced the overall power of the aristocracy, and in a savvy move, he had the laws written down on wooden panels and posted around the city so that anyone who could read could examine them. One of the new laws made it illegal for an Athenian to enslave another Athenian, regardless of debts owed.

He mitigated the worst of the social divides between rich and poor in Athens, but he still reserved the highest offices for members of the richest families. On the other hand, the poorer free citizens were completely exempt from taxes, which made it easier for them to stay out of debt and to contribute to Athenian society (and the military). In economics, Solon's reforms were aimed at encouraging Athenian trade. To foster the production of olive oil, a cash crop, he restricted all other agricultural exports. He changed Athenian weights, measures, and coins to conform to the most common Greek standard to further facilitate trade. The result was a commercial boom.

Perhaps the most innovative and important of Solon's innovations was the concept of an impersonal state, one in which the politicians come and go but which continues on as an institution obeying written laws; this is in contrast to "the state" as just the ruling cabal of elite men, which Athens had been prior to Solon's intervention. Solon made fundamental changes in Athenian government. He changed qualifications for office from birth to wealth, a huge step forward for the non-Eupatrid elite. He established four census classes based on agricultural production. Most offices were reserved for men of property, but the poorest class, known as *thetes*, could participate in the assembly and courts. Solon more than likely established the Council of 400, which prepared the assembly's agenda. He is also responsible for replacing the assembly's voice voting with the raising of hands.

Solon's moderation, respect for law, and liberation of the poor and downtrodden were all milestones in Greek history. Yet, Solon's reforms had an unexpected byproduct of the growth of slavery in Athens. Though the economy was booming, they had lost their

source of cheap labor when Solon freed all the Athenians held as slaves. The solution was to buy more slaves abroad and import them to Athens. Most slaves were prisoners of war, though some were victims of pirates or debtors from elsewhere, and most came from North Africa.

The government and institutions created by Solon were maintained, and extended, by those who succeeded Solon for nearly a century. These rulers became known as tyrants, rulers who championed the people and not the aristocracy. Here the tyrants seized more land from aristocrats and distributed it to farmers, most of whom sponsored new building projects, but none of whom definitively broke the power of the old families. Social divides and tension continued to be the essential reality of Athenian society. Solon's reforms had not ended social unrest, but they did forestall the revolution for many decades. And by 510, the Athenian elite had grown tired of the tyranny and wished to return to an oligarchy, but they would do much more unintentionally.

What became a democratic revolution was led by an Eupatrid named Cleisthenes. In 508 BCE the Athenian assembly supported Cleisthenes as he helped overthrow the ruling tyrant, Hippias. Originally he had intended to restore the oligarchy, or so he claimed, but when his rival Isagoras challenged him and ended up winning the position of chief archon, he instead turned to the demos, "the people," for support. He became their leader and held a vote for the chief archon by the popular assembly, which he overwhelmingly won. Frightened by the growingly assertive and restive populous supported by the Cleisthenes, the oligarchs and Isagoras called for Spartan military assistance, but to no avail, they were unable to defeat the will of the people. Following Spartan withdrawal, and Isagoras escaping into exile, Cleisthenes rallied the people to victory. And he rewarded his followers, first by taking the radical step of allowing *all* male citizens to have a vote in public matters and making them eligible to serve in public office. This included free but poor citizens, those too poor to afford weapons and serve as hoplites.

Cleisthenes then extinguished all traditional Eupatrid power once and for all by attacking its local bases of support creating new "tribes" mixing men of different backgrounds together. His goal here was to change how the Athenians identified themselves. He wanted to make them think of themselves as Athenians, not in terms of their social class. He abolished the 4 traditional tribes and apportioned the people among ten new tribes. Immigrants and their descendants, who had been excluded from the old tribes, now joined native born Greeks in the new tribes. The tribes formed the basis of a new Council of 500 to replace Solon's Council of 400. The council was divided into ten tribal units, each serving as a kind of executive committee for one of the ten months of the civic year. The centerpiece of the government was the assembly, some of whose members, perhaps emboldened by the new spirit of equality spoke for the first time. Thus, under Cleisthenes, Athens became the first "real" democracy in history.

That being noted, by modern standards Athens was still highly unequal and unrepresentative. Women were completely excluded from political life, as were free non-citizens (including many prosperous Greeks who had not been born in Athens) and, of course, slaves. The voting age was set at 20. Overall, about 40% of the population were native-born Athenians, of which half were men, and half were under 20, so only 10% of the actual population had political rights. This was still a very large percentage by the standards of the ancient world, but it should be considered as an antidote to the idea that the Greeks believed in "equality" in a modern sense.

The most unusual part of the Cleisthenic system was ostracism, a sort of annual unpopularity contest. Once a year all citizens were able to vote for an individual who they considered to be too powerful or dangerous. Citizens voted by scratching the name of a particular political figure or candidate on a piece of pottery called an *ostrakon*. Voting was anonymous. The individual with the most votes, or the "winner," was exiled for 10 years from the region of Attica (the larger province where Athens was located). Prior to leaving the "chosen" had 10 days to get his affairs in order, but then he had to leave. Interestingly, despite the exile those who were ostracized did not lose their citizenship or their personal property. Ostracism was meant to protect the regime by defusing factionalism and discouraging tyrants.

Sherd of pottery with Pericles's name on it

Ostrakon voting for Pericles, 444-443 BCE <https://www.worldhistory.org/uploads...v=1723483983-0>

Therefore, despite the expansion of citizenship under Cleisthenes, poor, regular Athenians still had little influence in Athenian government. However, this changed in the 450s to face the threat of the Persians. At this point one of the most famous ideas of Greek politics arose: Whoever fights for the state governs it. To counter the growing Persian threat in the 480s, Athens built a great navy. The standard ship was a *trireme*, an oared warship rowed by 170 men on three decks. The majority of the rowers were Athenian thetes. Just as hoplites supported political reforms and pushed for more rights, after 700 BCE, so rowers supported new regimes and political ideas after 500 BCE. We will examine the creation of a "radical democracy" in Athens in the following chapter. First, we must explore the power that pushed Athens to become more democratic: Persia.

Greece managed to develop its unique political institutions and culture as part of a larger Mediterranean "world," trading with, raiding, and settling alongside many of the other civilizations of the Iron Age. For centuries, Greece itself was too remote, geographically, and too poor, in terms of natural resources, to tempt foreign invaders to try to seize control. Starting in the sixth

century BCE, however, some Greek colonies fell under the sway of the greatest empire the world had seen to date, and a series of events culminated in a full-scale war between the Greeks and the Persian Empire.

Persia

Persia was one of the most significant ancient civilizations, a vast empire that was at the time the largest the world had ever seen. It incorporated all of the ancient civilizations of the Middle East, and at its height it even included Egypt. In other words, the entire expanse of land stretching from the borders of India to Greece, including nearly all of the cultures described in the preceding chapters, were all conquered and controlled by the Persians.

Persia itself corresponds with present-day Iran (the language of Iran today, Farsi, is a direct linguistic descendent of ancient Persian). Most of its landmass is an arid plateau crossed by mountain ranges. In the ancient world, it was dominated by warriors on horseback who were generally perceived as “barbarians” by the settled people of Mesopotamia to the west. By the seventh century BCE, a powerful collection of clans, the Medes, dominated Persia, forming a loosely-governed empire. In turn, the Medes ruled over a closely-related set of clans known as the Persians, who went on to rule territories far beyond the Iranian heartland.

Historians divide Persian history into periods defined by the founding clan of a given royal dynasty. The empire described in this chapter is referred to as the Achaemenid Persian Empire after its first ruling clan. Later periods of ancient Persian history, most importantly the Parthian and Sasanian empires, are described in the chapters on ancient Rome.

Persian Expansion

The Medes were allies of Babylon, and in 612 BCE they took part in the huge rebellion that resulted in the downfall of the Assyrian Empire. For just over fifty years, the Medes continued to dominate the Iranian plateau. Then, in 550 BCE a Persian leader, Cyrus II the Great, led the Persians against the Medes and conquered them (practically speaking, there was little distinction between the two groups since they were so closely related and similar; the Greeks regularly confused the two when writing about them). Cyrus assimilated the Medes into his own military force and then embarked on an incredible campaign of conquest that lasted twenty years, forging Persia into a gigantic empire.

Cyrus began his conquests by invading Anatolia in 546 BCE, conquering the kingdom of Lydia in the process. He then set his sights on Greece, beginning with the Greek colonies of Ionia, along the coast of the Aegean Sea. Cyrus swiftly defeated the Greek poleis, but instead of punishing the Greeks for opposing him he allowed them to keep their language, religion, and culture, simply insisting they give him loyal warriors and offer tribute. He found Greek leaders willing to work with the Persians and he appointed them as governors of the colonies. Thus, even though they had been beaten, most of the Greeks in the colonies did not experience Persian rule as particularly oppressive.

Cyrus next turned south and conquered the city-states and kingdoms of Mesopotamia, culminating with his conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE. This conquest was surprisingly peaceful; Babylon was torn between the priests of Marduk (the patron deity of the city) and the king, who was trying to favor the worship of a different goddess. After he defeated the forces of the king in one battle, Cyrus was welcomed as a liberator by the Babylonians and he made a point of venerating Marduk to help ensure their ongoing loyalty. He also adopted the traditional title of “King of Sumer and Akkad.” Finally, he put an end to Assyrian population transfers and even issued an edict permitting the Jewish exiles in Babylon to return to Judea.

Much of what historians know about Persia is gleaned from the propaganda Persian kings left behind. The conquest of Babylon produced an outstanding example – the “Cyrus Cylinder,” a pillar covered in a proclamation that Cyrus commissioned after the conquest of Babylon.

Part of the inscription reads: “I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, mighty king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters, the son of Cambyses, great king, king of Anšan, grandson of Cyrus, great king, king of Anšan, descendant of Teispes, great king, king of Anšan, of an eternal line of kingship, whose rule Bêl and Nabu love, whose kingship they desire for their hearts’ pleasure. When I entered Babylon in a peaceful manner, I took up my lordly abode in the royal palace amidst rejoicing and happiness. Marduk, the great lord, established as his fate for me a magnanimous heart of one who loves Babylon, and I daily attended to his worship.”

A pillar lying on its side, horizontally, with ancient inscriptions on it.

Cyrus Cylinder, British Museum <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collec...image/262857001>

The Cyrus Cylinder is a crucial source for understanding Persian rulership at its very beginning. Cyrus established his authority on two principles: descent from other great kings and the favor of the gods. He was the living representative of a supreme royal line of descent and an *ensis* in the Mesopotamian sense: the agent of the patron god on earth. Over time the identity of the god in question became Ahura Mazda, the supreme god of the Zoroastrian religion (described below) rather than Marduk, but the principle remained the same. All subsequent Persian kings would cite these two principles, which when combined elevated them in authority above all other rulers.

Cyrus continued the practice of finding loyal leaders and treating his conquered enemies fairly, which kept uprisings against him to a minimum. He then pushed into Central Asia, in present-day Afghanistan, conquering all of what constituted the “known world” in that region. To the northeast were the steppes, home of a steppe-dwelling nomadic people called the Scythians, whom the Persians would go on to fight for centuries (Cyrus himself died in battle against the Scythians in 530 BCE – he was 70 years old at the time).

Cyrus was followed by his son Cambyses II. Cambyses led the Persian armies west, conquering both the rich Phoenician cities of the eastern Mediterranean coast and Egypt. He was installed as pharaoh in Egypt, again demonstrating Persian respect for local traditions. Thus, in less than thirty years, Persia had gone from an obscure kingdom in the middle of the Iranian plateau to the largest land empire in the entire world, bigger even than China (under the Eastern Zhou dynasty) at the time. Cambyses died not long after, in 522 BCE, under somewhat mysterious circumstances – he supposedly fell on his sword while getting off of his horse.

In 522, following Cambyses’ death, Darius I became king (r. 521 – 486 BCE). Darius came to power after leading a conspiracy that may have assassinated Cambyses’ younger brother Bardiya, who had briefly ruled. In the midst of the political chaos at the top, a series of revolts briefly shook the empire, but Darius swiftly crushed the uprisings and reasserted Persian rule. He captured his moment of triumph in a huge carved image on a rock wall (the “Bisitun Inscription”) which depicts his victory over lesser kings and traces his royal lineage back to a shared ancestor with Cyrus the Great.

By the time Darius came to power, the Persian Empire was already too large to rule effectively; it was bigger than any empire in the world to date but there was no infrastructure or government sufficient to rule it consistently. Darius worked to change that. He expanded the empire further and, more importantly, consolidated royal power. He improved infrastructure, established a postal service, and standardized weights, measures, and coinage. He set up a uniform bureaucracy and system of rule over the entire empire to standardize taxation and make it clear what was expected of the subject areas.

The Persian Empire under Darius I

Darius inherited the conquests of his predecessors, and he personally oversaw the conquest of the northern part of the Indus river valley in northwestern India, thus marking the first time in world history when one state ruled over three of the major river systems of ancient history (i.e. the Nile, Mesopotamia, and the Indus). In 513 BCE he led a gigantic invasion of Central Asia to try to end the raids of the Scythians once and for all; he was forced to retreat without winning a decisive victory, but his army was still intact and he had added Thrace (present-day Bulgaria) to the empire.

Darius was also interested in seizing more territory to the west, conquering the remaining Greek colonies on the coast of Anatolia. In 499 BCE several Ionian Greek poleis rose against the Persians and successfully secured Athenian aid. Several years of fighting followed, with the Persians eventually crushing the rebellion in 494 BCE (the Persians deported many of the Greek rebels to India as punishment). Athens’ decision to support the rebellion especially angered the Persians, and Darius began to plan a full-fledged invasion of Greece (considered in the next chapter).

The Persian Military & Government

When one thinks of the Persian Empire and its rapid expansion, one may ask why and how were the Persians so successful so quickly? The first answer lies with the Persian military developed by Cyrus the Great. Persia was ruled by a warrior aristocracy whose traditional values, according to the Greek historian Herodotus, were “riding, hunting, and telling the truth.” The state was able to field a huge army of about 300,000 men, conscripted from their various subject peoples. Although the hodgepodge of soldiers from across the empire did not always fight as a unit, a crack infantry group, the 10,000 Immortals provided a solid core. The Immortals served as the King’s bodyguards, infantry shock-troops, and the most famous and well-trained soldiers of the ancient world. Having a core of soldiers that one could trust unconditionally was invaluable. And they had resources other soldiers did not.

Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus described them in the following manner: “All the companies were clad in iron, and all parts of their bodies were covered with thick plates, so fitted that the stiff joints conformed with those of their limbs; and the

forms of human faces [the helmets] were so skillfully fitted to their heads, that since their entire body was covered with metal, arrows that fell upon them could lodge only where they could see a little through tiny openings opposite the pupil of the eye, or where through the tip of their nose they were able to get a little breath. Of these some who were armed with pikes, stood so motionless that you would have thought them held fast by clamps of bronze." Most of the Immortals were cavalrymen and armed with swords, battle-axes, maces, javelins, and lances. They also carried two composite bows, two bowstrings, a quiver with 30 arrows and, sometimes a sling with stones or pellets. If one of them died, they were immediately replaced, hence the 10,000 appeared to be immortal.

Tiles featuring Persian Immortals in full regalia and marching formation on the walls of the Palace of Darius.

"Susian guards" from the Palace of Darius in Susa. Their garments match the description of the Immortals by ancient authors

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/lin_Museum.jpg

Beyond the Immortal troops, the Persian army generally excelled as bowmen and cavalrymen. Following the Assyrians, they made cavalry into the decisive strike force of the battlefield, assigning a more minor role to chariotry. Persia was even more innovative at sea, where it had its subjects build the first great navy, something the Greeks soon countered/copied. Although Persians served as marines and sometimes as commanders, the rowers and seamen were usually Phoenicians or Greeks. Persian men began military training at age 15, entering service at 20 and remaining eligible for battle until the age of 50. Conscripts were gathered for a specific battle and if they survived, could return home at the end of hostilities.

But an empire this large required much more than a large and trained military. First and foremost, an empire spanning multiple continents posed serious logistical challenges. The Persians may have had relatively loyal subjects, after all, but if it took months for messages to reach them, even loyal subjects could make decisions that the kings would disagree with. To help address this issue, Darius undertook a series of major reforms. The Persians continued the Assyrian practice of building highways and setting up supply posts for their messengers. The most important of these highways was called the Royal Road, linking the empire from western Anatolia to the Persian capital of Susa, just east of the Tigris. A messenger on the Royal Road could cover 1,600 miles in a week on horseback, trading out horses at posts along the way. The Persians standardized laws and issued regular coinage in both silver and gold. The state used several languages to communicate with its subjects, and the government sponsored a major effort to standardize a new, simplified cuneiform alphabet.

As described above, the key to Persian rule was the novel innovation of treating conquered people with a degree of leniency (in stark contrast to the earlier methods of rule employed by the Assyrians and Neo-Babylonians). So long as they were loyal, paid taxes, and sent troops when called, the Persian kings had no problem with letting their subjects practice their own religions, use their own languages, and carry on their own trading practices and customs. As previously mentioned, it was Cyrus who allowed the exiled Jews to return to Judah from Babylon. It seems that the Persian kings felt it very important to maintain an image of beneficence, of linking their power to sympathy for their subjects, rather than trying to terrorize their subjects into submission.

The Persian kings introduced a system of governance that allowed them to gather intelligence and maintain control over such a vast area relatively successfully. The empire was divided into twenty satrapies (provinces), ruled by officials called satraps. In each satrapy, the satrap was the political governor, advised and supplemented by a military general who reported directly to the king; in this way, the two most powerful leaders in each satrapy could keep an eye on each other. In addition, roaming officials called the "eyes and ears of the king" traveled around the empire checking that the king's edicts were being enforced and that conquered people were not being abused, then reporting back to the Persian capitals of Susa and Persepolis (both cities served as royal capitals) via the Royal Road. Despite that system of political "checks and balances," the satraps appointed the new king from the royal family when the old one died; sometimes they preferred to appoint weak-willed members of the royal family so that the satraps might enjoy more personal freedom. Likewise, despite the innovations that Darius introduced in organization, the satraps normally operated with a large degree of autonomy.

The kings themselves adopted the title of "King of Kings." They were happy to acknowledge the authority of the rulers of the lands they had conquered, but required those rulers to in turn acknowledge the Persian king's overarching supremacy. Persian images of the kings depicted them receiving tribute from other, lesser kings who had come to Susa or Persepolis in a show of loyalty and support. In this way, the political authority of the empire was tied together by both the formal bureaucratic structure of the satrapies as well as the bonds of loyalty between the King of Kings and his subject rulers.

Language also built unity. While most did not speak Persian, Cyrus and his successors adopted Aramaic as the official language of the empire. Aramaic was a Semitic language related to Hebrew and was first used by the Aramaeans, a nomadic people who settled in northern Syria until they too were conquered by the Assyrians in 725 BCE. Perhaps this language was adopted due to the simplicity of its alphabet. The spread of Aramaic by the Persians facilitated the development of literacy and recordkeeping. Aramaic became the common language of Western Asia for over a thousand years, until Arabic replaced it; Jesus Christ was the most famous Aramaic speaker.

Another component of the Persian system was relatively modest taxation. In order to keep taxes relatively low, the Persian kings only called up armies (of both Persians and conquered peoples) when there was a war; otherwise the only permanent army was the 10,000-strong elite bodyguard of the king, the Immortals. When the Persians did go to war, their subjects contributed troops according to their strengths. The Phoenicians formed the navy, the Medes the cavalry, the Mesopotamians the infantry, and so on. This system worked well on long campaigns, but its weakness was that it took up to two years to mobilize the whole empire for war, a serious issue in the conflicts between Persia and Greece in the long run. Another way that Darius made tax paying more efficient was to create an official coinage: the gold daric (named after Darius of course) and the silver shekel. Coins had been invented recently in the kingdom of Lydia in western Asia, a kingdom conquered by Cyrus in 547 and Darius was able to take advantage of the acquisition.

Finally, the development of a highly ethical religion brought cohesion to the empire. This religion, Zoroastrianism, became the religion of Persia even persisting in the face of Muslim conquest in the 7th century CE. It still survives in small communities, primarily in India. Many believe that Zoroastrian beliefs influenced both Judaism, Christianity, Roman paganism, and Indian Buddhism.

Zoroastrianism

Despite the overall policy of religious tolerance, there was still a dominant Persian religion: Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism, named after its prophet Zoroaster, taught that the world was being fought over by two great powers: a god of goodness, honesty, and benevolence known as Ahura Mazda (meaning “Lord Wisdom”) and an evil spirit, Ahriman. Ahura Mazda was aided by lesser gods like Mithras, god of the sun and rebirth, and Anahita, goddess of water and the cosmos. Every time a person did something righteous, honest, or brave, Ahura Mazda won a victory over Ahriman, while every time someone did something cruel, dishonest, or dishonorable Ahriman pushed back against Ahura Mazda. Thus, humans had a major role to play in bringing about the final victory of Ahura Mazda through their actions.

Zoroaster himself lived far earlier (sometime between 1300 BCE and 1000 BCE), long before the rise of the empire, and was responsible for codifying the beliefs of the religion named after him. Zoroaster claimed that Ahura Mazda was the primary god and would ultimately triumph in the battle against evil, but explained the existence of evil in the world as a result of the struggle against Ahriman. Thus, Ahura Mazda was not “all-powerful” in quite the same way as the Jewish (and later Christian and Muslim) God was believed to be. Human actions mattered in this scheme because everyone played a role, however minor, in helping to bring about order and righteousness or impeded progress by indulging in wickedness. Zoroastrianism also told a specific story about the afterlife: when the power of good finally triumphs definitively over evil, those who lived righteously would live forever in the glorious presence of Ahura Mazda, while those who were evil would suffer forever in a black pit. Zoroaster’s teachings survive in the Gathas (Songs), a portion of the Zoroastrian holy book called *Avesta*. Perhaps it was Zoroastrianism that inspired Cyrus’s policy of toleration, but it is unclear if he was a follower. We do know that Darius was, he even ordered the creation of a carving of himself alongside Ahura Mazda sculpted on the face of an Iranian cliff.

Mountainside carving in Iran featuring King Darius alongside God Ahura Mazda
Inscription of Darius & Ahura Mazda https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9d/Inscription_of_Darius_and_Ahura_Mazda.jpg

There are obvious parallels here between Zoroastrianism and Jewish and Christian beliefs. Indeed, there is a direct link between the Zoroastrian Ahriman and the Jewish and Christian figure of Satan, who was simply a dark spirit in the early books of the Torah but later became a distinct presence, the “nemesis” of God Himself and a threat to the order of the world, if not to God. Likewise, the Christian idea of the final judgment is clearly indebted to the Zoroastrian one: a great day of reckoning.

In turn, Zoroastrianism provided a spiritual justification for the expansion of the Persian Empire. Because the great kings believed that they were the earthly representatives of Ahura Mazda, they claimed that the expansion of the empire would bring the final triumph of good over evil sooner. There was a parallel here to the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, who had also (during their expansionist phase of the New Kingdom) claimed to be bringing order to a chaotic world at the end of a sword. The kings sponsored Zoroastrian temples and expanded the faith at least in part because the faith supported them: the magi, or priests, preached in favor of the continued power and expansion of the empire.

The Achaemenid dynasty of Persia ruled for approximately two centuries, from Cyrus’s victories in 550 BCE to its conquest by Alexander the Great, completed in 330 BCE. It is worth noting that despite the relatively “enlightened” character of Persian rule, rebellions did occur (often starting in Egypt), most frequently during periods of transition or civil war between rival claimants to the throne. In a sense, the empire both benefited from and was made vulnerable by the autonomy of its subjects: each region maintained its own identity and traditions, keeping everyday resentment to a minimum, but in moments of crisis that autonomy might also lead to the demand for actual independence.

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Chapter 5: The Athenian Golden Age

The most frequently studied period of Greek history is the “Classical Age,” the time between the triumph of the Greek coalition against Persia in 479 BCE and the conquest of Greece by the Macedonian king Philip II (the father of Alexander the Great) in 338 BCE. This was the era in which the Greek poleis were at their most powerful economically and militarily and their most innovative and productive artistically and intellectually. While opinions will vary, perhaps the single most memorable achievement of the Classical Age was in philosophy, first and foremost because of the thought of the most significant Greek philosophers of all time: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The Classical Age (like the European Renaissance about two thousand years later) is best remembered for its artistic and intellectual achievements rather than the political events of the time.

The Persian War & Its Impact

When the Greek cities of Ionia rose up against Persian rule, Darius vowed to make an example not just of them, but of the Greek poleis that had aided them, including Athens. This led to the Persian War, one of the most famous conflicts in ancient history. It is remembered in part because it pitted an underdog, Greece, against a massive empire, Persia. It is remembered because the underdog won, at least initially. The conflict began at the dawn of the 5th century.

In 500 BCE Sparta, the hegemon/power of the Peloponnesian League, was the most prominent power of the Greek mainland. Across the Aegean Sea in Anatolia, the Greek city-states had been under Persian rule for two generations, since Cyrus the Great's conquest in the 540s. In 499 BCE, events began to unfold that not only would revolutionize that balance of power, but also would throw the entire eastern Mediterranean into 200 years of turmoil. Led by Miletus, the Ionian Greek city-states rose in revolt against Persia in 499. Athens sent troops to help, but despite initial successes, Athens reconsidered the alliance and withdrew its forces. The Ionian coalition broke down and was crushed by Persia. Miletus was destroyed, but otherwise Persia was relatively lenient on Ionia. On the other hand the Persians were not so forgiving of Athens.

In 490 Darius I sent a huge naval expedition to Athens. About 25,000 infantrymen and 1200 cavalrymen landed at Marathon, some 24 miles from the city of Athens. Athens sent 10,000 men to defend Marathon, and a great battle ensued. The Athenians sent a renowned runner, Pheidippides, to Sparta (about 140 miles from Athens) to ask for help. The Spartans agreed, but said that they could only send reinforcements when their religious ceremonies were completed in a few days. Pheidippides ran back to Athens with the bad news, but by then the Athenians were already engaged with the Persians.

There were about 25,000 Persian troops – this was an “expeditionary force,” not a large army, against which the Athenians fielded 10,000 hoplites. The Athenians marched out to confront the Persians. The two armies camped out and watched each other for a few days, then the Persians dispatched about 10,000 of their troops in naval transports to attack Athens directly; this prompted a gamble on the part of the leading Athenian general (named Miltiades) to attack the remaining Persians, rather than running back to Athens to defend it. The ensuing battle was a decisive show of force for the Greeks: the citizen-soldier hoplites proved far more effective than the conscript infantry of the Persian forces. The core of the Persian army, its Median and Persian cavalry, fought effectively against the Athenians, but once the Athenian wings closed in and forced back the infantry, the Persians were routed.

The Greeks were especially good at inflicting casualties without taking very many – the Persians supposedly lost 33 men to every Athenian lost in the battle (6,400 Persian dead to 192 Athenians). There is also a questionable statistic from Greek sources that it was more than that – as many as 60 Persians per Athenian. Whatever the real number, it was a crushing victory for the Athenians. A later (likely fabricated) account of the aftermath of the battle claimed that Pheidippides was then sent back to Athens, still running, to report the victory. He dropped dead of exhaustion, but in the process he ran the first “marathon.”

It is entirely possible that, despite this victory, the Greeks would have still been overwhelmed by the Persians if not for setbacks in Persia and its empire. A major revolt broke out in Egypt against Persian rule, drawing attention away from Greece until the revolt was put down. Likewise, it took years to fully “activate” the Persian military machine; preparation for a full-scale invasion took a full decade to reach completion. Darius died in 486 BCE, in the middle of the preparations, which disrupted them further while his son Xerxes consolidated his power.

In the meantime, the Greeks were well aware that the Persians would eventually return. A new Athenian general, Themistocles, convinced his countrymen to spend the proceeds of a silver mine they had discovered on building a strong navy. Athens went into a naval-building frenzy, ending up with hundreds of warships called triremes, rowed by those free Athenians too poor to afford armor and weapons and serve as hoplites, but who now had an opportunity to directly aid in battle as sailors and rowers. This

was perhaps the first time in world history that a fairly minor power transformed itself into a major power simply by having the foresight to build an effective navy.

By 480 BCE, ten years after their first attempt to invade, the Persians had finally regrouped and were prepared to invade mainland Greece. Xerxes I, the new king was intent on getting revenge for his father, dispatched a huge army (as many as 200,000 soldiers and 1,200 ships) against Greece, supported by a navy over twice as large as that of the Athenians. The Greek poleis were, for the most part, terrified into submission, with only about 6% of the Greek cities joining into the defensive coalition created by Athens and Sparta (that being said, within that 6% were some of the most powerful poleis in Greece). The Spartans took leadership of the land army that would block the Persians in the north while the Athenians attacked the Persian navy in the south.

Map showing the movement of troops during the Battle of Thermopylae across the Greek islands

Battle of Thermopylae, 480 BCE https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:is_480_BC.gif

The Spartan-led force was very small compared to the Persian army, but for several days they held the Persians back at the Battle of Thermopylae, a narrow pass in which the Persians were unable to deploy the full might of their (much larger) army against the Greeks. The Spartan king, Leonidas, and his troops held the Persian forces in place until the Spartans were betrayed by a Greek hired by the Persians into revealing a path that allowed the Persians to surround the Greeks and, finally, overwhelm them. Despite the ultimate defeat of the Spartan force, this delay gave the Athenians enough time to get their navy into position, and they crushed the Persian navy in a single day.

A plate or shield depicting a Greek Hoplite defeating a Persian soldier.

Greek Hoplite versus Persian Soldier https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:rsian_duel.jpg

Despite the Persian naval loss, Xerxes' army was easily able to march across Greece and ransack various poleis and farmlands; it even sacked Athens itself, which had been evacuated earlier. Xerxes then personally withdrew along with a significant portion of his army, while claiming victory over the Greeks. Here, simple logistics were the issue: the Greek naval victory made supply of the whole Persian army impractical.

The next year, in 479 BCE, a decisive battle was fought in central Greece by a Greek coalition led by the Spartans, followed by a Greek naval battle led by the Athenians. The latter then led an invasion of Ionia that defeated the Persian army. Each time the Greeks were victorious, leading the Persians to finally decide to abandon the attempt to conquer Greece as being too costly. The remaining Greek colonies in Anatolia rose up against the Persians, and sporadic fighting continued for almost 20 years.

While there is obviously a pro-Greek bias to the Greek sources that describe the Persian War, they do identify an essential reason for Greek victories: thanks to the viability of the phalanx, each Greek soldier (from any polis, not just Sparta) was a real, viable soldier. The immense majority of the Persian forces were relatively ineffective peasant conscripts, unwillingly recruited from their homes and forced to fight for a king for whom they had little personal loyalty. The core of the Persian army were excellent cavalry from the Iranian plateau and Bactria (present-day Afghanistan), but those were always a small minority of the total force. 479 BCE was the end of the Persian war and the beginning of the "classical age" of Greece, the period during which the Greeks exhibited the most remarkable flowering of their ideas and accomplishments, as well as perhaps their most selfish and misguided political blunders in the form of a costly and ultimately pointless war between Sparta and Athens: the Peloponnesian War.

The Delian League

Following the victory against the Persians, and the brief feeling of unity amongst the Greek city-states, Athens was able to create a new security organization, the Delian League. It was centered on the island of Delos in the Aegean Sea with the goal of both protecting Greek lands and plundering Persian territory. Athenian leaders invited all Greek city-states to join the league to protect themselves from future Persian attacks and to even extend Greek power in the Ionian region of Anatolia. As the head of the league, the Athenians were to supply the commanders in chief and to decide which states provided ships or weapons or money. All funds gathered were to be received and distributed by the 10 Athenian treasurers. Each city-state would have a representative, with one vote, who met annually at Delos where the league's treasury was housed in the temple of Apollo. The original membership probably included most of the Aegean islands, most of the cities of Chalcidice, the shores of the Hellespont and Bosphorus, some of Aeolia, most of Ionia, and a few eastern Dorian and non-Greek Carian cities. Notably, Sparta did not join the league and was hesitant about remaining involved in overseas engagements.

Nevertheless, the number of allies grew from about 150 in 477 BCE to about 300 in 431 BCE, the height of the league. Athens was the center of the Delian League, collecting the monetary benefits, as they slowly brought more and more city-states into the group. Over time, money became the favorite method of paying dues (over weapons or ships). Athens then used this money to

construct their own huge navy and to pay men to row the new ships. Essentially by being at the heart of this military and economic organization Athens was able to become even more wealthy and powerful, to create their own quasi-empire. And not all city-states were pleased with the arrangement. Already in 472 when Naxos wished to leave the Delian League, Athens (with support from the rest of the league and its resources) razed Naxos to the ground. By the 450s there were anti-Athenian movements in at least three other city-states. Eventually conflict within the league led to the downfall of Athens. But first, they experienced a golden age, at least partially funded by the very league that destroyed the Greek city-states from the inside out.

Map of the Greek Islands showing the members of the Delian League in yellow versus those who were part of the Peloponnesian League in red.

The Delian League at its Height https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9a/Delian_League.png

Athens and the Ironies of Democracy

Just as the Classical Age is nearly synonymous with “ancient Greece” itself, “ancient Greece” in the Classical Age is often conflated with what happened in Athens specifically. Athens was the richest and most influential of all of the Greek poleis during this period, although its power waned once it plunged into the Peloponnesian War against Sparta starting in 431 BCE. The most famous Greek philosophers – Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle – were either native Athenians (Socrates and Plato) or studied and taught in Athens (Aristotle). Likewise, the Athenian democracy that crystallized under Cleisthenes, with about 10% of the overall population having a vote in public affairs, was at its height during this period.

The irony was not just that Athens reached its peak during the period of the Delian League and the wealth it extracted from other poleis, it was that Athenian democracy itself was at its strongest: even as it was forging an empire on top of the other city-states, Athens was becoming the first great experiment in democratic government in world history. The Athenian leader in charge during the transition to this phase was Pericles (495 – 429 BCE), an aristocrat who dominated Athenian politics but did not actually seize power as had earlier tyrants.

As Pericles rose to be a dominant voice in Athenian politics, Cleisthenes’s system remained in place. All adult male citizens had a vote in the public assembly, while a smaller council handled day-to-day business. Athenian citizens continued to pride themselves on their rhetorical skill, since everything hinged on the ability of public speakers to convince their fellows through strength of argumentative skill. The assembly also voted every year to appoint ten generals, who were in charge of both the military and foreign relations.

As the Delian League grew, which is to say as Athens took over control of its “allied” poleis, it increased the size of its bureaucracy accordingly. Under Pericles, there were about 1,500 officials who managed the taxation of the league’s cities, ran courts and administrative bodies, and managed the League’s activities. Pericles instituted the policy of paying public servants, who had worked for free in the past, a move that dramatically decreased the potential for corruption through bribes and opened the possibility of poorer citizens to serve in public office. He also issued a new law decreeing that only the children of Athenian parents could be Athenian citizens, a move that elevated the importance of Athenian women but also further entrenched the conceit of the Athenians in relation to the other Greek cities; the Athenians wanted citizenship to be their own; a carefully protected commodity. All of this suggests that Athens enjoyed a tremendous period of growth and prosperity, along with what was among the fairest and most impartial governments in the ancient world at the time, but that it did so on the backs of its Greek “allies.”

There were further ironies present in the seeming egalitarianism of Greek society during the Classical Age. The Greeks were the first to carry out experiments in rationalistic philosophy and in democratic government. At the same time, Greek society itself was profoundly divided and unequal. First and foremost, women were held in a subservient position. Women, by definition, could not be citizens, even though in certain cases like the Athens of Pericles, they could assume an honored social role as mothers of citizens. Women could not hold public office, nor could they legally own property or defend themselves independently in court. They were, in short, legal minors under the legal control and guardianship of their fathers or husbands.

For elite Greek women, social restrictions were stark: they were normally confined to the inner sanctums of homes, interacting only with family members or close female friends of the same social rank, and when they did go out in public they had to do so in the company of chaperones. There was never a time in which it was socially acceptable for an elite woman to be alone in public. Just about the only social position in which elite women had real, direct power was in the priesthoods of some of the Greek gods, where women could serve as priestesses. These were a very small minority, however.

Non-elite women had more freedom in the sense that they had to work, so they often sold goods in the marketplace or helped to run shops. Since the large majority of the Greek population outside of the cities themselves were farmers, women naturally

worked alongside men on farms. Regardless, they did not have legal control over their own livelihoods, even if they did much of the actual work, with their husbands (or fathers or brothers) retaining complete legal ownership.

In almost all cases, Greek women were married while extremely young, usually soon after puberty, and almost always to men significantly older than they were. Legal power over a woman passed from the father to the husband, and in cases of divorce it passed back to the father. Even in the case of widows, Greek tradition held that the husband's will should dictate who his widow marry – most often another male member of his family, to keep the family property intact. One important exception to the absence of legal rights for women was that Greek women could initiate divorce, although the divorce would be recognized only after a legal process proved that the husband's behavior was truly reprehensible to Greek sensibilities or laws, making it very rare. In fact, there is only one known case from classical Athens of a woman attempting to initiate divorce.

In the domestic sphere, there were physical divides between the front, public part of the house where men entertained their friends, and the back part of the house where women cared for the children and carried on domestic tasks like sewing. There was little tradition of mixed-sex socializing, outside of the all-male drinking parties called symposia that featured female “entertainers” – slaves and servants who carried on conversation, danced and sang, and had sex with the guests. In these cases, the female “company” was present solely for entertainment of the men.

Piece of ceramics showing women playing music and talking with Greek semi-nude men at a symposia.

Women Entertaining Men at a Greek Symposia <https://harvardartmuseums.org/collection/503?position=0>

In turn, prostitution was very common, with the bulk of prostitutes being slaves. Elite prostitutes were known as *hetairai*, who served as female companions for elite men who were supposed to be able to contribute to witty, learned discussion. One such *hetairai*, Aspasia, was the companion of Pericles and was a full member of the elite circle of philosophers, scientists, and politicians at the top of Athenian society. The difficulty in considering these special cases, however, is that they can gloss over the fact that the vast majority of women were in a disempowered social space, regarded as a social necessity that existed to bear children. An Athenian politician, Demosthenes, once said “we have *hetairai* for the sake of pleasure, regular prostitutes to care for our physical needs, and wives to bear legitimate children and be loyal custodians of our households.”

It is difficult to know the degree to which female seclusion was truly practiced, since all of the commentary that refers to it was written by elite men, almost all of whom supported the idea of female subservience and the separation of the sexes in public. What we know for sure is that almost no written works survive by women authors – the outstanding exception being Sappho, a poet of the Archaic period whose works suggests that lesbianism may have been relatively common (her home, the Greek island of Lesbos, is the root of the English word lesbian itself). Likewise, Greek legal codes certainly enforced a stark gender divide, and Greek homes were definitely divided into male-dominated public spaces and the private sphere of the family. There is at least some evidence, however, that gender divisions might not have been quite as stark as the male commentators would have it – as noted below, at least one Greek playwright celebrated the wit and fortitude of women in his work. Finally, we should note that major differences in gender roles were definitely present in different regions and between different poleis; regimented Sparta was far more progressive in its empowerment of women than was democratic Athens.

One product of the divide between men and women was the prevalence of bisexuality among elite Greek men (and, as suggested by Sappho's work, also apparently among women). There was no concept of “heterosexual” versus “homosexual” in Greek culture; sexual attraction was assumed to exist, in potential, between men as easily as between men and women, although bisexuality appears to have been most common among men in the upper social ranks. As discussed previously, the practice of pederasty (where an adult man of the elite classes “adopted” a male adolescent of his social class to mentor him in politics, social conduct, war, and carry on what we would now regard as a statutory sexual relationship with him) was common, especially in the barracks society of Sparta.

Building on the prevalence of male relationships was the Greek tradition of male homosexual warriorhood, homosexual bonds between soldiers that helped them be more effective fighters. To cite a literary example, in Homer's *Iliad*, the one event that rouses the mighty warrior Achilles to battle when he is busy sulking is the death of his (male) lover. In addition to the Spartan case noted above, another renowned historical example of homosexual warriorhood was the Sacred Band of the polis of Thebes, 150 male couples who led the army of Thebes and held the reputation of being completely fearless. Homosexual love in this case was linked directly to the Greek virtues of honor and skill in battle, as the Sacred Band were believed to fight all the harder in order to both honor and defend their lovers.

In addition to the dramatic gender disparities in Greek society, there was the case of slavery. Slaves in Greece were in a legal position just about as dire as any in history. Their masters could legally kill them, rape them, or maim them if they saw fit. Normally, slaves were not murdered outright, but this was because murder was seen as offensive to the gods, not because there were any legal consequences. As Greece became more wealthy and powerful, the demand for slaves increased dramatically as each polis

found itself in need of more labor power, so a major goal for warfare became the capturing of slaves. By 450 BCE, one-third of the population of Athens and its territories consisted of slaves.

Slaves in Greece came from many sources. While the practice of enslaving fellow Athenians was outlawed in Athens by Solon, most poleis still allowed the enslavement of their own people when they were unable to pay debts. More common was the practice of taking slaves in war, and one of the effects of the Greek victories in the Persian War was that thousands of Persian captives were taken as slaves. There was also a thriving slave trade between all of the major civilizations of the ancient world; African slaves were captured and sold in Egypt, Greek slaves to Persia (despite its nominal ban on slavery, it is clear that at least some slavery existed in Persia), nomadic people from the steppes in Black Sea ports, and so on. With demand so high, any neighboring settlement was a potential source of slaves, and slavery was an integral part of the Mediterranean economy as a result.

Slavery was so prevalent that what the slaves actually did varied considerably. Some more fortunate slaves who were educated ran businesses or served as bureaucrats, teachers, or accountants. In a small number of cases, such elite slaves were able to keep some of the money they made, save it, and buy their freedom. Much more common, however, were laborers or craftsmen of all kinds, who made things and then sold them on behalf of their masters. Slaves even served as clerks in the public bureaucracies, as well as police and guard forces in the cities. One exceptional case was a force of archers used as city guards in Athens who were slaves from Scythia (present-day Ukraine).

The Scythian Archers served as one of the earliest police forces, protecting magistrates, guarding gates, and even enforcing public decency and democratic participation. Yet, the Scythians themselves were not Athenian citizens or even Greeks. In fact, the Greeks considered them to be *barbaroi* or barbarians since they did not speak Greek or follow Greek cultural norms. Nevertheless the Greeks also admired the Scythians as famed archers, able to fire accurately from horseback in battle. They even defeated the Persians decades before the Greeks could say the same. In the mid 5th century Athens first purchased a group of 300 Scythian slaves which became the basis for their police force. By the end of the century Athens housed/possessed nearly 1,000 Scythian archers to control and defend their city.

Plate featuring a Skythian archer shown running while readying an arrow to fire.

Skythian Archer, 520BCE <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:S...tetos.jpg#file>

The worst positions for slaves were the jobs involving manual labor, especially in mines. There was no worse fate than being a slave in a salt mine (one of the areas containing a natural underground salt deposit). Salt is corrosive to human tissue in large amounts, and exposure meant that a slave would suffer a horrible death over time. Historical evidence suggests that slaves in mines were routinely worked to death, not unlike the sugar plantation slaves of Brazil and the Caribbean thousands of years later.

Classical Greek Culture or the Golden Age of Athens

If Greek society shares little with present-day concepts of fairness or equality, what about it led to this era being regarded as “classical”? The answer is that it was during the Classical Age that the Greeks arrived at some of their great intellectual and cultural achievements. The Athenian democratic experiment is, of course, of great historical importance, but it was relatively short-lived, with democratic government not returning to the western world until the end of the eighteenth century CE. In contrast, the Greek approach to philosophy, drama, history, scientific thought, and art remained living legacies even after the Classical Age itself was at an end.

The fundamental concept of Greek thought, as reflected in drama, literature, and philosophy, was humanism. This was an overarching theme and phenomenon common to all of the most important Greek cultural achievements in literature, religion, drama, history-writing, and art. Humanism is the idea that, first and foremost, humankind is inherently beautiful, capable, and creative. To the Greek humanists, human beings were not put on the earth to suffer by cruel gods, but instead carried within the spark of godlike creativity. Likewise, a major theme of humanism was a pragmatic indifference to the gods and fate – one Greek philosopher, Xenophanes, dismissed the very idea of human-like gods who intervened in daily life. The basic humanistic attitude is that if there are any gods, they do not seem particularly interested in what humans do or say, so it is better to simply focus on the tangible world of human life. The Greeks thus offered sacrifices to keep the gods appeased, and sought out oracles for hints of what the future held, but did not normally pursue a deeply spiritual connection with their deities.

Greek Theater

Caveats being noted, one of the major cultural innovations of the Greeks, the creation of drama, emerged from the very worship of the gods. Specifically, the celebrations of the god Dionysus, god of wine and revelry, brought about the first recognizable “plays”

and “actors.” Not surprisingly, religious festivals devoted to Dionysus involved a lot of celebrating, and part of that celebration were choruses of singing and chanting. Greek writers started scripting these performances, eventually creating what we now recognize as plays. According to ancient tradition, dramatic tragedy was first presented at the Dionysian festival in Athens in the 530s BCE. Enormously popular, drama spread all over Greece, and eventually most poleis had a theater.

Greek drama depicted life in human terms, even when using mythological or ancient settings. Playwrights set their plays in the past or among the gods, but the experiences of the characters in the plays were recognizable critiques of the playwrights’ contemporary society. Among the most powerful were the tragedies: stories in which the frailty of humanity, most importantly the problem of pride, served to undermine the happiness of otherwise powerful individuals. Typically, in a Greek tragedy, the main character is a powerful male leader, a king or a military captain, who enjoys great success in his endeavors until a fatal flaw of his own personality and psyche causes him to do something foolish and self-destructive. Very often this took the form of hubris, overweening pride and lack of self-control, which the Greeks believed was offensive to the gods and could bring about divine retribution. Other tragedies emphasized the power of fate, when cruel circumstances conspired to lead even great heroes to failure. The tragedies were meant to not only comment on the state of humanity, but to teach larger lessons. The three greatest playwrights were Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. All three were interested in divine justice.

A perfect example of the tragedy genre is *Antigone*, the second play of a trilogy telling the story of King Oedipus’s family. Here the character Antigone takes center stage. She is the daughter of Oedipus who seeks the respectable burial for her supposed traitor brother Polynices. The play begins at the end of civil war between her brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, who had ruled jointly until a conflict brought them to blows and Polynices was expelled by Eteocles. According to the playwright Sophocles, the two brothers agreed to alternate rule each year, but Eteocles decided not to share power with his brother after his tenure expired. Polynices left the kingdom, gathered an army and attacked the city of Thebes and both brothers were killed in the battle.

At this point King Creon, who had taken the throne after the death of both brothers, decreed that Polynices would not be buried according to the laws of the Gods. Per the order Polynices was not even to be mourned and anyone caught defying the decree would be stoned to death. Antigone, defied the order and was caught in the act of burying her brother. Her defense was that divine law is superior to human laws and that Creon’s decree was cruel and unjust.

For her crime, Creon orders Antigone buried alive in a tomb. Although Creon ultimately has a change of heart, following a visit from soothsayer Tiresias, and tries to release Antigone, he finds she has already hanged herself. Creon’s son Haemon, who was engaged to Antigone, also kills himself with a knife, and his mother Queen Eurydice kills herself in despair over her son’s death. Creon is then left completely alone to contemplate his errors.

YouTube Video

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Classical Athenian tragedy was performed at the annual Dionysia in March. Each playwright would submit a trilogy of plays on a central theme, plus a raucous farce to break the tension. Tension breakers or farces became the genre of comedies. Comedies, which were independent plays rather than trilogies, were performed both at the Dionysia (as the tension breaker) and at a separate festival held in winter. Like tragedy, comedy offered a moral commentary on contemporary Athenian life. Unlike tragedy, which was set in the past and took its characters from mythology, Athenian comedy was set in the present and poked fun at politicians and public figures. The greatest writer of comedy in the 5th century was Aristophanes. His extant plays are lively, ribald, and full of allusions to contemporary politics. Aristophanes loved to show the “little guy” getting the better of the more powerful. He also had fun with gender. He enjoyed depicting how women could deflate the pretensions of men. In one play, *Lysistrata*, he imagined the women of Greece stopping the Peloponnesian War by going on a sex strike that forces the men to make peace.

Greek drama, both tragedy and comedy, is of enormous historical importance because even when it used the gods as characters or fate as an explanation for problems, it put human beings front and center in being responsible for their own errors. It depicted human choice as being the centerpiece of life against a backdrop of often uncontrollable circumstances. Tragedy gave the Greeks the option of lamenting that condition, while comedy offered the chance of laughing at it. In the surviving plays of the ancient Greeks, there were very few happy endings, but plenty of opportunities to relate to the fate of, or make fun of, the protagonists.

In turn, almost every present-day movie and television show is deeply indebted to Greek drama. As are our award ceremonies. For both tragedies and comedies, wealthy producers competed to outfit the most lavish and impressive productions. Judges would award prizes for the best plays in each category, including scenery and costumes. Today's Oscar's harken back to Greek competitions. Greek drama was the first time human beings acted out stories that were meant to entertain, and sometimes to inform, their audiences, but not the last to be sure.

Greek Philosophy

Perhaps the single greatest achievement of Greek thought was in philosophy. It was in philosophy that the Greeks most radically broke with supernatural explanations for life and thought and instead sought to establish moral and ethical codes, investigate political theory, and understand human motivations all in terms of the human mind and human capacities. As noted above, the word "philosophy" literally means "love of knowledge," and Greek philosophers did much more than just contemplate the meaning of life; they were often mathematicians, physicists, and literary critics as well as "philosophers" in the sense that the word is used in the present.

Among the important questions that most Greek philosophers dealt were those concerning politics and ethics. The key question that arose among the early Greek philosophers was whether standards of ethics and political institutions as they existed in Greece – including everything from the polis, democracy, tyranny, Greek standards of behavior, and so on – were somehow dictated by nature or were instead merely social customs that had arisen over time. The Classical Age saw the full flowering of Greek engagement with those questions.

Some of the early philosophers of the Greek classical age were the Sophists (from the word meaning "instruct" or "make wise"): traveling teachers who tutored students on all aspects of thought. Their curriculum consisted not only of rhetoric (art of speaking and argument), but also of the rudiments of linguistics, ethics, psychology, history, and anthropology. While they did not represent a truly unified body of thought, the one common sophistic doctrine was that all human beliefs and customs were just habits of a society, that there were no absolute truths, and that it was thus vitally important for an educated man to be able to argue both sides of an issue with equal skill and rhetorical ability. Their focus was on training elite Greeks to be successful – the Greek term for "virtue" was synonymous with "success."

Thus, the sophists were in the business, literally as they charged quite high fees for their services, of educating Greeks to be more successful, especially in the courts of law and the public assemblies. They did not have a shared philosophical doctrine besides the idea that truth was relative and that the focus in life ought to be on individual achievement. They drew a distinction between *nomos* (meaning law or convention) and *physis* (meaning nature). In general, Sophists had very little respect for the established order, or *nomos*. They considered it mere convention. A great man trained by a Sophist might rise above convention to realize his limitless natural potential, or *physis*. If he used his skill to overturn democracy and establish a tyranny, so be it. Indeed the Sophists trained both democratic politicians and many of the oligarchs who launched coups d'état at the end of 5th century Athens.

The men who became the most famous Greek philosophers of all time strongly disagreed with the views and teachings of the Sophists. These were a three-person line of teachers and students. Socrates (469 – 399 BCE) taught Plato (428 – 347 BCE), who taught Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE), who went on to be the personal tutor of Alexander the Great for a time. It is one of the most remarkable intellectual lineages in history – three of the greatest thinkers of Greek civilization and one of the greatest military and political leaders, all linked together as teachers and students.

Socrates never wrote anything down; like most of his contemporaries, he believed that writing destroyed the memory and undermined meaning, preferring spoken discourses and memorization. Instead, his beliefs and arguments were recorded by his student Plato, who committed them to prose despite sharing Socrates' disdain for the written word. Unlike the Sophists, Socrates charged no fees, had no formal students, and did not claim to teach any positive body of knowledge. His main virtue, he believed, was his awareness of his ignorance. His favorite technique was to ask people questions. He believed that truth and knowledge could be found through verbal exchanges.

Socrates challenged the sophists and insisted that there are essential truths about morality and ethical conduct, but that to arrive at those truths one must be willing to relentlessly question oneself. He took issue with the fact that the sophists were largely unconcerned with ethical behavior, focusing entirely on worldly success; according to Socrates, there were higher truths and meanings to human conduct than mere wealth and political power.

Socrates used what later became known as the "Socratic Method" to seek out these fixed, unchanging rules of truth and ethics. In the Socratic Method, the teacher asks a series of questions of the student, forcing the student to examine his/her own biases

and gaps in logic, until finally arriving at a more satisfying and reasonable belief than he/she started with. In Socrates's case, his questions were meant to lead his interlocutors to arrive at real, stable truths about justice, truth, and virtuous politics. Unlike with the sophists' mastery of rhetoric, the point of the question-and-answer sessions was not to prove that nothing was true, but instead to force one to arrive at truths through the most rigorous application of human reason.

It is important to note that Socrates had doubts about democracy and the Athenian democratic turn. He criticized it for its inefficiency and for giving equal voice to the uneducated and the immoral. This criticism of the elite, in particular, based upon the teachings of their Sophist tutors and even demonstration of their ignorance, brought about his end. In 399 BCE Socrates was tried, convicted, and executed by an Athenian court for the crime of "corrupting the youth."

Plato agreed with his teacher that there are essential truths, but he went further: because the senses can be deceived and because our insight is imperfect, only through the most serious contemplation and discussion can we arrive at truth. Truth could only be apprehended with the mind, not with the eye or ear, and it required rigorous discussion and contemplation. To Plato, ideas (which he called "Forms") were more "real" than actual objects. The idea of a table, for instance, is fixed, permanent, and invulnerable, while "real" tables are fragile, flawed, and impermanent. Plato claimed that politics and ethics were like this as well, with the Form of Justice superseding "real" laws and courts, but existing in the intellectual realm as something philosophers ought to contemplate.

In Plato's work *The Republic* he wrote of an imaginary polis in which political leaders were raised from childhood to become "philosopher-kings," combining practical knowledge with a deep understanding of intellectual concepts. Plato believed that the education of a future leader was of paramount importance, perhaps even more important than that leader's skill in leading armies. Of all his ideas, this concept of a philosopher-king was one of the most influential; various kings, emperors, and generals influenced by Greek philosophy would try to model their rule on Plato's concepts right up to the modern era.

Plato founded a school, the Academy, in Athens, which remained in existence until the early Middle Ages as one of the greatest centers of thought in the world. Philosophers would travel from across the Greek world to learn and debate at the Academy, and it was a mark of tremendous intellectual prestige to study there. It prospered through the entire period of Classical Greece, the Hellenistic Age that followed, and the Roman Empire, only to be disbanded by the Byzantine (eastern Roman) emperor Justinian in the sixth century CE. It was, in short, both one of the most significant and one of the longest-lasting schools in history.

One of Plato's most famous dialogues from *The Republic* appears in Book VII, "The Allegory of the Cave." This chapter is written as a dialogue between Plato's brother Glaucon and Socrates (an example of the Socratic Method). In the allegory, Plato describes people who have spent their entire lives chained by their necks and ankles inside of a cave. They can only view the inner wall of said cave as they are unable to even turn their heads. From this vantage point they can only observe shadows reflected onto the inner wall by those moving behind in-between themselves and a fire.

Only the shadows and sounds are the cave prisoners' reality, which of course are not accurate representations of the real world. The shadows represent distorted and blurred copies of reality. Plato compares the shadow reality to what most people perceive through their own senses and experiences. But these are not accurate. In contrast the objects outside of the cave, under the sun represent the true forms of objects that can only be understood via reasoning and study.

In the dialogue, Socrates explains how the philosopher is like a prisoner freed from the cave who realizes that the shadows only display a partial reality. A philosopher then tries to understand the higher levels of reality and comes to understand that the shadows on the wall are not the direct source of the images seen. A philosopher aims to understand and perceive the higher levels of reality. Most individuals, like the other inmates of the cave, do not even desire to leave their prison, for they know no better life. In fact, Plato believed that very few people had the necessary drive or intelligence to become philosophers. So he envisioned a society whose elite would study philosophy and attain enlightenment. They would understand the vanity of political ambition, but would nonetheless accept the responsibility of governing the masses. Philosophers would then rule as benevolent kings.

Drawing showing Plato's allegory of the Cave with chained prisoners looking at shadows produced by figures on the other side of the wall with the help of a large fire. Beyond the cave are two men who have recently been freed and are seeing sunlight and the real world for the first time.

Illustration of The Allegory of the Cave https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3d/Plato%27s_Republic.jpg

Plato's most gifted student was Aristotle, who founded his own institution of learning, the Lyceum, after he was passed over to lead the Academy following Plato's death. Aristotle broke sharply with his teacher over the essential doctrine of his teaching. Aristotle argued that the senses, while imperfect, are still reliable enough to provide genuine insights into the workings of the world, and furthermore that the duty of the philosopher was to try to understand the world in as great detail as possible. One of his

major areas of focus was an analysis of the real-life politics of the polis; his conclusion was that humans are “political animals” and that it was possible to improve politics through human understanding and invention, not just contemplation.

Aristotle was the ancient world’s greatest intellectual overachiever. He single-handedly founded the disciplines of biology, literary criticism, political science, and logical philosophy. He wrote about everything from physics to astronomy and from mathematics to drama. His work was so influential that philosophers continued to believe in the essential validity of his findings well into the period of the Renaissance (thousands of years later) even though many of his scientific conclusions turned out to be factually inaccurate. Despite those inaccuracies, he unquestionably deserves to be remembered as one of the greatest thinkers of all time.

Greek Science

The idea that there is a difference between “science” and “philosophy” is a very recent one, in many ways dating to the eighteenth century CE (only about 300 years ago). The word “philosophy” literally means “love of knowledge,” and in the ancient world the people we might identify as Greek “scientists” were simply regarded as philosophers by their fellow Greeks, ones who happened to be especially interested in how the world worked and what things were made of. Unlike earlier thinkers, the Greek scientists sought to understand the operation of the universe on its own terms, without simply writing off the details to the will of the gods.

The importance of Greek scientific work is not primarily in the conclusions that Greek scientists reached, which ended up being factually wrong most of the time. Instead, its importance is in its spirit of rational inquiry, in the idea that the human mind can discover new things about the world through examination and consideration. The world, thought the Greek scientists, was not some sacred or impenetrable thing that could never be understood; they sought to explain it without recourse to supernatural forces. To that end, Greek scientists claimed that things like wind, fire, lightning, and other natural forces, were not necessarily gods or tools of gods, but might just be natural forces.

The first known Greek scientist was Thales of Miletus, who during the Archaic Age set out to understand natural forces without recourse to references to the gods. Thales explained earthquakes not as punishments inflicted by the gods arbitrarily on humanity, but as a result of the earth floating in a gigantic ocean that occasionally sloshed it around. He traveled to Egypt and was able to measure the height of the pyramids (already thousands of years old) by the length of their shadows. He became so skilled at astronomy that he (reputedly) successfully predicted a solar eclipse in 585 BCE.

Thales had a student, Anaximander, who posited that rather than floating on water as his teacher had suggested, the earth was held suspended in space by a perfectly symmetrical balance of forces. He created the first known map of the world that attempted to accurately depict distances and relationships between places. Following Anaximander, a third scientist, Anaximenes, created the theory of the four elements that, he argued, comprise all things – earth, air, fire, and water. Many centuries later, Galen of Pergamon, a Greek physician living under Roman rule, would explain human health in terms of the balance of those four forces (the four “humors” of the body), ultimately crafting a medical theory that would persist until the modern era.

Galen’s humoral theory proposed that the human body was made up of four main fluids or humors, each of which was associated with specific qualities and corresponding elements. Blood was linked to air, heat, and moisture. Too much blood was linked to a cheerful and optimistic temperament. It was also linked to fevers, so patients were bled to release the excess heat from the body. Phlegm was connected to water, cold, and moisture. Persons with too much phlegm were calm, but also could be indifferent and lazy. Illness linked to too much phlegm included anything related to production of mucus or pus. Third, was yellow bile linked to fire, heat, and dryness. An abundance of yellow bile purportedly caused one to be easily angered, frustrated, and irritable. Vomiting was seen as the cure to an over abundance of yellow bile. Finally, black bile was linked to the earth, cold, and dryness. An excess of black bile led one to be melancholy, introspective, or depressed, and was also linked to cancer.

In all three cases, the significance of the Greek scientists is that they tried to create theories to explain natural phenomena based on what they observed in nature itself. They were employing a form of what is referred to as inductive reason, of starting with observation and moving toward explanation. Even though it was (at it turns out) inaccurate, the idea of the four elements as the essential building-blocks of nature and health remained the leading explanation for many centuries. Other Greek scientists came along to refine these ideas, most importantly when two of them (Leucippus and Democritus) came up with the idea that tiny particles they called atoms formed the elements that, in turn, formed everything else. It would take until the development of modern chemistry for that theory to be proved correct through empirical research, however.

The Birth of History

It was the Greeks that came up with history in the same sense that the term is used today, namely of a story (a narrative) based on historical events that tries to explain what happened and why it happened the way it did. In other words, history as it was

first written by the Greeks is not just about listing facts, it is about explaining the human motivations at work in historical events and phenomena. Likewise, the Greeks were the first to systematically employ the essential historical method of using primary sources written or experienced at the time as the basis of historical research. The word history even comes from a word coined by Herodotus, *historiai*, meaning “inquiries” or “research”.

The founding figure of Greek history-writing was Herodotus (484 – 420 BCE), who wrote a history of the Persian War, acclaimed by his fellow Greeks. Herodotus sought to explain human actions in terms of how people tend to react to the political and social pressures they experienced. He applied his theory to various events in the ancient past, like the Trojan War, as well as those of Greece’s recent past. Most importantly, Herodotus traveled and read sources to serve as the basis of his conclusions. He interviewed survivors of the war, both Persians and Greeks. He did not simply sit in his home city and theorize about things; he gathered a huge amount of information about foreign lands and cultures and he examined contemporary accounts of events from multiple perspectives. This use of primary sources is still the defining characteristic of history as an academic discipline: professional historians must seek out writings and artifacts from their areas of study and use them as the basis for their own interpretations.

Herodotus also raised issues of ongoing relevance about the encounter of different cultures; despite the greatness of his own civilization, he was genuinely vexed by the issue of whether one set of beliefs and practices (i.e. culture) could be “better” than another. He knew enough about other cultures, especially Persia, to recognize that other societies could be as complex, and militarily more powerful, than was Greece. Nevertheless, his history of the Persian War continued the age-old Greek practice of referring to the Persians as “barbarians.”

Map of the world according to Herodotus with a very large Europe centered on Greece, Asia in present day Turkey, Arabia, and Libya as Africa.

The world as described by Herodotus (the map is a contemporary image based on Herodotus’s work). Note the central position of Greece, just south of the region marked “Thracians.” Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...rld_map-en.svg

The other great Greek historian of the classical period was the Athenian writer Thucydides (460 – 404 BCE), sometimes considered the real “father” of history-writing. Thucydides wrote a history of the Peloponnesian War that remains the single most significant account of the war to this day. The work meticulously follows the events of the war while investigating the human motivations and subsequent decisions that caused events. The war had been a terrible tragedy, he wrote, because Athens became so power-hungry that it sacrificed its own greatness in the quest for more power and wealth. Thus, he deliberately crafted an argument (a thesis) and defended it with historical evidence, precisely the same thing historians and history students alike are expected to do in their written work to this day. Thanks in part to the work of Herodotus and Thucydides, history became such an important discipline to the Greeks that they believed that Clio, one of the divine muses and the source of inspiration for thought and artistic creation, was the patron of history specifically.

Greek Art & Architecture

Another great legacy of Greek art is in its celebration of perfection and balance: the human body in its perfect state, perfect symmetry in buildings, and balance in geometric forms. One well known instance of this was in architecture, with the use of a mathematical concept known as the “golden ratio” (also known as the “golden mean”) which, when applied to building, creates forms that the Greeks, and many others afterwards, believed were inherently pleasing to the eye. The most prominent surviving piece of Greek architecture, the Parthenon of Athens dedicated to the polis’s patron goddess Athena, was built to embody the golden ratio in terms of its height and width. Likewise, in its use of symmetrical columns and beautiful carvings, it is widely believed to strike a perfect balance between elegance and grandeur.

A photograph looking at the Parthenon rising from the trees as one climbs the hill to the structure.

The Parthenon from below, photo by Erin Stone

Photograph of the Parthenon, though the front is scaffolded for repair and cleaning.

The Parthenon, June 2022, photo by Erin Stone

In turn, Greek sculpture is renowned for its unflinching commitment to perfection in the human form. The classical period saw a transition away from symbolic statuary, most of which was used in grave decorations in the Archaic period, toward lifelike depictions of real human beings. Classical statues often celebrated the human potential for beauty, most prominently in nude sculptures of male warriors and athletes at the height of physical strength and development. Greek sculptors would often use several live models for their inspiration, combining the most attractive features of each subject to create the “perfected” version present in the finished sculpture – this was artistic humanism in its purest form.

Most Greek art was destroyed over time, not least because the dominant medium for sculpture was bronze, which had allowed sculptors great flexibility in crafting their work. As Greece fell under the domination of other civilizations and empires in the centuries that followed, almost all of those bronzes were melted down for their metal. Fortunately, the Romans so appreciated Greek art that they frequently made marble copies of Greek originals. We thus have a fair number of examples of what Greek sculpture looked like, albeit in the form of the Roman facsimiles. Likewise, the Romans copied the Greek architectural style and, along with Greek buildings like the Parthenon that did survive, we are still able to appreciate the Greek architectural aesthetic.

Exploration

Greek knowledge of the outside world was heavily based on hearsay; Greeks loved fantastical stories about lands beyond their immediate knowledge, and so even great historians like Herodotus reported that India was populated by magical beasts and by men with multiple heads. In turn, the immediate knowledge Greeks actually had of the world extended to the coasts of the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, Egypt, and Persia, since those were the areas they had colonized or were in contact with through trade. Through the Classical Age, a strong naval garrison was maintained by the Carthaginians, Phoenician naval rivals of the Greeks, at the straits of Gibraltar (the narrow gap between North Africa and southern Spain between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean), which prevented Greek sailors from reaching the Atlantic and thereby limiting their direct knowledge of the world beyond.

One exception to these limited horizons was a Greek explorer named Pytheas. A sailor from the small Greek polis Massalia that was well-known for producing ship captains and navigators, Pytheas undertook one of the most improbable voyages in ancient history, alongside the famous (albeit anonymous) Phoenician voyage around Africa that purportedly happened earlier. Greek sailors already knew the world was round and had devised a system for determining latitude that was surprisingly accurate; Pytheas' own calculation of the latitude of Massalia was only off by eight miles. Driven by a sense of how large the world must be, he set off to sail past the Carthaginian sentries and reach the ocean beyond.

Sometime around 330 BCE, roughly the same time Alexander the Great was heading off to conquer the Persian Empire, Pytheas evaded the Carthaginian blockade and sailed into Atlantic waters. He went on to sail up the coast of France, trading with and noting the cultures of the people he encountered. He then sailed across the English Channel, ultimately circumnavigating England and Scotland, then sailing east to (probably) Denmark, and ultimately returning home to Massalia. He subsequently wrote a book about his account titled *On the Ocean* that was met with scorn from most of its Greek audience since it did not have any fantastical creatures and mixed in genuine empirical observation (about distances and conditions along the way) with its narrative. Armchair critics claimed that it was impossible that he had gone as far as north as he said, because north of Greece it was too cold and thereby humans could not survive. Practically speaking, despite Pytheas's voyage, the Greek world remained defined by the shores of the Mediterranean.

"Classical Greece" is important historically because of what people thought as much as what they did. What the Greeks of the Classical Age deserve credit for is an intellectual culture that resulted in remarkable innovations: humanistic art, literature, and a new focus on the rational mind's ability to learn about nature and to improve politics and social organization. What the Greeks had never done, however, was spread that culture and those beliefs to non-Greeks, both because of the Greek belief in their own superiority and their relative weakness in the face of great empires like Persia. That would change with the rise of a dynasty from the most northern part of Greece itself: Macedonia, and its king: Alexander.

Chapter 6: The Fall of Athens and the Hellenistic Age

When the Spartans and Athenians led the Greek poleis to victory against the Persians in the Persian War, it was a shock to the entire region of the Mediterranean and Middle East. Persia was the regional “superpower” at the time, while the Greeks were just a group of disunited city-states on a rocky peninsula to the northwest. After their success, the Greeks were filled with confidence about the superiority of their own form of civilization and their taste for inquiry and innovation. Greeks in this period, the “Classical Age,” produced many of their most memorable cultural and intellectual achievements.

The great contrast in the Classical Age was between the power and splendor of the Greek poleis, especially Athens and Sparta, and the wars and conflicts that broke out as they tried to expand their power and control. After the defeat of the Persians, the Athenians created the Delian League, in theory a defensive coalition that existed to defend against Persia and to liberate the Ionian colonies still under Persian control, but in reality a political tool eventually used by Athens to create its own empire. Eventually this very league, meant to keep Greece strong, tore it apart in the Peloponnesian War. And when Greek power in the Mediterranean collapsed, it left a void. This void was filled by a relatively unlikely successor, the Macedonians. And while they did conquer the Greek city-states, the Macedonians also cemented and spread Greek culture and legacy more than anyone could have predicted.

The ancient Greek word for Greece is *Hellas*. The period after the Classical Age is referred to as the Hellenistic Age because it saw Greek civilization spread across the entire Middle East, thanks to the tactical genius and driving ambition of one man, Alexander the Great. Hellenistic history at its simplest is easy to summarize: a Macedonian king named Alexander conquered all of the lands of the Persian Empire during twelve years of almost non-stop campaigning. Shortly afterward, he died without naming an heir. His top generals fell to bickering and ultimately carved up Alexander's empire between themselves, founding several new dynasties in the process. Those dynasties would war and trade with each other for about three hundred years before being conquered by the Romans (the rise of Rome happened against the backdrop of the Hellenistic kingdoms). Thanks to the legacy of Alexander's conquests, Greek culture went from relative insignificance to become a major influence on the entire region.

Pericles and Athenian Radical Democracy

As the power of Athens and the Delian League grew, so did the democratization of Athens. Athens's growing fleet of oarsmen began to realize that they were the cornerstone of Athenian power and prosperity. So they, as had the Hoplites centuries before them, began to demand more rights and influence. They wanted laws that would finally make Cleisthenes' promises and rhetoric of equality before the law true. Already they had the power to vote in the assembly (as long as one parent was an Athenian citizen), but now they wanted a part in the court system as well. They wanted to stop the unfair verdicts that only favored the elite, in both criminal and civil cases.

A member of one of Athens's wealthiest and most distinguished families interestingly supported the popular movement, Pericles. After years of study, Pericles entered politics, attacking the conservative leader Cimon. In 461 Pericles led the campaign to ostracize Cimon, accusing him of secretly aiding Sparta, which was successful. After Cimon's ostracism Pericles became Athens's most dominant politician, and adopted a populist position, leading the reforms that would make Athens a truly radical democracy. He began by issuing a decree that permitted the poor to watch theatrical plays without paying, with the state covering the cost of their admission. With other decrees he lowered the property requirement to hold political office in 458–457 BCE and bestowed generous wages on all citizens who served as jurors in the *Heliaia* (the supreme court of Athens) some time just after 454 BCE. Pericles believed that it was necessary to raise the status of the *demos*, in which he saw an untapped source of Athenian power and the key to Athenian military dominance, including the fleet of oarsmen, nearly all members of the lower classes.

So what was the “radical democracy” that Pericles was creating? First, participation in government by as many ordinary male citizens as possible in direct (not representative democracy). Second, selective leadership by elite, educated citizens. Fulfilling the requirements for a radical democracy Athenian people governed with the following policies enacted by Pericles and his allies: random selection by lottery for most public offices, term limits for the offices, shared power, salaries for most or all officials and members of the Council of 500 (which prepared the Assembly's agenda and generally supervised most public matters), and open investigation and punishment of corruption. As far as the justice system there was equal protection under the law for citizens regardless of wealth and random selection of jurors who would vote in secret and receive a salary for their service. Top officials had to be elected instead of chosen by lottery, and they had to be reelected every year. Those in higher offices were not permitted to receive a salary to prevent those seeking wealth to pursue election. Pericles himself won election 15 years in a row.

Not all agreed with the tenants of radical democracy, especially the most socially elite of citizens who claimed that it could only promote the interests of the “wicked” (ie. The poor) over those of the “useful” (ie. The rich). They insisted that oligarchy, the role of the few wealthy and educated, was much preferable and more just than the rule of the many, most of whom lacked education (and in the opinion of the elite moral values as well). Pericles combated the opposition through speeches, he was described as charismatic and a spell-binding speaker, a master of rhetoric. And he did have the masses or the demos on his side. Pericles’s citizenship reforms remade politics and increased who could participate in government.

Pericles also sought to alleviate the lower classes’ economic hardships through militarism, another factor that ultimately led to war with Sparta. Pericles convinced the assembly to launch naval campaigns, helping to employ the poor Athenians as rowers, against Sparta when war broke out in the 450s over Athenian meddling in Peloponnesian states. He also supported sending fleets against Persian forces in Cyprus, Egypt, and the eastern Mediterranean, perhaps even seeking to expand the Delian League further. The assembly authorized up to 3 major expeditions at a time, all to promote and expand Athenian power in Persia and other Greek states. This militarism was stopped, briefly, after a horrible defeat of Greek forces at the hands of the Persians in Egypt in 446–445 when tens of thousands of Greek oarsmen were killed by Persian forces. At this point a peace treaty was signed between Pericles and the Spartans, trying to maintain peace in the Mediterranean, but this would not last. By 431 BCE, Athens was again interfering with states belonging to the Peloponnesian League (more specifically Corinth), and Sparta gave Athens an ultimatum to stop interfering with their allies or it would be war. War ensued.

The Peloponnesian War

As previously discussed in the wake of the Persian war each year, members of the Delian League contributed money to build and support a large navy, meant to protect all of Greece from any further Persian interference. Athens, however, quickly became the dominant player in the Delian League. Athens was able to control the League due to its powerful navy; no other polis had a navy anywhere near as large or effective, so the other members of the League had to contribute funds and supplies while the Athenians fielded the ships. Thus, it was all too easy for Athens to simply use the League to drain the other poleis of wealth while building up its own power. The last remnants of Persian troops were driven from the Greek islands by 469 BCE, about ten years after the great Greek victories of the Persian War, but Athens refused to allow any of the League members to resign from the League after the victory.

Soon, Athens moved from simply extracting money to actually imposing political control in other poleis. Athens stationed troops in garrisons in other cities and forced the cities to adopt new laws, regulations, and taxes, all designed to keep the flow of money going to Athens. Some of the members of the League rose up in armed revolts, but the Athenians were able to crush the revolts with little difficulty. The final event that eliminated any pretense that the League was anything but an Athenian empire was the failure of a naval expedition sent in 460 BCE by Athens to help an Egyptian revolt against the Persians. The Greek expedition was crushed, and the Athenians responded by moving the treasury of the League, formerly kept on the Greek island of Delos (hence “Delian League”), to Athens itself, arguing that the treasury was too vulnerable if it remained on Delos. At this point, no other member of the League could do anything about it – the League existed as an Athenian-controlled empire, pumping money into Athenian coffers and allowing Athens to build some of its most famous and beautiful buildings. Thus, the great irony is that the most glorious age of Athenian democracy and philosophy was funded by the extraction of wealth from its fellow Greek cities. In the end, the Persians simply made peace with Athens in 448 BCE, giving up the claim to the Greek colonies entirely and in turn eliminating the very reason the League had come into being.

Meanwhile, Sparta (which had returned to isolationism after helping to defeat Persia) was the head of a different association, the Peloponnesian League, originally founded before the Persian War as a mutual protection league of the Greek cities of Corinth, Sparta, and Thebes. Like Athens, Sparta dominated its allies, although it did not take advantage of them in quite the same ways that Athens did. By the middle of the 5th century Sparta was resentful and, in a way, fearful of increasing Athenian power. Open war finally broke out between the two cities in 431 BCE after two of their respective allied poleis started a conflict and Athens tried to influence the political decisions of Spartan allies. The war lasted from 431 – 404 BCE, devastating Greece.

Map showing the division between the Delian League and the Peloponnesian League at the start of the Peloponnesian War

Alliances & Players of the Peloponnesian War https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/lop_war_en.png

The Spartans were unquestionably superior in land warfare, while the Athenians had a seemingly unstoppable navy. The Spartans and their allies repeatedly invaded Athenian territory, but the Athenians were smart enough to have built strong fortifications that held the Spartans off. The Athenians, in turn, attacked Spartan settlements and positions overseas and used their navy to bring in supplies. While Sparta could not take Athens itself, Athens was essentially under siege for decades; life went on, but it was usually impossible for the Athenians to travel over land in Greece outside of their home region of Attica. Nor was this unexpected for Athenians. Part of Pericles’s strategy was to endure a long conflict, never fighting a pitched battle against the militarily superior

Spartans, but instead to use Athenian superior resources to wait the Spartans out behind their city walls while sacrificing the countryside. Perhaps this strategy would have eventually worked, but fate intervened. In 430 BCE a plague ravaged Athens just as their population was stuck in tight quarters within the city walls, which only facilitated the spread of the virus, killing thousands, including Pericles himself. With Pericles deceased, Athens went on the offensive, and secured a brief peace with Sparta in 421 BCE.

However, truces came and went, with the war continuing for almost thirty years. In 415 BCE Athens suffered a disaster when a young general convinced the Athenians to send thousands of troops against the city of Syracuse (a Spartan ally) in southern Sicily, hundreds of miles from Greece itself, in hopes of looting it. The invasion turned into a nightmare for the Athenians, with every ship captured or sunk and almost every soldier killed or captured and sold into slavery; this dramatically weakened the Athenian military.

At that point, the Athenians were on the defensive. The Spartans established a permanent garrison within sight of Athens itself. Close to 20,000 slaves escaped from the Athenian silver mines that had originally paid for the navy before the Persian War and were welcomed by the Spartans as recruits (thus bolstering Spartan forces and cutting off Athens' main source of revenue). Sparta finally struck a decisive blow in 405 BCE by surprising the Athenian fleet in Anatolia and destroying it. Athens had to sue for peace. Sparta destroyed the Athenian defenses it had used during the war, but did not destroy the city itself. After nine months of rule by Sparta's "30 Tyrants" Athens was able to regain their independence and reestablish their democracy.

The reign of the "30 Tyrants" was part of the negotiated peace between the Spartans and the Athenians. The terms agreed upon called for Athens to destroy the long walls of Piraeus, allow exiles to return to the city, and reduce their navy to only twelve vessels, surrendering all remaining ones to Sparta. The Athenians were also ordered to recraft their government following a model dictated by the Spartans. It was the Thirty who were to redraw the Athenian government. With Spartan support, the Thirty established an interim government in Athens. They reestablished the *Boule*, a council composed of 500 members. They appointed other officials to govern the port town of Piraeus and another group of 300 to act as a police force. The Thirty oversaw trials in the Boule against Athenian leaders who had opposed the peace with Sparta and sentenced them to death. They then tried and executed many who they deemed to be enemies of Sparta or supporters of democracy in Athens. The Thirty Tyrants presided over a reign of terror in which they executed, murdered, and exiled hundreds of Athenians, seizing their possessions afterward. Aristotle reported that the Thirty executed 1,500 people without trial, including the revered philosopher Socrates. Many wealthy citizens were executed simply so the oligarchs could confiscate their assets, which were then distributed among the Thirty and their supporters. Few actual legal reforms were attempted in the 9 month period before the Athenians were able to regain control of their city.

The Aftermath

Greece was transformed by the Peloponnesian War. Both sides had sought out allies outside of Greece, with the Spartans ultimately allying with the Persians – formerly their hated enemies – in the final stages of the war. The Greeks as a whole were less isolated and more cosmopolitan by the time the war ended, meaning that at least some of their prejudices about Greek superiority were muted. Likewise, the war had inadvertently undermined the hoplite-based social and political order of the prior centuries.

Nowhere was this more true than in Sparta. Sparta had been greatly altered by the war, out of necessity becoming both a naval power and a diplomatic "player" and losing much of its former isolationist identity; some Spartans had gotten rich and were buying their sons out of the formerly-obligatory life in the barracks, while others were too poor to train. Likewise, the war had weakened Sparta's cultural xenophobia and obsession with austerity, since controlling diplomatic alliances was as important as sheer military strength. Diplomacy required skill, culture, and education, not just force of arms. Subsequently, the Greeks as a whole were shocked in 371 BCE when the polis of Thebes defeated the Spartans three times in open battle, symbolically marching to within sight of Sparta itself and destroying the myth of Spartan invincibility.

Across Greece, the Poleis all adopted the practice of state-financed standing armies for the first time, rather than volunteer citizen-soldiers. Likewise, the poleis came to rely on mercenaries, many of whom (ironically) went on to serve the Persians after the war wound down. Thus, between 405 BCE – 338 BCE, the old order of the hoplites and republics atrophied, replaced by oligarchic councils or tyrants in the poleis and stronger, tax-supported states. The period of the war itself was thus both the high point and the beginning of the end of "classical" Greece. Meanwhile, Persia re-captured and exerted control over the Anatolian Greek cities by 387 BCE as Greece itself was divided and weakened. Thus, even though the Persians had "lost" the Persian War, they were as strong as ever as an empire.

Despite the importance of the Peloponnesian War in transforming ancient Greece, however, it should be emphasized that not all of the poleis were involved in the war, and there were years of truce and skirmishing during which even the major antagonists

were not actively campaigning. The reason that this part of Greek history is referred to as the Classical Age is that its lasting achievements had to do with culture and learning, not warfare. The Peloponnesian War ultimately resulted in checking Athens' imperial ambitions and causing the Greeks to broaden their outlook toward non-Greeks; its effects were as much cultural as political. Ultimately, the Peloponnesian War opened Greek city-states to Macedonian invaders, ending the Golden Age.

Macedon and Philip II

The story starts in Macedon, a kingdom to the north of Greece. The Macedonians were warriors and traders. They lived in villages instead of poleis and, while they were recognized as Greeks because of their language and culture, they were also thought of as being a bit simple by the more "civilized" Greeks of the south. Macedon was a kingdom ruled by a single monarch, but that monarch had to constantly deal with both his conniving relatives and disloyal nobles, all of whom frequently conspired to get more power for themselves. Macedon was also bordered by nomadic peoples to the north, particularly the Thracians (from present-day Bulgaria), who repeatedly invaded and had to be repelled. The Macedonian army was comprised of free citizens who demanded payment after every campaign, payment that could only be secured by looting from defeated enemies. In short, Macedon bred some of the toughest and most wily fighters and political operators in Greece out of sheer necessity.

By the fifth century BCE, some of the larger villages of Macedon grew big enough to be considered cities, and elite Macedonians made efforts to civilize their country in the style of the southern Greeks. They competed in the Olympics and patronized the arts and literature. They tended to stay out of the political affairs of the other Greeks, however; they did not invade the Greek peninsula itself in their constant wars, nor did they take sides in conflicts like the Peloponnesian War. This did nothing to improve the situation in Macedon itself, of course, which remained split between the royal family and the nobility. In 399 BCE, Macedon slid into an ongoing civil war, with the nobles openly rejecting the authority of the king and the country falling into anarchy. The war lasted for forty years.

In 359 BCE, the Macedonian king, Philip II, re-unified the country. Philip was a classic Macedonian leader: shrewd, clever, skilled in battle, and quick to reward loyalty or punish sedition. He started a campaign across Macedonia and the surrounding areas to the north, defeating and usually killing his noble rivals as well as hostile tribes. When men joined with him, he rewarded them with looted wealth, and his army grew. Philip was a tactical innovator as well. He found a way to secure the loyalty of his nobles by organizing them into elite cavalry units who swore loyalty to him, and he proudly led his troops personally into battle.

He also reorganized the infantry into a new kind of phalanx that used longer spears, 16 feet long, than did traditional hoplites; these new spearmen would hold the enemy in place and then the cavalry would charge them, a tactic that proved effective against both "barbarian" tribes and traditional Greek phalanxes. Philip was the first Macedonian king to insist on the drilling and training of his infantry, and the combination of his updated phalanx and the cavalry proved unstoppable. Philip attacked neighboring Greek settlements and seized gold mines in the north of Greece, which both paid his soldiers and equipped them as well. He hired mercenaries to supplement his Macedonian troops, ending up with the largest army Macedon had ever seen.

Map of the Macedonian empire at the Death of Philip II covering much of northern Greece

The Greek poleis were understandably worried about these developments. Under the leadership of Athens, they organized into a defensive league to resist Macedonian aggression. For about ten years, the Macedonians bribed potential Greek allies, threatened those that opposed them, and launched attacks in northern Greece while the larger poleis to the south prepared for war. In 338 BCE, following a full-scale Macedonian invasion, the Macedonian army crushed the coalition armies. The key point of the battle was when Philip's eighteen-year-old son Alexander led the noble cavalry unit in a charge that smashed the Greek forces.

In the aftermath of the invasion, Philip set up a new league of Greek cities under his control and stationed troops throughout Greece. As of 338 BCE, Greece was no longer the collection of independent city-states it had been for over a thousand years; it was now united under an invader from the north. The Greeks deeply resented this occupation. They only grudgingly accepted the Macedonians as fellow Greeks and had celebrated the independence of the Greek poleis as one of the defining characteristics of Greek civilization for centuries. Philip thus had his job cut out for him in managing his new conquest.

The more immediate problem facing Philip in the aftermath of the Greek conquest was that his men demanded more loot – the only way he could pay them was to find new places to invade and sack. Thus, Philip ruled Greece but he could not afford to sit idle with troops aching for more victories. Cleverly, having just defeated the Greek poleis, Philip began behaving like a Greek statesman and assuming a kind of symbolic leadership role for Greek culture itself, not just Greek politics. He began agitating for a Greek invasion of Persia under his leadership to "avenge" the Persian invasion of the prior century. All things considered, this was a far-fetched scheme; Persia was by far the "superpower" of its day, and since the end of the Persian War over a century earlier numerous Greeks had served Persian kings as mercenaries and merchants. Nevertheless, the idea of an invasion created

an excuse for Macedonian and Greek imperialism and aggression under cultural pretext of revenge.

Golden coin with Philip II's face engraved upon its surface

Golden Coin featuring the portrait of Philip II of Macedon minted during the reign of Alexander his son. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/81_of_2%29.jpg

Unfortunately for Philip, he was murdered by one of his own bodyguards in 336 BCE, just two years after conquering Greece. Family politics might have been to blame here, as his estranged wife Olympias (mother of Alexander) may have ordered his murder, as well as the murder of his other wife and children. It is worth noting, however, that the theory of Olympias' involvement in Philip's murder, once accepted as fact, has recently faced sustained criticism. Regardless of who was ultimately responsible for the assassination, Alexander ascended to the throne at the age of twenty following his father's demise, and he remained devoted to his mother for as long as she lived.

Alexander the Great & The Creation of the Hellenistic World

Alexander is one of the few historical figures who truly deserves the honorific "the Great." He was a military genius and a courageous warrior, personally leading his armies in battle and fighting on despite being wounded on several occasions. He was a charismatic and inspirational leader who won the loyalty not only of his Macedonian countrymen, but the Greeks and, most remarkably, the people of the Persian Empire whom he conquered. He was also driven by incredible ambition; tutored by none other than Aristotle in his youth, he modeled himself on the legendary Greek hero Achilles, hoping to not only match but to surpass Achilles' prowess in battle. He became a legend in his own life, worshiped as a god by many of his Macedonian subjects, with even his Greek subjects coming to venerate him as one of the greatest leaders of all time. He was truly a legend in his own time.

Alexander's conquests began almost immediately after seizing the throne. He first ruthlessly killed off his rivals (including all of his male relatives who might be able to challenge his right to the throne) and enemies in Macedon and Greece, executing nobles he suspected of treason, and then leading an army back through Macedon, crushing the Thracian tribes of the north who threatened to defect. Some of the Greek poleis rose up, hoping to end Macedonian control almost as soon as it had begun, but Alexander returned to reconquer the rebellious Greek cities. In the case of the city of Thebes, for instance, Alexander let the Thebans know that, by rebelling, they had signed their own death warrant and he refused to accept their surrender, sacking the city and slaughtering thousands of its inhabitants as a warning to the rest of Greece.

By 334 BCE, two years after he became king, Alexander was thoroughly in control of Greece. He immediately embarked on his father's mission to attack Persia, leading a relatively small army (of about 45,000 men) into Persian territory – note how much smaller this army was than the Persian one had been a century earlier, when Xerxes I had invaded with over 200,000 soldiers. He immediately engaged Persian forces and started winning battles, securing Anatolia and the rich Greek port cities in 333 BCE and Syria in 332 BCE. In almost every major battle, Alexander personally led the cavalry, a quality that inspired loyalty and confidence in his men.

Slightly deteriorated mosaic showing the Battle of Issus with Alexander the Great in the center driving his chariot forward

Mosaic of Alexander the Great in the Battle of Issus, 100 BCE in Pompeii at the House of Faun https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/6-25-06_BW.jpg

His success against the Persians can be explained in part by the fact that the Persian technique of calling up their armies was too slow. Even though Alexander had arrived in Anatolia with only 45,000 men, against a potential Persian army of close to 300,000, far fewer troops were actually available to the Persians at any one time during the first years of Alexander's campaign. Instead, the first two years of the invasion consisted of highly skilled Macedonian and Greek forces/hoplites engaging with smaller Persian armies, some of which even included Greek mercenaries. Alexander's forces succeeded in conquering Persian territory piecemeal, taking key fortresses and cities, seizing supplies, and fighting off Persian counter-attacks; even with its overall military superiority, the Persian Empire could not focus its full might against the Greeks until much of the western empire had already been lost. In addition, Alexander was happy to offer alliances and concessions to Persian subjects who surrendered, sometimes even gifting lands and positions to those who had fought against him and lost honorably. In sum, conquest by Alexander was not experienced as a disaster for most Persian subjects, merely a shift in rulership.

In 332 BCE, the Persian king, Darius III, tried to make peace with Alexander and (supposedly – there is reason to believe that this episode was invented by Greek propagandists afterwards) offered him his daughter in marriage, along with the entire western half of the Persian Empire. Alexander refused and marched into Egypt, where he was welcomed as a divine figure and liberator from Persia. Alexander made a point of visiting the key Egyptian temples and paying his respects to the Egyptian gods (he identified

the chief Egyptian deity Amun-Ra with Zeus, father of the Greek gods), which certainly eased his acceptance by the Egyptians. In the meantime, Darius III succeeded in raising the entire strength of the Persian army, knowing that a final showdown was inevitable.

From Egypt, the Greek armies headed east, defeating the Persians at two more major battles, culminating in 330 BCE when they seized Persepolis, the Persian capital city. There, the Greek armies looted the entire palace complex before burning it to the ground; historians have concluded that Alexander ordered the burning to force the remaining Persians who were resistant to his conquest to acknowledge its finality. The wealth of Persepolis and the surrounding Persian cities paid for the entire Greek army for years to come and inspired a renaissance of building back in Greece and Macedon, paid for with Persian gold. For example, the Egyptian city of Tyre that Alexander levelled was rebuilt as a magnificent Hellenistic capital, Alexandria. Darius III fled to the east but was murdered by Persian nobles, who hoped to hold on to their own independence (this did not work – Alexander painstakingly hunted down the assassins over the next few years).

Alexander After the Conquest of Persia

Alexander paused his campaign to pay his men and allow some of his troops to return to Greece. He then arranged for thousands of his Greek and Macedonian officers to marry Persian noblewomen in an effort to formally and permanently fuse together the Greek and Persian civilizations. His goal was not to devastate the empire, but to become the next “Great King” to whom all other leaders had to defer. He maintained the Persian bureaucracy and enlisted thousands of Persian soldiers who joined his campaign as his armies moved even farther east. He also made a show of treating Darius’s family with respect and honor, demonstrating that he wanted to win the Persians over rather than humiliate them. Alexander declared that the ancient city of Babylon would be his new capital.

Even though he now ruled over the largest empire in the world, Alexander remained unsatisfied, and soon set off to conquer lands his new Persian subjects told him about beyond the borders of the empire. Alexander headed east with his armies, defeating the tribesmen of present-day Afghanistan and then fighting a huge battle against the forces of the Indian king Porus in the northern Indus River Valley in 327 BCE. He pressed on into India for several months, following the Indus south, but finally his loyal but exhausted troops refused to go on. Alexander had heard of Indian kingdoms even farther east (i.e. toward the Ganges River Valley, completely unknown to the Greeks before this point) and, being Alexander, he wanted to conquer them too. His men, however, were both weary and rich beyond their wildest dreams. Few of them could see the point of further conquests and wanted instead to return home and enjoy their hard-won loot. Some of his followers were now over 65 years old, having fought for both Philip II and then Alexander, and they concluded that it was high time to go home.

With soldiers’ complaints in his ear, and after marching for 70 days through monsoon rainfall, Alexander consulted an oracle that confirmed that disaster would strike if he crossed the next river, so after sulking in his tent for a week, he finally relented. To avoid the appearance of a retreat, however, he insisted that his armies fight their way down the Indus river valley and then across the southern part of the former Persian Empire on their way back to Mesopotamia. Unfortunately, Alexander made a major tactical error when he reached the Indian Ocean, splitting his forces into a fleet and a land force that would travel west separately. The fleet survived unscathed, but the army had to cross the brutally difficult Makran desert (in the southern part of present-day Pakistan and Iran), which cost Alexander’s forces more lives than had the entire Indian campaign.

Map showing all the territory conquered by Alexander the Great highlighted in pink stretching from Greece south to Egypt and then all the way to India

Alexander the Great’s Empire at its Height <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/28/1893%29.jpg>

The return journey was arduous, and it took years to get back to the heartland of Persia. During the return, Alexander began to experience great anxiety regarding his position and support. He feared many allies were really rivals and put multiple men through conspiracy trials, purges, and assassinations to ensure no one could touch his power. In one of the most spectacular, and clearly extra-legal episodes, he had a drunken quarrel with one of his senior commanders named Cleitus (also possibly one of his lovers) in which he accused him of rebellion and murdered him. He also began to make his subjects treat him like a semi-god. He had both Greeks and Macedonians bow down before him. He even began to believe that he was the son of Zeus. This precedent of deification continued from the Hellenistic Age into the Roman Empire.

In 323 BCE, his armies finally arrived in Babylon. Alexander was exhausted and plagued by injuries from the many battles he had fought, but Macedonian and Greek tradition required him to drink to excess with his generals. Part of the celebrations included a great banquet for 9,000 at which time he prayed for “concord and a partnership in rule between Greeks and Persians,” reinforcing his policy of fusion between the Greeks and the Persians begun years earlier. Such actions were a sharp divide from the traditional Greek belief in their superiority. Aristotle, for example, had referred to the peoples of western Asia as fit only to

be slaves. Alexander's policy of fusion/inclusion was revolutionary, but it probably had more to do with a desire for a new power base independent of the Macedonian nobility, who he did not trust. He already had begun training an army of 30,000 Iranians to replace all the Macedonian troops he dismissed.

But, Alexander's reign soon came to an end. Shortly after returning to Babylon, he died suddenly after only a few days illness. Some combination of his injuries, alcohol, and exhaustion finally caught up with him. Supposedly, while he lay on his deathbed, his generals asked who would follow him as Great King and he replied "the strongest," then died. The results were predictable: decades of fighting as each general tried to take over the huge empire Alexander had forged.

How did Alexander die? One of the largest mysteries of Alexander's life was his death, or the cause of his death, which only adds to the mystique of this historical figure. One theory behind his demise is malaria or dengue as he had just marched through several tropical regions rife with mosquito born illnesses. Additionally, in the days prior to his death he suffered from a high fever. Another speculated cause was alcoholism/alcohol poisoning exacerbated by a mental disorder like depression or anxiety. Finally, many suspected poisoning, either as a power grab or due to displeasure among Alexander's men resulting from his forced changes and upheaval in the military.

Detail of Alexander the Great's burial sarcophagus showing him atop a horse engaged in battle

Detail from the Alexander Sarcophagus defeating the battle of Issus https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...e_of_Issus.jpg

The true legacy of Hellenistic civilization was not Alexander's wars, as remarkable as they were, but their aftermath. During his campaigns, Alexander founded numerous new cities that were to be colonies for his victorious Greek soldiers, all of which were named Alexandria except for ones that he named after his horse, Bucephalus, and his dog, Peritas. For almost 100 years, Greeks and Macedonians streamed to these colonies, which resulted in a tremendous spread and growth of Greek culture across the entire ancient world. They also came to settle in conquered Persian cities. Everywhere, Greeks became a new elite class, establishing Greek laws and Greek buildings and amenities. At the same time, the Greeks were always a small minority in the lands of the east, a fact that Alexander certainly recognized. To deal with the situation, not only did he encourage inter-marriage, but he simply took over the Persian system of governance, with its royal road, its regional governors, and its huge and elaborate bureaucracy.

The Legacy of Alexander the Great & the Hellenistic Kingdoms

Alexander died in June 323 BCE, just one month before his 33rd birthday. In failing to name an heir, Alexander almost guaranteed that his empire would collapse as his generals turned on each other. Indeed, within a year of his death the empire plunged into civil war, even with the birth of Alexander's son, peace could not be secured. In fact, Alexander's son paid the price himself, when he was assassinated by one of the competing generals. It took until 280 BCE for the fighting to cease and three major kingdoms to be established, founded by the generals Antigonius, Ptolemy, and Seleucus.

The kingdoms that emerged from the fighting were known as the Hellenistic Kingdoms. To begin, though, what does Hellenistic mean and why were these kingdoms labelled as such? Hellenistic means "Greek-like" and tries to illustrate/convey the unique cultures that emerged in the wake of Alexander's conquests. These civilizations were a fusion (like Alexander's policy) and mixture of Mediterranean cultures with those to their east. In these kingdoms one can see both the adoption of Greek cultural elements in parts of Asia as well as the spread of eastern ideas to the Mediterranean. For example, monarchy returned to Greece for the first time since the fall of the Mycenaeans. And of course, as ideas and practices moved, they evolved. Greek culture most influenced Egypt and southwestern Asia, the most successful and stable of the Hellenistic Kingdoms.

Map of the three Hellenistic Kingdoms consolidated after the civil wars provoked by Alexander the Great's death

Major Hellenistic Kingdoms, 240 BCE <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...khai240nbc.jpg>

The Antigonids ruled over Macedon and Greece. Despite controlling the Macedonian heartland and Greece itself, the Antigonids were the weakest of the Hellenistic monarchies. Both areas were depopulated by the wars; many thousands of soldiers and their families emigrated to the new military colonies established by Alexander, weakening Greece and, of course, its tax base. Over time, the Antigonids had to fight to hold on to power in Greece alone and they ultimately saw many of the Greek poleis achieve independence from their rule.

The Ptolemies ruled over Egypt. The Ptolemies were very powerful and, perhaps more importantly, they had the benefit of ruling over a coherent, unified state that had ancient traditions of kingship. Once they cemented their control, the Ptolemies were able to simply act as pharaohs, despite remaining ethnically and linguistically Macedonian Greek. In their state, the top levels of rule and administration were Greek, but the bulk of the royal bureaucracy was Egyptian. There were long-term patterns of settlement

and integration, but right up to the end, the dynasty remained fiercely proud of its Greek heritage, with Greek soldier colonies providing the backbone of the Ptolemaic military. Ptolemy had been a close friend and trusted general of Alexander, and he took Alexander's body to Egypt and buried it in a magnificent tomb in Alexandria, thereby asserting a direct connection between his regime and Alexander himself. In the end, the Ptolemies were the longest-lasting of the Hellenistic dynasties.

The Seleucids ruled over Mesopotamia and Persia. Despite the vast wealth of the Seleucid kingdom, it was the most difficult one to govern effectively. There was a relative scarcity of Greeks vis-à-vis the native populations, and it was thus also the most diverse. It proved impossible in the long term for the Seleucid kings to hold on to the entire expanse of territories originally conquered by Alexander. Seleucus himself gave his Indian territory back to an Indian king, Chandragupta, in 310 BCE in return for some elephants. In 247 BCE a former Seleucid general based in the region of Parthia destroyed Seleucid control in the old Persian heartland, in the process founding a new Persian empire (remembered as the Parthian Empire for the region its rulers originally governed). Nevertheless, the Seleucid kingdom held on until its remnants were defeated in 63 BCE by Pompey the Great of Rome, one-time ally and subsequent enemy of Julius Caesar.

Each of the successor kingdoms was ruled by Greeks and Macedonians but the bureaucracies were staffed in large part by "natives" of the area. A complex relationship emerged between the cultures and languages of the kingdoms. Greek remained the language of state and the language of the elites, the Persian trade language of Aramaic was still used across most of the lands, and then a host of local tongues existed as the vernacular. The kings often did not speak a word of the local languages; as an example, Cleopatra VII (the famous Cleopatra and last ruler of Egypt before its conquest by Rome) was the first Ptolemaic monarch to speak Egyptian.

The Ptolemaic kingdom is particularly noteworthy: starting with Ptolemy himself, the existing Egyptian bureaucracy was expanded and its middle and upper ranks staffed entirely by Greeks (and Macedonians), who developed obsessively detailed records on every sheaf of wheat owed to the royal treasury. So much papyrus was used in keeping records that old copies had to be dumped unceremoniously in holes in the desert to make room for new ones – quite a lot of information about the Ptolemaic economy survived in these dumps to be discovered by archaeologists a few thousand years later. Likewise, the abundance of the Nile was carefully managed to produce the greatest yields in history, so large that even after numerous taxes were taken, Egyptian wheat was still the cheapest available everywhere from Spain to Mesopotamia (the same held true with papyrus, a royal monopoly used everywhere in the Hellenistic world). Under the Ptolemies, Egypt was in many ways at its most prosperous in history, outstripping even the incredible bounty of the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms centuries earlier.

While not as politically stable, the Seleucid Kingdom left a lasting mark on the region by consolidating long-distance trade. The Silk Road that linked China, India, the Middle East, and Europe truly began during the Hellenistic period and the Seleucids did everything in their power to support trade in their territories. They supervised the construction of roads and canals useful to merchants and derived much of their revenue from silk textiles. Even though raw silk (from silkworms) was only available from China, subjects of the Seleucids in Mesopotamia did master the production of textiles from the raw material, creating an enormously valuable commodity to markets farther west. Thus, even though Seleucid political control was somewhat haphazard overall, it did at least play a role in encouraging the east/west trade that would only grow in the following centuries.

Hellenistic Culture

One of the remarkable aspects of the Hellenistic age was the extent to which the people of Greece and the Middle East started exploring beyond the confines of the ancient world as they had known it. The Ptolemies supported trading posts along the Red Sea and as far south as present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia, trading for ivory and gold from the African interior. Explorers tried, but did not quite succeed, to circumnavigate Africa itself. In addition to accounts by explorers, the Greeks of the Hellenistic lands enjoyed histories and accounts of foreign lands written by the natives of those lands. Major histories of Mesopotamia, Persia, and Egypt were written during the Hellenistic period and translated into Greek. Ambassadors from the Hellenistic kingdoms in foreign lands sometimes wrote accounts of the customs of those lands (such as India). In short, it was a period when knowledge of the world greatly expanded.

How to Be Greek

The core of the Hellenistic kingdoms were the new cities founded by Alexander or, later, by the Hellenistic monarchs. The largest was Alexandria in Egypt, but there were equivalently grandiose cities in the other kingdoms. The new cities were built on grid-pattern streets with various Greek amenities like public forums, theaters, and temples. Likewise, citizenship, which had been the basic unit of political currency in the ancient poleis, became instead a mark of elite membership that could be won in multiple cities at the same time.

Many Greeks and Macedonians emigrated from home during the 4th and 3rd centuries, we do not know how many, but the evidence we have suggests a significant number. This was a type of colonizing impulse. Greek and Macedonian migrants also sought dreams of prosperity and adventure by going abroad. They served in the highest levels of administration in both Ptolemaic and Seleucid realms. But locals also served in these governments, providing good will and information to the new Greek rulers regarding the peoples they had conquered. Colonists also served as the core of the militaries, though by the 2nd century natives were also serving, receiving land, tax breaks, and the right to call themselves Hellenes or Greeks.

Here we see how Greek migrants, and those who they colonized, took advantage of a new definition of being Greek that began to emerge during Alexander's conquests. Disappointed by the narrow and self-destructive localism of the Greek city-states, and truly how this localism had ripped them apart at the end of the 5th century via the Peloponnesian War, some thinkers began to seek a wider horizon and definition of Greek identity. They promoted the idea that Greece was not a collection of city-states in a specific geographic location, but a civilization. One philosopher wrote "The people we call Hellenes are those who have the same culture as us, not the same blood." This new definition and ideal of Greek culture made it easier for colonists who left Greece to maintain a Greek identity. For that matter it was now possible for foreigners to become Greek by learning the Greek language, literature, philosophy, and general culture. The number of Hellenized foreigners was relatively small, yet their very existence marked a break from the Classical polis, where even a resident genius such as Aristotle could not obtain Athenian citizenship because he was not of Athenian descent.

The Greek language, in particular, served as a common denominator and unifier (along with Aramaic) becoming the language of trade and politics in the eastern Mediterranean. By the 2nd century, most people with even a little bit of education could speak Greek. In fact it is directly due to the conquest of Egypt by Alexander that we can understand/translate Egyptian hieroglyphics. Before the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, a granodiorite stele inscribed with a decree on behalf of King Ptolemy V, no one could decipher hieroglyphics. The decree appears in three scripts: the upper text is Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, the middle portion Demotic script, and the lowest Ancient Greek. Because it presents essentially the same text in all three scripts, it provided the key to the modern understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphs.

One of the most important artifacts of the Ptolemaic era is the Rosetta Stone, the object that enabled the translation of Egyptian hieroglyphics. Written during Ptolemaic rule, the stone consists of a single royal proclamation from 196 BCE in two hieroglyphic alphabets as well as ancient Greek.

Although it is believed to have originally been displayed within a temple, possibly at nearby Sais, the stone was probably moved during the early Christian or medieval period and was eventually used as building material in the construction of Fort Julien near the town of Rashid (Rosetta) in the Nile Delta. It was rediscovered there in 1799 by a soldier, Pierre-François Bouchard, of the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt. When the British defeated the French, they took the stone to London where it remains to this day on display in the British Museum.

A very large black stone inscribed with three distinct languages all sharing the same message

The Rosetta Stone in the British Museum, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0d/Rosetta_Stone.jpg

Despite these novel ideas about expanding citizenship and mixing of cultures, there were still ongoing problems for the Hellenistic ruling class, the most important of which was the continued stratification between Greeks and their non-Greek subjects. Greeks in the Hellenistic kingdoms felt that they were the heirs to Alexander's conquests and that they were thus justified in occupying most, if not all, of the positions of political power. Especially in places like Egypt and Mesopotamia that had enormous non-Greek populations, resentment could easily turn into outright rebellion. Various works emerged among the subjects of the Hellenistic kingdoms predicting the downfall of their Greek rulers; Mesopotamian priests, Zoroastrians in Persia, and Egyptian religious leaders all wrote works of prophecy claiming that the Greeks were in league with evil forces and would eventually be deposed. The Jews also struggled with their Greek overlords, a problem exacerbated by the fact that they were ruled first by the Ptolemies and then by the Seleucids. While the Ptolemaic kingdom remained relatively stable until its takeover by the Romans in 30 BCE, both the Antigonid and Seleucid kingdoms lost ground over the years, largely due to a failure to quell native revolts, ultimately ruling over a fraction of their former territories by the time the Romans began encroaching in the second century BCE.

Unrelated to the struggle between Greeks and non-Greeks, the Hellenistic period saw a significant shift in gender relations. Simply put, the Greek obsession with maintaining not just a strict sexual hierarchy but an attempt to separate men and women socially that reached its zenith in Classical Athens loosened enormously in the Hellenistic age. Women were praised for fulfilling social and familial duties, for carrying out religious ceremonies, borrowing and lending money, and even for their political savvy in the case of noteworthy queens (like Alexander's mother Olympias or, much later, the famous Cleopatra VII).

The general pattern appears to be that women in Greece itself faced greater legal restrictions than those living in Greek colonies

elsewhere in the Hellenistic world, which is unsurprising since the older Greek poleis had centuries of both law and tradition in place enforcing sexual divisions. The Macedonian society represented by Alexander and his companions had always been less restrictive, with women exercising much more autonomy than in the Greek poleis to the south, and that cultural value was clearly imprinted along with Macedonian rule itself across the Hellenistic world. Back in Greece, Sparta stood apart as the one polis that exceeded even Macedonian gender standards: Spartan women were fully autonomous economically, owning two-fifths of the land overall, and asserting considerable political influence.

As usual when discussing gender in the pre-modern period, however, it is necessary to provide some caveats about greater periods of freedom and autonomy for women. With very few exceptions (once again, Cleopatra VII is the outstanding example), men continued to control politics. The laws of the Hellenistic kingdoms did protect and recognize women in various ways, but men were always given the greater legal role and identity. Analysis of birth rates suggests that infanticide was common, with girl babies often left to die both out of a general preference for boys and because the dowry the girl would have to be provided with at marriage was a burdensome expense for the family. Most male intellectuals continued to insist on the desirability of female submission, and with a few great exceptions, the bulk of the literature and philosophy from the period was written by men.

Hellenistic Philosophy and Science

Hellenistic philosophy largely shifted away from the concerns of Greek philosophers of the Classical Age. Because philosophers were discouraged from studying politics, as had Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, they turned instead to investigations of personal ethics, of how to live one's life to be happy, even if a larger kind of social justice remained elusive. All of the major schools of Hellenistic philosophy shared the same pursuit, albeit in different ways: to live in pleasure and tranquility. Three are of particular note: the Epicureans, Stoics, and Cynics.

The Epicureans, named after their founder Epicurus, believed that humans ought to turn their backs on the pointless drama of politics and social competition and retire to a kind of inner contemplation. Epicurus taught that even if gods existed, they clearly had no interest in human affairs and thus did not need to be feared. Death was final and total, representing release and peace, not an afterlife of torment or work, so there was no need to worry about it, either. In short, the Epicureans believed in a virtuous renunciation of earthly cares and an indulgence in pleasure. Pleasure was not about overindulgence, however (which led to suffering – think of indigestion and hangovers), but a refined enjoyment of food, drink, music, and sex, although one interesting aspect of this philosophy was the idea that sexual pleasure was fine, but emotional love was to be avoided since it was too likely to result in suffering. To this day, the word “epicurean” as it is used in English means someone who enjoys the finer things in life, especially in terms of good food and wine.

The Cynics believed that social conventions were unfortunate byproducts of history that distracted people from the true source of virtue and happiness: nature. In turn, the only route to happiness was a more aggressive rejection of social life than that espoused by the Epicureans (who, again, were quite sedate). They advocated a combination of asceticism and naturalism, indulging in one's physical needs without regard to social convention. Practically speaking, this involved deliberately flouting social mores, sometimes in confrontational or even disgusting ways: Diogenes, founder of the Cynics, notoriously masturbated and defecated in public. Most Cynics were slightly more restrained, but took great pleasure in mocking people in positions of political authority, and they also belittled the members of other philosophical schools for their overly rigid systems of thought. One story had it that Alexander sought out Diogenes and found him lying in the street in a suburb of the polis of Corinth, asking him what he, the king, might do for him, the philosopher. The Cynic replied “stop standing in my sunbeam.”

Originally an offshoot of the Cynics, the Stoics became philosophers of fate and rationality. Unlike the Epicureans, Stoics believed that humans had an obligation to engage in politics, which formed part of a great divine plan, something linked to both fate and nature. As participants in the natural order, humans ought to learn to accept the trials and tribulations of life rationally, without succumbing to emotion (hence the contemporary meaning of the word “stoic”: someone who is indifferent in the face of pain or discomfort). The Stoics accepted the necessity of being part of a society and of fulfilling social obligations, but they warned against excesses of pride and greed. Instead, a Stoic was to do his duty in his social roles without the distraction of luxury or indulgence. They were one possible version of a philosophy that believes in the existence of fate, of accepting one's place in a larger scheme instead of resisting it, and they also celebrated the idea that the rational mind was always more powerful than emotional reactions.

What these three schools of philosophy had in common, despite their obvious differences, is that they all represented different approaches to accepting the (political) status quo. The Epicureans avoided politics, the Stoics supported existing political structures, and the Cynics mocked everything without offering positive suggestions for change. This was a far cry from the earnest inquiry of a Socrates, a Plato, or an Aristotle in trying to establish a virtuous form of politics. While Greek culture enjoyed a period of unprecedented influence during the Hellenistic period, its experiments in rational (let alone democratic) political analysis were

not a major component of that influence.

While political philosophy did not enjoy a period of growth during the Hellenistic period, there were significant accomplishments in science and mathematics. The most important Hellenistic mathematicians were Euclid and Archimedes. Euclid was the inventor of the mathematical discipline of geometry. He was the first to use obvious starting points called axioms – for instance, the idea that two parallel lines will never intersect – to be able to deduce more complex principles called theorems. Euclid's work on geometry, *The Elements*, was still used as the standard textbook in many courses on mathematics well into the twentieth century CE, thousands of years after it was composed. Archimedes was also a geometrician, best remembered for his applications of geometry to engineering. He discovered the principle of using the displacement of water to calculate the specific gravity of objects, and he devised a number of complex war machines used against Roman forces when his home city of Syracuse, in Sicily, was under attack (including, according to some accounts, a giant mirror used to focus the sun's rays on Roman ships and set them on fire). He also first calculated the approximate value of π (the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter).

Hellenistic thinkers also made important discoveries in astronomy, most notably the fact that certain astronomers determined that the sun was the center of the solar system. Hellenistic astronomers also refined the calculations associated with the size of the Earth; one astronomer named Eratosthenes calculated the circumference of the Earth that was only off by 200 miles. Another astronomer named Hipparchus created the first star charts that included precise positions for stars over the course of the year, and to help keep track of their positions he created the first system of longitudes and latitudes.

Hellenistic medicine also thrived in Alexandria. Both Greece and Egypt had long-established medical traditions. Egyptian drugs, and possibly Egyptian doctors' knowledge of the eye as well as their emphasis on measurement, helped stimulate Alexandrian medical progress, as no doubt did the mere fact of cross-cultural fertilization. The key to medical advance was the dissection of human cadavers in Alexandria, a first in the history of science. In Greece, as in many ancient societies, religious tradition demanded that dead bodies not be mutilated. But in the frontier atmosphere of early Alexandria, this traditional taboo lost much of its force. Although Egyptians did not practice dissection, they did practice embalming, which may have helped Alexandrian Greeks overcome the prohibition against cutting open the human body. Ever supportive of research, the Ptolemies provided corpses to Greek scientists for dissections. Indeed, they had condemned criminals sent from prison for LIVE dissection by scientists. The practice was only a short-lived experiment, as many philosophers and even doctors wrote against it, describing it as an atrocity. But, before the practice was disavowed, the scientists discovered that the Brain was the center of the nervous system, not the heart.

Perhaps the most memorable achievement in scholarship during the period was the institutional form it took at the Library of Alexandria and its associated Mouseion, often considered to be the first research university in the western world. Funded directly by the Ptolemaic government, the Library collected and translated every scrap of available scholarship from the Hellenistic world and played host to scholars who based their own work on its archives. It housed lecture halls as well, representing the preeminent site of learning in the Hellenistic world as a whole. It was eventually destroyed, although to this day there are competing versions of who was to blame for its destruction (ranging from the forces of Julius Caesar during his involvement in an Egyptian civil war to either Christian or Muslim crusaders centuries later).

Ruins in the center of present day Alexandria

Present-day Ruins of a storage facility for the Library of Alexandria https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...w_of_ruins.JPG

Hellenistic Art & Architecture

Hellenistic art is richly diverse in subject matter and in stylistic development. It was created during an age characterized by a strong sense of history. For the first time, there were museums and great libraries, such as those at Alexandria and Pergamon. Hellenistic artists copied and adapted earlier styles, and also made great innovations. Representations of Greek gods took on new forms. The popular image of a nude Aphrodite, for example, reflects the increased secularization of traditional religion. Also prominent in Hellenistic art are representations of Dionysus, the god of wine and legendary conqueror of the East, as well as those of Hermes, the god of commerce. In strikingly tender depictions, Eros, the Greek personification of love, is portrayed as a young child.

One of the immediate results of the new international Hellenistic milieu was the widened range of subject matter that had little precedent in earlier Greek art. There are representations of unorthodox subjects, such as grotesques, and of more conventional inhabitants, such as children and elderly people. These images, as well as the portraits of ethnic people, especially those of Africans, describe a diverse Hellenistic populace; regular people not just gods and/or royalty. These statues and sculptures also depicted people's emotions for the first time. Art was meant to show internal feelings and not just physical perfection.

Sculpture of an older women in rags seated

Sculpture of a Drunken market women, 200 BCE

Sculpture of a black fisherman nearly nude

Sculpture of an Old Fisherman, 2nd Century BCE https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia....morente_b.jpg

Beyond the new focus on secular and diverse subjects, featuring emotions, Hellenistic art demonstrated the mixing of ideas and religions. Two of the most popular of these new, mixed or syncretized cults were the Hellenized Egyptian cults of Serapis and of Isis. Created under Ptolemy I, Serapis was meant to combine Osiris, the Egyptian god of the afterlife with Apis, the god of the Nile flood. Serapis also suggested Pluto, the Greek god of the underworld. Serapis was even named in the official descriptions of Alexander's death. Hence Serapis was an early example of the common Hellenistic practice of religious syncretism. As the Hellenistic kingdoms grew and evolved, the mixing of ideas and religions became even more widespread. A perfect example is Greco-Buddhist art that developed in a northern province of present day India (Gandhara) combining Buddhism and Greek culture beginning around 200 BCE.

Sculpture of the top half of Serapis with a container on his head

Serapis, 4th century BCE

Sculpture of a Buddha in a Greek toga

Early Sculpture of Buddha from Gandhara India dressed in Greek Robes <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...%28nm%29.jpeg>

In addition to the new types and themes of sculpture and painting, Hellenistic architecture reached new heights and innovations. This is best seen in the innovative type of architecture, Monumentalism. The revolutionary sculptures and buildings were meant to showcase the wealth and success of the new Hellenistic leaders. By and large they also reinforced Greek identity and cultures, promoting the story of Alexander as supreme conqueror, and his successors as superior to locals. Thus, the monuments were to inspire awe in their viewers while also legitimizing the rule of new Hellenistic kings, showing the gods' support of the Hellenistic rulers.

An excellent example of Monumental architecture was the Colossus of Rhodes, a statue of the Greek titan-god of the sun Helios, erected in the city of Rhodes, on the Greek island of the same name in 280 BCE. It is considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The statue was constructed to celebrate Rhodes' victory over the ruler of Cyprus, Antigonos I, whose son unsuccessfully besieged Rhodes in 305 BCE. The construction began in 292 BCE. Ancient accounts, which differ to some degree, describe the structure as being built with iron tie bars to which brass plates were fixed to form the skin. The majority of the building materials were repurposed from the weapons abandoned in the wake of the battle or siege of Rhodes. The interior of the structure, which stood on a 15-meter (49-foot) high white marble pedestal near the harbor entrance, was then filled with stone blocks as construction progressed. Other sources place the Colossus on a breakwater in the harbor. The statue itself was over 30 meters (98 feet) tall. Upper portions were built with the use of a large earthen ramp. During the building, workers would pile mounds of dirt on the sides of the colossus. Upon completion all of the dirt was removed and the colossus was left to stand alone. After twelve years, in 280 BC, the statue was completed.

Fanciful depiction of the Colossus of Rhodes Statue when it was intact with a ship sailing through his legs.

Colossus of Rhodes, as imagined in 1527 CE https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia....of_Rhodes.jpg

Unfortunately, the structure did not stand the test of time and was destroyed, at least partially in an earthquake in 226 BCE. Under stress from the shaking earth, the statue broke at the knees and fell over onto land. Ptolemy III offered to pay for the reconstruction of the statue, but the Oracle of Delphi made the Rhodians fear that they had offended the god Helios. Their punishment then was the destruction of the statue among other structures during the earthquake, and fearing further retribution, they declined to rebuild it. The remains then lay on the ground for over 800 years and, even broken, they were so impressive that many travelled to see them.

One such visitor was Greek geographer, philosopher, and historian Strabo. In approximately 64 BCE he described the city and the remains of the Colossus as the following:

The city of the Rhodians lies on the eastern promontory of Rhodes; and it is so far superior to all others in harbors and roads and walls and improvements in general that I am unable to speak of any other city as equal to it, or even as almost equal to it, much less superior to it. It is remarkable also for its good order, and for its careful attention to the administration of affairs of state in general; and in particular to that of naval affairs, whereby it held the mastery of the sea for a long time and overthrew the business of piracy, and became a friend to the Romans and to all kings who favoured both the Romans and the Greeks. Consequently, it not only has remained autonomous but also has been adorned with many votive offerings, which for the most part are to be found in the Dionysium and the gymnasium, but

partly in other places. The best of these are, first, the Colossus of Helios, of which the author of the iambic verse says, “seven times ten cubits in height, the work of Chares the Lindian”; but it now lies on the ground, having been thrown down by an earthquake and broken at the knees. In accordance with a certain oracle, the people did not raise it again. This, then, is the most excellent of the votive offerings. (Strabo, *Geography*, Book XIV)

Another example of Monumentalist architecture was the Lighthouse at Alexandria. The lighthouse was constructed in the 3rd century BCE. After Alexander the Great died mysteriously at age 32, the first Ptolemy announced himself king in 305 BCE, and commissioned its construction shortly thereafter. The building was finished during the reign of his son, Ptolemy II. It took 12 years to complete and served as a prototype for all later lighthouses in the world. The light was produced by a furnace at the top and the tower was said to have been built mostly with solid blocks of limestone. When complete the lighthouse stood between 393 and 450 ft (120 and 137 m) tall. It was one of the tallest man-made structures on Earth for many centuries, and, like the Colossus was regarded as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It too suffered damage by not one, but three earthquakes between 956 and 1323 CE, finally abandoned in the 14th century. It was the third longest surviving ancient wonder (after the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus and the still extant Great Pyramid of Giza). In 1994, French archaeologists discovered some remains of the lighthouse on the floor of Alexandria’s Eastern Harbor.

Excerpt from the Book of Wonders showing the Lighthouse of Alexandria

The lighthouse as depicted in the Book of Wonders, a late 14th-century Arabic text https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...6a_cropped.jpg

While Alexander the Great is a well-known figure from ancient history, the Hellenistic period as a whole is not. The reason for that relative neglect (in popular culture and in many history surveys, at least those at the pre-college level) is that the Hellenistic age is overshadowed by what was happening simultaneously to the west: the rise of Rome. In precisely the same period in which Alexander and his successors first conquered then ruled the territories of the former Persian Empire, Rome was in the process of evolving from a town in central Italy to the center of what would eventually be one of the greatest and longest-lasting empires in world history. That is the subject of the next few chapters.

Chapter 7: The Rise of the Roman Republic

In many ways, Rome defines Western Civilization. Even more so than Greece, the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire that followed created the idea of a single, united civilization sharing certain attributes and providing a lasting intellectual and political legacy. Its boundaries, from what is today England to Turkey and from Germany to Spain, mark out the heartland of what its' inhabitants would later consider to be "The West" in so many words. The Greek intellectual legacy was eagerly taken up by the Romans and combined with unprecedented organization and engineering on a scale the Greeks had never imagined, even under Alexander the Great.

The Romans turned an Italian city-state into one of the largest and longest lasting empires in history. By promoting prosperity in every corner, Rome planted in what would become Britain, France, Germany, and Spain the seeds of the advanced civilizations of the Mediterranean. Much of modern politics, including the very vocabulary we use, can be traced to Rome. These include the words president, inauguration, and forum. The Roman Republic mixed popular power with government controlled by wealthy landowners. The government was divided into 3 branches, which created a system of checks and balances that tended toward consensus. The result was efficiency and, for centuries, stability. Unlike Greece, Rome extended its citizenship to a large population, first throughout Italy and then across its entire empire. The modern nation-state with its mass citizenship owes much to Rome. And while Rome was NOT a democracy, the idea of a government elected by a very large population does have its roots in the Roman Republic (remember all the restrictions for voting even in the radical Athenian democracy) as well as in the Greek Polis. This is perhaps because the Romans were already quite indebted culturally and socially to the Greeks. But, Rome outlasted the Greeks by several centuries, though ultimately Roman society was destroyed by its own excesses and successes. In many ways the very military success of the Romans eventually brought them to their knees.

Roman Origins

Rome was originally a town built amidst seven hills surrounded by swamps in central Italy. The Romans were just one group of "Latins," central Italians who spoke closely-related dialects of the Latin language. Rome itself had a few key geographical advantages. Its hills were easily defensible, making it difficult for invaders to carry out a successful attack. It was at the intersection of trade routes, thanks in part to its proximity to a natural ford (a shallow part of a river that can be crossed on foot) in the Tiber River, leading to a prosperous commercial and mercantile sector that provided the wealth for early expansion. It also lay on the route between the Greek colonies of southern Italy and various Italian cultures in the central and northern part of the peninsula.

The legend that the Romans themselves invented about their origins centered around two brothers: Romulus and Remus. In the legend, Romulus and Remus were two boys born to a Latin king, but then kidnapped and thrown into the Tiber River by the king's jealous brother. They were discovered by a female wolf and suckled by her for a time before a shepherd encountered the boys and adopted them. After growing up among the flocks of sheep, they discovered their true identities, and royal heritage, ultimately exacting revenge on their treacherous uncle. To celebrate their victory they decided to found a city where they had been rescued by the wolf, but disagreed on the location. They then fought each other, with Romulus killing Remus and founding the city of Rome, named after himself. According to the story, the city of Rome was founded on April 21, 753 BCE. This legend is just that: a legend. Its importance is that it speaks to how the Romans wanted to see themselves, as the descendants of a great man who seized his birthright through force and power, accepting no equals. In a sense, the Romans were proud to believe that their ancient heritage involved being literally raised by wolves.

Wall carving of a wolf with two children suckling her underneath

A roman relief of Romulus and Remus suckling the she-wolf located in Cathedral of Maria Saal in present day Austria
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...122013_774.jpg

The Romans were a warrior people from very early on, feuding and fighting with their neighbors and with raiders from the north. And Rome was a lawless city. Romulus simply sought to populate his territory and so he accepted outcasts from other tribes, including outlaws, murderers, and runaway slaves. Unsurprisingly, few families sought to ally themselves with these sort of men, and so Roman men found it difficult to acquire wives. And without women, there could be no real increase of population, so Romulus came up with a plan. Inspired by the god Consus (god of good counsel) Romulus decided to take advantage of an approaching festival, Consualia (the first fruits festival), and invited the neighboring Sabines to join Rome in celebration of the recently harvested crops. The Sabines lived in the Sabine Hills of central Italy northeast of Rome, and had previously refused Romulus's requests for brides. However, on this day in late August the Sabines agreed to attend Consualia, but as soon as they

arrived at the gates of Rome, Romulus and his men ambushed the group, killing the men and kidnapping the women. They then forced the women, as few as 30 and as many as 600 depending on the account, into marriage. This night became known as the “Rape of Sabine” and purportedly began a famous wedding tradition where the husband carries his wife across the threshold of their home, just as the Roman men carried their unwilling Sabine brides into their residences.

While this tale likely offends our modern sensibilities, morals, and values, it also shows how distinct the Roman identity was from their Greek ancestors. From the start, Romans embraced foreigners, while they were a hierarchical society, they were unlike the Greeks in that they welcomed new comers, making them Romans. Perhaps this lesson had its origins with Alexander and the Hellenistic Kingdoms.

The Etruscans

The peoples who most influenced nascent Rome, beyond the Greeks, were their northwestern neighbors and allies, the Etruscans. For a time Rome, was even ruled by the Etruscans. Located between the Apennine Mountains and the Tyrrhenian Sea, Etruria was established in the 7th century BCE, approximately two hundred years before the Roman shift from monarchy to republic. The Etruscans inhabited land between modern Tuscany and central Lazio, with colonies in the north known as Etruria Padana and in the south known as Etruria Campana. While Etruria had no centralized government, there was the *Lega dei Popoli* (League of the Peoples), typically composed of twelve cities spread throughout the territory. Each city acted akin to city-states, each an independent entity under the same regional identity.

The Etruscan economy depended on trade, often exchanging goods with Greek, Phoenician, and other Mediterranean settlements. Etruria’s exports consisted of wines, stonework, and raw materials, depending on its city of origin; however, the region was widely recognized for its fresco paintings, bucchero pottery, and metalwork, specifically cast bronze sculptures. Over time, Rome became a key link along the Etruscan – Greek trade route. This mixing of cultures, Etruscan, Greek, and Latin, included sharing mythologies and stories. The Greek gods and myths were shared by the Romans, with only the names of the gods being changed (e.g. Zeus became Jupiter, Aphrodite became Venus, Hades became Pluto, etc.). In this way, the Romans became part of the larger Mediterranean world of which the Greeks were such a significant part.

Map of Etruscan territory at its height encompassing much of northern Italy
Etruscan Territory circa 900 BCE https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4a/Etruscan_Territory_circa_900_BCE.png

According to Roman legends, the Etruscans ruled the Rome from some time in the eighth century BCE until 509 BCE. During that time, the Etruscans organized them to fight along Greek lines as a phalanx. From the phalanx, the Romans eventually created new forms of military organization and tactics that overwhelmed the Greeks themselves (albeit hundreds of years later). There is no actual evidence that the Etruscans ruled Rome, but as with the legend of Romulus and Remus, the story of early Etruscan rule inspired the Romans to think of themselves in certain ways – most obviously in utterly rejecting foreign rule of any kind, and even of foreign cultural influence. Romans were always fiercely proud (to the point of belligerence) of their heritage and identity.

By 600 BCE the Romans had drained the swamp in the middle of their territory and built the first of their large public buildings. As noted, they were a monarchy at the time, ruled by (possibly) Etruscan kings, but with powerful Romans serving as advisers in an elected senate. Native-born men rich enough to afford weapons were allowed to vote, while native-born poor men were considered full Romans but had no vote. In 509 BCE (according to legend), the Romans overthrew the last Etruscan king, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, and established a fully Republican form of government, with elected senators making all of the important political decisions. Roman antipathy to kings was so great that no Roman leader would ever call himself Rex – king – even after the Republic was eventually overthrown centuries later.

The story of the end of Etruscan rule, and monarchy, in Rome is told by historian Livy in his volume *History of Rome* published in 17 CE in one chapter, “The Rape of Lucretia.” The story describes the rape of the virtuous Roman wife, Lucretia, who left home alone by her husband, was raped by the son of the final King of Rome, Sextus Tarquinius. Feeling she had lost her honor as a result of the rape, Lucretia committed suicide, sending her now widowed husband and his compatriots to seek revenge, killing Lucius Tarquinius Superbus himself and overthrowing the entire Etruscan/Roman monarchy. And thus was born the Roman Republic.

[Livy's “Rape of Lucretia” Full Text](#)

Despite overthrowing the last Etruscan king in the 6th century BCE, the Etruscan cultural impact lasted for centuries. For example, the Roman, Greek, and Etruscan pantheon shared figureheads within their religions, such as Jupiter/Jupiter/Juno or Juno/Hera/Uni. The Etruscans specifically introduced some Gods and Goddesses to Roman mythology. Menrva (Goddess of War, Art, Wisdom, and Health), the Etruscan counterpart to Greece’s Athena, is often regarded as the basis for the Roman Minerva (Goddess of

Poetry, Medicine, Commerce, Weaving, Crafts, and Wisdom). Beyond religion, Etruria fashion continued to be favored in the Roman Republic and later Empire. The *tabenna*, worn by Etruscan men, was the predecessor to the Roman toga, as it incorporated a similar semi-circular design. As Rome evolved, the design and symbolism associated with the toga shifted, often utilizing color or style to reflect social status. Etruscan influence is also visible in Roman architecture and technology, such as the Roman sewer system *Cloaca Maxima*. Commissioned by King Priscus, the system was heavily based on the *cuniculus*, an Etruscan drainage channel. By the 1st century CE, eleven aqueducts were channeled into the Cloaca Maxima, allowing continuous running water to remove waste from the city.

The outflow of a very large sewer line

Outflow of Cloaca Maxima circa 2019 <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/...Maxima2019.jpg>

Map showing the Roman sewer system

Map of Cloaca Maxima in Ancient Rome <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/...-annotated.jpg>

The Celts

While the Hellenistic world was flourishing in Greece and the Middle East, and Rome was beginning its long climb from obscurity to power, most of Western Europe was dominated by the Celts. The Celts provide background context to the rise of Rome, since Roman expansion eventually spelled the end of Celtic independence in most of Europe.

Much less is known about the Celts than about contemporaneous cultures of the Mediterranean because the Celts did not leave a written record. The Celts were not a unified empire of any kind; they were a tribal people who shared a common culture and a set of beliefs, along with certain technologies having to do with metal-working and agriculture.

The Celts were a warrior society which seemed to have practiced a variation of what would later be known as feudal law, in which every offense demanded retribution in the form of either violence or “man gold”: the payment needed to atone for a crime and thereby prevent the escalation of violence. The Celts were in contact with the people of the Mediterranean world from as early as 800 BCE, mostly through trade. They lived in fortified towns and were as quick to raid as to trade with their neighbors.

By about 450 BCE the Celts expanded dramatically across Europe. They seem to have become more warlike and expansionist and they adopted a number of technologies already in use further south, including chariot warfare and currency. By 400 BCE groups of Celts began to raid further into “civilized” lands, sacking Rome itself in 387 BCE and pushing into the Hellenistic lands of Macedonia, Greece, and Anatolia. Subsequently, Celtic raiders tended to settle by about 200 BCE, often forming distinct smaller kingdoms within larger lands, such as the region called Galatia in Anatolia, and serving as mercenary warriors for the Hellenistic kingdoms.

Eventually, when the Romans began to expand beyond Italy itself, it was the Celts who were first conquered and then assimilated into the Republic. The Romans regarded Celts as barbarians, but they were thought to be barbarians who were at least capable of assimilating and adopting “true” civilization from the Romans. Centuries later, the descendants of conquered Celts considered themselves fully Roman: speaking Latin as their native language, wearing togas, drinking wine, and serving in the Roman armies. And they were some of the earliest converts to Christianity.

Photograph of a celtic cross in a centuries old graveyard in the Scottish hills

The oldest Celtic Cross in Kildalton, Scotland; photo by author Erin Stone

The Roman Republic

Roman society was hierarchical and class based. It was divided into the Patricians (the wealthy, upper class rulers), the Plebeians (the lower class commoners), and the slaves. There were about one hundred patrician families, descending from the man Romulus had, allegedly, appointed to the first senate. They were allied with other rich and powerful people, owners of large tracts of land, in trying to hold in check the plebeians. But the Roman Republic was not a monarchy as it differed in two basic ways. First, the Republic stood for liberty, which for the Romans meant both freedom from arbitrary power of a king and freedom for all free men to participate in public affairs. Second, the Republic was a commonwealth and it belonged to the Roman people, not to a royal family. In theory, the Roman people were sovereign, that is the people at large ruled the state. In practice though, very few Romans truly ruled the state. Roman society and culture, moreover were conservative and did not value change. Once the young Republic had its values and institutions in place, it tried to maintain them over centuries with little change. Nor did the Republic give up entirely on the old values of monarchy, as we will see.

Executive power lay in the hands of Rome's powerful magistrates. They were elected by citizens and not chosen by lottery, as in Greek democracy. Election required campaigning, which in turn took money and connections. Magistracies were time-consuming jobs but offered no salary, unlike in Greek democracy. Thus only a wealthy few could afford to hold public office in Rome, mainly patricians. The magistrates together formed the Centuriate Assembly that created laws. The Centuriate Assembly was divided into five different classes based on wealth (a system that ensured that the wealthy could always outvote the poorer). The wealthiest class consisted of the equestrians, so named because they could afford horses and thus form the Roman cavalry; the equestrian class would go on to be a leading power bloc in Roman history well into the Imperial period. The Centuriate Assembly voted on the consuls (chief magistrates) each year, declared war and peace, and acted as a court of appeal in legal cases involving the death penalty. It could also propose legislation, but the Senate had to approve it for it to become law.

Annually, the Centuriate Assembly elected two executives called consuls to oversee the laws and ensure their enforcement. The consuls had almost unlimited power, known as *imperium*, including the right to inflict the death penalty on law-breakers, and they were preceded everywhere by twelve bodyguards called lictors. Consular authority was, however, limited by the fact that the terms were only a year long and each consul was expected to hold the other in check if necessary. Under the consuls there was the Senate, essentially a large body of aristocratic administrators, appointed for life, who controlled state finances. The Senate consisted of 300 men and all former magistrates. The whole system was tied closely to the priesthoods of the Roman gods, who performed divinations and blessings on behalf of the city. While the Romans were deeply suspicious of individuals who seemed to be trying to take power themselves, several influential families worked behind the scenes to ensure that they could control voting blocks in the Centuriate Assembly and the Senate.

When Rome faced a major crisis, the Centuriate Assembly could vote to appoint a dictator, a single man vested with the full power of *imperium*. Symbolically, all twenty-four of the lictors would accompany the dictator, who was supposed to use his almost-unlimited power to save Rome from whatever threatened it, then step down and return things to normal. While the office of dictator could have easily led to an attempted takeover, for hundreds of years very few dictators abused their powers and instead respected the temporary nature of Roman dictatorship itself.

While the Senate began as an advisory body, it later wrested real law-making power from the consuls (who were, after all, almost always drawn from its members). By 133 BCE, the Senate proposed legislation and could veto the legislation of the consuls. An even more important power was its ability to designate funds for war and public building, giving it enormous power over what the Roman government actually did, since the senate could simply cut off funding to projects it disagreed with.

Class Struggle

Rome struggled with a situation analogous to that of Athens, in which the rich not only had a virtual monopoly on political power, but in many cases had the legal right to either enslave or at least extract labor from debtors. In Rome's case, an ongoing class struggle called the Conflict of Orders took place from about 500 BCE to 360 BCE (140 years!), in which the plebeians struggled to get more political representation. In 494 BCE, the plebeians threatened to simply leave Rome, rendering it almost defenseless, and the Senate responded by allowing the creation of two officials called Tribunes, men drawn from the plebeians who had the legal power to veto certain decisions made by the Senate and consuls. Later, the government created a Plebeian Council to represent the needs of the plebeians, approved the right to marry between patricians and plebeians, banned debt slavery, and finally, came to the agreement that of the two consuls elected each year, one had to be a plebeian. By 287 BCE, the Plebeian Assembly could pass legislation with the weight of law as well.

Roman soldiers were citizen-soldiers, farmers who volunteered to fight for Rome in hopes of being rewarded with wealth taken from defeated enemies. An important political breakthrough happened in about 350 BCE when the Romans enacted a law that limited the amount of land that could be given to a single citizen after a victory, ensuring a more equitable distribution of land to plebeian soldiers. This was a huge incentive to serve in the Roman army, since any soldier now had the potential to become very rich if he participated in a successful campaign against Rome's enemies.

That being said, class struggle was always a factor in Roman politics. Even after the plebeians gained legal concessions, the rich always held the upper hand because wealthy plebeians would regularly join with patricians to out-vote poorer plebeians. Likewise, in the Centuriate Assembly, the richer classes had the legal right to out-vote the poorer classes – the equestrians and patricians often worked together against the demands of the poorer classes. Practically speaking, by the early third century BCE the plebeians had won meaningful legal rights, namely the right to representation and lawmaking, but those victories were often overshadowed by the fact that wealthy plebeians increasingly joined with the existing patricians to create something new: the Roman aristocracy. Most state offices did not pay salaries, so only those with substantial incomes from land (or from loot won in campaigns) could afford to serve as full-time representatives, officials, or judges – that, too, fed into the political power of the aristocracy over common citizens.

In the midst of this ongoing struggle, the Romans came up with the basis of Roman law, the system of law that, through various iterations, became the basis for most systems of law still in use in Europe today (Britain being a notable exception). Private law governed disputes between individuals (e.g. property suits, disputes between business partners), while public law governed disputes between individuals and the government (e.g. violent crimes that were seen as a threat to the social order as a whole). In addition, the Romans established the Law of Nations to govern the territories it started to conquer in Italy; it was an early form of international law based on what were believed to be universal standards of justice.

The plebeians were concerned that legal decisions would always favor the patricians, who had a monopoly on legal proceedings, so they insisted that the laws be written down and made publicly available. Thus, in 451 BCE, members of the Roman government wrote the Twelve Tables, lists of the laws available for everyone to see, which were then posted in the Roman Forum in the center of Rome. Just as it was done in Athens a hundred years earlier (and in Babylon thousands of years prior), having the laws publicly available reduced the chances of corruption. In fact, according to a Roman legend, the ten men who were charged with recording the laws were sent to Athens to study the laws of Solon of Athens; this was a deliberate use or “copy” of his idea.

The Roman Family

The fundamental societal unit of the Roman Republic was the family. This can be seen in the “Rape of Lucretia” and in the above discussion of the basics of Roman government, which many consider to have been little more than the maneuvering of a few powerful families. However, the Roman family was broader than our definition today and is better understood as an entire household or series of households connected by marriage. Romans considered their families to extend beyond those related by blood, to include slaves, animals, property, as well as ancestors.

The legal head of the family was the *paterfamilias* or the oldest living male, usually the father, who exercised *patria potestas* or “Father’s power.” According to Roman law the *paterfamilias* had supreme power within the household, though he was supposed to call a council of all older male relatives for very important decisions. He even held the right of life or death over his family members, i.e. he could sell family members into slavery or kill an errant wife or child. A son, no matter his age, was subject to his living *paterfamilias*. Adult men only became fully independent, and their own *paterfamilias*, at the death of their father. This respect for the *paterfamilias* was linked to the Roman respect for their ancestors.

On the other hand Roman women never became legally independent, even on the death of their *paterfamilias*. Women were perpetually linked with their *paterfamilias*, from birth to death. Daughters were not given individual, unique first names, and instead were named according to their father’s gens or root name. For example, Julius Caesar’s daughter was called Julia and if he had had a second daughter her name would have literally been Julia the Second. Although fathers were supposed to support all male children, they only had to support their first daughter. In other words, they were free to “expose” their additional daughters, meaning they could leave them in the open to die, be raised as a slave, or in the best of circumstances to be adopted.

Woodcut of Caesar’s daughter Julia featuring her image in the center surrounded by script identifying her as a daughter and wife

Image of Julia (daughter of Caesar) from a 16th century woodcut. The inscription reads “Julia; Gaius Caesar’s daughter; Pompey’s wife” showing how women were identified by the men in their lives https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...a_caesaris.jpg

Women received little if any education, except in household duties, as they were expected to be loyal and supportive wives and mothers above all else. A father arranged his daughter’s marriage and provided her with a dowry. Once married the woman was literally “handed off” to her new *paterfamilias*, though he could not completely control her until the death of her own father. And women married very young. For example, the Roman statesman and lawyer, Cicero had a daughter who was engaged at 12 and married at 16, but a widow already at 22. Married women were expected to have a limited political role, helping their husbands in social activities and serving as a supportive ally in their political endeavors, as can be seen in the story of Lucretia. Women did manage the household, slaves, and kept account of their property. The most important job for a Roman woman was to instill virtue into their children. Women could inherit property, though if they married, their husbands would control said inheritance. If the woman was widowed or divorced though, she would have control of the property, with the caveat that her eldest male relative (brother usually) would be tasked with advising them on all decisions. Divorce was quite common, with both men and women legally able to initiate the procedures, though fathers would keep the children. Widows were also common thanks to the young marriage age of women, as young as 13 years old, and the death of soldier husbands. Once widowed women were legally autonomous and continued to run households after the death of the husband.

Roman Expansion

At the beginning of the Republic, in 509 BCE, Roman territory comprised about 500 square miles. Roman expansion began with

its leadership of a confederation of allied cities, the Latin League. Rome led this coalition against nearby hill tribes that had periodically raided the area, then against the Etruscans that had once ruled Rome itself. Just as the Romans started to consider further territorial expansion, a fierce raiding band of Celts swooped in and sacked Rome in 389 BCE, a setback that took several decades to recover from. In the aftermath, the Romans swore to never let the city fall victim to an attack again.

A key moment in the early period of Roman expansion was in 338 BCE when Rome defeated its erstwhile allies in the Latin League. At this point Rome controlled 2,000 square miles and was moving north into Etruscan territory. By 265 BCE Rome controlled all of the Italian peninsula to modern day Pisa, an area of about 50,000 square feet. By 146 BCE Roman provinces included Sicily, Gaul (the northernmost part of Italy), Sardinia, Corsica, and Spain. Once-great Carthage was the Roman province of Africa and once-mighty Macedon was the province of Macedonia whose governor was effectively in charge of Greece. The Seleucid kingdom was free, but weak. Rome was the supreme power between Gibraltar and the Levant. How had they achieved this great success against other powers both large and small?

Rome evolved as a militaristic society partially out of necessity. Rome was under nearly constant threat or occupied by outside forces for much of the state's formative years. Roman magistrates other motivation for military assaults and expansion was taken from Athenian leader, Pericles. As he had used the Delian League to occupy Athenian soldiers, Rome saw war and conquest as a way to keep the plebeians quiet. However, by the 2nd century the pragmatic reasons for expansion were replaced by simple greed for increased land and wealth by Rome's power hungry leaders. It was through military victory that magistrates continued to gain fame and prominence.

Roman soldiers were inspired by straightforward greed as well as the tremendous cultural importance placed on winning military glory. Nothing was as important to a male Roman citizen than his reputation as a soldier. Likewise, Roman aristocrats all acquired their political power through military glory until late in the republic, and even then military glory was all but required for a man to achieve any kind of political importance. The greatest honor a Roman could win was a triumph, a military parade displaying the spoils of war to the cheers of the people of Rome; many people held important positions in Rome, but only the greatest generals were ever rewarded with a triumph.

It is important to emphasize the extreme militarism and terrible brutality of Rome during the republican period. Wars were annual: with very few exceptions over the centuries the Roman legions would march forth to conquer new territory every single year. The Romans swiftly acquired a reputation for absolute ruthlessness and even wanton cruelty, raping and/or slaughtering the civilian inhabitants of conquered cities, enslaving thousands, and in some cases utterly wiping out whole populations (the neighboring city of Veii was obliterated in roughly 393 BCE, for example, right at the start of the conquest period). The Greek historian Polybius calmly noted at the time in his sweeping history of the republic that insofar as there was a deliberate intention behind all of this cruelty, it was easy to identify: causing terror.

The overall picture of Roman culture is of a society that was in its own way as fanatical and obsessed with war as was Sparta during the height of its barracks society. Unlike Sparta, however, Rome was able to mobilize gigantic armies, partly because slaves came to perform most of the work on farms and workshops over time, freeing up free Roman men to participate in the annual invasions of neighboring territories. One prominent contemporary historian of Rome, W.V. Harris, wisely warns against the temptation of "power worship" when studying Roman history. Rome did indeed accomplish remarkable things, but it did so through appalling cruelty and astonishing levels of violence.

Another factor in Rome's impressive expansion were their military technology and tactics employed by their huge armies. First, while the Romans originally utilized the Greek Hoplite Phalanx (it suited them on the level ground of Central Italy), after a major defeat in 321 BCE in northern, mountainous Italy, the Romans adopted a new formation: the legion. Taking equipment and tactics from the Samnites, they abandoned the phalanx, which overpowered the enemy by fighting as one thickly massed unit, and adopted the more flexible and adaptable legion. Legions were drawn up into 3 lines, thirty maniples "handfuls", and sixty "centuries" or hundreds. Each century was commanded by a centurion. A legion marched in a checkerboard pattern, leaving gaps in the lines. In battle each line closed its gaps as it attacked in turn. Unlike hoplites, who engaged the enemy at short range, legionnaires first threw their javelins at long range. Then, having broken the enemy's order, they charged and fought with sword and shield. The semi-independence of each manipule or century, each with its own commander and banner, created a more maneuverable army than that of the phalanx and one better suited for mountain fighting. When Rome's legion beat the Macedonian phalanx decisively in 197 BCE, military history entered a new era. For an example of Roman legions in action see the relatively accurate scene from *Gladiator* below.

YouTube Video

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

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In addition to the new organization, tactics, and maneuverability, the Roman army possessed one more advantage to most of their opponents; they were a Citizen Army. In fact, the Roman army (at least the highly trained legions, including the equestrians) was made up of ALL male citizens who served for long periods, not just during times of war, but often for up to twenty years. Thus, after a few years they were highly trained and experienced, this was no amateur army. Beginning in the 4th century the citizen soldiers also received a salary for their service, making this the first fully professional military. And in addition to their salary, legionnaires (especially the higher ranked) also received portions of conquered land. This kept the army loyal with a high morale, at least at the core of the army.

Map showing roman expansion over time

Map of Roman Expansion. Note that the territories in the red and pink were those conquered during the Republican period.
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/71/Extent_of_the_Roman_Republic_and_the_Roman_Empire_between_218_BC_and_117_AD.png

The Punic Wars

Rome's great rival in this early period of expansion was the North-African city of Carthage, founded centuries earlier by Phoenician colonists. Carthage was one of the richest and most powerful trading empires of the Hellenistic Age, a peer of the Alexandrian empires to the east, trading and occasionally skirmishing with the Ptolemaic armies of Egypt and the Greek cities of Sicily. Rome and Carthage had long been trading partners, and for centuries there was no real reason for them to be enemies since they were separated by the Mediterranean. That being said, as Rome's power increased to encompass all of Italy, the Carthaginians became increasingly concerned that Rome might pose a threat to its own dominance.

First Punic War, 264-241 BCE

Conflict finally broke out in 264 BCE in Sicily. The island of Sicily was one of the oldest and most important areas for Greek colonization. There, a war broke out between the two most powerful poleis, Syracuse and Messina. The Carthaginians sent a fleet to intervene on behalf of the Messinians, but the Messinians then called for help from Rome as well (a betrayal of sorts from the perspective of Carthage). Soon, the conflict escalated as Carthage took the side of Syracuse (in the face of perceived Messinian betrayal) and Rome saw an opportunity to expand Roman power in Sicily. The Centuriate Assembly voted to escalate the Roman military commitment since its members wanted the potential riches to be won in war. This initiated the First Punic War, which lasted from 264 to 241 BCE. (Note: "Punic" refers to the Roman term for Phoenician, and hence Carthage and its civilization.)

Like Rome, Carthage was guided by a wealthy elite, but it was mercantile in character rather than agrarian. Rome was a land power, Carthage a sea power. Rome had virtually no navy. Carthage commanded a great war fleet, and its merchant ships dominated the western Mediterranean and played a major role in the east. Carthage was an economic power house, exploiting the rich mines of Spain and even building large-scale plantations for the production of single crops worked by slaves (the first society to do this). Carthage also boasted brilliant generals, the most famous being Hamilcar and Hannibal Barca. At the start of the conflict, most would have favored Carthage to beat the upstart Romans. But in the end Carthage was absolutely destroyed due to unforeseen weaknesses and Roman strengths.

First and foremost, unlike Rome, Carthage did not have a citizen army. Their commanders were Carthaginian, but most of their soldiers were paid mercenaries and of questionable loyalty. Unlike Rome, which treated at least its Italian allies well, Carthage showed contempt for all its troops who were not Carthaginians. As one might expect, the mercenaries abandoned Carthage as soon as circumstances did not look in their favor. And even with their mercenaries, Carthaginian armies were still smaller than Rome's.

Even with the benefits of a citizen army, Rome had one huge problem; at the start of the first Punic war Rome had absolutely no

navy. But the Romans proved to be adaptable, tenacious, and ruthless. To win the First Punic War, Rome not only built a navy but outlasted the enemy in a long and bloody conflict. To begin Rome captured a Carthaginian ship and used it to construct their own navy, literally modeling their ships on those of Carthage. Still, Rome lost many battles as they built their fleet, but due to the long war the Carthaginian government began to run out of money, and needed to hire even more foreign soldiers/mercenaries as their forces were diminished. Meanwhile the Romans were rich and powerful enough to persist in the war effort. Additionally, Rome benefited greatly from the fact that the Carthaginians did not realize that the war could grow to be about more than just Sicily; even after winning victories there, the Carthaginians never tried to invade Italy itself (which they could have done, at least early on). The Romans eventually learned how to carry out effective naval warfare and stranded the Carthaginian army in Sicily. The Carthaginians sued for peace in 241 BCE and agreed to give up their claims to Sicily and to pay a war indemnity. The Romans, however, betrayed them and seized the islands of Corsica and Sardinia as well, territories that were still under the nominal control of Carthage. Rome then destroyed nearly all of the Carthaginian navy.

From the aftermath of the First Punic War and the seizure of Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica emerged the Roman provincial system: the islands were turned into “provinces” of the Republic, each of which was obligated to pay tribute (the “tithe,” meaning tenth, of all grain) and follow the orders of Roman governors appointed by the senate. That system would continue for the rest of the republican and imperial periods of Roman history, with governors wielding enormous power and influence in their respective provinces.

Second Punic War, 218-202 BCE

Unsurprisingly, the Carthaginians wanted revenge, not just for their loss in the war but for Rome’s seizure of Corsica and Sardinia. For twenty years, the Carthaginians built up their forces and their resources, most notably by invading and conquering a large section of Spain, containing rich mines of gold and copper and thousands of Spanish Celts who they conscripted to serve as mercenaries in the Carthaginian armies. In 218 BCE, the great Carthaginian general Hannibal (son of the most successful general who had fought the Romans in the First Punic War, Hamilcar) launched a surprise attack in Spain against Roman allies and then against Roman forces themselves. This led to the Second Punic War (218 BCE – 202 BCE).

Rome and Carthage’s respective plans reflected their militaristic strengths. Whereas Rome opted to utilize their naval superiority, Hannibal led Carthaginian troops through the Alps into Italian territory. By marching to the Alps, Hannibal avoided the first of two Roman fleets, the second initially designated to invade Carthage in Northern Africa. Following their march, Hannibal saw victory at Ticinus in present-day Switzerland, which forced the Romans to retreat south of the Padus River. The Romans pulled the troops destined for Carthage and shifted the war front to Italian territories.

Small ivory carving of a Roman war elephant with a soldier riding on top

Statue of a Roman War Elephant recovered from Pompeii https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...r_elephant.jpg

Hannibal crossed the Alps into Italy from Spain with 60,000 men and a few dozen war elephants (most of the elephants perished, but the survivors proved very effective, and terrifying, against the Roman forces). For the next two years, he crushed every Roman army sent against him, killing tens of thousands of Roman soldiers and marching perilously close to Rome. Hannibal defeated the Romans using clever tactics: he lured them across icy rivers and ambushed them, he concealed a whole army in the fog one morning and then sprang on a Roman legion, and he led the Romans into narrow passes and slaughtered them.

In 216 BCE, Rome elected Gaius Terentius Varro and Lucius Aemilius Paullus as consuls to focus on the war, as they promised to thwart Hannibal’s army. Gathered outside Cannae, the two consuls recruited an army of over 70,000 soldiers. This was the largest army Rome would ever gather on Italian territory; however, even this mass of forces did not stop Hannibal and resulted in one of the worst defeats in Roman history. Despite Hannibal’s continued victories and the wavering of allies (though none officially broke with Rome, something Hannibal was counting on to be able to take Rome), Rome rejected all peace attempts favoring Carthage. The Roman territory was reduced to that of central Italy and Sicily at their lowest point against Hannibal, but they would not give up.

Between 215 and 205 BCE, Rome deployed four to seven legions annually, conducting operations from Hispania, Africa, to the Aegean. Hannibal could not sustain battle with this onslaught of multiple armies simultaneously and opted to finally march against Rome in 211 BCE. While he could not siege Rome due to its defenses, Carthage’s attack on Rome postponed their planned expedition to Africa. However, by 209 BCE, Rome began to gain the upper hand, to reconquer most of its former cities and conquering Carthaginian territories. Between 207 and 205 BCE, Hannibal suffered three drastic losses that shifted the war in Rome’s favor. Over those three years, Hannibal lost his brother Hasdrubal at Metaurus, Rome conquered Hispania and destroyed a Carthaginian resupply fleet. Rome entered Africa by 204 BCE and quickly ambushed Carthaginian and Numidian forces. Numidia was a northwestern African monarchy, initially divided between the Massylii (east) and the Masaesyli (west). During the war, the

east was initially allied with Carthage, whereas the west supported Rome; however, in 206 BCE, the new eastern king Masinissa allied with the Romans. The Roman General pursuing Hannibal, Scipio Africanus, saw numerous victories between 204 and 202 BCE. The Battle of Zama ended the Second Punic War, as Scipio undermined Hannibal's war elephants, with his troops routing and attacking rear Carthaginian troops. Nearly 20,000 Carthaginians died over the course of the battle, compared to Rome's 2,000. The victorious Scipio, now easily the most powerful man in Rome, became the first great general to add to his own name the name of the place he conquered: he became Scipio "Africanus" – conqueror of Africa.

Map showing the different battles of the Second Punic War, most of which took place in Spain

Battles of the Second Punic War <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:P...ttles.PNG#file>

The resulting peace treaty seceded all Carthaginian territories outside of Africa and inhibited future war efforts as Rome required their approval before Carthage could engage in battle. Furthermore, Carthage had to raise 10,000 troops (known as talents) for Rome over fifty years. While the war left Carthage financially devastated, citizens trusted Hannibal (who the Romans surprisingly spared) and voted him to the office of *suffete* (chief magistrate). In office, Hannibal reformed the tax system and stabilized the economy, resulting in prosperity and later confrontations.

Third Punic War, 149-146 BCE

An uneasy peace lasted for several decades between Rome and Carthage, despite enduring anti-Carthaginian hatred in Rome; one prominent senator named Cato the Elder reputedly ended every speech in the Senate with the statement "...and Carthage must be destroyed." Rome finally forced the issue in the mid-second century BCE by meddling in Carthaginian affairs. The third and last Punic War that ensued was utterly one-sided: it began in 149 BCE, and by 146 BCE Carthage was defeated. Not only were thousands of Carthaginian people killed or enslaved, but the city itself was brutally sacked (the comment by Polybius regarding the terror inspired by Rome, noted above, was specifically in reference to the horrific sack of Carthage). The Romans created a myth to commemorate their victory, claiming that they had "plowed the earth with salt" at Carthage so that nothing would ever grow there again – that was not literally true, but it did serve as a useful legend as the Romans expanded their territories even further.

The end of the Third Punic War left Carthage uninhabited for over a century and contributed significantly to Rome's expansion into Africa. In 46 BCE, Julius Caesar ordered the Romans to rebuild the destroyed city. By 1 CE, it was the second-largest city in the Western Roman Empire. The downfall of Carthage resulted in Rome's exclusive control over most of the Mediterranean Sea; however, it was this expansion that contributed to the downfall and destabilization of the Roman Republic, paving the way for the growth of an empire.

Greece

Rome expanded eastward during the second Punic War, and in the period between the second and third wars, eventually conquered all of Greece, the heartland of the culture the Romans so admired and emulated. While Hannibal was busy rampaging around Italy, the Macedonian King Philip V allied with Carthage against Rome, a reasonable decision at the time because it seemed likely that Rome was going to lose the war. In 201 BCE, after the defeat of the Carthaginians, Rome sent an army against Philip to defend the independence of Greece and to exact revenge. There, Philip and the king of the Seleucid empire (named Antiochus III) agreed to divide up the eastern Mediterranean, assuming they could defeat and control all of the Greek poleis. An expansionist faction in the Roman senate successfully convinced the Centuriate Assembly to declare war. The Roman legions defeated the Macedonian forces without much trouble in 196 BCE and then, perhaps surprisingly, they left, having accomplished their stated goal of defending Greek independence. Rome continued to fight the Seleucids for several more years, however, finally reducing the Seleucid king Antiochus III to a puppet of Rome.

Despite having no initial interest in establishing direct control in Greece, the Romans found that rival Greek poleis clamored for Roman help in their conflicts, and Roman influence in the region grew. Even given Rome's long standing admiration for Greek culture, the political and military developments of this period, from 196 – 168 BCE, helped confirm the Roman belief that the Greeks were artistic and philosophical geniuses but, at least in their present iteration, were also conniving, treacherous, and deficient in political organization. There was also a growing conservative faction in Rome led by Cato the Elder that emphatically emphasized Roman moral virtue over Greek weakness.

Philip V's son Perseus took the throne of Macedon in 179 BCE and, while not directly threatening Roman power, managed to spark suspicion among the Roman elite simply by reasserting Macedonian sovereignty in the region. In 172 BCE Rome sent an army and Macedon was defeated in 168 BCE. Rome split Macedon into puppet republics, plundered Macedon's allies, and lorded over

the remaining Greek poleis. Revolts in 150 and 146 against Roman power served as the final pretext for the Roman subjugation of Greece. This time, the Romans enacted harsh penalties for disloyalty among the Greek cities, utterly destroying the rich city of Corinth and butchering or enslaving tens of thousands of Greeks for siding against Rome. The plunder from Corinth specifically also sparked great interest in Greek art among elite Romans, boosting the development of Greco-Roman artistic traditions back in Italy.

Painting showing the violent Roman sack of Corinth in a Romantic style
19th Century Rendition of the Sack of Corinth <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/Allom.jpg>

Thus, after centuries of warfare, by 140 BCE the Romans controlled almost the entire Mediterranean world, from Spain to Anatolia. They had not yet conquered the remaining Hellenistic kingdoms, namely those of the Seleucids in the Near East and the Ptolemies in Egypt, but they controlled a vast territory nonetheless. Even the Ptolemies, the most genuinely independent power in the region, acknowledged that Rome held all the real power in international affairs.

The last great Hellenistic attempt to push back Roman control was in the early first century BCE, with the rise of a Greek king, Mithridates VI, from Pontus, a small kingdom on the southern shore of the Black Sea. Mithridates led a large anti-Roman coalition of Hellenistic peoples first in Anatolia and then in Greece itself starting in 88 BCE. Mithridates was seen by his followers as a great liberator from Roman corruption (purportedly he ordered one Roman governor to have molten gold poured down his throat to symbolize the just punishment of Roman greed). He went on to fight a total of three wars against Rome, but despite his tenacity he was finally defeated and killed in 63 BCE, the same year that Rome extinguished the last vestiges of the Seleucid kingdom.

Greco-Roman Culture

The Romans had been in contact with Greek culture for centuries, ever since the Etruscans struck up their trading relationship with the Greek poleis of southern Italy. Initially, the Etruscans formed a conduit for trade and cultural exchange, but soon the Romans were trading directly with the Greeks as well as the various Greek colonies all over the Mediterranean. By the time the Romans finally conquered Greece itself, they had already spent hundreds of years absorbing Greek ideas and culture, modeling their architecture on the great buildings of the Greek Classical Age and studying Greek ideas.

Despite their admiration for Greek culture, there was a paradox in that Roman elites had their own self-proclaimed “Roman” virtues, virtues that they attributed to the Roman past, which were quite distinct from Greek ideas. Roman virtues revolved around the idea that a Roman was strong, honest, straightforward, and powerful, while the Greeks were (supposedly) shifty, untrustworthy, and incapable of effective political organization. The simple fact that the Greeks had been unable to forge an empire except during the brief period of Alexander’s conquests served as proof to the Romans that they did not possess an equivalent degree of virtue.

The Romans summed up their own virtues with the term *Romanitas*, which meant to be civilized, to be strong, to be honest, to be a great public speaker, to be a great fighter, and to work within the political structure in alliance with other civilized Romans. There was also a powerful theme of self-sacrifice associated with *Romanitas* – the ideal Roman would sacrifice himself for the greater good of Rome without hesitation. In some ways, *Romanitas* was the Romans’ spin on the old Greek combination of *arete* and civic virtue.

One example of *Romanitas* in action was the role of a dictator. A Roman dictator, even more so than a consul, was expected to embody *Romanitas*, leading Rome through a period of crisis but then willingly giving up power. Since the Romans were convinced that anything resembling monarchy was politically repulsive, a dictator was expected to serve for the greater good of Rome and then step aside when peace was restored. Indeed, until the first century CE, dictators duly stepped down once their respective crises were addressed.

Romanitas was profoundly compatible with Greek Stoicism (which came of age in the Hellenistic monarchies just as Rome itself was expanding). Stoicism celebrated self-sacrifice, strength, political service, and the rejection of frivolous luxuries; these were all ideas that seemed laudable to Romans. By the first century BCE, Stoicism was the Greek philosophy of choice among many aristocratic Romans (a later Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius, was even a Stoic philosopher in his own right).

The implications of *Romanitas* for political and military loyalty and morale are obvious. One less obvious expression of *Romanitas*, however, was in public building and celebrations. One way for elite (rich) Romans to express their *Romanitas* was to fund the construction of temples, forums, arenas, or practical public works like roads and aqueducts. Likewise, elite Romans would often pay for huge games and contests with free food and drink, sometimes for entire cities. This practice was not just in the name of showing off; it was an expression of one’s loyalty to the Roman people and their shared Roman culture. The creation of numerous

Roman buildings (some of which survive to this day) is the result of this form of Romanitas.

Despite their tremendous pride in Roman culture, the Romans still found much to admire about Greek intellectual achievements. By about 230 BCE, Romans started taking an active interest in Greek literature. Some Greek slaves were true intellectuals who found an important place in Roman society. Having a Greek slave who could tutor one's children in the Greek language and Greek learning even served as an important status symbol in Rome. In 220 BCE a Roman senator, Quintus Fabius Pictor, wrote a history of Rome in Greek, the first major work of Greek literature written by a Roman (like so many ancient sources, it has not survived). Soon, Romans were imitating the Greeks, writing in both Greek and Latin and creating poetry, drama, and literature.

That being noted, the interest in Greek culture was muted until the Roman wars in Greece that began with the defeat of Philip V of Macedon. Rome's Greek wars created a kind of "feeding frenzy" of Greek art and Greek slaves. Huge amounts of Greek statuary and art were shipped back to Rome as part of the spoils of war, having an immediate impact on Roman taste. The appeal of Greek art was undeniable. Greek artists, even those who escaped slavery, soon started moving to Rome en masse because there was so much money to be made there if an artist could secure a wealthy patron. Greek artists, and the Romans who learned from them, adapted the Hellenistic Greek style. In many cases, classical statues were recreated exactly by sculptors, somewhat like modern-day prints of famous paintings. In others, a new style of realistic portraiture in sculpture that originated in the Hellenistic kingdoms proved irresistible to the Romans; whereas the Greeks of the Classical Age usually idealized the subjects of art, the Romans came to prefer more realistic and "honest" portrayals. We know precisely what many Romans looked like because of the realistic busts made of their faces: wrinkles, warts and all.

Sculpture of Cato the Elder's head with details showing his wrinkles and large nose

The Patrician Torlonia bust thought to be of Cato the Elder from the 1st century BCE <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/Torlonia.jpg>

Along with philosophy and architecture, the most important Greek import to arrive on Roman shores was rhetoric: the mastery of words and language in order to persuade people and win arguments. The Greeks held that the two ways a man could best his rivals and assert his virtue were battle and public discussion and argumentation. This tradition was felt very keenly by the Romans, because those were precisely the two major ways the Roman Republic operated – the superiority of its armies was well-known, while individual leaders had to be able to convince their peers and rivals of the correctness of their positions. The Romans thus very consciously tried to copy the Greeks, especially the Athenians, for their skill at oratory.

Not surprisingly, the Romans both admired and resented the Greeks for the Greek mastery of words. The Romans came to pride themselves on a more direct, less subtle form of oratory than that (supposedly) practiced in Greece. Part of Roman oratorical skill was the use of passionate appeals to emotional responses in the audience, ones that were supposed to both harness and control the emotions of the speaker himself. The Romans also formalized instruction in rhetoric, a practice of studying the speeches of great speakers and politicians of the past and of debating instructors and fellow students in mock scenarios.

Chapter 8: The Dawn of the Roman Empire

By the end of the Third Punic War the Roman Republic had nearly complete control of the Mediterranean, bringing Rome untold wealth and power. However, the expansion was a double edged sword as it brought many unintended and unexpected consequences. Most significantly, expansion exacerbated Rome's already unequal society, leading the poor to become poorer and the rich to become wealthier. On top of the widening socio-economic gap, many of the newly wealthy legionnaires lacked access to political power, which was still largely dominated by a few Roman families. Here we see a situation similar to those that ended with democratic revolutions in Ancient Greece, first pushed by the Hoplites and later by the rowers. In the end while expansion of the republic brought wealth and fame to many, it ultimately destabilized the regime and led to the transformation of the republic to an empire.

Socioeconomic Consequences of Expansion

For some the expansion of the Roman Republic was nothing short of a blessing. Already wealthy, the Roman elite came into fabulous riches in the wake of the Punic wars and Greek conflicts. Huge profits awaited the generals, patrons, diplomats, magistrates, tax collectors, and businessmen who followed Rome's armies. In Italy most profits were in the form of land; while in the further afield provinces wealth was found not only in land, but also in slaves, booty, and grafting off the top of any taxes collected. It was common for provincial governors to skim some off the top of all taxes or tribute collected, and while Rome did see this as a problem, it was difficult to stop from afar. The first Roman coinage, dating to 289 BCE facilitated the growth of wealth and commercial transactions, especially important as the republic expanded. Previously, the Romans had made do with barter and/or cast bronze bars, but trade was revolutionized with the adoption of coins (in the style of the Greeks/Hellenistic Kingdoms). Elite Romans also actively collected Greek metalwork, jewelry, and art objects. Gone were the early days of austerity for wealthy Romans.

On the other hand ordinary Romans saw little of this splendor and wealth. In fact, the lengthy Punic Wars, which lasted more than a century, strained the finances of most Roman people. Hannibal's invasion left much of the farmland of southern Italy totally devastated and Italian manpower considerably reduced. Yet most people might have rebounded from these problems within a few generations, if they had not faced other serious troubles. These included political corruption, societal unrest, and repercussions of the dependence upon a huge population of disgruntled slaves.

The Impacts of Roman Clientage & Conscription

Much of Roman social life revolved around the system of clientage. Clientage consisted of networks of "patrons" – people with power and influence – and their "clients" – those who looked to the patrons for support. A patron would do things like arrange for his or her (i.e. there were women patrons, not just men) clients to receive lucrative government contracts, to be appointed as officers in a Roman legion, to be able to buy a key piece of farmland, and so on. In return, the patron would expect political support from their clients by voting as directed in the Centuriate or Plebeian Assembly, by influencing other voters, and by blocking political rivals. Likewise, clients who shared a patron were expected to help one another. These were open, publicly-known alliances rather than hidden deals made behind closed doors; groups of clients would accompany their patron into meetings of the senate or assemblies as a show of strength.

The government of the late Republic still took the form of the Plebeian Assembly, the Centuriate Assembly, the Senate, ten tribunes, two consuls, and a court system under formal rules of law. By the late Republic, however, a network of patrons and clients had emerged that largely controlled the government. Elite families of nobles, through their client networks, made all of the important decisions. Beneath this group were the equestrians: families who did not have the ancient lineages of the patricians and who normally did not serve in public office. The equestrians, however, were rich, and they benefited from the fact that senators were formally banned from engaging in commerce as of the late third century BCE. They constituted the business class of Republican Rome who supported the elites while receiving various trade and mercantile concessions.

Bronze Statue of Marcus Aurelius astride a horse

Statue of Marcus Aurelius, an Equestrian, 176 CE <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/54663.jpg>

Meanwhile, the average plebeian had long ago lost his or her representation. The Plebeian Assembly was controlled by wealthy plebeians who were the clients of nobles. In other words, they served the interests of the rich and had little interest in the plight of the class they were supposed to represent. This created an ongoing problem for Rome, one that was exploited many times by

populist leaders. Rome relied on a free class of citizens to serve in the army, but those same citizens often had to struggle to make ends meet as farmers. As the rich grew richer, they bought up land and sometimes even forced poorer citizens off of their farms. Thus, there was an existential threat to Rome's armies, and with it, to Rome itself.

A comparable pattern existed in the territories – soon provinces – conquered in war. Rome was happy to grant citizenship to local elites who supported Roman rule, and sometimes entire communities could be granted citizenship on the basis of their loyalty (or simply their perceived usefulness) to Rome. Citizenship was a useful commodity, protecting its holders from harsher legal punishments and affording them significant political rights. Most Roman subjects, however, were just that: subjects, not citizens. In the provinces they were subject to the goodwill of the Roman governor, who might well look for opportunities to extract provincial wealth for his own benefit.

Only weakening the position of farmers and plebians, was the normalizing and lengthening of conscription into the Roman army. The average term of military service for a Roman citizen between the ages of 17 and 46 was six years with a maximum of 20 years. Because experienced legionnaires were at a premium, commanders were reluctant to release them from service. But the longer a man was away in the army, the harder it was for his wife and children to keep the family farm running. Many of these families were eventually pushed off their land through outright violence or as a penalty of debt foreclosure. Sometimes the new land owner would allow the families to remain as tenants, but often they would leave in search of opportunities in the capital city of Rome. Unfortunately, things were not much better in Rome itself. By the late Republic Rome was overcrowded. Scholars estimate the number of inhabitants to have reached one million by the end of the first century BCE. Food was in such high demand that the government had to take charge of the grain supply to prevent price gouging and the resultant riots.

As family farms struggled, large-scale agricultural enterprises grew. Wealthy landowners were able to monopolize Italian farmland, importing huge numbers of slaves, and displacing the free Italian peasantry. Whereas Roman rural society had once been full of independent farmers, it was now full of slave dependent plantations, or huge landed estates. By the end of the 1st century BCE Italy's slave population was estimated at 2 million to 3 million, about a third of the peninsula's total. Prisoners of war and conquered civilians provided a ready supply of slaves. Most worked in agriculture or mining, and their treatment was often abominable; the fewer house slaves were usually better off. Even freed slaves, called freedmen, had limited legal rights and had formal obligations to serve their former masters as clients. Roman slaves spanned the same range of jobs noted with other slaveholding societies like the Greeks: elite slaves lived much more comfortably than did most free Romans, but most were laborers or domestic servants. All could be abused by their owners without legal consequence. A displaced farmer would have found it very difficult to compete in the labor market against slave labor even that of freedmen. Additionally, Roman ideology frowned on wage labor by Roman citizens. Nor was it practical for a poor farmer to sue a wealthy patron who seized his land, because the plaintiff himself had to bring the accused into court. The social hierarchy, and its limits, were most visible in the Roman court of law.

Slavery was a huge economic engine in Roman society. Much of the "loot" seized in Roman campaigns was made up of human beings, and Roman soldiers were eager to capitalize on captives they took by selling them on returning to Italy. In historical hindsight, however, slavery undermined both Roman productivity and the pace of innovation in Roman society. It simply was not necessary to seek out new and better ways of doing things in the form of technological progress or social innovations because slave labor was always available. While Roman engineering was impressive, Rome developed no new technology to speak of in its thousand-year history. Likewise, the long-term effect of the growth of slavery in Rome was to undermine the social status of free Roman citizens, with farmers in particular struggling to survive as rich Romans purchased land and built huge slave plantations.

The Conduct and Treatment of Slaves

A Roman playwright, Plautus, writing about the time of the end of the Second Punic War (201 B.C.), gives this picture of an inconsiderate master, and the kind of treatment his slaves were likely to get. Very probably conditions grew worse rather than better for the average slave household, for at least two centuries. As the Romans grew in wealth and the show of culture they did not grow in humanity.

Plautus, *Pseudolus*, Act. I, Sc. 2.

[Ballio, a captious slave owner, is giving orders to his servants.]

Ballio: Get out, come, out with you, you rascals; kept at a loss, and bought at a loss. Not one of you dreams minding your business, or being a bit of use to me, unless I carry on thus! [He strikes his whip around on all of them.] Never did I see men more like asses than you! Why, your ribs are hardened with the stripes. If one flogs you, he hurts himself the most: [Aside.] Regular whipping posts are they all, and all they do is to pilfer, purloin, prig, plunder, drink, eat, and abscond! Oh! they look decent enough; but they're cheats in their conduct.

[Addressing the slaves again.] Now, unless you're all attention, unless you get that sloth and drowsiness out of your breasts and eyes, I'll have your sides so thoroughly marked with thongs that you'll outvie those Campanian coverlets in color, or a regular Alexandrian tapestry, purple-broidered all over with beasts. Yesterday I gave each of you his special job, but you're so worthless, neglectful, stubborn, that I must remind you with a good basting. So you think, I guess, you'll get the better of this whip and of me—by your stout hides! Zounds! But your hides won't prove harder than my good cowhide. [He flourishes it.] Look at this, please! Give heed to this! [He flogs one slave] Well ? Does it hurt ? . . . Now stand all of you here, you race born to be thrashed! Turn your ears this way! Give heed to what I say. You, fellow! that's got the pitcher, fetch the water. Take care the kettle's full instanter. You who's got the ax, look after chopping the wood.

Slave: But this ax's edge is blunted.

Ballio: Well; be it so! And so are you blunted with stripes, but is that any reason why you shouldn't work for me? I order that you clean up the house. You know your business; hurry indoors. [Exit first slave]. Now you [to another slave] smooth the couches. Clean the plate and put in proper order. Take care that when I'm back from the Forum I find things done—all swept, sprinkled, scoured, smoothed, cleaned and set in order. Today's my birthday. You should all set to and celebrate it. Take care—do you hear—to lay the salted bacon, the brawn, the collared neck, and the udder in water. I want to entertain some fine gentlemen in real style, to give the idea that I'm rich. Get indoors, and get these things ready, so there's no delay when the cook comes. I'm going to market to buy what fish is to be had. Boy, you go ahead [to a special valet], I've got to take care that no one cuts off my purse.

How to Manage Farm Slaves

Cato the Elder passed as the incarnation of all worldly wisdom among Romans of the second century B.C. The precepts here given were undoubtedly put into effect on his own farms. During the early Republic, when the estates were small, there seems to have been a fair amount of kindly treatment awarded the slaves; as the farms grew larger the whole policy of the masters, by becoming more impersonal, became more brutal. Cato does not advocate deliberate cruelty—he would simply treat the slaves according to cold regulations, like so many expensive cattle.

Cato the Elder, Agriculture, chs. 56-59

Country slaves ought to receive in the winter, when they are at work, four modii [Davis: One modius equals about a quarter bushel] of grain; and four modii and a half during the summer. The superintendent, the housekeeper, the watchman, and the shepherd get three modii; slaves in chains four pounds of bread in winter and five pounds from the time when the work of training the vines ought to begin until the figs have ripened.

Wine for the slaves. After the vintage let them drink from the sour wine for three months. The fourth month let them have a hemina [Davis: about half a pint] per day or two congii and a half [Davis: over seven quarts] per month. During the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth months let them have a sextarius [Davis: about a pint] per day or five congii per month. Finally, in the ninth, tenth, and the eleventh months, let them have three hemina [Davis: three-fourths of a quart] per day, or an amphora [Davis: about six gallons] per month. On the Saturnalia and on Compitalia each man should have a congius [Davis: something under three quarts].

To feed the slaves. Let the olives that drop of themselves be kept so far as possible. Keep too those harvested olives that do not yield much oil, and husband them, for they last a long time. When the olives have been consumed, give out the brine and vinegar. You should distribute to everyone a sextarius of oil per month. A modius of salt apiece is enough for a year.

As for clothes, give out a tunic of three feet and a half, and a cloak once in two years. When you give a tunic or cloak take back the old ones, to make cassocks out of. Once in two years, good shoes should be given.

Winter wine for the slaves. Put in a wooden cask ten parts of must (non-fermented wine) and two parts of very pungent vinegar, and add two parts of boiled wine and fifty of sweet water. With a paddle mix all these thrice per day for five days in succession. Add one forty-eighth of seawater drawn some time earlier. Place the lid on the cask and let it ferment for ten days. This wine will last until the solstice. If any remains after that time, it will make very sharp excellent vinegar.

Source: <https://blogs.memphis.edu/pbrand/slavery-texts/>

Slave Revolts

While the increased reliance on slavery negatively impacted many plebians and destabilized the republic, those who suffered most under the system were of course the slaves. This suffering led to numerous slave revolts, which further worked to undermine

the central authority of the ruling Roman families. The first slave revolt, also known as the First Servile War, erupted in Sicily in 135 BCE and it took 4 years for the Romans to crush. The second revolt, also in Sicily, began in 104 BCE and again took 4 years for the Roman legions to overcome. Then the third revolt exploded in 73 BCE in mainland Italy, and proved to be the most serious of them all. Perhaps the severity of this insurrection was due to the fact that it was led by a Gladiator.

Gladiators were a subset of slaves, though a few were volunteers, who entertained the Roman masses by fighting (at times to the death) against other gladiators, condemned criminals, and even wild animals. The first record of gladiators can be found in funerary rites during the First Punic War. By the Second Punic War, gladiatorial games served to both celebrate military victories and inspire further military expansion by rehashing previous defeats. Criminals were punished by being forced to play, often impossible, gladiatorial games while also displaying and spreading Rome's message of power and invulnerability. These shows were meant to instill fear and respect in the larger populous. And finally, gladiatorial games were in fact meant to entertain the masses. Many Gladiators even became Roman celebrities. Gladiators were part warrior and part athlete whether or not they were free or enslaved.

Dull, aged metal helmet that once belonged to gladiator, discovered in the ruins of Pompeii

Gladiator Helmet found in the ruins of the Gladiator barracks of Pompeii https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...century_CE.jpg

By the end of the second century BCE, the gladiatorial games began to take on political significance as well. Gladiatorial games offered their sponsors, usually aspiring or current magistrates, extravagantly expensive but effective opportunities for self-promotion to their clients and potential voters. Here it is important to note that gladiatorial games were free for all to attend, though the better seats were reserved for purchase, so they became effective campaign rallies. As gladiators became more famous, and lucrative to political leaders, the games transformed into a big business for trainers, owners, and politicians who could command the gladiators' services. Gladiators who survived successive battles became celebrities, and were sought after by powerful men and women in the Roman Republic. Often famous gladiators could make large sums of money by selling their sexual services to high class Roman women seeking a thrill. Graffiti unearthed in Pompeii proves the famous stature of gladiators. One such inscription was dedicated to a star of the gladiatorial arena whom "all the girls sigh for."

Mosaic (painting made from small tiles) depicting two gladiatorial fights.

Mosaic depicting a gladiatorial fight, 3rd century CE between Symmachus and Maternus in Rome. Housed in the National Archaeological Museum, Madrid Spain. Photo by Author Erin Stone.

Depending on the theme of the game, remember they were for entertainment, opponents were armed with various specialized weapons or none at all. Volunteer gladiators, or those who had won several battles, became known for certain styles of fighting with specific weaponry. For example, *Murillo* were heavily armored gladiators that used a large, oblong shield and a sword called a gladius while *Retiarius*, were gladiators who wielded a large net and a trident, attempting to trap their opponents under their net prior to stabbing them with their three-pronged spear. As one might imagine, these were skilled fighters, and thus did receive specialized training in gladiatorial schools, who for the most part had not been condemned to serve as gladiators as punishment.

Carving of two female gladiators into a cliff in Turkey

Relief of paired fighters Amazonia and Achillea, the only image of female gladiators, located in present day Turkey
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...rix_relief.jpg

While female Christians are well documented as being forced into the gladiatorial arenas as punishment, few historical works have highlighted female gladiators. Surprisingly, there were hundreds of female gladiators who volunteered and trained to participate in the games. These women came from all levels of society, from enslaved women to middle class to elite senatorial wives. Their motives for fighting ranged from seeking freedom from enslavement to the thrill of the combat. The fact that the Roman Senate passed laws prohibiting the participation of elite women in gladiatorial games in 11 and 19 CE underscores how common the practice may have been.

According to Roman historian Cassius Dio, Nero held an exhibition in 59 CE "that was at once most disgraceful and most shocking, when men and women not only of the [middle class] but even of the senatorial order...drove horses, killed wild beasts and fought as gladiators, some willingly and some sore against their will." So clearly, the laws were ineffective in preventing elite women from participating in gladiatorial games.

During the games, the audience was seated in order of social rank, ranging from slaves to senators to the emperor himself. The floor of the *arena*, which in Latin means sand, was called such because the floor needed to be made of sand to be able to soak up the blood of the gladiators and/or animals who died in the ring. At times up to 100 gladiators died in a single occasion. While all gladiators understood that fights could end in death, often matches between trained gladiators ended with neither opponent dying. This was mainly due to pragmatic reasons, it was expensive to find and train new gladiators. Thus, most matches pitting

exotic animals (from hippos to lions and tigers) against gladiators were reserved for criminals or prisoners condemned to death via the gladiatorial ring.

And gladiatorial games spread well beyond Rome, throughout the lands conquered by the Republic. Conquered cities took part in these games or combat before large crowds. We can best see this in the proliferation of coliseums that to this day dot the European landscape. Without a doubt the gladiatorial games were a quintessential part of Roman culture that they transported across Western Europe.

Recent photograph of the Roman Colliseum from a distance

The Roman Coliseum, photo by author Erin Stone

Inside the Roman Coliseum, photo by author Erin Stone

View from inside the arena of the Roman colliseum at Italica

Coliseum at Italica, the capital of Roman Spain/Hispania, photo by author Erin Stone

Spartacus Revolt

According to differing sources and their interpretation, Spartacus either was an auxiliary Thracian soldier from the Roman legions later condemned to slavery, or a captive taken by the legions. Either way, after his designation as an enslaved gladiator, Spartacus was trained at the gladiatorial school of Capua. Then, in 73 BCE, Spartacus was among a group of gladiators who rebelled against the Roman hierarchy, plotting an escape from the school. While the plan for revolt was discovered before the gladiators could execute it, Spartacus and his accomplices were not deterred. Approximately 70 gladiators in training raided the kitchen, taking all the implements they could find to use as weapons and fought their way out of the school. During the fight, they were able to seize several wagons of gladiatorial weaponry and armor.

At first, the gladiators remained in the outskirts of Capua, raiding the countryside and recruiting other slaves to join their revolt. After several weeks, they sought a more defensible position and climbed to the top of Mount Vesuvius. At this point most sources claim that the group chose two leaders, one of them being Spartacus, to organize the group. This included training the non-gladiatorial slaves in combat. And lucky for the escaped gladiators, they had time to prepare to face the Roman legions as they were busy elsewhere in the now sprawling Republic.

At this point most of the Roman legions were engaged in fighting a revolt in the province of Hispania. Additionally, the seriousness of the gladiatorial revolt was not immediately understood and at first, the Romans viewed the conflict as more of a policing matter. Thus, they first dispatched their militia to besiege Spartacus and his camp hoping that without access to food and other supplies the gladiators would surrender quickly. But, this was not the case. Instead, the militia faced a surprise attack when Spartacus's group, who had made ropes from vines, climbed down the cliff side of Mt. Vesuvius and attacked the unfortified Roman camp in the rear, killing most of them. The rebels soon after defeated a second expedition, nearly capturing the commander, killing his lieutenants and seizing their military equipment. These victories only inspired more slaves to flee their masters, eagerly joining with the seemingly invincible Spartacan forces. Even some free, though poor Romans joined their ranks (such as herdsmen). At the group's height reports counted up to 70,000 men.

In the spring of 72 BCE, the slaves left their Mt. Vesuvius encampments and began to march northward, possibly to escape Roman authority. At the same time, the Roman Senate, alarmed by the defeat of the Roman military forces, dispatched a pair of consular legions. The two legions were initially successful—defeating a group of 30,000 rebels but then were defeated by Spartacus. The defeat of the legions struck fear into the Senate, and so they charged Marcus Licinius Crassus, the wealthiest man in Rome, with ending the rebellion. Crassus was to command eight legions, approximately 40,000 trained Roman soldiers (who were to join with the already positioned military factions), against Spartacus and his group. In early 71 BCE Crassus' legions were victorious in several engagements, forcing Spartacus not only to stop moving northward, but to return south. By the end of 71 BCE, Spartacus was encamped in Rhegium (Reggio Calabria), near the Strait of Messina, in many ways trapped.

But Spartacus still had a plan. He made an agreement with a group of Sicilian pirates to ferry he and about 2,000 of his allies to Sicily where he hoped to incite a slave revolt and gather reinforcements. From there he planned an invasion of Rome. However, he was betrayed by the pirates, who took payment and then abandoned the rebels, leaving them stranded with Crassus's legions fast approaching. Spartacus' forces were once again under siege and cut off from their supplies.

Just as Spartacus found himself in an untenable position versus Crassus, Pompey's legions returned from Hispania and were immediately ordered by the Senate to head south to aid Crassus. In the end, Spartacus's troops were no match for the professionally trained and well supplied Roman legions. In a last stand, the rebels were routed completely, with most killed on the battlefield. Some reports say that Spartacus died on the battlefield, while others claim he was crucified along with hundreds of his

followers. As a message to anyone considering defying the Roman Senate, they executed hundreds of rebels via crucifixion and then lined the Appian Way (the road from Capua to Rome) with their bodies. As his body was never recovered, mystery remains behind Spartacus's end, leading to one of the most famous movie scenes from the 1960 film *Spartacus*.

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The End of the Republic

The Roman Republic lasted for roughly five centuries. It was under the Republic that Rome evolved from a single town to the heart of an enormous empire. Despite the evident success of the republican system, however, there were inexorable problems that plagued the Republic throughout its history, most evidently the problem of wealth and power. Roman citizens were, by law, supposed to have a stake in the Republic. They took pride in who they were and it was the common patriotic desire to fight and expand the Republic among the citizen-soldiers of the Republic that created, at least in part, such an effective army. At the same time, the vast amount of wealth captured in the military campaigns was frequently siphoned off by elites, who found ways to seize large portions of land and loot with each campaign. By around 100 BCE even the existence of the Plebeian Assembly did almost nothing to mitigate the effect of the debt and poverty that afflicted so many Romans thanks to the power of the clientage networks overseen by powerful noble patrons.

The key factor behind the political stability of the Republic was that there had never been open fighting between elite Romans in the name of political power. In a sense, Roman expansion (and especially the brutal wars against Carthage) had united the Romans; despite their constant political battles within the assemblies and the senate, it had never come to actual bloodshed. Likewise, a very strong component of Roman ethics was the idea that political arguments were to be settled with debate and votes, not clubs and knives. Both that unity and that emphasis on peaceful conflict resolution within the Roman state itself began to crumble after the sack of Carthage and the formal end of the Punic Wars.

The Gracchi

Beyond the unrest caused by slave revolts, many Romans were worried about the military dimension of the agrarian crisis. In modern societies, draftees are often the poorest people. In Rome, military service was a prestigious activity, one conducted by wealthy property owning citizens (with slaves used as needed). As fewer and fewer citizens/potential soldiers could afford to own and maintain property, however, during the second century it became necessary to reduce the property qualification several times. By 150 BCE a conscript had to own property worth only 400 denari, basically a very small house, owning large plots of land was no longer necessary. If the peasantry continued to decline, Rome would either have to drop the property qualifications all together for the military or stop fielding armies. Something had to be done...resulting in contentious Senatorial debate and eventually revolution.

The first step toward violent revolution in the Republic was the work of the Gracchus brothers – remembered historically as the Gracchi (i.e. “Gracchi” is the plural of “Gracchus”). The older of the two was Tiberius Gracchus, a rich but reform-minded politician. Tiberius was the son of a distinguished general and ambassador and one of the ten tribunes for the year 133 BCE. He seemed to be an excellent spokesperson for a group of prominent senators who backed land reform. Tiberius, among others, was worried that the free, farm-owning common Roman would go extinct if the current trend of rich landowners seizing farms and replacing farmers with slaves continued. Without those commoners, Rome's armies would be drastically weakened. Thus, he managed to pass a bill through the Centuriate Assembly that would limit the amount of land any single man could own, distributing the excess to the poor. Tiberius's law restored the roughly 320 acre limit to the amount of public land a person could own. A commission was then set up to repossess excess land and redistribute it to the poor, in small lots that were to be inalienable—that is, the wealthy could not buy them back. The former landowners would be reimbursed for the improvements they had made, such as buildings or plantings.

Even though Tiberius Gracchus's bill was fairly moderate, the Senate was horrified and fought bitterly to reverse the bill. To keep his reforms in place Tiberius broke with tradition twice, first deposing one of his fellow tribunes (and opponents) Octavius and then running for a second term. Shocked and angered conservative senators then conspired to club Tiberius Gracchus to death in 133 BCE. This massacre marked the first time in the Republic that a political debate was settled by bloodshed in Rome itself. All ancient sources agree this was the beginning of a century of revolution. Tiberius's killers had not merely committed murder, but had attacked the traditional inviolability of the tribunes. Yet over the next century public violence grew to be a commonly used weapon of politics in the Republic. Meanwhile, the land commission went ahead with its work, even without Tiberius.

Bronze sculpture of the Gracchus brothers side by side holding a piece of legislation
19th Century Sculpture of the Gracchi Brothers <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/he/Gracchi.jpg>

A few years following his assassination, Tiberius's brother Gaius Gracchus took up the cause, also becoming tribune. He attacked corruption in the provinces, allying himself with the equestrian class by allowing equestrians to serve on juries that tried corruption cases. He also tried to speed up land redistribution. His most radical move was to try to extend full citizenship to all of Rome's Italian subjects, which would have effectively transformed the Roman Republic into the Italian Republic. Here, he lost even the support of his former allies in Rome, and he killed himself in 121 BCE rather than be murdered by another gang of assassins sent by senators. Unfortunately, despite his death, another 3,250 of Gaius's supporters were assassinated in short order.

The reforms of the Gracchi were temporarily successful: even though they were both killed, the Gracchi's central effort to redistribute land accomplished its goal. The land commission created by Tiberius remained intact until 118 BCE, by which time it had redistributed huge tracts of land held illegally by the rich. Despite their vociferous opposition, the rich did not suffer much, since the lands in question were "public lands" largely left vacant in the aftermath of the Second Punic War, and normal farmers did enjoy benefits. Likewise, despite Gaius's death, the Republic eventually granted citizenship to all Italians in 84 BCE, after being forced to put down a revolt in Italy. In hindsight, the historical importance of the Gracchi was less in their reforms and more in the manner of their deaths – for the first time, major Roman politicians had simply been murdered (or killed themselves rather than be murdered) for their politics. It became increasingly obvious that true power was shifting away from rhetoric and toward military might.

There was also a growing, clear social/economic divide within the Roman Republic. The violence surrounding the Gracchi brothers had divided the political community into two loose groupings. On one side were the *optimates* "the best people" or conservatives who asserted the rule of the Senate against the popular tribunes and the maintenance of the estates of the wealthy in spite of the agrarian crisis. On the other side were the *populares* "men of the people" who challenged the rule of the Senate in the name of relief of the poor. The populares were not democrats. Like the optimates, they were Roman nobles who believed in hierarchy, but they advocated the redistribution of wealth and power as a way of restoring stability and strengthening the military.

A contemporary of the Gracchi, a populares general named Gaius Marius, took further steps that eroded the traditional Republican system in response to a near full-scale military crisis. By 100 BCE Rome's armies led by senatorial commanders fared poorly; both in present day Algeria and in southern Gaul against Germanic invaders. Marius recognized the political and social origins of Rome's declining military might and set out to remedy the problem, combining political savvy with effective military leadership. Marius was both a consul (elected an unprecedented seven times despite being the first in his family to even enter politics) and a general, and he used his power to first eliminate the property requirement entirely for membership in the army. This allowed the poor to join the army in return for nothing more than an oath of loyalty, one they swore to their general rather than to the Republic. The army would then provide the recruits with weaponry and training, something that soldiers had had to fund themselves in the past, hence the property requirements. As a result, Roman soldiers were no longer peasants doing part-time military service but rather were landless men making a profession of the military. In addition to the training and equipment, they would also receive a stable pay and a portion of any booty taken in battle. But, they were also forbidden to marry. Regardless, the military became totally devoted to Marius.

Marius made several other changes to streamline and strengthen the Roman army. Camp followers were reduced in number (in the past families had followed their fathers or husbands and this was now forbidden) and individual soldiers were made to carry their own equipment. To meet the Germans, who attacked in overwhelming waves, maniples were reorganized and combined into larger units called cohorts, rendering the army firmer and more cohesive when need be. And his policies worked, as the revitalized Roman legions won victory after victory against enemies in both Africa and Germany. Following successful battles, Marius then distributed land and farms to his poor soldiers. This made him a people's hero, but it also terrified the nobility in Rome because he was able to bypass the usual Roman political machine. His decision to eliminate the property requirement meant that his troops were totally dependent on him for loot and land distribution after campaigns, undermining their allegiance to the Republic in Rome.

The Senate recognized the threat that Marius's loyal army posed to their power, and thus they declared all of Marius's land

distributions invalid, taking the land away from the soldiers who had just received plots in Germany and northern Africa. Angry, and confident in their military prowess, soldiers in Rome began to riot, demanding their land and for Marius to replace the Senate. While Marius had pushed the bounds of his power militarily, he did not want to go against the very framework of the Republic, and in the face of violence he resigned as tribune.

Silver coin, a Denarius, showing Marius leaving a battle triumphantly

Silver Denarius depicting Gaius Marius in triumph, 101 BCE <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...riumphator.png>

“Social War”

The Republic at this point was very weak, but it would become still weaker as the result of two wars. First Rome’s Italian allies rose up against them in a bloody and bitter civil war known as the “Social War” from 91 to 89 BCE. The conflict gets this name because it was a war between *socii* or allies. The Italian allies fought hard, and Rome, in order to prevail, had to concede to them what they had demanded long ago (and what the Gracchi tried to give them); Full Roman Citizenship. The war wrought devastation in the countryside, further destabilizing the Republic and only hurting independent farmers more. The other conflict of the period pitted Rome against a rebellious king in northern Anatolia who conquered a bit of Roman territory and proceeded to slaughter numerous Italian businessmen and tax collectors there. Once again a military man rose to save the day for Rome, this time Marius’s rival and former lieutenant, Optimate Lucius Cornelius Sulla. He became consul in the year 88 BCE.

General Sulla followed in Marius’s footsteps by recruiting soldiers directly and using his military power to bypass the government, angering the Senate. Then in the aftermath of another Italian revolt, prompted by Rome’s delay in bequeathing citizenship to its Italian allies, the Assembly took Sulla’s command of Roman legions away and gave it to Marius in return for his support in enfranchising the people of the Italian cities. Sulla promptly marched on Rome with his army, forcing Marius to flee. A civil war in the very streets of Rome was barely avoided, but not for long.

Marius, though deposed and out of graces with the Senate, was still very influential in military circles. And he both disagreed with Sulla’s policies and was jealous of his power, so when Sulla was engaged with another conflict in the east (against the anti-Roman king Mithridates), Marius gathered a group of soldiers and marched on Rome, retaking the city and settling scores. Marius himself soon died (of old age), but his followers remained united in an anti-Sulla coalition under a friend and colleague of Marius named Cinna.

After defeating Mithridates, Sulla returned and a full-scale civil war shook Rome in 83 – 82 BCE. It was horrendously bloody, with some 300,000 men joining the fighting and many thousands killed. After Sulla’s ultimate victory he had thousands of Marius’s supporters imprisoned. From these men he also confiscated land, disenfranchised their sons, and had them executed. Sulla then divided the confiscated land up among his loyal troops, about 80,000 men. If anyone tried to oppose the ruling, he expelled them as well. He then assumed the title of dictator, something only supposed to be used for 6 months during a state of emergency, but he did so without the vote of the Senate nor with any explicit term limit. As dictator, Sulla greatly strengthened the power of the Senate (expanding its members from 300 to 600) at the expense of the Plebeian Assembly, abolished trials before popular assemblies and equestrian-staffed courts (created by Gaius Gracchus) replacing them with seven courts whose juries would all be Senators, and had his enemies murdered and their property seized. After two years, in 79 BCE, Sulla felt he had accomplished his goal to stabilize Rome and remove all power from the populares. He then retired to a life of debauchery in his private estate, where he soon died from a mysterious illness.

The problem for the Republic was that, even though Sulla ultimately proved that he was loyal to republican institutions, in that he only kept the mantle of Dictator for two years, other generals might not be in the future. Sulla could have simply held onto power indefinitely thanks to the personal loyalty of his troops. Additionally, discontent still smoldered, perhaps even more so, amongst the poor and especially now amongst the men who Sulla had confiscated land from. Others now sought to do what Sulla had done, pursuing personal power over the Senate and seeking to use the weak points of the Republic against itself.

Julius Caesar & the Triumvirate

Thus, the Roman Republic was in a precarious state when a new politician and general named Julius Caesar emerged and quickly became increasingly powerful. He ultimately began to replace the Republic with an empire, following in the footsteps of Marius and Sulla. Julius Caesar’s rise to power is a complex story that reveals just how murky Roman politics were by the time he became an important political player in about 70 BCE. Caesar himself was both a brilliant general and a shrewd politician; he was skilled at keeping up the appearance of loyalty to Rome’s ancient institutions while exploiting opportunities to advance and enrich himself and his family. He was loyal, in fact, to almost no one, even old friends who had supported him, and he also cynically used the

support of the poor for his own gain.

Two powerful politicians, Pompey and Crassus (both of whom had risen to prominence as supporters of Sulla with Pompey even divorcing his first wife to marry Sulla's stepdaughter Aemilia), joined together to crush the slave revolt of Spartacus in 70 BCE and were elected consuls because of their success. Pompey was one of the greatest Roman generals, and he soon left to eliminate piracy from the Mediterranean, to conquer the Jewish kingdom of Judea, and to crush an ongoing revolt in Anatolia. He returned in 67 BCE and asked the Senate to approve land grants to his loyal soldiers for their service, a request that the Senate refused because they feared Pompey's power and influence over so many soldiers who were loyal to him instead of the Republic. Pompey reacted by forming an alliance with Crassus and Julius Caesar, who was a member of an ancient patrician family. This group of three is known in history as the First Triumvirate.

Painting featuring the profiles of the three leaders of the First Triumvirate

The First Triumvirate Source: Bileta, Bileta. "What Was the First Triumvirate?" TheCollector.com, <https://www.thecollector.com/vedran-bileta/>

Each member of the Triumvirate wanted something specific: Caesar (a populares) hungered for glory and wealth and hoped to be appointed to lead Roman armies against the Celts in Western Europe, Crassus wanted to lead armies against Parthia (i.e. the "new" Persian Empire that had long since overthrown Seleucid rule in Persia itself), and Pompey (an optimate) wanted the Senate to authorize land and wealth for his troops. The three of them had so many clients and wielded so much political power that they were able to ratify all of Pompey's demands, and both Caesar and Crassus received the military commissions they hoped for. Caesar was appointed general of the territory of Gaul (present-day France and Belgium) and he set off to fight an infamous Celtic king named Vercingetorix.

From 58 to 50 BCE, Caesar waged a brutal war against the Celts of Gaul. He was both a merciless combatant, who slaughtered whole villages and enslaved hundreds of thousands of Celts (killing or enslaving over a million people in the end), and a gifted writer who recorded his own accounts of wars in excellent Latin prose. His forces even invaded England, establishing a Roman territory there that lasted centuries. All of the lands he invaded were so thoroughly conquered that the descendants of the Celts ended up speaking languages based on Latin, like French, rather than their native Celtic dialects.

Caesar's victories made him famous and immensely powerful, and they ensured the loyalty of his battle-hardened troops. In Rome, senators feared his power and called on Caesar's former ally Pompey to bring him to heel (Crassus had already died in his ill-considered campaign against the Parthians; his head was even used as a prop in a Greek play staged by the Parthian king). Pompey, fearing his former ally's power and perhaps recalling their political differences (populares vs. optimate), agreed and brought his armies to Rome. The Senate then recalled Caesar after refusing to renew his governorship of Gaul and his military command, or allowing him to run for consul in absentia.

The Senate hoped to use the fact that Caesar had violated the letter of republican law while on campaign to strip him of his authority. Caesar had committed illegal acts, including waging war without authorization from the Senate, but he was protected from prosecution so long as he held an authorized military command. By refusing to renew his command or allow him to run for office as consul, he would be open to charges. His enemies in the Senate feared his tremendous influence with the people of Rome, so the conflict was as much about factional infighting among the senators as fear of Caesar imposing some kind of tyranny.

Caesar knew what awaited him in Rome – charges of sedition against the Republic – so he simply took his army with him and marched to Rome. In 49 BCE, he dared to cross the Rubicon River in northern Italy, the legal boundary over which no Roman general was allowed to bring his troops; he reputedly announced that "the die is cast" and that he and his men were now committed to either seizing power or facing total defeat. The brilliance of Caesar's move was that he could pose as the champion of his loyal troops as well as that of the common people of Rome, whom he promised to aid against the corrupt and arrogant senators; he never claimed to be acting for himself, but instead to protect his and his men's legal rights and to resist the corruption of the Senate.

Pompey had been the most powerful man in Rome, both a brilliant general and a gifted politician, but he did not anticipate Caesar's boldness. Caesar surprised him by marching straight for Rome. Pompey only had two legions, both of whom had served under Caesar in the past, and he was thus forced to recruit new troops. As Caesar approached, Pompey fled to Greece, but Caesar followed him and defeated his forces in battle in 48 BCE. Pompey himself escaped to Egypt, where he was promptly murdered by agents of the Ptolemaic court who had read the proverbial writing on the wall and knew that Caesar was the new power to contend with in Rome. Subsequently, Caesar came to Egypt and stayed long enough to forge a political alliance, and carry on an affair, with the queen of Egypt: Cleopatra VII, last of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Caesar helped Cleopatra defeat her brother (to whom she was married, in the Egyptian tradition) in a civil war and to seize complete control over the Egyptian state. She also bore him his only son, Caesarion.

Painting showing Caesar ushering a robed Cleopatra to her now empty throne

Caesar Restoring Cleopatra to the Throne of Egypt (c. 1637–1643) by Pietro da Cortona <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/de/Cortone.jpg>

Caesar returned to Rome two years later, after hunting down Pompey's remaining loyalists. There, he had himself declared dictator for life (purportedly after considering taking the title of King with the support of Cleopatra) and set about creating a new version of the Roman government that answered directly to him. He filled the Senate with his supporters and established military colonies in the lands he had conquered as rewards for his loyal troops (which doubled as guarantors of Roman power in those lands, since veterans and their families would now live there permanently). He established a new calendar, which included the month of "July" named after himself, and he regularized Roman currency. Then he promptly set about making plans to launch a massive invasion of Persia.

And at home he also sponsored a huge number of reforms. His political goal was to elevate Italians and others at the expense of old Roman families. To achieve this, Caesar conferred Roman citizenship liberally, on all of Gaul as well as on certain provincial towns. He again enlarged the Senate from 600 to 900, adding his supporters, including some Gauls, to the membership. Caesar sponsored social and economic reforms to help the lower classes, reducing debt and settling veterans and poor citizens in colonies outside of Italy. He undertook a grand public building program in the city of Rome. He also adopted the Egyptian calendar of 365 and $\frac{1}{4}$ days on January 1, 45 BCE. He called this the Julian calendar, named after none other than himself.

While many Romans were dedicated to Caesar, others feared his motivations and viewed many of his actions as attacks on the very fabric of the Republic. In the end, mistrust of Caesar exploded on March 15, 44 BCE (the Ides of March in the Julian calendar) when 60 senators stabbed Caesar to death. The assassination took place in the portico attached to the Theater of Pompey, in front of a statue of Pompey himself, where the Senate was meeting that day. The assassins called themselves "The Liberators," believing that they were freeing themselves from tyranny just as the founders of the Republic had done centuries earlier. Indeed, one of the chief conspirators, Marcus Junius Brutus claimed descent from Lucius Tarquins who was believed to have established the Republic (think back to "The Rape of Lucretia"). Brutus had been a magistrate, military officer, and provincial administrator, as well as confidant of Caesar. The assassination of Caesar threw Rome back into turmoil. Civil war followed for the next 13 years, first between the Liberators and Caesar's supporters and then between the two leading Caesarians (followers of Caesar). The final struggle pitted Mark Anthony, Caesar's chief lieutenant and Cleopatra's new lover, against Octavian, Caesar's grandnephew, adopted son, and heir to both Caesar's name and fortune.

Mark Antony vs. Octavian

Following his death, Caesar's right-hand man, a skilled general named Mark Antony, joined with Octavian and another general named Lepidus to form the "Second Triumvirate." In 43 BCE they seized control in Rome and then launched a successful campaign against the old republican loyalists, killing off the men who had killed Caesar and murdering the strongest senators and equestrians who had tried to restore the old institutions. Mark Antony and Octavian soon pushed Lepidus to the side and divided up control of Roman territory – Octavian taking Europe and Mark Antony taking the eastern territories and Egypt. This was an arrangement that was not destined to last; the two men had only been allies for the sake of convenience, and both began scheming as to how they could seize total control of Rome's vast empire.

Mark Antony moved to the Egyptian city of Alexandria, where he set up his court. He followed in Caesar's footsteps by forging both a political alliance and a romantic relationship with Cleopatra, and the two of them were able to rule the eastern provinces of the Republic in defiance of Octavian. They then declared, via the Donations of Alexandria in 34 BCE, that the eastern portion of the Republic would be divided between Antony and Cleopatra's children, ensuring Octavian could never unite the empire. Alexander Helios was named king of Armenia, Media and Parthia (territories which were not for the most part under the control of Rome), his twin Selene got Cyrenaica and Libya, and the young Ptolemy Philadelphus was awarded Syria and Cilicia. As for Cleopatra, she was proclaimed Queen of Kings and Queen of Egypt, to rule with Caesarion (Ptolemy XV Caesar, son of Cleopatra by Julius Caesar), King of Kings and King of Egypt. Most important of all, Caesarion was declared THE legitimate son and heir of Caesar. These proclamations caused a fatal breach in Antony's relations with Rome.

While the distribution of nations among Cleopatra's children was hardly a conciliatory gesture, it did not pose an immediate threat to Octavian's political position. Far more dangerous was the acknowledgment of Caesarion as legitimate son and heir to Caesar. Octavian's base of power was his link with Caesar through adoption, which granted him much-needed popularity and loyalty of the legions. To see this situation attacked by a child borne by the richest woman in the world was something Octavian could not accept. Another civil war was beginning.

During 33 and 32 BCE, a propaganda war was fought in the political arena of Rome, with accusations flying between sides. Antony (still in Egypt) divorced his Roman wife Octavia (Octavian's sister) and accused Octavian of being a social upstart, of usurping

power, and of forging his adoption papers. Meanwhile, Octavian claimed that Antony was under Cleopatra's thumb (which is unlikely: the two of them were both savvy politicians and seem to have shared a genuine affection for one another) and was breaking with traditional Roman values, eventually seizing on this behavior to claim that he, Octavian, was the true protector of Roman morality. Octavian even produced a will that Mark Antony had supposedly written ceding control of Rome to Cleopatra and their children on his death; whether or not the will was authentic, it fit in perfectly with the publicity campaign on Octavian's part to build mistrust against his former ally in Rome.

By the end of 32 BCE, Octavian charged Antony with treason (of illegally keeping provinces that should be given to other men by lots, as was Rome's tradition, and of starting wars against foreign nations without the consent of the Senate) and the Senate removed Antony's magistrate powers. The Senate then declared war against Cleopatra, as Octavian had no wish to advertise his role in perpetuating Rome's internecine bloodshed. Octavian claimed he was only interested in defeating Cleopatra, which led to broader Roman support because it was not immediately stated that it was yet *another* Roman civil war. Antony and Cleopatra's forces were already fairly scattered and weak due to a disastrous campaign against the Persians a few years earlier. In 31 BCE, at the Battle of Actium (in northwestern Greece) Octavian defeated Mark Antony's forces, which were poorly equipped, sick, and hungry, and destroyed the Egyptian navy. Antony and Cleopatra's soldiers were starved out by a successful blockade engineered by Octavian and his friend and chief commander Agrippa, and the unhappy couple killed themselves the next year in exile. Octavian was 33. As his grand-uncle had before him, Octavian began the process of manipulating the institutions of the Republic to transform it into something else entirely: an empire.

A Truly Shakespearean Love Story

While Marc Antony and Cleopatra had their highs and lows over their ten year relationship, they truly seemed to have had genuine love for one another. This is best proved in their deaths. Despite Cleopatra's fortune and Antony's military prowess, in the end they were no match for Octavian. Nor did Cleopatra's actions help the situation. While Octavian's troops marched closer to Alexandria, Cleopatra was occupied building a new "temple to Isis," which she called her mausoleum. Following the announcement of the Donation of Alexandria, Cleopatra was often seen dressed as the goddess Isis, with Antony dressed as Dionysus.

As she arranged her mausoleum/temple, Cleopatra stuffed it with gems, jewelry, works of art, gold, royal robes, and stores of cinnamon and frankincense. She planned to use the treasure as either punishment or in negotiations. Cleopatra was secretly negotiating with Octavian, unbeknownst to Antony. Cleopatra hoped to at the very least save her children, and if that was not possible to burn her treasure and force Octavian to watch. Her plan was set in motion when she sent a messenger to tell Antony that she had killed herself, knowing that he would soon follow. She was right. According to Plutarch, when Antony was told of Cleopatra's death, he said:

O Cleopatra, I am not distressed to have lost you, for I shall straightaway join you; but I am grieved that a commander as great as I should be found to be inferior to a woman in courage.

But, Antony did not perish quickly, and when Cleopatra heard that he was on his deathbed, she sent for him. He died in her arms, in her mausoleum. After Antony breathed his last, Cleopatra fought on, attempting to negotiate with Octavian. But when all hope was lost and she was captured by Octavian's forces, Cleopatra snuck poison (or in some versions an asp snake) past Octavian's guards. She died while imprisoned by Octavian, avoiding the punishment she knew he would force her to endure and still hoping her children would be spared. Octavian did in fact spare Cleopatra and Antony's children, giving them to his sister Octavia to raise. However, Caesarion (son of Caesar and Cleopatra) was murdered. Honoring Cleopatra's last request, Octavian had Cleopatra and Antony buried side by side.

Slightly blurry frescoe painting showing Cleopatra as an asp snake bites her

Painting of Cleopatra's Suicide from Giuseppe II's house in Pompeii https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...ing_poison.jpg

Octavian to Augustus/Republic to Empire

The height of Roman power coincided with the first two hundred years of the Roman Empire, a period that was remembered as the Pax Romana: the Roman Peace. It was possible during the period of the Roman Empire's height, from about 1 CE to 200 CE, to travel from the Atlantic coast of Spain or Morocco all the way to Mesopotamia using good roads, speaking a common language, and enjoying official protection from banditry. The Roman Empire was as rich, powerful, and glorious as any in history up to that point, but it also represented oppression and imperialism to slaves, poor commoners, and conquered peoples.

Octavian was unquestionably the architect of the Roman Empire. Despite the violent beginnings of his rule, Octavian proved to be

an astute politician and a sharp judge of others. He learned and heeded the lessons of Caesar's greatest mistakes. He understood that the Roman elite, however weakened, was still strong enough to oppose a ruler who flaunted monarchical power. To avoid a second Ides of March, therefore, Octavian was infinitely diplomatic. Since the term Rex (king) would have been odious to his fellow Romans, Octavian instead referred to himself as *Princeps Civitatus*, meaning "first citizen." He used the Senate to maintain a facade of republican rule, instructing senators on the actions they were to take; a good example is that the Senate "asked" him to remain consul for life, which he graciously accepted. Octavian wanted advice without dissent. He used the senate, or rather a committee of senators and magistrates, as a sounding board; the group evolved into a permanent advisory body. Ordinary senate meetings, however, what with carefully planted informers, lost their freedom of speech. The popular assemblies fared even worse, as their powers were limited and eventually transferred to the senate.

In 27 BCE the Senate awarded Octavian the honorific Augustus: "illustrious" or "semi-divine." It is by that name, Augustus Caesar, that he is best remembered. Then in 23 BCE, Octavian assumed the position of tribune for life, the office that allowed unlimited power in making or vetoing legislation. All soldiers swore personal oaths of loyalty to him, and having conquered Egypt from his former ally Mark Antony, Octavian was worshiped as Egypt's latest pharaoh. Augustus was the most powerful Roman ruler recorded.

Statue of Augustus seated on a throne wearing robes as the God Jupiter
Roman Emperor Augustus as God Jupiter https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/_/Jupiter_1.jpg

Augustus divided the provinces between himself and the senate. To check any new would-be Caesar or other tyrant, Augustus kept the frontier provinces, where the main concentration of armies resided, as well as grain-rich Egypt within his grasp. The local commanders were all loyal equestrians who owed their success directly to Augustus. Most of the other provinces continued to be ruled as before by senators serving as governors. Nor would unruly crowds within Rome or other larger cities be tolerated. Augustus established Rome's first police force to control the urban environs in addition to his own personal guards. Called the praetorians (the name used for a Roman general's personal bodyguard) or Praetorian Guard, the force would play a crucial role in future imperial politics and helped to prevent rebellion and riots. Augustus sought to end the rampant political violence began with the Gracchi brothers nearly a century earlier.

Despite his obvious personal power, Augustus found it useful to maintain the facade of the Republic, along with republican values like thrift, honesty, bravery, and honor. He instituted strong moralistic laws that penalized (elite) young men who tried to avoid marriage and he celebrated the piety and loyalty of conservative married women. Even as he converted the government from a republic to a bureaucratic tool of his own will, he insisted on traditional republican beliefs and republican culture. This no doubt reflected his own conservative tastes, but it also eased the transition from republic to autocracy for the traditional Roman elites.

As Augustus's powers grew, he received an altogether novel legal status, *imperium majus*, that was something like access to the extraordinary powers of a dictator under the Republic. Combined with his ongoing tribuneship and direct rule over the provinces in which most of the Roman army was garrisoned, Augustus's practical control of the Roman state was unchecked. As a whole, the legal categories used to explain and excuse the reality of Augustus's vast powers worked well during his administration, but sometimes proved a major problem with later emperors because few were as competent as he had been. Subsequent emperors sometimes behaved as if the laws were truly irrelevant to their own conduct, and the formal relationship between emperor and law was never explicitly defined. Emperors who respected Roman laws and traditions won prestige and veneration for having done so, but there was never a formal legal challenge to imperial authority. Likewise, as the centuries went on and many emperors came to seize power through force, it was painfully apparent that the letter of the law was less important than the personal power of a given emperor in all too many cases.

This extraordinary power did not prompt resistance in large part because the practical reforms Augustus introduced were effective. He transformed the Senate and equestrian class into a real civil service to manage the enormous empire. He eliminated tax farming and replaced it with taxation through salaried officials. Within Rome, and other larger cities, Augustus established the first civil service, consisting of a series of prefecture or departments supervising, for example, the city watch, the grain supply, the water supply, the building of roads and bridges, tax collection, and the provisioning of the armies. Equestrians and freedmen were prominent in these prefectures and in provincial government, so they enthusiastically supported the Principate. Augustus also sought to rebuild the city of Rome back to its days of glory. He built monumental temples, including the enormous temple to Mars the Avenger in the center of the Forum, and expanded the Roman Forum in general. He even tried to improve sanitation by building aqueducts around the city to bring in fresh water.

The old Roman ruling class made its peace, though reluctantly, with Augustus. Some still looked back wistfully to the Late Republic (effectively destroyed by Caesar, though in decline as we saw since the Gracchi brothers) as a golden era of freedom. But most people in the Roman world welcomed and admired the Principate because Augustus and his successors brought peace and prosperity after a century of disasters under the late Republic. The Augustan period enjoyed affluence, especially in Italy; the

other provinces slowly caught up with Italy by the 2nd century CE. Agriculture flourished with the end of civil war. Italian industries became leaders in exports. Italian glass bowls and windowpanes, iron arms, and tools, silver eating utensils, silver candlesticks, and bronze statues and pots circulated from Britain to central Asia.

And Augustus's reforms were not limited to Rome, they extended throughout much of the empire. He instituted a regular messenger/mail service. His forces attacked Ethiopia in retaliation for attacks on Egypt and he received ambassadors from India and Scythia (present-day Ukraine). In short, he supervised the consolidation of Roman power after the decades of civil war and struggle that preceded his takeover, and the large majority of Romans and Roman subjects alike were content with the demise of the Republic because of the improved stability Augustus's reign represented. Only one major failure marred Augustus's rule: three legions (perhaps as many as 20,000 soldiers) were destroyed in a gigantic ambush in the forests of Germany in 9 CE, halting any attempt to expand Roman power past the Rhine and Danube rivers. Despite that disaster, after Augustus's death the senate voted to deify him: like his great-uncle Julius, he was now to be worshipped as a god.

The perennial problem of the Late Roman Republic had been land-hunger, which drove peasants into the arms of ambitious generals willing to help them. Augustus kept his troops happy by compensating 300,000 loyal veterans with land, money, or both, often in new overseas colonies. He made the rich pay for these services via new taxes. The result kept the peace, but many non-military in Italy remained poor, as of course did the huge number of slaves. But the urban poor of Rome enjoyed a more efficient system of free grain distribution under Augustus and a large increase in games and public entertainment-the imperial policy of "bread and circuses" designed to content the masses. Augustus also set up a major public works program, which provided jobs for the poor. He prided himself on having found Rome "a city of brick" and having left it a "city of marble." Many benefited from this building program.

Finally, it was under Augustus that Roman law became a permanent fact. The first law school was opened in Rome under Augustus. Although various provincial legal systems remained in use, the international system of Roman law was also used widely in the provinces and would be the basis for law codes across Europe for centuries to come. He also made sure that only a few legal experts would guide the administration of justice by appointing a few distinguished jurists the exclusive right to issue legal opinions "on behalf of the princeps."

One of the peculiar things about the Roman Republic is that its rise to power was in no way inevitable. No Roman leader had a "master plan" to dominate the Mediterranean world, and the Romans of 500 BCE would have been shocked to find Rome ruling over a gigantic territory a few centuries later. Likewise, the demise of the Republic was not inevitable. The class struggles and political rivalries that ultimately led to the rise of Caesar and then to the true transformation brought about by Octavian could have gone very differently. Perhaps the most important thing that Octavian could, and did, do was to recognize that the old system was no longer working the way it should, and he thus set about deliberately creating a new system in its place. For better or for worse, by the time of his death in 14 CE, Augustus had permanently dismantled the Republic and replaced it with the Roman Empire.

Chapter 9: The Roman Empire

As we have seen, when Octavian succeeded in defeating Marc Antony, he removed the last obstacle to his own control of Rome's vast territories. While paying lip service to the idea that the Republic still survived, he in fact replaced the republican system with one in which a single sovereign ruled over the Roman state. In doing so he founded the Roman Empire, a political entity that survived for almost five centuries in the west and over a thousand years in the east. This system was called the Principate, rule by the "First Citizen." Likewise, although "Caesar" had originally simply been the family name of Julius Caesar's line, "Caesar" came to be synonymous with the emperor himself by the end of the first century CE. The Roman terms for rule survived into the twentieth century: the imperial titles of the rulers of both Russia and Germany – "Tsar" and "Kaiser" – meant "Caesar." In turn, the English word "emperor" derives from *imperator*, the title of a victorious Roman general in the field, which was adopted as yet another honorific by the Roman emperors. The English word "prince" is another Romanism, from *Princeps Civitatis*, "First Citizen," the term that Augustus invented for himself. For the sake of clarity, this chapter will use the anglicized term "emperor" to refer to all of the leaders of the Roman imperial system.

Pax Romana

The Imperial Dynasties

The period of the Pax Romana included three distinct dynasties:

1. The Julian dynasty: 14 – 68 CE – those emperors related (by blood or adoption) to Caesar's line.
2. The Flavian dynasty: 69 – 96 CE – a father and his two sons who seized power after a brief civil war.
3. The "Five Good Emperors": 96 – 180 CE – a "dynasty" of emperors who chose their successors, rather than power passing to their family members.

The Julian Dynasty

There is a simple and vexing problem with any discussion of the Roman emperors: the sources. While archaeology and the surviving written sources create a reasonably clear basis for understanding the major political events of the Julian dynasty, the biographical details are much more difficult. All of the surviving written accounts about the lives of the Julian emperors were written many decades, in some cases more than a century, after their reign. In turn, the two most important biographers, Tacitus and Suetonius, detested the actions and the character of the Julians, and thus their accounts are rife with scandalous anecdotes that may or may not have any basis in historical truth (Tacitus is universally regarded as the more reliable, although Suetonius's *The Twelve Caesars* does make for very entertaining reading). Thus, the biographical sketches below are an attempt to summarize what is known for sure, along with some notes on the scandalous assertions that may be at least partly fabricated.

Succession Issues

As Augustus aged, he began to face the issue of who would succeed him and who he could trust to maintain his reforms and legacy. The problem stemmed from the fact that Augustus only had one child, a daughter named Julia, from his first marriage. Perhaps in an effort to fix this, he divorced his first wife in 38 BCE and married Livia, who divorced her husband to marry Augustus even though she was pregnant with their second son. Livia then went on to remain barren during her marriage to Augustus. Seeking a male heir, Augustus used Julia as a pawn in a game of dynastic marriage, divorce, and remarriage, but to no avail. Julia's first two husbands both predeceased her, as did two sons, each of whom Augustus had adopted before their untimely deaths. Ultimately, Augustus was forced to choose as successor, and adopt, a man he disliked, Tiberius, Livia's elder son. But, he did make Tiberius marry his daughter Julia, forcing him to divorce his beloved wife to become Julia's third husband. And unlike Julia's first two husbands, Tiberius survived the marriage. Many believed that Livia had orchestrated the succession, poisoning Julia's children and husbands (who did all die quite suddenly and very young) to secure the Principate for her son. Some even thought she may have killed Augustus when he died after a short illness in 14 CE.

When Augustus died, his stepson Tiberius (r. 14 – 37 CE) became emperor. While it was possible that the Senate might have tried to reassert its power during the transfer, there was no political will to do so. Only idealistic or embittered senators really dreamed of restoring the Republic, and a coup would have been rejected by the vast majority of Roman citizens. Under the Caesars, after

all, the empire had never been more powerful or wealthy. Genuine concessions had been made to the common people, especially soldiers, and the only people who really lost out in the short term were the old elite families of patricians, who no longer had political power independent of the emperor (although they certainly retained their wealth and status).

Tiberius began his rule as a cautious leader who put on a show of only reluctantly following in Augustus's footsteps as emperor. He was a reasonably competent emperor for over a decade, delegating decisions to the Senate and ensuring that the empire remained secure and financially solvent. His one focus was to expand and strengthen the Praetorian Guard to better secure the city. No Roman Emperor would be able to rule without the guard's support after Tiberius's reign. In addition, he oversaw a momentous change to the priorities of the Roman state: the Roman Empire no longer embarked on a sustained campaign of expansion as it had done ever since the early decades of the Republic half a millennium earlier. This does not appear to have been a conscious policy choice on the part of Tiberius, but instead a shift in priorities: the Senate was now staffed by land-owning elites who did not predicate their identities on warfare, and Tiberius himself saw little benefit in warring against Persia or invading Germany (he also feared that successful generals may threaten his power, at one point ordering one to call off a war in Germany). The Roman Empire continued to expand at times in the following centuries, but never to the degree or at the pace that it had under the Republic.

Eventually, Tiberius retreated to a private estate on the island of Capri (off the west coast of Italy). Suetonius's biography would have it that on Capri, Tiberius indulged his penchant for bloodshed and sexual abuse, which is highly questionable – what is not questionable is that Tiberius became embittered and suspicious, ordering the murders of various would-be claimants to his throne back in Rome, and sometimes ignoring affairs of state. When he died, much to the relief of the Roman populace, great hopes were pinned on his heir.

Family Tree of the Julio-Claudians beginning with Julius Caesar in the top corner

The Julio-Claudian Dynasty/Family Tree <https://www.worldhistory.org/uploads...v=1723866665-0>

That heir was Gaius (r. 37 – 41 CE), much better known as “Caligula,” literally meaning “little boots” but which translates best as “bootsie.” As a boy, Caligula moved with his father, a famous and well-liked general related by marriage to the Julians, from army camp to army camp. While he did so he liked to dress up in miniature legionnaire combat boots; hence, he was affectionately dubbed “Bootsie” by the troops.

Even if some of the stories of his personal sadism are exaggerated, there is no doubt that Caligula was a disastrous emperor. According to biographers, Caligula quickly earned a reputation for cruelty and megalomania, enjoying executions (or simple murders) as forms of entertainment (including executing his own sister after he married her) and spending vast sums on shows of power. Convinced of his own godhood, Caligula had the heads of statues of the gods removed and replaced with his own head. He liked to appear in public dressed as various gods or goddesses; one of his high priests was his horse, Incitatus, whom he supposedly also appointed as a Roman consul. Many believe he may have gone this far to show his disdain for the Senate or any republican institutions.

He staged an invasion of northern Gaul of no tactical significance which culminated in a Triumph (military parade, traditionally one of the greatest demonstrations of power and glory of a victorious general) back in Rome where all he had to show for his efforts were some collected sea shells. Just before his death he was making plans to erect a golden statue of himself (as a God) to be placed in the temple of Jerusalem.

Much of the scandalous gossip about him, historically, is because he was unquestionably the enemy of the Senate, seeing potential traitors everywhere and inflicting waves of executions against former supporters. He used trials for treason to enrich himself after squandering the treasury on buildings and public games. He also made senators wait on him dressed as slaves, and demanded that he be addressed as “dominus et deus,” meaning “master and god.” He was finally murdered by a group of senators and guardsmen.

[More on the Infamous Caligula](#)

The next emperor was Claudius (r. 41 – 54 CE), the one truly competent emperor of the Julian line after Augustus. Claudius had survived palace intrigues because he walked with a limp and spoke with a pronounced stutter; he was widely considered to be a simpleton, whereas he was actually highly intelligent. Once in power Claudius proved himself a competent and refreshingly sane emperor, ending the waves of terror Caligula had unleashed. He went on to oversee the conquest of England, first begun by Julius Caesar decades earlier. He was also a scholar, mastering the Etruscan and Punic languages and writing histories of those two civilizations (the histories are now lost, unfortunately). He restored the imperial treasury, depleted by Tiberius and Caligula, and maintained the Roman borders. He also established a true bureaucracy to manage the vast empire and began the process of formally distinguishing between the personal wealth of the emperor and the official budget of the Roman state.

Part of the expansion of the bureaucracy was his strengthening even further of the Praetorian Guard. The guard was nine cohorts of 480 men, already expanded by Tiberius, but under Claudius each cohort was grown to 1,000 men. The terms of service in the Praetorian Guard were very attractive: 16 years instead of 25 (the term of service of the regular Roman army) and pay that was significantly higher (this was a necessity: emperors starting with Claudius knew that they were vulnerable to the Praetorians and needed to keep them happy and loyal). Not surprisingly, Praetorians were recruited from veteran legionaries. They did not simply serve the emperor in the city of Rome, instead actively campaigning both when defending Roman territory from invasion (which became an increasing problem by the fourth century CE), and with the emperor while on campaign.

According to Roman historians, despite his expansion of the Praetorian Guard, Claudius was eventually betrayed and poisoned by his wife, who sought to have her son from another marriage become emperor. That son was Nero. Nero (r. 54 – 68 CE) was another Julian who acquired a terrible historical reputation; while he was fairly popular during his first few years as emperor, he eventually succumbed to a Caligula-like tendency of having elite Romans (including his domineering mother) killed. In 64 CE, a huge fire nearly destroyed Rome, which was largely built out of wood. This led to the legend of Nero “playing his fiddle while Rome burned” – in fact, in the fire’s aftermath Nero had shelters built for the homeless and set about rebuilding the roughly half of the city that had been destroyed, using concrete buildings and grid-based streets. That said, he did use space cleared by the fire to begin the construction of a gigantic new palace in the middle of Rome called the “golden house,” into which he poured state revenues.

Nero’s terrible reputation arose from the fact that he unquestionably hounded and persecuted elite Romans, using a law called the *Maiestas* that made it illegal to slander the emperor to extract huge amounts of money from senators and equestrians. He also ordered imagined rivals and former advisors to kill themselves, probably out of mere jealousy. Besides Roman elites, his other major target was the early Christian movement, whom he blamed for the fire in Rome and whom he relentlessly persecuted (thousands were killed in the gladiatorial arena, ripped apart by wild animals). Thus, the two groups in the position to write Nero’s history – elite Romans and early Christians – had every reason to hate him. In addition, Nero took great pride in being an actor and musician, two professions that were considered by Roman elites to be akin to prostitution. His artistic indulgences were thus scandalous violations of elite sensibilities. After completely losing the support of both the army and the Senate, Nero committed suicide in 68 CE.

Another note on the sources: what the “bad” emperors of the Julian line (Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero) had in common is that they violated the old traditions of Romanitas, squandering wealth and glorifying themselves in various ways, thus inspiring hostility from many elite Romans. Since it was other elite Romans (albeit many years later) who became their biographers, we in the present cannot help but have a skewed view of their conduct. Historians have rehabilitated much of the rule of Tiberius and (to a lesser extent) Nero in particular, arguing that even if they were at loggerheads with the Senate at various times and probably did unfairly prosecute at least some senators, they did a decent job of running the empire as well.

The Flavian Dynasty

In the aftermath of Nero’s death, a brief civil war broke out. Four generals competed for the emperorship, supported by their armies. In the end, a general named Vespasian (r. 69 – 79 CE) seized power and founded a fairly short-lived dynasty consisting of himself and his two sons, known to history as the Flavians. The importance of Vespasian’s takeover was that it reinforced the idea that real power in Rome was no longer that of the old power-broking families, but instead the armies; Vespasian had no legal claim to the throne, but his emperorship was ratified by the Senate nevertheless. The emperor’s major concern had to be maintaining the loyalty of the armies above all else, because they could and would openly fight to put their man on the throne in a time of crisis – this occurred numerous times in the centuries to come.

Vespasian was one of the great emperors of the early empire. He pulled Rome’s finances back from the terrible state they had been left in by Nero and restored the relationship between the emperor and the Roman elite; it certainly did not hurt his reputation that he was a successful general, one of the traditional sources of status among Roman leaders. He was also renowned for his openness and his grounded outlook. Reputably, he did not keep a guard and let people speak to him directly in public audiences. In an act of classic Romanitas, he started work on the famous Colosseum (known at the time as the Flavian Amphitheater) in Rome in order to provide a grand setting for public games and performances. All of this happened in just a decade; he died of natural causes in 79 CE.

Photograph of the Roman Colosseum at night

The Colosseum https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...%2C_Kolosseum_-_2024_-_0610.jpg

Vespasian’s older son Titus (r. 79 – 81 CE) had been groomed to follow his father and began as a promising and competent emperor. He was also the first Roman Emperor to inherit the position from his father. The Arc of Titus, pictured below, was

constructed to honor the occasion. The arch also included treasures looted from the Temple at Jerusalem.

Portion of the Arc of Titus of the Roman Forum featuring a menorah looted from the temple of Jerusalem
Temple Menorah on the Arc of Titus https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/Rome_Italy.jpg

Unfortunately, almost as soon as Titus took the throne a volcano in southern Italy, Mt. Vesuvius, erupted, followed shortly by another huge fire as well as an epidemic in Rome. Titus' reign lasted only 2 years, yet he maintained a strong popularity with the Roman people based on his handling of the Mount Vesuvius disaster in 79 CE. Titus struggled to aid victims of all three disasters, but was then struck by fever and died in 81 CE cutting short what could have been a much more impactful reign.

On August 24, 79 CE at 1pm, Mt. Vesuvius erupted, covering the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum in ashes, freezing/preserving them in time. This tragedy that took so many lives also created a treasure trove for today's historians and archaeologists. The sites provide a unique snapshot of two thriving commercial cities with sophisticated infrastructure like aqueducts and public baths, revealing insights into social stratification, religious practices, sexual practices, art, and graffiti as a form of early social media. Because both cities were abandoned after the disaster, one can gain a picture perfect impression of life at the height of the Roman Empire/Principate. One of the more interesting facets of the Roman Empire was the proliferation of prostitution and importance of sex in social and political dealings. Pompeii allows one to see this frozen in time, including in the oldest still intact brothel. For more on this, see: <https://www.bbc.com/reel/video/p09xtq4m/the-forbidden-erotica-of-ancient-pompeii>

Painting showing the desolation after the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius

Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum by John Martin, 1821

Present day street of Pompeii with Mt. Vesuvius towering in the background

Streets of Pompeii with Mt. Vesuvius in the Towering over, Photo by Author Erin Stone

Carving of a Penis with wings on the walls of Pompeii

Phallic Symbol on the Streets of Pompeii, Photo by Author Erin Stone

Archaeologists conducting a dig within the foundations of Pompeii

Active Archaeological Excavation at Pompeii, May 2022, Photo by Author Erin Stone

Vespasian's second son, Domitian (r. 81 – 96 CE), who was not “supposed” to take the throne, proved to be a terrible ruler. He created an atmosphere of terror in elite Roman circles in an effort to watch out for potential rebels, murdering senators and elites he suspected. He adopted a Caligula-like concern for glorifying himself (like Caligula, he insisted that he be addressed as “dominus et deus” and that all oaths be sworn to the godhood of the emperor) and liked to appear before the senate in the armor of a Roman commander returning from victory. He also enjoyed large spectacles, including flooding the Colosseum to host mock naval battles.

However, Domitian differed from Caligula in his opinions regarding sex. Whereas Caligula promoted prostitution and may have had affairs with his sisters, Domitian implemented widespread reforms such as banning male castration and penalizing Vestal Virgins for transgressions, like sexual promiscuity. He also undertook major building projects during his reign, both for palaces for himself and public works, including roads and fortifications. And the empire did remain relatively stable during his rule (with little if any military expansion). That noted, Domitian became increasingly paranoid and violent between 89 and 96 CE, until he was finally killed by assassins in his palace after 15 years as emperor. The senate then replaced him with Nerva.

The “Five Good Emperors” and the Severans

Following the work of the great eighteenth-century English historian Edward Gibbon, historians frequently refer to the rulers of the Roman Empire who followed the death of Domitian as the “Five Good Emperors,” those who successfully managed the Empire at its height. For almost a century, emperors appointed their own successors from the most competent members of the younger generation of Roman elites. Not least because none of them (except the last, to disastrous consequences) had surviving direct heirs of their own, each emperor would adopt a younger man as his son, thereby ensuring his succession. Rome prospered during this period under this relatively meritocratic system of political succession where duty to the state and the Gods superseded familial sentiment. In these emperors we also see the first leaders to be born outside of Italy. Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius all came from Hispania (present day Spain) and Antoninus Pius came from Gaul. It was under one of these emperors, Trajan, that the empire achieved its greatest territorial expanse.

One of the important aspects of the behavior of the “good emperors” is that they fit the model of a “philosopher-king” first described by Plato centuries earlier. Even though monarchy had been repugnant to earlier Romans, during the period of the Republic, the good emperors tried to live and act according to traditional Roman Romanitas, undertaking actions not only for

their own glorification but for the good of the Roman state, not just Rome. They went to great lengths to care for the provinces. These emperors not only commonly received petitions from cities, associations, and individuals in far off regions, but answered them. The Empire's borders were maintained (or, as under Trajan, expanded), public works and infrastructure built, and infighting among elites kept to a minimum.

Trajan's accomplishments deserve special mention, not only because of his success in expanding the Empire, but in how he governed it. He was a fastidious and straightforward administrator, focusing his considerable energies on the practical business of rule. He personally responded to requests and correspondence, he instituted a program of inexpensive loans to farmers using the interest to pay for food for poor children, and he worked closely with the Senate to maintain stability and imperial solvency. The fact that he personally led the legions on major military campaigns capped his reign in the military glory expected of an emperor following the rule of the Flavians, but he was remembered at least as well for his skill as a leader in peacetime.

Map of the Roman Empire at its height from Spain and England stretching east to Mesopotamia

The Roman Empire under Trajan, at its peak https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/17/Trajan_117AD.png

The next two emperors, Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, did not win comparable military glory, but they did defend the borders (Hadrian gave up Trajan's conquests in Mesopotamia to do so, recognizing that they were unsustainable), oversaw major building projects, and maintained Roman stability. Hadrian spent much of his reign touring the Roman provinces, particularly Greece. It was clear by his reign that the emperor's authority was practically limitless, with both emperors issuing imperial proclamations known as "rescripts" while away from Rome that carried the force of law. With Hadrian one can see most clearly that humane leadership did not always mean softness, in particular in his suppression of the revolt in Judea.

This period of successful rule eventually broke down when the practice of choosing a competent follower ended – the emperor Marcus Aurelius, a brilliant leader and Stoic philosopher (161 – 180 CE) named his arrogant and foolish son Commodus (r. 177 – 192 CE) his co-emperor three years before Aurelius's death. Storm clouds had already been gathering under Aurelius, who found himself obliged to lead military campaigns against incursions of Germanic tribes in the north despite his own lack of a military background (or, really, temperament). He had, however, been a scrupulously efficient and focused political leader. His decision to make Commodus his heir was due to a simple fact: Aurelius was the first of the Five Good Emperors to have a biological son who survived to adulthood. As emperor, Commodus indulged his taste for debauchery and ignored affairs of state, finally being assassinated after twelve years of incompetence.

One last dynasty emerged in the aftermath of Commodus's death, that of the Severans who ruled from 192 – 235 CE. They faced growing threats on the Roman borders, as Germanic tribes staged repeated (and often at least temporarily successful) incursions to the north and a new Persian dynasty known as the Sasanians pressed against Roman territory to the east. The last Severan emperor, Severus Alexander, died in 235 CE, ushering in a terrible period of military defeat and instability considered in the next chapter.

Romanization

As noted above, by the year 117 CE under Trajan, the Roman Empire reached its greatest size. It encompassed most of England across to Germany and Romania, all of North Africa from present-day Morocco, and extended to the borders of the Persian Empire. Beyond these borders were "barbarians" of various kinds; as far as the Romans were concerned there were no civilized people outside of their borders except the Persians. Trajan's successor, the emperor Hadrian, built an enormous series of fortifications to consolidate power on the frontiers – these were eventually (by the third century CE) known as the limes, permanent garrisons and fortresses that were meant to serve as barriers to prevent "barbarian" incursions. Some of these survive to the present, including Hadrian's Wall in northern England. While fleets patrolled the rivers and oceans, these garrisons controlled access to the empire.

Throughout the first 2 centuries CE, all portions of the Roman Empire, except for the furthest extended boundary settlements, experienced the phenomenon of Romanization. At its most basic, Romanization meant the spread and sharing of Roman ideas, language, religion, laws, cultural practices, architecture, technology and more across their enormous empire. Most of the spread of culture and infrastructure, was purely pragmatic, like the need for systems of roads to connect northern Europe with Africa, the southeastern Mediterranean, and even with Mesopotamia. For the first time urban centers appeared across Europe and northern Africa, outside of Ptolemaic Egypt of course. Everywhere the Romans went they shared their culture. They built aqueducts along with roads allowing for freshwater to be more readily available across Europe. Coliseums and gladiatorial competitions followed the Romans. And ultimately, the Romans would be the bearers of one of the most influential religions in Western Civilization, Christianity, as it spread throughout their empire.

Roman Legions & Expansion of Roman Citizenship

Perhaps the most important thing Augustus did besides establishing the principate itself was to reorganize the Roman legions. He created a standing professional army with regular pay and retirement benefits, permanently ending the reliance on the volunteer citizen – soldiers that had fought for Rome under the republic. Instead, during the empire, Legionaries served for twenty years and then were put on reserve for another five, although more than half died before reaching retirement age. The major benefits of service were a very large bonus paid on retirement (equivalent to 13 years of pay!) and land: military colonies spread across the empire ensured that a loyal soldier could expect to establish a prosperous family line if he lived that long.

Service in the army was grueling and intense. Roman soldiers were expected to be able to march over 20 miles a day carrying a heavy pack. They were subject to brutal discipline, up to and including summary execution if they were judged to have been derelict in their duties – one of the worst was falling asleep on guard duty, punishable by being beaten to death by one's fellow soldiers. Roman soldiers were held to the highest standards of unit cohesion, and their combat drills meant they were constantly ready for battle.

Starting in the Augustan period, the essential division in the Roman military was the legion, a self-sufficient army unto itself that could be combined with other legions to form a full-scale invasion force but could also operate on its own. During the Augustan period, each legion consisted of 5,400 infantry and 120 cavalry, along with hundreds of specialists such as engineers, arrow-makers, and blacksmiths who allowed the legion to operate independently while traveling. The legions were subdivided into cohorts of 480 men, each of which was led by a centurion, veterans who had risen through the ranks to lead. The legions were designed to be flexible, adaptable, and “standardized”: each legion was comparable in its organization, down to the placement of the tents in the camps built at the end of every day while the legion was on the march.

In turn, each legion was led by a legionary legate, usually a powerful noble appointed by the imperial government or the emperor himself. These legates were often politicians rather than soldiers, meaning that the key figures in actual battle were the centurions, each of whom had earned his position through exemplary service. Perhaps most important of all was the lead centurion, the First Spear, who dictated tactics on the field. The legions were made up of Roman citizens, but not all members of the Roman military were citizens. Instead, as numerous as the legions were auxiliaries: Roman subjects (e.g. Celts, North Africans, Syrians, etc.) who nevertheless served the empire. The auxiliaries were divided into cohorts of infantry and alae (“wings”) of cavalry. In comparison to the infantry-focused Roman legions, the auxiliaries tended to vary their arms – auxiliaries could be slingers and archers as well as foot soldiers and cavalry. They tended to serve as scouts and support for the legions as well as engaging in combat in their own right. As of 23 CE they numbered about 150,000 men, which was the same as the legions at the time. The emperor Claudius rewarded 25 years of service with citizenship; by the early second century, all auxiliaries gained citizenship on discharge.

The army was important in integrating provincial subjects into Roman culture. A soldier recruited from the provinces had to learn Latin, at least well enough to take orders and respond to them. Auxiliaries served with men from all over the empire, not just their own home regions, and what each soldier had in common was service to Rome. Commanding officers were often from the Italian heartland, forming a direct link to the Roman center. Military families were a reality everywhere, with sons often becoming soldiers after their fathers. Thus, the experience of serving in the legions or the auxiliaries tended to promote a shared sense of Roman identity, even when soldiers were drawn from areas that had been conquered by Rome in the recent past.

In the provinces, there was a pattern that took place over a few generations. After being conquered by the Romans, there were often resistance movements and rebellions. Those were put down with overwhelming, brutal force, often worse than that of the initial invasion. Eventually, local elites were integrated in the governor's office and ambitious people made sure their sons learned Latin. Locals started joining the army and, if lucky, returned eventually with money and land to show for it. Roman amenities like aqueducts and baths were built and roads linked the province with the rest of the empire. In short, assimilation and/or romanization happened. A few generations after Roman conquest, many (local elites especially) in a given province would identify with Roman civilization. Regular people in the countryside, meanwhile, would at least be obliged to tolerate Roman rule even if they did not embrace it.

Roman Law, Arts, and Technology

For the republican period and the first few hundred years of the Empire, Roman jurisprudence was split in the provinces. This meant that provincial people were accountable to their own legal systems so long as they were loyal to Rome and paid their taxes on schedule. The most famous historical example of the overlapping legal systems of the Empire was the biblical trial of Jesus before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Pilate tried to hand the case off to the local Jewish puppet king, Herod, who in turn refused it and handed Jesus back over to Pilate. In the end, Jesus was executed by the Roman government for inciting rebellion,

using the traditional Roman punishment of crucifixion. More on this to come.

Roman citizens could always appeal to Roman law if they wanted to, even if they lived in a province far from Rome. There were many benefits, not least exemption from the local laws that non-citizens were obliged to follow, and wealthy citizens were exempt from the more horrible forms of punishment and execution as well (such as crucifixion). This changed dramatically in 212 CE when the emperor Caracalla extended citizenship to all free men and women (to make it easier to collect taxes). This was an important event because it extended Roman law to almost everyone in the empire, essentially laying the foundation for Western law across the Mediterranean world. Some of the concepts and practices of Roman law outlived the empire itself. Rome initiated the tradition of using precedent to shape legal decisions, as well as the idea that there is a spirit to laws that is sometimes more important than a literal interpretation. The Romans were the first to codify the idea that someone accused of a crime was innocent until proven guilty; this was a totally radical idea in the area of justice, which in the rest of the ancient world normally held the accused guilty unless guilt could be conclusively disproved.

In addition to the spread and maintenance of Roman laws throughout the empire, Romans also brought their culture and technology with them wherever they colonized. To this day we can see and touch Roman architecture across the Mediterranean world and into Northern Europe. One need not visit Rome to see the beauty and power of Roman engineering and architecture. Just a few examples follow.

Roman temple in Austria

Roman Temple dedicated to Augustus & Livia, Vienna, Austria https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...e_Julie_-2.JPG

Roman city gate in Germany

Porta Nigra, or the City Gate to Trier, Germany built in 170 CE https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...Nigra_BW_3.JPG

Roman Bathes in England

Roman Bathes in Bath, England, constructed 60-70 CE <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:R....jpg#filelinks>

Roman Aqueduct in Spain

Roman Aqueduct of Segovia, 112 CE, Photo by author Erin Stone

A view of the now Spanish Aqueduct from above

The Aqueduct of Segovia from above at dusk, Photo by Author Erin Stone

Roman Theater in Spain

Roman Theatre, Merida, Spain, constructed 15 BCE https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...9rida_2023.jpg

Roman Bridge in Spain, lit for the night

Roman Bridge of Merida, Spain at night, Photo by Author, Erin Stone

Religion: Roman Faiths and the birth and spread of Christianity

Rome had always been a center of religious diversity. While the official Roman gods were venerated across the Empire, Roman elites had no objections to the worship of other deities, and indeed many Romans (elites and commoners alike) eagerly embraced foreign faiths. Originating in the Hellenistic kingdoms, many Romans were attracted to mystery religions, cults that promised spiritual salvation to their members. These mystery religions shared a belief that the universe was full of magical charms that could lead to spiritual salvation or eternal life itself. In many ways, they were more like cults of magic than traditional religious faiths. A worshiper could join multiple mystery religions, intoning chants and prayers and participating in rituals in hopes of securing good fortune and wealth in life and the possibility of spiritual immortality after death.

Even Rome's perennial adversary Persia supplied sources of spiritual inspiration to Rome. Mithras, the Zoroastrian god of war, the sun, and rebirth became immensely popular among Romans. Mithras believed that Mithras had been a soldier, slain by his enemies, who then rose to enjoy eternal life, a secret he could share with his initiates. His worshipers believed that Mithras had captured and killed a scared bull whose blood and body were the source of life. Accordingly, Mithraism focused on bull sacrifice carried out in a vaulted cave like temple called a Mithraeum. Initiates were baptized with the bull's blood and participated in various other rituals among them a sacramental meal. Their moral code advised imitating the life of their hero. Roman soldiers campaigning in Persia brought Mithraism back to Rome since Mithras's identity as a former soldier made his worship all the more appealing to members of the Roman military. The worship of Mithras was so popular that, some historians have noted, it is easy to imagine the Roman Empire becoming Mithran instead of Christian if Constantine had not converted to the latter faith.

Sculptures showing scenes from a Mithraic ritual including the sacrificing of a bull

Mithraic Relief from 2nd Century Rome <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...Reliefvert.jpg>

In some cases, non-Roman gods even came to supplant Roman ones; one of the Severan emperors embraced the worship of the Syrian sun god Sol Invictus (meaning “the unconquered sun”) and had a temple built in Rome to honor the god alongside the traditional Roman deities. The notion of being as powerful and unstoppable as the sun appealed to future emperors, so subsequent emperors tended to venerate Sol Invictus along with the Roman Jupiter until the triumph of Christianity. In other cases, the worship of non-Roman gods was so popular that it simply could not be suppressed in the few cases in which Roman leaders saw a need to. The Egyptian goddess Isis, who was at the heart of the largest mystery cult in the entire Mediterranean region, was so popular among both women and men that repeated attempts to purge her cult from Rome for being socially disruptive utterly failed.

The cult of Isis derived from the ancient Egyptians’ worship of Isis, her brother, and husband Osiris and their son, Horus. Like other cults, its central theme was eternal life, through the promise of resurrection achieved by moral behavior in this life. Isis, the “Goddess of 10,000 names,” was portrayed as a loving mother and elements of Isis were later syncretized in the cult of the Virgin Mary. Her followers were known to march in colorful, and at times terrifying (and disruptive), parades through Roman streets, flagellating themselves as a sign of penitence, something we will see much more of in Medieval Europe. Although men joined in the worship of Isis, the cult mainly appealed to women. The goddess’s popularity crossed class lines; devotees ranged from slaves to the wealthiest Romans.

So here in these cults, one can see several things. First, how the various regions conquered by Rome were actively influencing Roman culture; of most significance were cults from both Persia and Egypt. Second we can see some similarities to Christianity, and perhaps how they influenced one another during their development. Of course the religion with the closest most clear connection to Christianity is Judaism.

The Jews and Jesus

The Roman territory of Palestine was a thorn in Rome’s side thanks to the unshakable opposition of the Jews. Palestine suffered from heavy taxation and deeply-felt resentment toward the Romans. One key point of contention was that the Jews refused to pay lip service to the divinity of the emperors. The Romans insisted that their subjects participate in symbolic rituals acknowledging the primacy of the emperors, but since the Jews were strict monotheists, they would not do so.

In 66 CE there was a huge uprising against Rome. It took four years for imperial forces to crush the uprising, resulting in the greatest disaster in ancient Jewish history: the permanent destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE. In the aftermath, the Romans enslaved or deported much of the Jewish population, which contributed to the phenomenon of the Jewish diaspora, the people without a homeland united only by the Hebrew Bible, the teaching of the rabbis, and Jewish cultural traditions. Another uprising decades later (between 132 – 136 CE) resulted in the almost complete dispersal of the Jews, to the point that the Jewish homeland was truly lost to them until the foundation of the modern state of Israel in 1948 CE.

In the first century CE, Jewish society, especially its leadership, was divided between rival groups. Some powerful priests, the Sadducees, claimed that all Jews should follow the 10 Commandments, but only the priests of the Temple needed to follow the 613 laws and injunctions laid down by Moses. They were opposed by the Pharisees, who insisted that all Jews had to abide by all of the laws of Moses, and they also preached that a messiah – a savior – would soon come to bring about a day of judgment before Yahweh and the fulfillment of the Biblical Covenant. In the deserts outside of the major cities, a group called the Essenes emphasized a life of asceticism and mysticism, while across Palestine anti-Roman revolutionaries known as the Zealots advocated for armed revolt against the Roman occupier.

The Jewish uprising that occurred against the Romans in 66 CE happened a generation after the death of another Jewish revolutionary of sorts: Jesus of Nazareth. For all its historical importance, Jesus’s life is poorly documented. The main source on the life of Jesus are the four Gospels, accounts of his life and teachings composed after his death by three of his apostles (his closest followers and students), Matthew, Mark, and John, and another early Christian leader, Luke. The Gospels were transmitted orally for decades before being recorded in their definitive versions; most scholars now date the written gospels to approximately 90 CE (about sixty years after the death of Jesus). While the specific language of the Gospels is, of course, different, and some of the events described are also described differently, the Gospels agree on most of the major aspects of the life of Jesus, some of which are corroborated by scanty Roman documents.

According to the Gospels, Jesus was the son of the miraculous union of the Holy Spirit, one of the aspects of the Jewish God Yahweh, and a virgin named Mary. Jesus showed an aptitude for theological and spiritual understanding at a young age, debating Jewish doctrine with learned Jewish priests when he was still a boy. At the age of thirty, having earned his living as a carpenter up to that point, Jesus began to preach a message of salvation that revolved around the concept that mankind as a whole could be saved if it sought forgiveness from God for their sins. He traveled and delivered his teachings in the Roman province of Palestine

and the nearby puppet kingdoms dominated by the Romans for three years, but was then arrested by the Roman authorities for inciting rebellion. In the end, Jesus was executed in the customary Roman fashion of crucifixion at the age of 33.

According to the Gospels, Jesus returned to life, with an angel rolling the boulder back from the entrance to the tomb in which his body had been laid to rest. He renewed his call for devotion to God and the offer of salvation for those who sought forgiveness, then passed into the divine presence. Jesus's followers, led by the twelve apostles, began to teach his lessons to others, and the new religion of Christianity was born. His followers began to refer to Jesus as "the Christ," meaning "the anointed one" in Greek, a reference to the idea that Jesus was anointed to provide salvation for humanity.

But, what does evidence beyond the Gospels tell us about Jesus? Again, not a great deal, but with some careful analysis we can paint a basic picture of Jesus the man. He was probably born not long before the death in 4 BCE of Herod, the Roman-installed client-king of the province of Judea. The date of 1 CE for Jesus's birth, a mistaken calculation of Late Antiquity, does not accord with the date of the New Testament. At around age 30, Jesus was baptized by the mysterious preacher John the Baptist. Soon afterward Herod Antipas, the Roman's client-king of Galilee, ordered the execution of John. John had preached that God's kingdom was about to arrive, a time of universal perfection and the end of misery. In preparation, sinful humankind needed to repent.

Jesus's teachings were both similar to and different from John's preaching and other contemporary doctrines of Palestinian Judaism, but closest to the most popular group, the Pharisees, who focused on the spiritual needs of ordinary people. The Pharisees believed that law was central to Judaism but argued that it could be interpreted flexibly, in light of the oral tradition that had grown up alongside the written text of the Hebrew Bible. The Pharisees emphasized charity toward the poor and spoke in parables-vivid allegories/stories that made their teaching accessible. Like the Pharisees Jesus strongly criticized the pillar of the Jewish establishment, the priests and wealthy men who saw the Temple at Jerusalem and its rites as the heart of Judaism. Also like the Pharisees, Jesus rejected the growing movement of the Zealots, advocates of revolt against Roman rule, although there were many Zealots among his followers.

Yet Jesus was not a Pharisee. His teachings went further than the Pharisees' in rejecting the need to follow the letter of biblical law. Inward purity became the key principle, as reflected in Jesus's statement to his disciples: "Who ever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it." Only an adult could become an expert in biblical law, but it is probably easier for a child than for an adult to attain spiritual innocence. Jesus argued that the kingdom of God, which John the Baptist had said was coming soon, was actually already beginning to arrive. Moreover, Jesus said that he himself, acting through the direct order of God, could forgive sins. He emphasized the notion of God as a loving and forgiving father. He welcomed marginalized groups, including prostitutes and lepers. He praised the poor and the humble and scorned the pursuit of wealth instead of righteousness. He called for generosity and forgiveness, recalling the traditional Jewish golden rule-to treat others as one would like to be treated. He said that prayer, fasting, and acts of charity should be conducted in private, not in public, in order to emphasize purity of motive.

Jesus's teachings while winning him many Jewish followers, also gained him hostility from some Pharisees, who considered his claim to be able to forgive sins blasphemous. In fact most Jewish groups did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. And he only made things worse by actively challenging the central authority by going to Jerusalem and teaching and healing in the Temple under the eyes of the very priests that he criticized. Nor did he confine his opposition to words, he drove merchants and moneychangers away from the Temple precincts by over turning their tables and perhaps even threatening them with a whip. Jesus attracted large crowds of followers, at least some of whom were armed. Authorities began to fear trouble, especially the overlords of Judea, the Romans. The governor, Pilate (Pontius Pilatus) had already endured vehement Jewish objections to the display in Jerusalem of an imperial medallion and of an inscription that asserted Augustus's divinity. Pilate had no need of further uproar or rebellion. Temple police and Roman soldiers were called on to arrest Jesus quietly.

Jesus's subsequent trial and execution have always been controversial. The New Testament emphasizes the role of the Jewish leadership and the Jerusalem mob in Jesus's death. Written after the First Jewish Revolt (66-70 AD), however, the Gospels may reflect anti-Jewish sentiment in the empire. Crucifixion, the method used to execute Jesus, was a Roman penalty (the traditional Jewish punishment was stoning) and Jesus was executed by Romans, not Jews. Jesus probably appeared in informal and hurried proceedings before both the Jewish council and Pilate. He suffered a slow death by crucifixion on Golgotha Hill, just outside of the city. It was a spring Friday, on the eve of the Passover festival, around 30 CE.

After Jesus's death, Christianity could have remained a small Jewish cult, if not for St. Paul's conversion and the active missionizing of his core group of disciples. After Jesus's death, his disciples, returned to Jerusalem and spread his teachings. They preached in synagogues, private households, and even Greek Temples, to Greek-speaking as well as Palestinian Jews. Their movement spread in the 30s and 40s throughout Palestine and into Syria. In Jerusalem Christians were known as Nazarenes-that is, followers of Jesus of Nazareth; it was at Antioch that they were first called the "men of Christ" or Christians. The leaders of the

movement were known as apostles, from the Greek word apostle, “one who is sent” and who enjoys the authority of the sender. The apostles included Jesus’s 12 original followers, or disciples. The most prominent disciple was Peter, a Galilean fisherman whom Jesus endowed with particular authority. After the crucifixion, Peter became a miracle-worker and leading apostle. According to reliable tradition, he went to Rome, whose church he headed and where he died as a martyr in 64 CE.

Early Christianity

At the beginning of the Christian faith, there was no single set of texts or beliefs that united Christians. The four major Gospels do not agree on everything, because they were written by different people from memory (decades after the apostles themselves were alive). It was St. Paul, a Jewish leader who underwent a profound conversion experience and became the foremost Christian evangelist, who popularized the notion that the death of Jesus on the cross was part of a divine plan that canceled out human sin. For hundreds of years, Christians debated and argued about what Christ’s message had “really” been because many of Jesus’s teachings were, and are, open to interpretation. Early Christians were divided on very significant issues, including:

What God did Jesus represent? One cult believed that the God of Christ was not the Jewish God, who had been vengeful and warlike. According to this sect, Christ’s God was a more powerful and loving deity come to save the world from Yahweh.

Was Jesus the messiah? In Jewish doctrine, the messiah was to be a figure who liberated the Jews from oppression and made good on the Covenant between the Jews and God, delivering the Promised Land for all eternity. Many Jews had hoped that Jesus would be a revolutionary against Roman rule and, since Judea remained in Roman hands after his death, they did not believe that Jesus had been the messiah. Early Christians came to insist, following Paul, that Jesus had indeed been the messiah, but that the “liberation” he offered was spiritual in nature, rather than having to do with prosaic politics. In other words, the potential to save one’s soul from damnation superseded the old Covenant.

Was Jesus human, or was he instead somehow God Himself? He lived like a normal man, but according to the gospels he had also performed miracles, and he claimed to be the son of God. Likewise, while Jesus lived an exemplary life, he also displayed traits like anger and doubt (the latter most famously on the cross when he asked God why He had “forsaken” Jesus), traits that did not seem those of a “perfect” being. This debate would go on for centuries, with equally pious groups of Christians coming to completely different conclusions about Christ’s divine and human natures.

Likewise, early Christians were torn as to whether everyone could be a Christian, or instead, if membership was limited to the Jews. If Jesus was indeed the specifically Jewish messiah, after all, it did not make sense for a Roman or a Persian or a Celt to be able to convert. In the end, thanks largely to the influence of St. Paul again, most Christians came to believe that the salvation offered by Christ was potentially universal, and that not just Jews could become Christians as a result. Some Christians, however contemplated a radial break; among them no one was more important than Paul of Tarsus.

A remarkable figure, Paul, originally Saul, embodied 3 different and interlocking worlds. He was a Jew of the Diaspora from the southern Anatolian city of Tarsus. He was a learned Pharisee, and a native speaker of Aramaic, but also knew Hebrew and Greek. His father was one of the few Jews to attain Roman citizenship, a privilege that Paul inherited. At first Paul joined in the persecution of the Christians, whom he considered blasphemous. Around 36 CE, however, he claimed to see a blinding light on the road to Damascus, a vision of Jesus that convinced him to change from persecutor to believer. It was a complete turn around. At this point Saul changed his name to Paul and became a Christian. But more importantly, he changed what being a Christian meant.

The key to Paul’s faith was not so much Jesus’s life, although that was a model for Christian ethics, as it was Jesus’s death and resurrection. Jesus’s fate, Paul wrote, offered all humanity the hope of resurrection, redemption, and salvation. Paul retained his belief in Jewish morality and ethics, but not in the rules of Jewish law. He claimed that following the law, no matter how carefully, would not lead to salvation; only faith in Jesus as Messiah would. Paul’s doctrine meant a break with Judaism, opening up the religion to gentiles instead of just to Jews. For centuries some gentiles had shown interest in Judaism, but they were put off by the strict dietary laws, circumcision, observance of the Sabbath, and other Jewish rituals. But, Paul and his followers did not have to strictly follow Jewish laws. Even while many Jewish temples baptized converts and considered them Jews, Paul did not consider them to be Jews alone, but more specifically, converts to Christ.

From the late 40s to the early 60s CE Paul undertook missionary journeys through the cities of the Roman East and to Rome itself. He aimed to convert Gentiles, yet many of his followers were already Hellenized Jews. While Paul had opened the door to differentiate Christianity from Judaism, it took events in the next centuries to completely divide the two. First was the persecution of the Jews after the Jewish Revolt in 70 CE when most remaining, surviving Jews rallied to the Pharisees, beginning to consolidate the Jewish community under one doctrine. Second, Jews and Christians began competing for converts and thus emphasized their respective differences. Third, although many Jews made their peace with Rome in 70 CE, enough Jewish-Roman

hostility remained to lead to uprisings in the 2nd century that were suppressed, but made Judaism even more stigmatized by the Romans. Many Christians sought to distance themselves from the Jews at this point.

Map of Apostle Paul's travels across Eastern and Central Europe

Map of Paul of Tarsus's Missionary Travels https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8d/Map_of_Paul_of_Tarsus's_Missionary_Travels.png

Once the debate about whether non-Jews could become Christians was resolved, Christianity's teachings and doctrine was open to all. Early Christians recognized no social distinctions, which was fundamentally at odds with the entire Roman system, reliant as it was on formal legal separations between social classes and a stark system of social hierarchy. Likewise, one unequivocal requirement placed on Christians was to love their neighbors, meaning in practice showing kindness and compassion to others regardless of their social rank. Few concepts could have been more alien to Roman sensibilities.

Christianity thus at least potentially threatened the hierarchical nature of Roman society. Likewise, it inherited from Judaism a strict monotheism that refused to accept the worship of the Roman emperors. What made it even more threatening than Judaism, however, was that Christianity actively sought out new converts (i.e. Christianity was inherently evangelical, in stark contrast to Judaism which did not seek new members). Roman authorities were thus already very much inclined to be suspicious of the Christians as potential rabble-rousers. In 68 CE, Nero blamed the Christians for the huge fire that consumed much of the city of Rome, and hundreds of Christians were rounded up and slaughtered in the arena. The persecution of Christians became a potent symbol for Christianity as a whole. Over a thousand years later, when Christianity was firmly entrenched as the religion of Europe, the trope of martyrdom was still used to explain righteous suffering.

Expansion, Divergence, and Persecution

Although Jesus's mission had primarily been in the countryside, early Christianity quickly became an urban movement and spread throughout the cities of the Roman Empire. By around 200 CE orthodox (meaning "right thinking" in Greek) Christianity had emerged. Rooted in Judaism, it was nonetheless a distinct and separate religion that found most of its supporters among Gentiles. A simple rule of faith emphasizing the belief in one God and the mission of his son Jesus as savior, united Christians from one end of the Empire to the other. Christianity attracted all types of followers, men and women, poor and wealthy. Many of the early followers believed that Christ's return was imminent. Early churches were simple and relatively informal congregations that gathered for regular meetings. The liturgy or service consisted of reading from the Scriptures, old and New Testaments, teaching, praying, and singing hymns. Baptism was used to initiate converts. The Lord's Supper, a communal meal in memory of Jesus, was the major ritual. The most important parts of the meal were the baking and distribution of bread at the beginning and the passing of a cup of wine at the end; these recalled the body and blood of Christ.

As Christianity spread, its trouble with the authorities deepened. For one thing, Christians met in small groups, a kind of assembly the conservative Romans had long suspected as a potential source of sedition. More troubling, however, was Christians' refusals to make sacrifices to the emperor. The Romans expected all subjects to make such sacrifices as a sign of patriotism. The only exception was the Jews, who were permitted to forgo the imperial cult because their ancestral religious beliefs prohibited them from worshipping idols. The Christians, however, were a new group, and the Romans distrusted novelty. As a result the emperors considered Christianity at best a nuisance and at worst a serious threat. Christians were tested from time to time by being asked to sacrifice to the emperor; those who failed to do so might be executed, sometimes in the arena. More often, however the Romans tacitly tolerated Christians as long as they kept their religion private. Christians could not proselytize in public places, put up inscriptions or monuments, or build churches. Christianity thus spread under severe restrictions, but spread it did, particularly in the cities of the East and due to the appeal of its promise of a good afterlife for all, not just Jews. The only requirement was accepting Jesus Christ as their savior. The willingness of martyrs to die for their faith made a strong impression on potential converts. Although the number of Christians in the empire is not known, it is clear that by the late 3rd century they were a significant and growing minority.

Early Christian Organization

Early Christians had already developed a distinct hierarchy of worshipers, a divide between priests and worshipers. Bishops were the head of each city's congregation, and they supervised a staff of priests and deacons who interacted with everyday worshipers and led services. The bishops of main cities, usually the imperial capitals of their respective provinces, came to be called an archbishop. Each bishop oversaw activity in the diocese, again following the imperial structure, in instructing people in Christian doctrine and in building charity networks. One important effect was that the church actively supported charities for the poor and hungry, a practice which won over new converts. This was one of the notable moments in history when a religion linked together a message of compassion for the needy and real, practical efforts to help the needy. In another strong contrast with Roman practice, Christianity saw disenfranchised groups like women and the poor (not to mention poor women) play major roles in the

early church's organization.

And as Christianity spread across the Empire, slowly formalizing its doctrines, structure, and practices, it also began to transform the Roman Empire from within. At the same time, Rome began to face increasing pressure from new enemies. For the first two centuries of its existence, Rome was overwhelmingly powerful, and its political institutions were strong enough to survive even prolonged periods of incompetent rule. However, trouble was afoot on Rome's borders, as barbarian groups became more populous and better-organized, and as the meritocratic system of the "Five Good Emperors" gave way to infighting, assassination, and civil war. The Roman Empire was slowly falling apart by the 3rd century CE.

Chapter 10: The Transformation of the Roman Empire

The Crisis of the Third Century, also known as the Imperial Crisis, began in 235 CE with the assassination of Emperor Alexander Severus (r. 222-235 CE) and defined a period of fragmentation between the once united empire. While historians debate the nature of the crisis and its causes, there is notable evidence of great change occurring within the Empire. Due to militaristic uprisings, economic instability, and the division of breakaway empires, the Roman Empire did not see peace until the ascension of Lucius Domitius Aurelianus to the throne in 270 CE, who proposed reformation policies that were later strengthened by Diocletian in 284 CE.

Yet the unrest of the 3rd century had its origins much earlier, in the 1st century CE. As Christianity grew and spread, the larger Roman Empire lurched from crisis to crisis. These included the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, several civil wars, invasions of various portions of the Roman Empire's frontier, and out of control inflation. By the end of the 3rd century CE, decisive action needed to be taken if Rome was to survive. The chronic civil wars had to be brought to an end. The army needed to be reformed and expanded to meet new threats on the frontiers of the empire. And the economy had to be stabilized to bring in the revenue the government needed for administrative and military reforms. Rome was fortunate in raising up 2 rulers, Diocletian and Constantine, with more than 50 years of rule between them, who understood the empire's problems and legislated energetically to address them, initiating a sort of resurgence of the Roman state. Although these rulers thought of themselves as traditional Roman leaders, they actually initiated a far-reaching transformation of the Roman Empire.

In fact, the period between the end of the five good emperors and the "collapse" of Rome was much more complex than one of simple decline and weakness, and even when the city of Rome could not defend itself, Roman civilization left an enormous, permanent impression on Western Civilization. Perhaps most importantly, what began as an obscure cult in Roman-ruled Judea eventually became one of the great world religions – Christianity – thanks to its success in spreading throughout the Roman Empire before the western Empire's collapse.

Border Incursions & Other Crisis's

Until the 2nd century CE Rome was focused on expansion, however by the 3rd century, the Roman empire was barely maintaining its frontiers. So who were they fighting against? As far as the Romans were concerned, there were only two things beyond their borders: to the north and northeast, endless tracts of inhospitable land and semi-human barbarians like the Germanic tribes, and to the east, the only other civilization Rome was prepared to recognize: the Persians, ruled first by the Parthians and then the Sasanians. For the rest of the Roman Imperial period, Rome and Persia periodically engaged in both raiding and full-scale warfare, with neither side proving capable of conclusively defeating the other.

East and North of the Empire

Far beyond Persia was the Chinese Empire, already thousands of years old. China and Rome never established formal diplomatic ties, although the leaders of both empires knew of one another. During the entire period of Roman Imperial power, only China could produce silk, which was highly coveted in Rome. Shipments of silk moved along the aptly-named Silk Road across Central Asia, directly linking the two most powerful empires in the world at the time (via, as mentioned above, Persia, which derived huge profits in the process).

In addition, a major navigational breakthrough occurred during the time of Augustus, when the Romans learned to navigate the Indian Ocean using the Monsoon winds to reach western India. There, they could trade for Chinese silk at much better prices. This journey was hugely risky, but if a Roman merchant could succeed and return to Rome with a cargo hold full of silk, he would earn fully 100 times his investment as profit. Along with spices (especially pepper), the trade for silk eventually drained enormous amounts of gold from Rome, something that added up to a serious economic liability over the hundreds of years of exchange.

The most important, and threatening, border for Rome was to its north, on the eastern and northern banks of the Rhine and Danube rivers. The region the Romans called Germania was an enormous stretch of heavily forested land, which was cold, wet, and uninviting from the Roman perspective. The "Germans" were a hugely diverse group of tribes practicing feudal law, the system of law in which offenses were met with clan-based violent retribution or blood payments. For hundreds of years there were complex relationships between various tribes and the Roman empire in which the Romans both fought with and, increasingly, hired German tribes to serve as mercenaries. Eventually, some of the Germanic tribes were allowed to settle along the Roman borders in return

for payments of tribute to Rome.

The two major rivers, the Rhine and the Danube, were the key dividing lines to the north of Rome, with Roman legions manning permanent fortifications there. As far as the Romans were concerned, even if they were able to militarily, they did not want to conquer German territory. The Romans tended to regard the Germans as being semi-human at best, incapable of understanding true civilization. Some Romans did admire their bravery and codes of honor – the same Tacitus who provides much of the information on the early emperors contrasted the supposed weakness and dissolution of his contemporary Romans with the rough virtue of the Germans. That being noted, most Romans believed that the Celts, conquered by Caesar centuries earlier, were able to learn and assimilate to Roman culture, but the Germans, supposedly, were not. Likewise, Germania was assumed to be too cold, too wet, and too infertile to support organized farming and settlement. Thus, the role of the lines was to hold the Germans back rather than to stage new wars of conquest. For about three hundred years, they did just that, until the borders started breaking down in the third century CE.

Crisises of Empire from Within

Major crises affected the Empire from 235 to 284 CE. The basis of the crises was increasing pressure from foreign invaders on the Roman borders coupled with political instability within the Empire itself. The emperor Severus Alexander was murdered in 235 CE. All of the emperors to follow for the next fifty years were murdered or died in battle as well, save one; there were twenty-six emperors in those fifty years, and only one died of natural causes. Many emperors stayed on the throne for only a few months before they were killed. Not surprisingly, in this environment, most emperors were only concerned with either seizing the throne or staying alive once they had it, meaning they tended to neglect everything important needed for the stability of the Empire.

Bust of Alexander Severus, the top half of his body

Bust of Young Alexander Severus, Palazzo Nuovo, Rome https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia.../Rome_2016.jpg

Rome's internal political problems were somewhat of its own making – the Praetorian Guard auctioned off the throne, would-be emperors eagerly assassinated their rivals, and Roman elites largely retreated to their enormous estates to profit off of their serfs. Other factors, however, were external: Rome's international environment grew much worse. In 220 CE, a new clan – the Sasanians – seized control of Persia. The Sasanians were much more aggressive and well-organized than the earlier Parthian dynasty had been, and Rome was obliged to fight almost constant wars to contain the Persian threat. Simultaneously, the Germanic groups along Rome's northern borders were growing larger and better-organized. Centuries of contact with Rome itself had improved agricultural techniques among the Germans, leading to population growth. Eventually, these larger, wealthier groups joined together into forces that posed serious threats to the Roman borders.

As the quality of Roman leadership declined and the threats grew worse, the results were predictable: Rome lost battles and territory. The emperor Valerian was captured by the Persian king Shapur I when he led a Roman army against Persia and, according to some accounts, was used as the Persian king's personal footstool for climbing up onto his horse. Another emperor rebuilt walls around Rome itself in 270 CE because of the threat of Germanic invaders from the north, who had pushed all the way into northern Italy. Likewise, emperors, all being generals at this point, traveled constantly with their armies and made their courts wherever they had to while waging campaigns.

The problem was that the entire Roman imperial system hinged on the direct, personal decision-making of the emperor himself. The emperor was supposed to oversee all major building campaigns, state finances, and the worship of the Roman gods, not just military strategy. Thus, in an era when the speed a message could travel was limited by how fast a messenger could travel on horseback, the machinery of the Roman government ground to a halt whenever the latest emperor was weeks or even months away from Rome. Needless to say, the problem was exacerbated when the Empire was torn between rival claimants to the throne – for a few years toward the end of the crisis period the empire proper was split into three competing “empires” under rival imperial pretenders.

The Crisis concluded with Diocletian, who furthered Aurelian's security of the Empire's borders and significantly reduced the Emperor's reliance on the military's support. While Diocletian initiated policies that aided in reducing uncontrolled militarism and curbed rapid inflation, the most notable of his reformation efforts was dividing the Roman Empire into the Western Roman Empire and the Eastern (Byzantine) Empire. While the severance allowed for the settlement of the Third Century Crisis, it set a precedent for the growth of unique cultural identities and later conflict. We will dive into Diocletian and his legacy much more in the rest of the chapter.

Roman Society & Life During the Crisis's

Rome itself was opulent during this period. The city of Rome boasted eleven aqueducts, enormous structures that brought fresh water into the city from miles away. The houses of the rich had indoor plumbing with drains that led to public sewers. There were enormous libraries and temples, along with numerous public sites for recreation, including public baths, race tracks, and the famous Colosseum, used primarily for displays of lethal gladiatorial combat.

The empire as a whole enjoyed levels of commercial and agricultural productivity not seen again until the seventeenth century CE. Specialized craftsmen made high-quality goods to be sold on an empire-wide market, with better-off citizens enjoying access to quality tools, dishware, linens, and so on, much of which had been manufactured hundreds of miles away. While the long-term economic pattern was that the wealthier parts of society tended to become even richer at the expense of the common people, there was still a substantial “middle class” that enjoyed a relatively high standard of living.

We should note that, while the Romans are not famous as scientists, they are famous as architects and engineers. The Romans used concrete extensively in building projects. They mastered the art of building arches and domes to hold up ceilings without interior supports. Using only gravity, they could transport water dozens of miles, not just in Rome but in other major cities across the Empire. Roman roads were so well built that some survive to the present, now used by cars rather than the horse-drawn carts they were originally built for.

Each city built by the Romans in their conquered territory was laid out according to careful plans, with streets built in grids and centered on a public forum with public buildings. One of the reasons that the Romans were so effective in assimilating conquered peoples into Roman society was that they built a great deal of infrastructure (Romanization); being conquered by Rome seemed less like a burden when an aqueduct, public baths, and street system appeared within a generation of the Roman conquest (the relative cultural and religious tolerance of Roman culture was also key). All of these cities were linked by the 40,000 miles of roads that stretched across the empire. The primary purpose of these administrative capitals was extracting taxes and other wealth from the local areas and funneling them back to Rome, but they also served as genuine cultural centers. Likewise, even though the roads were often built with troop movement in mind, people everywhere could take advantage of them for trade.

That all being said, there were vast social distances that separated elites and commoners. Even in the city of Rome, most of the citizens lived in squalor, packed into apartment buildings many stories high, made out of flammable wood, looming over open sewers. The rich lived in a state of luxury that probably would not be equaled until the Renaissance, but the majority of Romans lived in squalid conditions.

Most people in the empire were, of course, poor farmers; only a minority of the imperial population lived in cities. Peasants sometimes joined the army, but most were simply struggling to get by. They were seasonal laborers, they rented from wealthy landowners, or they owned farms but were perpetually threatened by the predatory rich. Over the centuries, poor farmers found it more and more difficult to hold on to their land, both because they could not compete with the enormous, slave-tilled plantations of the rich and because of outright extortion. There are numerous accounts of rich landowners simply forcing small farmers off of land and seizing it; the peasants could not afford to battle the rich in court and the rich had few scruples about hiring thugs to terrify the peasants into submission. Once in a great while, a poorer Roman citizen could petition an emperor personally for redress and succeed, as could the occasional provincial to a governor, but the immense majority of the time the poor (citizen and non-citizen alike) were simply at the mercy of elite landowners.

One percent of the population of the empire were members of the aristocracy, those men who were allowed to participate as officials in the imperial government and their families. In turn, access to political power was explicitly linked to wealth, a system first introduced by Augustus himself. To serve in the imperial senate required an annual income of 1,000,000 sesterces (the basic coin of the empire). To serve on the governing council of a small city or town required an annual income of 100,000 sesterces. Meanwhile, a typical soldier earned about 1,200 a year, and poor farmers much less. Land ownership was by far the major determinant of wealth, and with the prevalence of slavery, economies of scale dictated that the more land a given family controlled, the more wealth they could generate.

The overall pattern in the Roman Imperial period is that the wealthy were highly successful in becoming richer from generation to generation, at the expense of the rest of Roman society: the wealth of elite landowners grew approximately eight times from 1 CE to 400 CE, with almost no new wealth coming into the Roman economy during that period. Thus, as a whole, social mobility was so limited as to be almost nonexistent (to cite a single example, a member of the equestrian class in the Empire might have about 17,000 times the annual income of a poor laborer). Roman elites kept taxes on their own properties low, but the provinces were often ruthlessly exploited and overall tax levels were high. The immense majority of Roman citizens and subjects were born into the social class they would stay in for their entire lives regardless of their own intelligence and competence.

Still, while they might prey on poor farmers, elite Romans were well aware of the threat posed by destitute city-dwellers. Thus, one striking characteristic of the Imperial period was “bread and circus government.” Building on a precedent originally established by the Gracchi during the Republic and reinforced by Augustus, the imperial state distributed free grain (and, later, wine and olive oil) to the male citizens of the city of Rome. Eventually, other Roman cities adopted the practice as well. In addition, public games and theater performances were free, subsidized by the state or by elites showing off their wealth (the most popular were circuses: horse races around a track). Thus, a Roman citizen in one of the large cities could enjoy free bread – although it was not enough to sustain an entire family, necessitating at least some source of supplemental income – and free entertainment. This policy was both a cynical move on the part of the state to keep down urban unrest and a legal right of urban citizens. Free bread or not, the average life expectancy was 45 years for men and 34 for women, the latter because of the horrible conditions of bearing children.

Meanwhile, fully 40% of the population of Italy were slaves when Augustus took power. Not only were slaves captured in war, but children born to slave mothers were automatically slaves as well. Some slaves did domestic labor, but most were part of the massive labor force on huge plantations and in mines. The conditions of life for slaves were often atrocious, and strict oversight and use of violent discipline ensured that no slave revolt ever succeeded (despite the best efforts of leaders of revolts, like Spartacus in the first century BCE). Relatively large numbers of slaves did earn their freedom, and the “freedmen” as a class tended to be innovative commercial entrepreneurs, but many slaves had little hope of freedom. Slavery declined by about 200 CE because supplies started drying up and prices rose; without the constant expansion of the empire, there were far fewer slaves available. By that time, however, the legal and social conditions of farmers had degenerated to the point that they were essentially serfs (known as *coloni*): unfree rural laborers, barely better than slaves themselves.

Rebuilding the Roman Empire

Reforms of Diocletian, 284-305

By the ascension of Emperor Diocletian Rome was falling apart from within and without. The Empire faced both a Persian invasion and rebellion from impoverished and frustrated citizens. Yet, within a few years the period of crisis came to an end under the effective and innovative leadership of Diocletian. Diocletian not only managed to survive for twenty years after taking the throne, he also reorganized the empire and pulled it back from the brink of disaster. Recognizing that the sheer size of the empire was a detriment to its effective governance, Diocletian decided to share power with a co-emperor: Diocletian ruled the eastern half of the empire and his co-emperor Maximian ruled the west. Then, about ten years after he took the throne, Diocletian decided to further divide responsibility and each emperor took on a junior emperor. This created the Tetrarchy, the rule of four. Diocletian further subdivided the empire, so that for the rest of his reign, the four co-emperors (two “augusti” and two “caesars”) worked together to administer the entire territory.

Gold coin with Diocletian's face depicted on it

Coin Depicting Emperor Diocletian, 284 CE <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...obverse%29.jpg>

In about 293 CE Diocletian, who was born a poor farmer and rose in the ranks of the army and later Praetorian guard, devised the “tetrarchy” with which he intended to address both the political instability of the Roman regime and the awesome size of the Empire. First Diocletian decided to divide the empire into eastern and western halves and then selected an imperial colleague for assistance. Ruling from Nicomedia and retaining the position of senior emperor, he took charge of the wealthy and militarily threatened eastern half of the empire. Diocletian and his colleague each selected a subordinate official who would eventually succeed to the imperial office. The advantage of the tetrarchy was that it yielded four men of imperial rank who could lead armies and make decisions in political and administrative matters. Diocletian hoped that the tetrarchy would end the cycle of assassinations, provide orderly succession to the imperial office and promote experienced, respected men. This system was quite similar to the merit-based selection process of emperors during the rule of the Five Good Emperors.

Map depicting the Roman Empire divided into 4 areas, each governed by a member of Diocletian's Tetrarchy

Diocletian's Tetrarchy https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...archy_map3.jpg

Diocletian also disposed with all the pretense of ruling as a “first citizen” like Augustus and the other rulers of the Principate had done. Instead he ruled as Lord and Master, becoming the Dominate and adopting many eastern, especially Persian habits like wearing a gilded cloak, a jeweled crown, sprinkling gold dust in his hair, sitting on an elevated throne, and rarely appearing in public. In fact he required those who were allowed to approach him to prostrate themselves before him. He also tried to increase the amount of control he had over the entire empire. Given its size and issues, the Roman Empire was dramatically under governed. The empire had some 50 provinces varying greatly in size, population, wealth, and strategic importance. The provinces then were largely governed by aristocratic amateurs and numbered only a few hundred men when Diocletian ascended to the

throne. Rome had traditionally asked very little of its empire, primarily taxes, military recruits, and loyalty. Local authorities were in charge of tax collections and military recruiting with little interference from Imperial agents and leaders. Diocletian changed this.

Diocletian increased the number of officials and doubled the number of provinces by dividing old, large provinces into smaller ones. He then subdivided each province further, in the end upping the number of officers reporting to Rome to nearly 40,000. He filled this growing bureaucracy with trained administrators instead of wealthy senators and equestrians who viewed government service as a means of enriching themselves and advancing their own interests. While this may have provided more dedicated administrations, it also alienated the Senatorial elite. At the same time the imperial officials also displaced local leaders long accustomed to more autonomy. This would prove to be a problem in the near future.

In addition to reforming government practices, Diocletian also tried to solve Rome's military problems. His major initiative was an attempt to double the size of the army from 300,000 to 600,000 men, although the final number never reached above 450,000. Diocletian also built new forts along the frontier and improved roads that supplied frontier defenses. In order to increase the military forces by such large numbers, Diocletian looked beyond the fortified boundaries of the Roman Empire and began the systematic incorporation of barbarians into the army. This step blurred the distinction between Romans and barbarians at the edges of the empire. Military service was especially attractive to barbarians living along the frontiers because it offered them an avenue to Roman citizenship. At first, the army tended to Romanize the barbarians, but as the proportion of barbarian soldiers and officers grew, the culture and ethos of the army began to change in ways never expected by the Roman elite.

For all their good, Diocletian's reforms were expensive and required a predictable income. And his expenditures only added to an already unhealthy budget. State finances were in shambles when Diocletian came to power. To try to deal with the problem, Diocletian reformed the tax system and instituted an official census for taxation purposes. He also tried to freeze wages and prices by decree, something that did not work since it created a black market for both goods and labor. Peasants bore the brunt of Diocletian's reforms; most independent farmers that still existed were turned into serfs (*coloni*), one step above slaves. State tax collectors were so feared that many peasants willingly gave their land to wealthy landowners who promised to protect them from the tax agents. To address the mounting inflation, Diocletian issued the Edict of Maximum Prices in 302, freezing the costs of goods. Unfortunately, because of Senatorial opposition virtually the whole cost of the Roman system continued to fall on agriculture, in particular on small farmers. The reform brought in more revenue for the Empire, but it made life harder for many. At the same time with officials handling larger and larger sums of money, corruption ran rampant.

Diocletian's Edit of Maximum Prices (301 CE):

"For who is so hard and so devoid of human feeling that he cannot, or rather has not perceived, that in the commerce carried on in the markets or involved in the daily life of cities immoderate prices are so widespread that the unbridled passion for gain is lessened neither by abundant supplies nor by fruitful years; so that without a doubt men who are busied in these affairs constantly plan to control the very winds and weather from the movements of the stars, and, evil that they are, they cannot endure the watering of the fertile fields by the rains from above which bring the hope of future harvests, since they reckon it their own loss if abundance comes through the moderation of the weather."

Bruce Bartlett : "How Excessive Government Killed Ancient Rome", Cato Institute Journal 14: 2, Fall 1994

Finally, Diocletian tried to reinstate religious orthodoxy. He believed that too many people had turned away from worship of the Roman gods, which had in turn brought about the long period of crisis preceding his takeover. Thus, he went after sects that he thought threatened stability, including Christianity. He banned Christian worship and executed several thousand Christians who refused to renounce their beliefs in an attempt to wipe out the cult once and for all. Needless to say, this was a spectacular failure.

Diocletian retired in 305 CE due to failing health, as did (reluctantly) his co-emperor in the west. The idea behind the Tetrarchy was that the junior emperors would then become the senior emperors and recruit new juniors – this system worked exactly once, as the junior emperors under Diocletian and Maximian took power. Instead of a smooth transition inaugurating a stable new beginning, however, the Empire was yet again plunged into civil war. A general (at the time stationed in Britain) named Constantine, son of the Tetrarch Constantius, launched a military campaign to reunite Rome under his sole rule. From 306 until 313 as many as six men claimed to be emperor somewhere in the empire. By 312 CE Constantine had succeeded, claiming total control and appointing no co-emperor. Though Diocletian's reforms made sense, and did accomplish many of his goals, they also brought about far-reaching and unexpected consequences that would eventually lead to the fragmentation of the empire.

The Reign of Constantine

Legalizing Christianity

The year 312 CE was much more than the year that Constantine consolidated control of the majority of the Roman Empire, it was also the beginning of Latin Christendom. In fact, legend has it that Constantine attributed his successful invasion of Italy to his conversion to and acceptance of Christianity. While marching toward Rome to fight one of his rivals in October 312, Constantine believed that he saw a cross in the sky accompanied by the words “In this sign you shall conquer.”

A plaque on a sarcophagus with the Chi Ro engraved on it

Monogramme of Christ (the Chi Rho) on a plaque of a sarcophagus, 4th-century CE https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/Rome_Italy.jpg

Persuaded, Constantine put a chi-rho (the first two letters of Christos or Christ in Greek) monogram on his soldiers' uniforms. He then went on to defeat his foe at the Battle of Milvian Bridge. Certain that Christ had assured his victory, he and his Eastern colleague issued the Edict of Milan in 313 granting Christianity full legal status in the empire. Though the story of his conversion depicts it as a sudden epiphany, Constantine's mother was a Christian, so he likely held sympathies to the new faith well before his public proclamation.

While Constantine maintained the administrative structure of Diocletian and continued the eastward shift of power by creating a second imperial capital in the East, an old Greek city called Byzantium that he renamed Constantinople (Constantine's polis), his embrace of Christianity marked an enormous shift. Whereas Diocletian launched the last persecution of Christians in the Roman empire, Constantine legalized the new faith. Specifically, Diocletian believed having Christian soldiers in his army was offending the Roman/ancestral gods and thereby leading to their defeats along the frontier of the empire. Diocletian's persecution of Christians was both harsh and systematic. He ordered churches to be closed and written scriptures seized and destroyed. He arrested members of the clergy and required all citizens to make a public act of sacrifice in a Roman temple. All of this persecution came to an end in 313.

Nor did Constantine only legalize Christianity. He and his mother sponsored the construction of impressive churches, such as Saint Peter's in Rome and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher over the traditional site of Christ's tomb in Jerusalem. He also instituted Sunday as the Lord's Day, a holy occasion each week on which no official business could be done. He called it Sunday to specifically blend the two traditions of Christianity and paganism by honoring two divinities; the Sun God (Sol Invictus) and Christ. Here we can see that while Constantine did promote Christianity he did not force anyone to become a Christian, but instead allowed religious freedom for everyone within the Roman Empire, making it safe for both pagans/polytheists and Christians alike. He even commissioned new statues of traditional gods to decorate his new city of Constantinople. Perhaps this was because Christians were still a minority of the people during Constantine's reign, so his legalization and patronage of the new faith may have been visionary, but certainly offended many Roman elites during his lifetime. Even so, Christianity spread rapidly across the empire, quickly becoming a dominant religion. In fact, it took less than a century for Christianity to become the ONLY legal religion in the Roman Empire.

Engraved Detail from Constantine's Arch depicting his soldiers with shields depicting the Chi Rho

Detail from Constantine's Arch featuring the new Chi-Ro symbol on the shields https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/nstarch_d4.jpg

Fresco painting showing the interior of St Peter's Basilica in the 4th century

Fresco depicting St. Peter's Basilica in the 4th century <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:...jpg#filelinks>

Orthodoxy and Heresy

In addition to disagreements between Christians and pagans, were the arguments between Christians themselves. Constantine was scandalized by disagreements over Christian teachings and distressed by riotous quarrels among competing Christian factions. He dealt with religious controversies by summoning individual theologians to guide him and by assembling church councils to debate controversies and reach solutions. In 325 CE at Nicaea, near Constantinople, the emperor convened a council of more than 300 bishops (the title literally meant overseers; they were elder priests usually of metropolitan areas), the largest council by far to that date. This was the first of many “ecumenical” or all-world councils in church history. One of the main concerns faced by the Council at Nicaea was Arianism.

In the late third century, an Egyptian Christian priest named Arius created a firestorm of controversy when he made a simple logical argument: God the father had created Jesus, so it did not make any sense for Jesus to be the same thing as God. Furthermore, it was impossible to be both human and perfect; since Jesus was human, he was imperfect and could not therefore

be God, who was perfect. This belief came to be known as “Arianism.” Arianism quickly took hold among many people, most importantly among the Germanic tribes of the north, where Arian Christian missionaries made major inroads. Thus, Arianism quickly became the largest and most persistent heresy in the early Christian church.

In 325 CE, only a little over a decade after he had converted to Christianity, Constantine assembled a council of church leaders, the Council of Nicaea, to lay Arianism to rest. One of the results was the Nicene Creed (now usually referred to as the Apostles’ Creed), to this day one of the central elements of Catholic Mass. In a single passage short enough to commit to memory, the Creed declared belief in Christ’s identity as part of God (“consubstantial to the Father” in its present English translation or “one in being with the father”), Christ’s status as the son of God and the Virgin Mary, Christ’s resurrection, and the promise of Christ’s return at the end of the world. Additionally, the Council of Nicaea condemned Arius and his teachings.

Black and white fresco of the Council of Nicaea

Fresco in the entry of the Sistine Chapel depicting the Council of Nicaea https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...Vatican_t.jpg

But the reforms of the council did not stick immediately. Constantine’s successor, his son Constantius II, was an avowed Arian. This faith also caught on with the Barbarians as they entered the empire in ever higher numbers. Then, in 360, Constantine’s nephew Julian (The Apostate) ascended to the throne and despite the fact that he was raised as a Christian, he rejected Christianity and tried to restore paganism and the Roman pantheon of Gods during his brief reign. But his efforts were too late, even though Christianity had only been legal since 313, it had spread far and wide and was already entrenched in Roman society. So after Julian’s death, no other Emperor supported paganism.

Christianity was poised to unite “Western Civilization” just as Roman culture had a few centuries earlier. Yet, at the same time, because of the peculiarities of Christian belief, it was also a potentially divisive force. Christians spoke a host of different languages and lived across the entire expanse of the Empire. As noted previously, there were serious debates around who or what Jesus was. For centuries, there could be no “orthodoxy,” meaning “correct belief,” because there was no authority within the church (very much including the popes) who could enforce a certain set of beliefs over rival interpretations. Rival groups of Christians came to refer to their enemies as “heretics,” from the word “heresy,” meaning simply “choice.”

While Christianity spread and grew it co-existed as one faith amongst many, that is until a series of laws issued from 378-381 by Emperor Theodosius not only outlawed pagan cults, but effectively made Christianity and Judaism the *only* legal religions in the empire. He even began to persecute pagans. He shut down oracles, stopped the Panhellenic games, and closed philosophical schools across the empire. And while Jews could still practice their religion, they could no longer do so freely. Imperial decrees banned Jews from holding government posts but still required them to assume the financial burdens for which they received no status. By the late 6th century laws barred Jews from marrying Christians, making wills, receiving inheritances, or testifying in court. These restrictions began the long process that made Jews into second class citizens for much of Western history, but they did not destroy Judaism.

Theodosius also required all Christians to follow the doctrines and theology of the bishop of Rome in the hope of imposing religious unity on battling groups of Christians. Unity under Roman leadership was essential, Theodosius said, because Peter (the leader of Jesus’s original apostles according to the Gospel of Matthew) had transmitted the unblemished faith directly to Rome after Jesus’s death and Peter’s successors had preserved it there. By the late 4th century the bishop of Rome was usually addressed as *pappas* or Pope and his power only continued to grow, at least in the Christian church of the western Empire.

Even when united in belief, Christians were divided by language, since the western Empire still spoke Latin and the eastern Empire Greek. In 410 the monk Jerome produced a version of the Christian Bible in Latin, the Vulgate, which was the main edition in Europe until the sixteenth century. Surprising from a contemporary perspective, however, is that it was not until 1442 (during the Renaissance) that the definitive and in a sense “final” version of the Bible was established by the Western Church when it defined exactly which books of the Old Testament were to be included and which were not. Meanwhile, in the east, Greek was not only the language of daily life for many, it was the official language of state in the Empire and the language of the church. The books of the New Testament, starting with the Gospels, were written in Greek in the first place, and the Greek intellectual legacy was still very strong. There was an equally strong Jewish intellectual legacy that provided accurate translations from Hebrew and Aramaic to Greek, providing Greek-speaking Christians with access to a reliable version of the Old Testament.

While it certainly clarified the beliefs of the most powerful branch of the institutional church, as the Council of Nicaea defined the official orthodoxy, it guaranteed that there would always be those who rejected that orthodoxy in the name of a different theological interpretation. Likewise, the practical issues of lingual and cultural differences undermined the universalism (“Catholicism”) of the Christian Church. Those differences and the diversity of belief would only grow over time.

Monasticism and Christian Culture

Near the end of the third century, a new Christian movement emerged that was to have major ramifications for the history of the Christian world: monasticism. Originally, monasticism was tied to asceticism, meaning self-denial, following the example of an Egyptian holy man named Antony. In about 280, Antony sold his goods and retreated to the desert to contemplate the divine, eschewing all worldly goods in imitation of the poverty of Christ. He would have remained in obscurity except for a book about him written by the bishop Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, that celebrated Antony's rejection of the material world and embrace of divine contemplation. According to Athanasius, normal life was full of temptation, greed, and sin, and that the holiest life was thus one that rejected it all completely in favor of prayer and meditation away from human company. Thousands of people followed Antony's example, retreating to the wilderness. These early monks were called Anchorites: hermits who lived in deserts, forests, or mountains away from the temptations of a normal social existence (although they had to live close enough to civilization for the donations of food that kept them alive).

One particularly extreme sect of early monks were the Stylites, from the Greek word *stylos*, meaning "column." The founder of the group, St. Simeon the Stylite, climbed up a pillar in Syria and spent the next 30 years living on top of it. He was so famous for his holiness and endurance in the face of the obvious physical toll of living on top of a pillar that he attracted followers from all over the Roman world who came to listen to him preach. Soon, many others sought out columns in imitation of Simeon.

Painting of two "pillar saints" upon their columns

The Pillar-Saints Simeon the Elder and Simeon the Younger by Neemah Al-Mussavir, 1699 https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/2C/2C_1699.jpg

Ultimately, pillar-sitting did not become the predominant model of Christian life. Instead, groups of ascetics came together in communities called monasteries. Originally, these early monks spent almost all of their time in prayer, but over time most monastic communities came to embrace useful work as well as prayer and meditation. The most important development in the evolution of monasticism was the work of Benedict, an Italian bishop, who wrote a book known as the Rule in about 529 that laid out how monks should live. The Rule dictated a strict schedule for daily life that revolved around prayer, study, and useful work for the monastery itself (tending crops and animals, performing labor around the monastery, and so on). Going forward, many monasteries became economic powerhouses, owning large tracts of land and selling their products at a healthy profit.

More important than their economic productivity, at least from the perspective of the history of ideas, is that monasteries became the major centers of learning, especially in Western Europe after the collapse of the western Roman Empire. One of the tasks undertaken by monks was the painstaking hand-copying of books, almost all of which had to do with Christian theology (e.g. the Bible itself, commentaries from important Christian leaders, etc.), but some of which were classical Greek or Roman writings that would have otherwise been lost. Often, these books were beautifully illustrated by the monks and are referred to as illuminated manuscripts – among the finest examples of medieval art.

Outside of monasteries, churches were built in practically every city and town (and many small villages) in the Roman sphere of influence. One interesting and, from a contemporary perspective, somewhat peculiar phenomenon in early Christianity was the focus on relics: holy objects. Relics were everything from the bones of saints to fragments of the "True Cross" on which Christ was crucified. Each church had to have a relic in its altar (contained in a special box called a reliquary) or it was not considered to be truly holy ground. All relics were not created equal: the larger the object, or the closer it had been to Christ or the apostles, the more holy power it was believed to contain. Thus, a thriving trade in relics (plagued by counterfeits – it was not easy to determine if a given finger bone was really the finger bone of St. Mark!) developed in Europe as rival church leaders tried to secure the most powerful relic for their church. This was not just about the symbolic importance of the relics, as pilgrims would travel from all over the Roman world to visit the site of noteworthy relics, bringing with them considerable wealth. Whole regional economies centered on pilgrimage sites as a result.

Christian Learning

Christian learning was a complex issue, because, strictly speaking, spiritual salvation was thought to be available to anyone simply by accepting the basic tenets of Christian doctrine. In other words, the whole intellectual world of Greek and Roman philosophy, literature, science, and so on did not necessarily relate to the Church's primary task of saving souls. Many church leaders were learned men and women, however, and insisted that there was indeed a place for learning within Christianity. The issue was never settled – one powerful church leader, Tertullian, once wrote "what does Athens have to do with Rome?", meaning, why should anyone study the Greek intellectual legacy when it was produced by pre-Christian pagans?

Once Christianity was institutionalized, church leaders generally came around to the importance of classical learning because it proved useful for administration. A vast Greco-Roman literature existed describing governance, science, engineering, etc., all

of which was necessary in the newly-Christian Empire. A kind of uneasy balance was struck between studying classical learning, especially things like rhetoric, while warning against the spiritual danger of being seduced by its non-Christian messages.

The most important thinker who addressed the intersection of Christian and classical learning was St. Augustine of Hippo (a Roman city in North Africa), whose life spanned the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Augustine lived through the worst period of Roman decline, completing his work while his own city was besieged by a Germanic group called the Vandals. To Roman Christians, this posed a huge challenge – if all-powerful God had embraced them, why was their empire falling apart? Augustine's answer was that life on earth is not ultimately significant. In his work *The City of God*, Augustine distinguished between the perfect world of heaven, attainable through Christian faith, versus the flawed and imperfect world of the living. This concept explained the decline of the Empire as being irrelevant to the greater mission of salvation. Thus, according to Augustine, all of learning was just a facet of material life; useful in its way but totally insignificant compared to the necessity of laying one's soul bare to God and waiting for the second coming of Christ.

The irony of these struggles over Christian doctrine versus ancient learning was that the issue was decided by the collapse of Rome. When Rome “fell” to Germanic invaders in the mid-fifth century, so began the decline of organized learning – there simply was no funding from Roman elites for what had been a robust private school system. In the absence of instruction, literature and philosophy and engineering all but vanished, preserved only in monasteries and in the eastern Empire. Once the western Empire collapsed, the church was the only institution that still supported scholarship (including basic literacy), but over time the levels of literacy and education in Europe unquestionably declined. This decline inspired the contempt of later Renaissance thinkers who wrote off the period between the fall of Rome and the beginning of the Renaissance in about 1300 CE as the “Dark Ages.”

Ultimately, after the western part of the Roman Empire fell in the late fifth century, it was the Christian Church that carried on at least parts of Roman civilization, learning, and culture. One of the historical ironies of this period of history is that even though Rome's Empire began to decline and (eventually) collapse politically, it lived on thanks to ideas and beliefs that originally arose in the Roman context – it lived on ideologically and spiritually.

The Transformation of the Roman Empire

The “Fall” of Rome

The so-called fall of Rome, conventionally dated to 476 CE, is one of the most iconic events in the history of the western world. For centuries, people have tried to draw lessons from Rome's decline and fall about their own societies, a practice inspired by the question of how a so mighty and, at one time, stable civilization could disintegrate so quickly. The answers to the conundrum have varied considerably: Rome grew corrupt and weak over time, Rome was infiltrated by “barbarian” cultures, Rome was simply overcome by overwhelming odds, or perhaps Rome was simply transformed into a different, more diverse set of societies rather than destroyed in so many words. However the events of the period are interpreted, the simple fact remains: the political unity of the Roman Empire was shattered by the end of the fifth century CE.

While the debate as to the causes of Rome's fall will probably never be definitively answered, an important caveat should be noted: Rome did not “really” fall for another thousand years, even though the city of Rome itself, along with the western half of the Empire, did indeed lose its sovereignty in the face of invasion by Germanic “barbarians.” The Roman capital had already been moved to Constantinople in the early fourth century, and the eastern half of the empire remained intact, albeit under constant military pressure, until 1453. Arguably, one of the major causes for the collapse of the western empire was the fact that the Empire as a whole had focused its resources in the east for a century by the time waves of invaders appeared on the horizon starting in the fourth century CE.

At the time, most Christians blamed polytheism and heresy for Rome's fall: it was God's wrath exacted on a sinful society. In turn, the remaining polytheists blamed Christians for undermining the worship of the gods who had presided over the Empire while Rome was great. From the contemporary perspective, Rome's fall and/or transformation seems to have less to do with divine intervention than routine defeats and growing threats.

Roman Relations with Barbarians

Romans had always held “barbarians” in contempt, and they believed that the lands held by barbarians (such as Scotland and Germany) were largely unsuitable for civilization, being too cold and wet for the kind of Mediterranean agriculture Romans were accustomed to. Romans believed that barbarian peoples like the Germans were inferior to subject peoples like the Celts, who could at least be made useful subjects (and, later, citizens) of the Empire. For all their posturing, for the entire history of the

Empire, the Romans never seem to have figured out exactly which groups they were interacting with; they would simply lump them together as “Goths” or even “Scythians,” a blanket term referring to steppe peoples. Other names by which the Romans referred to the groups included Franks, Saxons, Vandals, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Lombards, and Burgundians. Occasionally, hundreds of years after, Roman writers would actually refer to Germans as Celts. Here we see a clear discrimination of the Romans, in particular regarding those who refused to become part of the Roman Empire.

It is easy to overstate this attitude; there were many members of Germanic tribes who did rise to prominence in Rome (one, Stilicho, was one of the greatest Roman generals in the late Empire, and he was half Vandal by birth). Likewise, it is clear from archaeology that many Germans made a career of fighting in the Roman armies and then returning to their native areas, and that many Germans looked up to Rome as a model of civilization to be emulated, not some kind of permanent enemy. Some Romans clearly did admire things about certain barbarian groups, as well – the great Roman historian Tacitus, in his *Germania*, even praised the Germans for their vigor and honor, although he did so in order to contrast the Germans with what he regarded as his own corrupt and immoral Roman society.

That said, it is clear that the overall pattern of contact between Rome and Germania was a combination of peaceful coexistence punctuated by many occasions of extreme violence. Various tribes would raid Roman lands, usually resulting in brutal Roman reprisals. As the centuries went on, Rome came increasingly to rely on both Germanic troops and on playing allied tribes against hostile ones. In fact, by the late fourth century CE, many (sometimes even most) soldiers in “Roman” armies in the western half of the Empire were recruited from Germanic groups.

Meanwhile, there had been hundreds of years of on-again, off-again wars along the Roman borders before the “fall” of Rome actually occurred. Especially since the third century, major conflicts were an ongoing reality of the enormous borders along the Rhine and Danube. Those conflicts had prompted emperors to build a system of lines meant to defend Roman territory, and from that point on, the majority of Roman legions were usually deployed along the semi-fortified northern borders of the empire. There is evidence that many of those soldiers spent their careers as not-so-glorified border guards and administrators and never experienced battle itself; there is no question that the performance of the Roman military was far poorer in the late imperial period than it had been, for instance, under the Republic. Hence the lack of expansion.

In turn, many of the Germans who settled along those borders were known as *federatii*, tribal groups who entered into treaties with Rome that required them to pay taxes in kind (i.e. in crops, animals, and other forms of wealth rather than currency) and send troops to aid Roman conquests, and who received peace and recognition (and usually annual gifts) in return. The problem for Rome was that most Germanic peoples regarded treaties as being something that only lasted as long as the emperor who had authorized the treaty lived; on his death, there would often be an incursion since the old peace terms no longer held. The first task new emperors had to attend to was often suppressing the latest invasion from the north. One example was the Goths, settled at the time somewhere around present-day Romania, whom Constantine severely punished after they turned on his forces during his war of conquest leading up to 312 CE.

The bottom line is that, as of the late fourth century CE, it seemed like “business as usual” to most political and military elites in the Roman Empire. The borders were teeming with barbarians, but they had always been teeming with barbarians. Rome traded with them, enlisted them as soldiers, and fought them off or punished them as Roman leaders thought it necessary. No one in Rome seemed to think that this state of affairs would ever change. What contemporary historians have determined, however, is that things had changed: there were more Germans than ever before, they were better-organized, and they were capable of defeating large Roman forces. What followed was a kind of “barbarian domino effect” that ultimately broke the western Empire into pieces and ended Roman power over it.

One other factor in the collapse of the western half of the Empire should be emphasized: once Rome began to lose large territories in the west, tax revenues shrunk to a fraction of what they had been. While the east remained intact, with taxes going to pay for a robust military which successfully defended Roman sovereignty, Roman armies in the west were under-funded, under-manned, and vulnerable. There was thus a vicious cycle of lost land, lost revenue, and poor military performance that saw Roman power simply disintegrate over the course of less than a century. Even the handful of effective emperors and generals in the west during that period could not staunch the tide of defeat.

Invasions

The beginning of the end for the western empire was the Huns. The Huns were warriors of the central Asian steppes: expert horsemen, skillful warriors, unattached to any particular land. They had much in common with other groups of steppe peoples like the Scythians who had raided civilized lands going back to the very emergence of civilization in Mesopotamia. They were believed to be so cruel and so unstoppable that the Germanic groups farther west claimed that they were the product of unions between

demons and witches, rather than normal humans.

In 376 CE the Huns drove a tribe of Goths, the Visigoths in particular, from their lands in southern Russia. Those Goths were allowed to settle in the Balkans by the Romans, but were soon extorted and abused by Roman officials, causing the Goths to rise up against Rome in retribution. In 378 the Visigoths killed the emperor, Valens, and destroyed a Roman army in an open battle. Their victory is at least partially due to their familiarity with Roman military tactics as they had served as auxiliary troops for decades before. The new emperor, Theodosius I, made a deal with the Goths, allowing them to serve in the Roman army under their own commanders in return for a salary, more land, and official protection from the Emperor.

For years the Visigoths struggled to improve the terms of their settlements in the Balkans. Alaric, the Visigothic king beginning in 395 (also the year of Theodosius's death and the division of the empire into two with each son inheriting half), grew tired of unfulfilled promises from Emperor Honorius (who inherited the Western portion of Theodosius's empire) and finally forced matters by attacking Italy. In August 410 the Visigoths surrounded Rome's thirteen gates and sacked the city. But, leading up to that event, the Roman legions were already losing their former coherence and unity. In 406 CE a very cold winter froze the Rhine river, and armies of barbarians invaded (literally walking across the frozen river in some cases), bypassing the traditional Roman defenses. One group, the Vandals, sacked its way to the Roman provinces of Spain and seized a large swath of territory there. The entire army of Britain left in 407 CE, when yet another ambitious general tried to seize the imperial throne, and Roman power there swiftly collapsed.

But nothing could prepare the Empire for the sacking of Rome itself. The taking of the city for the first time in 800 years shocked the entire Roman world and still looms large in history books. And it was likely a monumental event for Romans as well. Upon gaining entrance to the city, Alaric's troops plundered the elite's gold and silver, set fire to the city, and raided churches; however, Alaric ordered restraint from killing and respected Christian entities. And, after three days of plunder, Alaric's army departed Rome, claiming Gaul as their new settlement. It seems as though the entire attack was a ploy by Alaric to improve the terms of his already official status not to actually conquer Rome.

Painting show the Visigoths attacking Rome

Sack of Rome by the Visigoths on 24 August 410 by JN Sylvestre, 1890 https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4a/Sack_of_Rome_by_the_Visigoths_on_24_August_410.jpg

Alaric died soon after the taking of Rome, in late 410, and his brother led the Visigoths north into southern Gaul. For good measure the new Visigothic king captured the Western emperor's sister, Galla Placidia, on his way out of Rome and forced her to marry him. However, objectionable this act may seem, the Visigoths viewed it as a further demonstration of their loyalty to Rome and their determination to effect a satisfactory treaty and union with Rome. In 418 the Roman government gave in. A treaty permitted the Visigoths to settle permanently in southern Gaul with Toulouse as their base of operations/capital. They were assigned the task of protecting the area from marauding bands of brigands. In return for their service, the Visigoths were given land allotments and a portion of Roman tax receipts as pay. The treaty made the Visigoths the first Germanic kingdom to live legally and with privileges on Roman soil.

Map showing the various invasions of the Roman Empire by groups of "barbarians"

Invasions of the Western Roman Empire, 100-500 CE https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4a/Map_of_the_Western_Roman_Empire_100-500_CE.png

Yet, peace remained elusive for the crumbling Western Roman Empire. For the next fifty years, various groups of Germanic invaders wandered across Europe, both looting and, soon, settling down to occupy territory that had only recently been part of a unified Roman Empire. Most of these groups soon established kingdoms of their own. The Vandals pushed through Spain and ended up conquering most of Roman North Africa. After the Visigoths sacked Rome itself in 410, the emperor Honorius gave them southern Gaul to get them to leave; they ended up seizing most of Spain (from the Vandals who had arrived before them) as well.

Back in Italy, the Huns, under the leadership of the legendary warlord Attila, arrived in the late 440s, pushing as far as the gates of Rome in 451. There, the Pope (Leo I) personally appealed to Attila not to sack the city and paid them a hefty bribe. Attila died in 453 and the Huns were soon defeated by a combined army of their former Germanic subjects and a Roman army. By then, however, the damage was done: the domino effect set off by the Hunnic invasion of the previous century had already almost completely swallowed up the western empire. Only two years after the Huns were defeated, the Vandals sailed over from Africa in 455 and sacked Rome again. This sacking, despite occurring with relatively little carnage, nevertheless led to the use of the word "vandal" to mean a malicious destroyer of property.

Italy itself held out until 476, when an Ostrogothic ("eastern Goth") warlord named Odoacer deposed the last emperor and declared himself king of Italy; the Roman emperor in Constantinople (having little choice) approved of Odoacer's authority in Italy in return for a nominal pledge of loyalty. In 493, Odoacer was deposed and killed by a different Ostrogothic king, Theodoric,

but the link with Constantinople remained intact. The Roman emperor worked out a deal with Theodoric to stabilize Italy, and Theodoric went on to rule for decades (r. 493 – 526). Thus, by 500 CE Italy and the city of Rome were no longer part of the empire still called “Roman” by the people of the eastern empire. By the end of the fifth century, the western empire was gone, replaced by a series of kingdoms ruled by Germanic peoples but populated by former citizens of the Roman Empire.

Theodoric presided over a few decades of prosperity, restoring peace to the Italian peninsula and joining together with other Gothic territories to the west. He maintained excellent relations with the Pope even though he was an Arian Christian, and he set up a system in which a government existed for his Goths that was distinct from the Roman government (with him at the head of both, of course). Some historians have speculated that Theodoric and the Goths might have been able to forge a new, stable Empire in the west and thereby obviate the coming of the “Dark Ages,” but that possibility was cut short when the Byzantine Empire invaded to try to reconquer its lost territory (that invasion is considered in the next chapter).

In Gaul, a fierce tribe called the Franks, from whom France derives its name, came to power, driving out rivals like the Visigoths. Unlike the other Germanic tribes, the Franks did not abandon their homeland when they set out for new territory. From the lower Rhine Valley, they gradually expanded into northern Gaul late in the fifth century. Under the leadership of the warrior chieftain Clovis (r. 481/482 – 511), the various Frankish tribes were united, which gave them the military strength to depose the last Roman governor in Gaul, drive the Visigoths into Spain, absorb the territory of yet another barbarian group known as the Burgundians, and eventually conquer most of Gaul. Thus, what began as an invasion and occupation of Roman territory evolved in time to become the earliest version of the kingdom of France.

In almost every case, the new Germanic kings pledged formal allegiance to the Roman emperor in Constantinople in return for acknowledgment of the legitimacy of their rule. They often did their best to build on the precedent of Roman civilization as well; for example, Clovis of the Franks made a point of having the Frankish laws recorded in Latin, and over time the Frankish language vanished, replaced by the early form of French, a Latinate language. In fact, for well over a century, most Germanic “kings” were, officially, treaty-holding, recognized Roman officials from the legal and diplomatic perspective of Constantinople. That said, the “Roman” emperors of Constantinople had plenty of legal pretext to regard those kings as usurpers as well, since the treaties of acknowledgment were often full of loopholes. Thus, when the emperor Justinian invaded Italy in the sixth century, he was doing so to reassert not just the memory of the united Empire, but to restore the Empire to the legal state in which it already technically existed.

While interpretations of the collapse of the Empire will continue to differ as long as there are people interested in Roman history, there is no question about the basic facts: half of what had once been an enormous, coherent, and amazingly stable state was splintered into political fragments by the end of the fifth century. Yet for most people living in the former Western Roman Empire, life would have changed very little. Taxes would have continued to be paid to Germanic, royal governments, who had inherited or replaced the position of Roman officials and military. Latin persisted as the language of administration. Law codes issued by the Germanic kingdoms were largely adaptations of Roman provincial law. In other words, the legal conditions under which most people lived stayed pretty much the same.

Chapter 11: Turning to the Near East; Byzantium and Islam

Byzantium, the Roman Empire of the East

The creation of the tetrarchy, by Diocletian, separated the eastern and western halves of the Roman Empire administratively. In theory, there was only one formal empire, ruled by one senior Emperor, but in practice the Eastern and Western courts followed different policies, notably in their relations with the Germanic peoples. As time passed fundamental cultural differences also began to distinguish East from West. The East was more populous, more heavily urbanized, and more prosperous. The eastern Mediterranean was largely Greek in culture and intellectually livelier than the West. From Diocletian in the 3rd century to Justinian in the sixth, the eastern Roman Empire evolved slowly along the path marked out by its first great reformers while carrying on most of the traditions of Rome. Moreover, the eastern empire survived intact for centuries as the western empire was being parceled out into kingdoms. It was truly one of the great civilizations of world history. And yet, as demonstrated in everything from college curricula to representations of ancient history in popular culture, the eastern empire, remembered as “Byzantium,” is not as well represented in the contemporary view of the past as is the earlier united Roman Empire. Why might that be?

The answer is probably this: like the western empire before it, Byzantium eventually collapsed. However, Byzantium did not just collapse, it was absorbed into a distinct culture with its own traditions: that of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. More to the point, the religious divide between Christians and Muslims, at least from the perspective of medieval Europeans, was so stark that Byzantium was “lost” to the tradition of Western Civilization in a way that the western empire was not. Even though the Ottoman Empire itself was a proudly “western” civilization, one that eagerly built on the prosperity of Byzantium after absorbing it, there is a (misguided) centuries-long legacy of distinguishing between the Byzantine – Ottoman culture of the east and the Roman – European medieval culture of the west.

Constantinople

Why was it that the west had fallen into political fragmentation while the east remained rich, powerful, and united? There are a few major reasons. First, Constantinople itself played a major role in the power and wealth of the east. Whereas Rome had shrunk steadily over the years, especially after its sacking in 410 and the move of the western imperial government to the Italian city of Ravenna (which was more easily defensible), Constantinople had somewhere around 500,000 residents. That can be compared to the capital of the Gothic kingdom of Gaul, Toulouse, which had 15,000 (a large city by the standards of the time for western Europe). Not only was Constantinople impregnable to invaders, but its population of proud Romans repeatedly massacred barbarians who tried to seize power, and they deposed unpopular emperors who tried to rule as military tyrants rather than true emperors possessing sufficient Roman “virtue.”

Additionally, the east had long been the richest part of the empire, and because of its efficient bureaucracy and tax-collecting systems, much more wealth flowed into the imperial coffers in the east than it did in the west. Each year, the imperial government in Constantinople brought in roughly 270,000 pounds of gold in tax revenue, as compared to about 20,000 in the west. This made vastly better-equipped, trained, and provisioned armies possible in the east. Furthermore, the west was still dominated by various families of unbelievably rich Roman elites who undermined the power, authority, and financial solvency of the western imperial government by refusing to sacrifice their own prerogatives in the name of a stronger united empire. In the east, while nobles were certainly rich and powerful, they were nowhere near as powerful as their western counterparts.

Lastly, the east enjoyed a simple stroke of good luck in the threats it faced from outside its borders: the barbarians went west and Persia did not launch major invasions. The initial Gothic uprising that sparked the beginning of the end for the west was in the Balkans, but the Goths were then convinced to go west. Subsequent invasions from Central Europe were directed at the west. Even though the Huns were from the steppes of Central Asia, they established their (short-lived) empire in the west. Eastern Roman armies had to repulse threats and maintain the borders, but they did not face the overwhelming threats of their western Roman counterparts. Finally, despite Persia’s overall strength and coherence, there was a lull in Persian militarism that lasted through the entire fifth century.

Byzantine civilization’s origins are found in the decision by the emperor Constantine to found a new capital in the Greek village of Byzantium, renamed Constantinople (“Constantine’s city”). By the time the western empire fell, the center of power in the Roman Empire had long since shifted to the east: simply put, by the fifth century CE the majority of wealth and power was concentrated in the eastern half of the empire. The people of Constantinople and the eastern empire did not call it “Byzantium” or themselves

“Byzantines” – they continued to refer to themselves as “Romans” long after Rome itself was permanently outside of their territory and control.

After the fall of the western empire, the new Germanic kings acknowledged the authority of the emperor in Constantinople. They were formally his vassals (lords in his service) and he remained the emperor of the entire Roman Empire in name. At least until the Byzantine Empire began to decline in the seventh century, this was not just a convenient fiction. Even the Franks, who ruled a kingdom on the other end of Europe furthest from the reach of Constantinople, lived in genuine fear of a Byzantine invasion since the treaties they had established with Constantinople were full of loopholes and could be repudiated by any given emperor.

Constantius II, Constantine's son and successor in the East, began making Constantinople a truly imperial city. He gave “New Rome” as he called it, its own Senate and urban magistrates, placing the city on an equal constitutional footing with Rome. Constantinople did not have an ancient aristocracy, so Constantius had to create a senatorial order. This he did by recruiting some elite Romans and promoting prominent and well-educated persons from cities in the eastern half of the empire, thereby forging bonds between the capital and its hinterland. Constantius and his successors also built elaborate palaces, public buildings, and churches to give the city a truly imperial character.

But, with the exception of Constantine himself, the man who promoted and protected Constantinople the most was Theodosius II, who also enjoyed the longest rule in Roman history. Through skillful diplomacy and the occasional application of force, he managed to keep the eastern empire free of serious Germanic incursions and the Persians at bay in Mesopotamia. To protect his capital he built massive walls, whose ruins are impressive even today. He promoted learning in the city and both added and beautified/improved important buildings. But Theodosius's greatest achievement was his law code issued in 438, the most comprehensive collection of Roman laws issued since Augustus, and arranged in a very clear and systematic fashion. We can see here that Theodosius II, as other Byzantine rulers, viewed himself as an heir of ancient Roman culture. Byzantine rulers continued to refer to themselves as Romans, even though most of them spoke Greek as their native language and used Latin only for government and military communications.

Map showing the division of the Roman Empire into the East and the West after Theodosius I's death

The division of the Empire after the death of Theodosius I, c. AD 395 https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...27s_empire.png

Justinian

After Theodosius II died in 450, the eastern empire endured 77 years of rule by military men who lacked the culture and vision of their predecessors, but they did preserve the empire and kept the government functioning. From these rough soldiers emerged Justinian, who ruled from 527 to 565 and became the greatest ruler of Late Antiquity, one of the greatest of all Roman emperors. Despite growing up in rural military camps, Justinian showed a wide range of interest and abilities. He surrounded himself with remarkable people and gave them considerable latitude. Justinian was the last Roman emperor to speak Latin as his native tongue; afterwards, all emperors spoke Greek. He is remembered for being both an incredibly fervent Christian, a major military leader, the sponsor of some of the most beautiful and enduring Byzantine architecture in existence, and the husband of probably the most powerful empress in the history of the empire, a former actress and courtesan named Theodora.

Justinian created a tradition that was to last for all of Byzantine history: that of the emperor being both the spiritual leader of the Christian Church and the secular ruler of the empire itself. By the time the western empire fell, the archbishops of Rome had begun their attempts to assert their authority over the church (they would not succeed even in the west for many centuries, however). Those claims were never accepted in the east, where it was the emperor who was responsible for laying down the final word on matters of religious doctrine. Justinian felt that it was his sacred duty as leader of the greatest Christian empire in the world to enforce religious uniformity among his subjects and to stamp out heresy. He called himself “beloved of Christ,” a title the later emperors would adopt as well. While he was never able to force all of his subjects to conform to Christian orthodoxy (especially in rural regions far from the capital city), he did launch a number of attacks and persecutory campaigns against heretical sects.

Mosaic (tile) portrait of Emperor Justinian

Mosaic of Justinian in Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, 547 CE <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...Ravenna%29.jpg>

One aspect of Justinian's focus on Christian purification was the near complete destruction of the ancient traditions of paganism in Greece and the surrounding areas initiated by his Christian predecessors. The Olympics had already been shut down by the emperor Theodosius I in 393 CE (he objected to their status as a pagan religious festival, not an athletic competition). Justinian insisted that all teachers and tutors convert to Christianity and renounce their teaching of the Greek classics; when they refused in 528, he shut down Plato's Academy, functioning at that point for almost 1,000 years. Many of the now-unemployed scholars

fled to Persia, where they were welcomed by the Sasanian rulers.

Justinian did not just enforce religious uniformity, he also imposed Roman law on all of his subjects. The empire had traditionally left local customs and laws alone so long as they did not interfere in the important business of tax collection, troop recruitment, and loyalty to the empire. Justinian saw Roman law as an aspect of Roman unity, however, and sought to stamp out other forms of law under his jurisdiction. He had legal experts go through the entire corpus of Roman law, weed out the contradictions, and figure out the laws that needed to be enforced. He codified this project in the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, which forms the direct textual antecedent for most of the legal systems still in use in Europe. Between 529 and 533 Justinian's Code of Civil Law was issued in 3 parts. *The Code* was a systematically organized collection of all imperial legislation. *The Digest* was a collection of the writings of the classical Roman jurists, the legal philosophers of the Early Empire. *The Institutes* was a textbook for law students. Justinian's code became the most influential legal collection in human history. It summarizes a thousand years of legal work, remained valid in the eastern empire until 1453, and has subsequently influenced almost every legal system in the modern world.

Justinian was also intent on re-conquering the western empire from the Germanic kings that had taken over. He was equally interested in imposing Christian uniformity through the elimination of Christian heresies like Arianism. He sent a brilliant general, Belisarius, to Vandal-controlled North Africa in 533 with a fairly small force of soldiers and cavalry, and within a year Belisarius soundly defeated the Vandal army and retook North Africa for the empire. From there, Justinian dispatched Belisarius and his force to Italy to seize it from the Ostrogoths.

What followed was twenty years of war between the Byzantines and the Gothic kingdom of Italy. The Goths had won over the support of most Italians through fair rule and reasonable levels of taxation, and most Italians thus fought against the Byzantines, even though the latter represented the legitimate Roman government. In the end, the Byzantines succeeded in destroying the Gothic kingdom and retaking Italy, but the war both crippled the Italian economy and drained the Byzantine coffers. Italy was left devastated; it was the Byzantine invasion, not the "fall of Rome" earlier, that crippled the Italian economy until the late Middle Ages.

In 542, during the midst of the Italian campaign, a horrendous plague (the "Plague of Justinian") killed off half the population of Constantinople and one-third of the empire's population as a whole. This had an obvious impact on military recruiting and morale. In the long term, the more important impact of the plague was in severing many of the trade ties between the two halves of the empire. Economies in the west became more localized and less connected to long-distance trade, which ultimately impoverished them. A few years earlier, in 536, a major volcanic eruption in Iceland spewed so much debris in the air that Europe's climate cooled considerably with "years without a summer," badly undermining the economy as well. Thus, war, natural disaster, and disease helped usher in the bleakest period of the Middle Ages in the west, as well as leading to a strong economic and cultural division between west and east.

Even as the Byzantine forces struggled to retake Italy, Justinian, like the emperors to follow him, had a huge problem on his eastern flank: the Persian Empire. Still ruled by the Sasanians, the Persians were sophisticated and well-organized rivals of the empire who had never been conquered by Rome. Ongoing wars with Persia represented the single greatest expense Justinian faced, even as he oversaw the campaigns in Italy. The Byzantines and Persians battled over Armenia, which was heavily populated, and Syria, which was very rich. Toward the end of his reign, Justinian simply made peace with the Persian king Khusro I by agreeing to pay an annual tribute of 30,000 gold coins a year. It was ultimately less expensive to spend huge sums of gold as bribes than it was to pay for the wars.

The problem with Justinian's wars, both the reconquest in the west and the ongoing battles with the Persians in the east, was that they were enormously expensive. Because his forces won enough battles to consistently loot, and because the empire was relatively stable and prosperous under his reign, he was able to sustain these efforts during his lifetime. After he died, however, Byzantium slowly re-lost its conquests in the west to another round of Germanic invasions, and the Persians pressed steadily on the eastern territories as well.

Nor were Justinian's military expenditures, endless campaigns, and restrictive religious policies met with resounding approval. In 532 violent mobs coursed through the streets of Constantinople demanding the dismissal of one of Justinian's most trusted and powerful advisers, John the Cappadocian (who was in charge of restructuring tax burdens and collection) and other imperial agents. After nine days of violence that left a large portion of Constantinople destroyed, Justinian was ready to flee the city and give up his role as Emperor. But, his wife and Empress Theodora persuaded him to ruthlessly quell the riot. In the end Justinian ordered his army to enforce his laws, arresting thousands of people and ultimately executing 30,000 to 40,000 people.

Here we see the influence and power of Theodora over Justinian's reign. Theodora, who had come from decidedly humble origins as an entertainer/actress, would not traditionally have been seen as an acceptable bride for an Emperor. Nonetheless, it seems as though the couple shared genuine affection for one another, and thus Justinian went against convention marrying

the former actress. Born c. 490, Augusta Theodora was one of three daughters of circus animal keeper Acacius and his wife, an actress of the Hippodrome in Constantinople. Before her ascension to the Byzantine Throne, Theodora also worked as an actress, with contemporary historians noting her wit, albeit concerning behaviors on stage. As discussed in *The Secret History*, author Procopius recalled how one such act featured geese who ate barley seeds off Theodora's body and recalled with "great disgust" her lack of embarrassment. After leaving the Hippodrome, Theodora worked as a sex worker for the administration of Hecebolus in Pentapolis (Modern North Africa). Historian David Potter notes that she may have first met Justinian after leaving this position when she worked as an agent of the Byzantine's Blue Faction.

Mosaic of Empress Theodora standing in front of her many attendants

Mosaic of Theodora, Basilica San Vitale, Ravenna, 547 https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...C_Italy%29.jpg

Justinian fell remarkably quickly for Theodora. While marriages between individuals of high status and those of low status were not unheard of, Theodora received notable resistance from then-Empress Lupicina. Legislation was in place to forbid such a marriage; however, Justinian convinced Emperor Justinus to retract the law, and the two married in 525 CE. Theodora was crowned Augusta at Justinian's side on April 1st, 527 CE. By all accounts she was a woman of intelligence, imagination, and great courage, and despite being nearly twenty years younger than her husband, Theodora was one of Justinian's closest advisors, drastically influencing his political decisions. Contemporaries believed that she guided the emperor's religious policy and gave Justinian his backbone. In many ways Theodora became Justinian's co-emperor, setting up the tradition of strong and powerful women in the Empire. She worked diligently both to free prostitutes from sexual slavery, expand the legal rights and protections of women (including to divorce), and protect children from infanticide and sexual trafficking. Located a few miles north of the city, Theodora established the Metanoia (Repentance) Hostel so women had a place to recover from abuse or trauma. She was Justinian's confidant and supporter throughout their lives together, helping to conceive of not just legal revisions, but the splendid new building projects they supervised in Constantinople.

Theodora died in 559 CE, as Justinian knelt in prayer at her tomb. Despite her past as an actress and prostitute, she grew to shape the Byzantine Empire drastically. Historians remember Theodora for many traits, including her political agency, intelligence, and loyalty; however, most notably, her undying love for Justinian and their empire.

Primary Source Highlight: A Selection of Chapter Nine of Procopius' *The Secret History*:

But at a later time it came about that the Empress died. And the Emperor, having become foolish as well as extremely old, incurred the ridicule of his subjects, and since all were filled with utter contempt for him as not comprehending what was going on, they disregarded him; but Justinian they cultivated with great fear. For by a policy of stirring things up and throwing them into confusion, he kept everything in a turmoil. Then at length he set about arranging a betrothal with Theodora. But since it was impossible for a man who had attained to senatorial rank to contract marriage with a courtesan, a thing forbidden from the beginning by the most ancient laws, he compelled the Emperor to amend the laws by a new law, and from then on he lived with Theodora as his married wife, and he thereby opened the way to betrothal with courtesans for all other men; and as a tyrant he straightway assumed the imperial office, concealing by a fictitious pretext the violence of the act. For he was proclaimed Emperor of the Roman conjointly with his uncle by all men of high station, who were led to vote thus by an overwhelming fear. So Justinian and Theodora took over the Roman Empire three days before the feast of Easter, a time when it is not permitted either to greet any of one's friends or to speak him peace. And not many days later Justinus died a natural death, having lived nine years in office, and Justinian alone took over the throne with Theodora.

Both Justinian and Theodora sought to rebuild and improve Constantinople. In particular, the couple sought to create a monument equal to Justinian's lofty vision of the empire. To do this Justinian sought out the two greatest mathematicians to design a church that would represent the place where heaven and earth meet. He was not looking for a traditional basilica, but for something fantastic that he would be remembered by. The end result was the magnificent Hagia Sophia, the largest Christian church (until the construction of Saint Peter's in Rome in 1503-1614) in the world.

Faded painting showing the construction of the Hagia Sophia

Miniature 38 from the Constantine Manasses Chronicle, 14th century: Construction of Hagia Sophia during the reign of emperor Justinian <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...-chronicle.jpg>

The building begins with a square just over 100 feet on each side and rising 70 feet above are 4 great arches. Two of the arches are solid and form the nave walls of the church; the other two give way to semicircular continuations of the nave. Above the main square is a dome that seems to float on the blaze of light that pours through its windows. The inside is a riot of color, achieved by marble fittings in almost every imaginable hue and by the mysterious play of light and shadow. The effect of the whole is disorienting. The space in most basilicas is ordered, controlled, and elegant. But the space in the Hagia Sophia is horizontal and vertical, straight and curved, square and round. The inside is by turns dark and light, purple and green, red and blue. It is indeed

as if one has entered a realm that is anchored to this world but gives access to another. Beyond the Hagia Sophia the couple designed and built enormous underground cisterns to hold water so that Constantinople could withstand a prolonged siege, no matter who the invader.

The Hagia Sophia from afar

Hagia Sophia Mosque in Istanbul, Turkey circa 2010 <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4824757%29.jpg>

Interior Domes of the Hagia Sophia

Interior of the dome of the Hagia Sophia https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/gia_Sophia.jpg

Division and Decline

The relative political and religious unity Justinian's campaigns brought back to Byzantium declined steadily after his death. For almost 1,000 years, the two kinds of Christianity – later called “Catholic” and “Eastern Orthodox,” although both terms speak to the idea of one universal and correct form of Christian doctrine – were sundered by the great political divisions between the Germanic kingdoms of the west and Byzantium in the east. In Eastern Europe, small kingdoms and poor farmers played host to rival missionaries preaching the slightly-different versions of Christianity. Trade existed, but was never as strong as it had been during the days of the united empire.

Byzantium's major ongoing problem was that it faced a seemingly endless series of external threats. Byzantium was surrounded by hostile states and groups for most of its existence, and it slowly but steadily lost territory until it was little more than the city of Constantinople and its immediate territories. It is important to remember, however, that this process took many centuries, longer even than the Roman Empire itself had lasted in the west. During that time, Constantinople was one of the largest and most remarkable cities on the planet, with half a million people and trade goods and visitors from as far away as Scandinavia, Africa, and England. Its people believed that their empire and their emperor were preserved by God Himself as the rightful seat of the Christian religion. Thanks to the resilience of its people, the prosperity of its trade networks, and the leadership of its emperors (the effective ones, anyway), Byzantium remained a major state and culture for centuries despite its long-term decline in power from the days of Justinian.

The most significant leader after Justinian was the emperor Heraclius (r. 610 – 641). He was originally a governor who returned from his post in Africa to seize the throne from a rival named Phocas in the midst of a Persian invasion. The empire was in such disarray at the time that the Persians seized Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, cutting off a huge part of the food supply to Constantinople. In the process, the Persians even seized the “True Cross,” the cross on which (so Christians at the time believed) Christ Himself had been crucified, from its resting place in Jerusalem. Simultaneously, the Avars and Bulgars, steppe peoples related to the Huns, were pressing Byzantine territory from the north, and piracy was rife in the Mediterranean.

Heraclius managed to save the core of the empire, Anatolia and the Balkans, by recruiting free peasants to fight instead of relying on mercenaries. He also focused on Anatolia as the breadbasket of the empire, temporarily abandoning Egypt but keeping his people fed. He led Byzantine armies to seize back Jerusalem and the True Cross from the Persians, soundly defeating them in 628, and in 630 he personally returned the True Cross to its shrine in Jerusalem. The fighting during this period was often desperate – Constantinople itself was besieged by an allied force of Avars and Persians at one point – but in the end Heraclius managed to pull the empire back from the brink.

Despite his success in staving off disaster, however, a new threat to Byzantium was growing in the south. The very same year that Heraclius returned the True Cross to Jerusalem, the Islamic Prophet Muhammad returned to his native city of Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula with the first army of Muslims. Heraclius had no way of knowing it, but Byzantium would soon face a threat even greater than that of the Persians: the Arab caliphates. Indeed, Heraclius himself was forced to lead Byzantium during the first wave of the Arab invasions, and despite his own leadership ability vital territories like Syria, Palestine, and Egypt were lost during his own lifetime (he died in 641, the same year that most of Egypt was conquered by the Arabs).

As the decades passed, Arab invasions swiftly destroyed Byzantine power in the Near East and North Africa, and while fragments of Justinian's reconquest remained in Byzantine hands until the eighth century, “Byzantium” was basically synonymous with the contiguous territory of the Balkans, Greece, and most of Anatolia by then. It was, despite its continued pretensions to empire, really a kingdom after the territorial losses, populated almost entirely by Greek-speaking “Romans” rather than by its former Syrian, Jewish, African, Italian, and Spanish subjects.

Islam & The Caliphates

It is important to include the story of Islam as an inherent, intrinsic part of the history of Western Civilization, not the religious bogeyman Medieval Europeans sometimes imagined it to be. That being noted, it is not just medieval prejudices or contemporary geopolitical conflict that has created the idea that Islam is some alien entity to Western Civilization. After the rise of Christianity and the conversion of the Roman Empire, the idea of a single, unified empire of Christianity, “Christendom” became central to the identity of Christians in Europe. Once Rome itself fell, this idea became even more important. The Germanic Kingdoms, what was left of the western empire, the new rising empires like Kievan Rus, and of course Byzantium were all linked in the concept of Christendom. For many of those Christian states, Islam was indeed the enemy, because the rise of Islam coincided with one of the most extraordinary series of military conquests in world history: the Arab conquests.

Thus, from its very beginning, there have been historical reasons that Christians and Muslims sometimes considered themselves enemies. The first generations of Muslims did indeed try to conquer every culture and kingdom they encountered, although not initially in the name of conversion. The important thing to bear in mind, however, is that throughout the Middle Ages many of the struggles between Christian and Muslim kingdoms, and Christian and Muslim people, were as often about conventional battles over power, wealth, and politics as religious belief. Likewise, once the years of conquest were over, Islamic states settled into familiar patterns of peaceful trade and they contained religiously diverse populations.

Arabia before Muhammad

The pre-Islamic Arabian peninsula, most of which is today the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, was populated by the Arab people. The Arabs were herders and merchants. They were organized tribally, with tribes claiming descent from common ancestors and governing through meetings of the patriarchs of each clan. The Arabs were well known in the Roman and Byzantine world as merchants for their camel caravans that linked Europe to a part of the Spice Road, transporting goods from India and China. They were also known to be some of the most fierce and effective mercenary warriors in the eastern Mediterranean region; they rode slim, fast, agile horses and fought as light cavalry.

Arab trade, and population, was concentrated in the more fertile southern and western regions, especially in what is today the country of Yemen. By the late Roman Empire, small but prosperous Arab kingdoms were in diplomatic contact with both Rome and Persia (as well as the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, then called Aksum). As the wars between Rome and Persia became even more destructive after the Sasanian takeover in 234 CE, the Arabs emerged as important mercenaries and political clients for both empires. Persia in particular invested heavily in employing Arab soldiers and in cultivating the maritime trade route across the Indian Ocean and along the south and west coasts of Arabia. For a time, the southern coast of Arabia was ruled by Persia through Arab clients and Persia was clearly a major cultural influence (so great was the renown of the Persian Great King Khusrau that his name became the root of an Arabic word for king: *kisra*). This contact and trade enriched the Arabic economy and led to a high degree of tactical sophistication among Arab soldiers.

Map of Arabia before Muhammed

Arabia before Muhammed <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/mic/Arabia.PNG>

The Arabs were polytheists – they worshiped a variety of gods linked to various oases in the desert. One important holy site that would take on even greater importance after the rise of Islam was the city of Mecca. Mecca had been a major center of trade for centuries, lying at the intersection of trade routes and near oases. In the center of Mecca was a shrine, called the Ka’aba, built around a piece of volcanic rock worshiped as a holy object in various Arabic faiths, and Mecca was a major pilgrimage site for the Arabs well before Islam.

The Ka’aba in the center of the Great Mosque of Mecca

The Ka’ba, Great Mosque of Mecca, Saudi Arabia, circa 2020 <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/ia/%282%29.jpg>

The Arab East was also economically intricate and fragile. Bedouins (Arabs who were nomadic pastoralists) provided for their own needs from their herds of sheep and goats, from small-scale trading in towns, and from regular raids on one another and on caravans. Some farmers worked the land, but in many areas soils were too poor and rain was too infrequent to support widespread agriculture. Cities supported traders who carried luxury goods, such as spices, incense, and perfumes from the Indian Ocean region and southern Arabia along caravan routes to the cities of the eastern Mediterranean. These traders formed the economic and political elite of Arabia, and they led the tribes. Mecca was the foremost city of Arabia, but competition among cities and tribes was fierce.

A solution to the competition among tribes and towns for control of trade routes was the institution of harams, or sanctuaries-

places where contending parties could settle disputes peacefully. Mecca was one of the chief harams in Arabia, and its founding was attributed to the Israelite patriarch Abraham and one of his sons, Ishmael. The focus of the sanctuary was the black stone shrine known as Ka'aba, founded by Abraham in approximately 2000 BCE according to Arab tradition. For centuries people from all over Arabia made pilgrimages to Mecca, to the Ka'aba, supposedly following Abraham's example. While the Ka'aba serves as a religious monument within Islamic faith, the building initially housed upwards of 360 idols, representative of tribal Arabian deities.

The Prophet Muhammad

Everything changed in the Arab world in the sixth century CE. A man named Muhammad was born in 570 CE to a powerful clan of merchants, the Quraysh, who controlled various trade enterprises in Mecca and surrounding cities. He grew up to be a merchant, and at age 20 married a wealthy and intelligent widow named Khadija (who was originally his employer; he worked as her financial adviser). He was particularly well known as a fair and perceptive arbitrator of disputes among other Arab tribes and merchants. He traveled widely on business, dealing with both Christians and Jews in Palestine and Syria, where he learned about their respective religions.

An introspective man who detested greed and corruption, Muhammad was in the habit of retreating to hills near Mecca, where there was a cave in which he would camp and meditate. When he was about forty, he returned to Mecca and reported that he had been contacted by the archangel Gabriel, who informed him that he, Muhammad, was to bear God's message to the people of Mecca and the world. The core of that message was that the one true God, the God of Abraham, venerated already by the Jews and Christians, had called the Arabs to cast aside their idols and unite in a community of worshippers.

Muhammad did not meet with much success in Mecca with his initial preaching. The temples of the many gods there were rich and powerful and people resented Muhammad's attempts to get them to convert to his new religion, in large part because he was asking them to cast aside centuries of religious tradition. The largest issue with Muhammad's message was its call for exclusivity – if Muhammad had just asked the Meccans to venerate the God of Abraham in addition to their existing deities, it probably would not have incited such fierce resistance, especially from the clan leaders who dominated Meccan society. Those clan leaders were fearful that if Muhammad's message caught on, it would threaten the pilgrims who flocked to Mecca to venerate the various deities: that would be bad for business.

Thus, in 622 CE, Muhammad and a group of his followers left Mecca, exiled by the powerful families that were part of Muhammad's own extended clan, and traveled to the city of Yathrib, which Muhammad later renamed Medina ("the city of the Prophet"), 200 miles north. They were welcomed there by the people of Medina who hoped that Muhammad could serve as an impartial mediator in the frequent disputes between clans and families. Muhammad's trek to Medina is called the Hejira (also spelled Hijra in English) and is the starting date of the Islamic calendar.

In Medina, Muhammad met with much more success in winning converts. He quickly established a religious community with himself as the leader, one that made no distinction between religious and political authority. His followers regularly gathered to hear him recite the Koran, which means "recitations": the repeated words of God Himself as spoken to Muhammad by the angel. In 624, just two years after his arrival in Medina, Muhammad led a Muslim force against a Meccan army, and then in 630 CE, he conquered Mecca, largely by skillfully negotiating with his former enemies there – he promised to make Mecca the center of Islam, to require pilgrimage, and to incorporate it into his growing kingdom. Additionally, Muhammad left the Quraysh in control, and he retained the Ka'aba as a focus of piety. He sent missionaries and soldiers across Arabia, as well as to foreign powers like Byzantium and Persia. By his death in 632, Muhammad had already rallied most of the Arab tribes under his leadership and most willingly converted to Islam.

Muhammed before the Ka'aba

Muhammad at the Ka'ba" from the Siyer-i Nebi, c. 1595 CE https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia.../Nebi_151b.jpg

"The Hanged Poems"

As Muhammad rose to power, the Ka'aba became a significant religious site within Islamic faith. To express the prominence of Islamic belief over prior Arabian idols, he ordered the removal of all such artifacts from inside and outside the Ka'aba. Of such artifacts, he allowed for a collection of poems to remain hung onto the structure's exterior walls. Below is an excerpt of the The Poem of Imru-ul-Qais, which captures love, death, and grief.

Stop, oh my friends, let us pause to weep over the remembrance of my beloved.

Here was her abode on the edge of the sandy desert between Dakhool and Howmal.

The traces of her encampment are not wholly obliterated even now;

For when the South wind blows the sand over them the North wind sweeps it away.

The courtyards and enclosures of the old home have become desolate;

The dung of the wild deer lies there thick as the seeds of pepper.

On the morning of our separation it was as if I stood in the gardens of our tribe,

Amid the acacia-shrubs where my eyes were blinded with tears by the smart
from the bursting pods of colocynth.

As I lament thus in the place made desolate, my friends stop their camels;

They cry to me "Do not die of grief; bear this sorrow patiently."

Nay, the cure of my sorrow must come from gushing tears.

Yet, is there any hope that this desolation can bring me solace ?

So, before ever I met Unaizah, did I mourn for two others;

My fate had been the same with Ummul-Huwairith and her
neighbor Ummul-Rahab in Masal.

Source: "Medieval Sourcebook: Pre-Islamic Arabia: The Hanged Poems, before 622 CE."

Muhammad's Faith

But to what exactly had Muhammad and his followers converted? At the most basic level, people were asked to surrender completely to Allah, the one true God- that is, they were asked to make al-Islam, "the surrender." Those who surrendered became Muslims and joined the umma muslima, a completely new kind of community in which membership depended only on belief in Allah and acceptance of Muhammad as Allah's prophet. No longer were one's duties confined to a particular clan, tribe, or town. All members of the umma were understood to have personal and communal responsibility for all other members. Because of the experience of the hijra, Islam was a religion of exile, of separation from the ordinary world, and of reliance on God alone.

The word Islam means "submission." Its central tenet is submission before the will of God, as revealed to humanity by Muhammad. An aspect of Islam that distinguishes it from Judaism and Christianity is that the Koran has a single point of origin, the recitations of Muhammad himself, and it is believed by Muslims that it cannot be translated from Arabic and remain the "real" holy book. In other words, translations can be made for the sake of education, but every word in the Koran, spoken in the classical Arabic of Muhammad's day, is believed to be the true language of God – according to traditional Islamic belief, the angels speak Arabic in paradise.

According to Islam, Muhammad was the last in the line of prophets stretching back to Abraham and Moses and including Jesus, whom Muslims consider a major prophet and a religious leader, but not actually divine. Muhammad delivered the "definitive version" of God's will as it was told to him by Gabriel on the mountainside. The core tenets of Islamic belief are referred to as the "five pillars":

1. There is only one God and Muhammad is his prophet.
2. Each Muslim must pray five times a day, facing toward the holy city of Mecca.
3. During the holy month of Ramadan, each Muslim must fast from dawn to sundown.
4. Charity should be given to the needy.
5. If possible, at least once in his or her life, each Muslim should undertake the Haaj: the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.

In the early decades the pillars helped to sustain a faith that stressed strict monotheism and practices that affirmed Islam and built up a sense of community. At certain times of the day all Muslims everywhere bowed in prayer, with their heads facing towards Mecca. Everyone paid alms, creating thereby a feeling of solidarity among all members of the umma. Mecca itself and the experience of pilgrimage were central to all Muslims. Originally there was no elaborate theology, intricate doctrinal mysteries, creed, or clergy. Men called imams led the Friday prayers in the mosque and usually offered sermons that applied Muslim teaching to the issues of the day, but Islam involved no ordained priesthood as in Judaism or Christianity and no hierarchy of churches.

In turn, another central concept of Islam is that of the worldwide community of Muslims, the Ummah, meaning “community of believers.” The Ummah was a central idea from the lifetime of Muhammad onward, referring to a shared identity among Muslims that is supposed to transcend differences of language, ethnicity, and culture. All Muslims are to follow the five pillars, just as all Muslims are to meet other members of the Ummah at least once in their lives while on pilgrimage.

One term associated with Islam, Jihad, has sparked widespread misunderstanding among non-Muslims. The word itself simply means “struggle.” It does mean “holy war” in some cases, but not in most. The concept of Jihad revolves around the struggle for Muslims to live according to Muhammad’s example and by his teachings. Its most common use is the “jihad of the heart,” of struggling to live morally against the myriad corrupting temptations of life.

The Koran itself was written down starting during Muhammad’s life (his revelations were delivered over the course of about twenty years, and were initially transmitted orally). The definitive version was completed in the years following his death. Of secondary importance to the Koran is the Hadith, a collection of stories about Muhammad’s life, behavior, and sayings, all of which provided a model of a righteous and ethical life. In turn, in the generations following his death, Muslim leaders created the Sharia, the system of Islamic law based on the Koran and Hadith.

The Koran/Qur’an

Muhammad communicated God’s teaching to his followers always stating that he was transmitting a direct, verbal revelation and not offering any of his own interpretations. That revelation came in the form of “recitations” that now make up the Koran, the Scriptures of Islam. Not long after Muhammad’s death his closest followers arranged the recitations into 114 Suras, or chapters. The Koran contains legal and wisdom literature like the Hebrew Scriptures and moral teaching like the Christian New Testament. It also prescribes regulations for diet and personal conduct. For example, the Koran forbids alcohol and gambling, censures luxury, and imposes strict sexual restraints on both men and women.

Initially the Koran was interpreted rather freely within the umma, doubtless because there was no official clergy to impose a uniform interpretation after Muhammad’s death. But eventually, some followers felt the need for an authoritative teaching-as early Christians had felt the need for a canon of Christian scripture and teaching-and their efforts resulted in the collections called the sunna, which means roughly “good practice”-that is the words and customs of Muhammad himself. Crucial to the development of the sunna were the hadith or sayings of the Prophet, the comments he sometimes made about how God’s revelation was to be understood and applied. The opening of the Koran is below.

Al-Fatiha (The Opening)



Surah 1

*Bismillaah ar-Rahman ar-Raheem
Al hamdu lillaahi rabbil 'alameen
Ar-Rahman ar-Raheem Maaliki yaumid Deen
Iyyaaka na'abudu wa iyyaaka nasta'een
Ihdinas siraatal mustaqeem
Siraatal ladheena an 'amta' alaihim
Ghairil maghduubi' alaihim waladaaleen
Aameen*

In the name of God, the infinitely Compassionate and Merciful.
Praise be to God, Lord of all the worlds.
The Compassionate, the Merciful. Ruler on the Day of Reckoning.
You alone do we worship, and You alone do we ask for help.
Guide us on the straight path,
the path of those who have received your grace;
not the path of those who have brought down wrath, nor of those who wander astray.
Amen.

The Arab Conquests & Political Histories of the Arabs after Muhammed

When Muhammad died, there were immediate problems among the Muslim Arabs. He did not name a successor, but he had been the definitive leader of the Islamic community during his life; it seemed clear that the community was meant to have a leader. The Muslim elders appointed Muhammad's father-in-law, Abu Bakr (r. 632 – 634), as the new leader after a period of deliberation. He became the first Caliph, meaning "successor": the head of the Ummah, the man who represented both spiritual and political authority to Muslims. He and his three successors down to 661 were all Meccans, relatives of the Prophet by marriage, and early converts. Islamic tradition calls them the "Rightly Guided Caliphs."

Under Abu Bakr and his successors, Umar (another of Muhammad's fathers-in-law; r. 634 – 644), and Uthman (r. 644 – 655), Muslim armies expanded rapidly. This began as a means to ensure the loyalty of the fractious Arab tribes as much as to expand the faith; both Abu Bakr and Umar were forced to suppress revolts of Arab tribes, and Umar hit upon the idea of raiding Persia and Byzantium to keep the tribes loyal. For the first time in history, the Arabs embarked on a sustained campaign of conquest rather than serving others as mercenaries. As the Arab elite divided up the new provinces of the caliphate, some of them became emirs or governors, and others became lower administrators. Arab administrators then collected from all conquered people

personal taxes and land taxes. Converts to Islam though paid only land taxes. Arab settlers paid no taxes and received salaries from the taxes paid by others.

Riding their swift horses and camels and devoted to their cause, the Arab armies conquered huge amounts of territory extremely rapidly. It was the Arab army that finally conquered Persia in 637 (although it took until 650 for all Persian resistance to be vanquished), that hitherto-unconquered adversary of Rome. The Arabs conquered Syria and seized Byzantine territory in Anatolia equally quickly: Egypt was conquered by 642, with an attempted Byzantine counter-attack fought off in 645. Within twenty years of the death of Muhammad, the heartland of the Middle East was firmly in Arab Muslim hands.

Part of the success of the first decades of the Arab conquests was because of the vulnerability of Byzantium and Persia at the time, and another part was the tactical skill of Arab soldiers. The Arabs conquered Persia not just because it was weakened by its wars with Byzantium (most importantly its defeat by Heraclius in 627), but because many Arab clans had fought as mercenaries for both sides in the conflict; great wealth had been flowing into Arabia for decades, and the Arabs were already veteran soldiers. They had learned both Roman and Persian tactics and strategy and they were skilled at siegecraft, intelligence-gathering, and open battle alike.

The Arab armies were easily the match of the Byzantine and Persian forces. The Arabs were able to field armies of about 20,000 – 30,000 men, with a total force of closer to 200,000 by about 700 CE. Most were Arabs from Arabia itself, along with Arabs who had settled in Syria and Palestine and were then recruited. A smaller percentage were non-Arabs who converted and joined the armies. Tactically, the majority were infantry who fought with spears and swords and were lightly-armored.

The major tactical advantage of the Arab armies was their speed: horses and camels were important less as animals to fight from than as means of transportation for the lightly-armored and equipped armies. Soldiers were paid in coins captured as booty and whole armies were expected to buy their supplies as they marched rather than relying on heavy baggage trains. Their conquests were a kind of sustained sprint as a result. Likewise, one specific military “technology” that the Arabs used to great effect was camels, since no other culture was as adept at training and using camels as were the Arabs. Camels allowed the Arab armies to cross deserts and launch sudden attacks on their enemies, often catching them by surprise.

Cultural factors were yet more significant. For centuries, raiding and plundering had been a way of life in Arabia, but because Islam forbade Muslims from raiding other Muslims, a new outlet for traditional violence was needed. The Prophet himself had believed firmly in the need to expand the faith, and his successors shared that belief. Muslim ideology divided the world into the “House of Islam” and the “House of War.” In the House of Islam the justice of Allah reigned supreme. In the House of War jihad, or holy war, was the rule. Christians and Jews, as fellow “Peoples of the Book”-sharers in scriptural tradition reaching back to Abraham-were spared the choice of conversion or death, but “infidels” were expected to submit and convert. The Arab conquests were carefully planned and directed to channel violence out of Arabia, to populate much of western Asia with loyal Muslims, and to reward members of the umma.

Finally, especially in Byzantine territories, high taxes and ongoing struggles between the official Orthodox form of Christianity and various other Christian sects led many Byzantine citizens to welcome their new Arab rulers; taxes often went down, and the Arabs were indifferent to which variety of Christian their new subjects happened to be. In addition, the Arabs made little effort to convert non-Arabs to Islam for several generations after the initial conquests. To be clear, there was plenty of bloodshed during the Arab conquests, including the deaths of many civilians, but the long-term experience of Arab rule in former Byzantine territories was no more, and probably less, oppressive than it had been under Byzantium.

Painting of an Arab army chasing a fleeing Byzantine force

Arab Army chasing fleeing Byzantine army from the battle of Azazion, 13th century <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/at/Azazion.jpg>

The Umayyad Caliphate and the Shia

The second caliph, Umar, was murdered by a slave in 644 and the Muslim leaders had to pick the next caliph. They chose an early convert and companion of Muhammad, Uthman. Many members of the Muslim community, however, supported Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law Ali, claiming he should be the head of the Ummah, as someone who was part of Muhammad's direct family line. That group was known as the “party” or “faction” of Ali: the Shia of Ali (note that Shia is also frequently spelled “Shi'ite” in English). For Shia Muslims, the central idea was that only descendants of Muhammad should lead the Ummah. The majority of Muslims, known as Sunnis (“traditionalists”), however, argued that any sufficiently righteous and competent leader could be appointed caliph.

While the Shia rejected Uthman's authority in theory, there was as yet no outright violence between the two factions within

the larger Muslim community. And there remained efforts to unify the community through standardized beliefs and texts. The prophet's scribe, Zayd ibn Thabī, created both the initial and later standardized version of the Koran between the rules of Abu Baker and Uthman. Despite the prophets and his successors creating a sense of religious unity, political and social divisions remained.

In 656 Uthman died, the victim of a short-lived Egyptian rebellion against the Arabs. Ali was elected as the next caliph, seemingly ending the dispute over who should lead the Ummah. Unfortunately for Muslim unity, however, a significant number of Arab leaders disagreed with Ali's policies (his goal was to create a truly Islamic government by emphasizing the religious side of the caliph's office) and chose to support a rival would-be caliph, a relative of Uthman named Mu'awiya, a member of the Umayyad clan governing Syria. Ali was murdered by a rebel (unrelated to the power struggle over the caliphate) in 661, cementing the Umayyad claim on power, but not the doctrinal dispute between Shia and Sunni.

It was thus under the leadership of caliphs who were not themselves related to Muhammad's family line that the Arab conquests not only continued, but stabilized in the form of a true empire. The Umayyad clan created the first long-lasting and stable Muslim state: the Umayyad Caliphate. It was centered in Syria and lasted almost 100 years. It supervised the consolidation of the gains of the Arab armies to date, along with vast new conquests in North Africa and Spain. The Umayyads were capable administrators and skilled generals and the majority of Muslims saw the Umayyad rulers as the legitimate caliphs.

What they could not do, however, was destroy the Shia, despite Ali's death. Shia Muslims, representing about 10% of the population of the Ummah (then and now), viewed the Umayyad government as fundamentally illegitimate, rejecting the very idea of a caliphate and arguing instead that the faithful should be led by an Imam: a direct biological and spiritual descendant of Muhammad's family. When Ali's son Hussein, then the leader of the Shia and a grandson of Muhammad himself, was killed by the Umayyads in 680, the permanent breach between Sunni and Shia was cemented.

By 700 CE, the Umayyads had conquered all of North Africa as far as Portugal and the Atlantic. Then, in 711, they invaded Spain and smashed the Visigothic kingdom, definitively ending Arian Christianity across both North Africa and Spain. They were finally stopped in two battles, first in 722 at the Battle of Covadonga by the Visigothic King Pelayo, and ten years later in 732 by a Frankish army led by the Frankish lord Charles Martel at the Battle of Poitiers; this marked the end of the Arab conquests in Europe. Likewise, despite conquering large amounts of Byzantine territory, Constantinople itself withstood a huge siege in 718 and Byzantine forces then pushed back Arab forces in Anatolia.

Map showing the progression of Muslim/Ara Conquests across Europe, Africa, and Asia

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0s_to_820s.svg

In 751, Arab forces went so far as to defeat a Chinese army in Central Asia outside of the caravan city of Samarkand (they fought an army of the Tang dynasty, which had been expanding along the Silk Road). The last Umayyad caliph had been murdered shortly before this conflict, however, and the Muslim forces thus had little reason to continue their expansion. This battle marked the furthest extent of the core Muslim-ruled territories. For several centuries to follow, the Muslim world thus consisted of the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain.

The Umayyad Government and Society

The Umayyads did not just complete and consolidate the conquests of the Arabs. They also established lasting forms of governance. They quickly abandoned the practice of having elders come together to appoint leadership, insisting on a hereditary line of caliphs. This alone caused a civil war in the late seventh century, as some of their Muslim subjects rose up, claiming that they had perverted the proper line of leadership in the community. The Umayyads won that war, too.

The major problem for the Umayyads was the sheer size of their empire. Just like other rapid conquests, for example that of Alexander the Great 1,000 years earlier, in the course of just a few decades a people found itself in control of enormous swaths of territory. The Arabs had a strong lingual and cultural identity and many of the Arab conquerors saw themselves as a people apart from their new subjects, regardless of religious belief. Thus, while non-Arabs were certainly encouraged to convert to Islam, the power structure of the Caliphate remained resolutely Arabic. As with the Greeks under Alexander, the Romans during their centuries of conquest, and the Germanic tribes that sliced up the western Roman empire, the Arabs found themselves a small minority ruling over various other groups. To try to effectively govern this vast new empire, the Umayyads took over and adapted the bureaucracies of the people they conquered, including those of both the Byzantines and, especially, the Persians. They created new borders and provinces to better suit their administration and ensure that tax revenue made it back to the capital at Damascus, with the idiosyncratic additional factor of needing to pay an ongoing salary to all Arab soldiers, even after those soldiers had

retired.

One change that was to last until the present was lingual. Unlike in the Greek case during the Hellenistic period, Arabic was to replace the vernacular of the land conquered during the Arab conquests. The only exceptions were Persian, which would eventually become the modern language of Farsi (the vernacular of the present-day country of Iran), and Spain, where Arabic and Spanish coexisted until Christian kingdoms reconquered Spain many centuries later. This lingual uniformity was a huge benefit to trade and cultural and intellectual exchange, because one could travel from Spain to India and speak a single language, as well as be protected from bandits by a single administration.

Arabs also followed the patterns of Greek and Roman conquerors by colonizing the places they conquered. At first, they settled in garrison and administrative towns, but they also set up communities within conquered cities. As Arabic became the language of daily life, not just of administration, Arabs and non-Arabs mixed more readily. Arabs also built new cities all across their empire, the most notable being a small town in Egypt that would eventually grow into Cairo. They built these cities on the Hellenistic and Roman model: planned grids of streets at right angles. In the center of each city was the mosque, which served not only as the center of worship, but in various other functions. Mosques were both figuratively and literally central to the cities of the Umayyad caliphate. They were the predominant public spaces for discussion among men. They were the courthouses and the banks. They provided schooling and instruction. They were also often attached to administrative offices and governmental functions.

The Umayyads imposed taxes across their entire empire, even insisting that their fellow Arabs pay a tax on their land, which was met with enormous resistance because, to Arabs unused to paying taxes at all, it implied subordination. By channeling taxes through their new, efficient bureaucracy, the Umayyads were able to support a very large standing army. That allowed them not only to keep up the pressure on surrounding lands, but to quash rebellions.

The Umayyads supervised a tremendous expansion in trade and commerce across the Middle East and North Africa as well. Muhammad had been a merchant, after all, and the longstanding commercial practices and regulations of Arabic society were codified in Sharia law – in that sense, commercial law was directly linked to religious righteousness. Likewise, even from this early period, the caliphate supported maritime trade networks. Muslim traders regularly sailed all across the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and eventually as far as China and the Philippines. In waters controlled by the caliphate, piracy was contained, so trade prospered even more. One effect of Arab seafaring is that Islam spread along sea routes well beyond the political control of any of the Arab empires and kingdoms to come; today the single largest predominantly Muslim country is Indonesia, thanks to Muslim merchants that brought their faith along the trade routes. By the time European explorers began to establish permanent ties to Asian kingdoms and empires in the sixteenth century, Islam was established in various regions from India to the Pacific, thousands of miles from its Middle Eastern heartland.

Other Faiths Under Islamic Rule

One of the noteworthy aspects of the Arab conquests is the complex role of conversion. The Koran specifically forbids the forcible conversion of Jews and Christians. It does allow that non-Muslim monotheists pay a special tax, however. For the century of Umayyad rule, only about 10% of the population was Muslim. Non-Muslims, called dhimmis (followers of religions tolerated by law) had to pay a head tax and were not allowed to share in governmental decision-making or in the spoils of war. Many Jews and Christians found Arab rule preferable to Byzantine rule, however, because the Byzantine government had actively persecuted religious dissenters and the Arabs did not. Likewise, taxes were lower under the Arabs as compared to Byzantium. These traditions of relative tolerance would continue all the way up to the modern era in places like the Ottoman Empire. However, even without forcible pressure, many people did convert to Islam either out of a heartfelt attraction to Islam or because of simple pragmatism; in some cases, Muslim generals rejected the attempted conversions of local people because it threatened their tax base so much.

There was also the case of the nomadic peoples of North Africa, collectively referred to as “Berbers” by the Arabs. The Berbers were hardy, warlike tribesmen living in rugged mountainous regions across North Africa. They had already seen the Romans and the Vandals come and go and simply kept up their traditions with the arrival of the Arabs. They were, however, polytheists, which the Muslims were unwilling to tolerate. Thus, faced with the choice of forcible conversion or death, the Berbers converted and then promptly joined the Arab armies as auxiliaries. This lent tremendous strength to the Arab forces and helps explain the relative ease of their conquests, especially in Spain.

The members of other monotheistic faiths who chose not to convert were often left much more free to practice their religions than they would have been in Christian lands, because the Umayyads simply did not care about theological disagreements among their Jewish and Christian subjects so long as the taxes were paid. Over time, various sects of Christianity survived in Muslim lands that vanished in kingdoms that were officially, and rigidly, Christian. Likewise, Jews found that they were generally better off in Muslim lands than in Christian kingdoms because of their safety from official persecution. Jews became vitally important

merchants, scholars, bankers, and traders all across the caliphate.

Zoroastrianism, however, declined in the long run. The first generations of Muslim rulers accepted Zoroastrians as People of the Book like Jews and Christians, but that acceptance atrophied over time. Muslims were less tolerant of Zoroastrianism because it did not venerate the God of Abraham and its traditions were markedly different from those of Judaism and Christianity. Likewise, as Muslim rule over Persia was consolidated over time, the practical necessity of respecting Zoroastrianism as the majority religion of the Persian people weakened. By the tenth century, most Zoroastrians who had not converted to Islam migrated to India, where they remain today in communities known as the Parsees.

The Abbasids

Despite their military successes, the Umayyads were not popular. Many people resented their centralization of power, especially in Syria and in solely Arab hands. New converts and those on the fringes of the Empire especially resented these policies. Other Muslims were offended by the secular nature of Umayyad rule and sought higher morality in their leaders. The opposition came to a head in a series of rebellions that culminated in the naming of a rival caliph, Abu'l Abbas, a member of a clan descended from Muhammad's uncle, in 749. In 750 he defeated his Umayyad opponent and the Abbasid dynasty was born.

The Abbasids were supported by many non-Arab but Muslim subjects of the Caliphate (called *mawali*) who resented the fact that the Umayyads had always protected the status of Arabs at the expense of non-Arab Muslims in their empire. After seizing control of the Caliphate, the Abbasids went on a concerted murdering spree, trying to eliminate all potential Umayyad competitors, with only a single member of the Umayyad leadership surviving. The Abbasids lost control of some of the territories that had been held by the Umayyads (starting with Spain, which formed its own caliphate under the surviving Umayyad), but the majority of the lands conquered in the Arab conquests a century earlier remained in their control.

The true golden age of medieval Islam took place during the Abbasid Caliphate. The Abbasids moved the capital of the caliphate from Damascus to Baghdad (referred to as the "navel of the universe"), which they founded in part to be nearer to the heart of Persian governmental traditions. There, they combined Islam even more closely with Persian traditions of art and learning. They also created a tradition of fair rulership, in contrast to the memory of Umayyad corruption. The Abbasid caliphs were the leaders of both the political and spiritual orders of their society, seeking to make sure everything from law to trade to religious practice was running smoothly and fairly. They enforced fair trade practices and used their well-trained armies primarily to ensure good trade routes, to enforce fair tax collection, and to put down the occasional rebellion. The Abbasid rulers represented, in short, a kind of enlightened despotism that was greatly ahead of Byzantium or the Latin kingdoms of Europe in terms of its cosmopolitanism. The Abbasids abandoned Arab-centric policies and instead adopted Muslim universalism that allowed any Muslim the possibility of achieving the highest state offices and political and social importance.

They also made a concerted effort to expand technological, architectural, and intellectual advancements across the empire. For example, some of the most famous and elaborate mosques built under the Abbasids were located outside of the Middle East, underscoring the Abbasid belief in the fundamental equality of all believers, old and new, Arab or not. With their frontier origins, the Abbasids were sympathetic to the caliphate's provincial populations. Thus, they created a more international regime.

Photograph of the Cordoba Mosque Cathedral from the Roman Bridge of Cordoba

Mosque of Cordoba, now the Mosque Cathedral, constructed during the Abbasid Caliphate, photo by author Erin Stone

Close up of a wall of Cordoba's Mosque Cathedral

Cordoba's Mosque Cathedral, photo by author Erin Stone

Perhaps the most important phenomenon within the Abbasid caliphate was the great emphasis and respect the caliphs placed on learning. New discoveries were made in astronomy, metallurgy, and medicine, and learned works from a variety of languages were translated and preserved in Arabic. The most significant tradition of scholarship surrounding Aristotle's works, in particular, took place in the Abbasid caliphate. In 832 an Abbasid caliph endowed the "House of Wisdom" an academy for scholars in Baghdad as the center of the caliphate's intellectual endeavors. From this point on Muslim scholars had the leisure and wherewithal to begin tackling the corpus of Greek thought, especially scientific writers. The earliest Arab scholars sought mainly to master the learning of the past Greek, Persian, and Indian works which they collected and translated. They copied manuscripts and built new libraries to hold all of the works. It was largely through these collections that the works of Classical Greece and Rome were preserved. Hundreds of years later, the works were re-discovered by Italians during the Crusades and then Renaissance.

The various advances that took place in the Abbasid Caliphate included:

- Medicine: far more accurate diagnoses and treatments than existed anywhere else (outside of China).

- Optics: early telescopes, along with the definitive refutation of the idea that the eye sends out beams to detect things and instead receives information reflected off of objects.
- Chemistry: various methods including evaporation, filtration, sublimation, and even distillation. Despite the specific ban on intoxicants in the Koran, it was Abbasid chemists who invented distilled spirits: al-kuhl, meaning “the essence,” from which the English word alcohol derives.
- Mathematics: the creation of Arabic numerals, based on Hindu characters, which were far easier to work with than the clunky Roman equivalents. In turn, the Abbasids invented algebra and trigonometry.
- Geography and exploration: accurate maps of Asia and East Africa, thanks to the presence of Muslim merchant colonies as far as China, along with new navigational technologies like the astrolabe (a device that is used to determine latitude while at sea).
- Banking: the invention of checks and forms of commercial insurance for merchants.
- Massive irrigation systems, which made Mesopotamia nearly on par with Egypt as the richest farmland in the world.

Page of 1st Century Greek Medical Treatise preserved in the House of Wisdom

Arabic Translation of the 1st century Greek Medical Treatise from 1224, Baghdad https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...2C_leaf%29.jpg

In addition, the Abbasid Caliphate witnessed a major increase in literacy. Not only were Muslims (men and women alike) encouraged to memorize the Koran itself, but scholars and merchants were often interchangeable; unlike medieval Christianity, Islam did not reject commerce as being somehow morally tainted. Thus, Muslims, whose literacy was due to study of specifically Islamic texts, the Koran and the Hadith especially, easily used the same skills in commerce. The overall result was a higher literacy rate than anywhere else in the world, with the concomitant advantages in technological progress and commercial prosperity.

The success of the Abbasids in ruling a huge, diverse empire arose in part from their willingness to follow Persian traditions of rule (a pattern that would be repeated by later Turkic and Mongol rulers). The Abbasid caliphs employed Persian bureaucrats and ruled in a manner similar to the earlier Persian Great Kings, although they did not adopt that title. Their role as caliphs was in protecting the ummah and providing a political framework in which sharia law could prosper – it was in the Abbasid period that Islamic law was truly developed and codified. From the Persian tradition the Abbasid caliphs borrowed both practical traditions of bureaucracy and administration and an equally important tradition of political status: they were the rulers over many peoples, acknowledging local identities while expecting deference and, of course, taxes.

At its height, the Abbasid Empire was truly enormous– it covered more land area than had the Roman Empire. Its merchants traveled from Spain to China, and it maintained diplomatic relations with the rulers of territories thousands of miles from Baghdad. The Caliphate reached its peak during the rule of the caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786 – 809). His palace was so enormous that it occupied one-third of Baghdad. He and the greatest early-medieval European king, Charlemagne, exchanged presents and friendly letters, albeit out of political expediency: Charlemagne was the enemy of the Cordoban Caliphate of Spain, the last vestige of Umayyad power, and the Abbasids acted as an external pressure that Charlemagne hoped would make the Byzantine emperors recognize the legitimacy of his imperial title (as an aside, one of Charlemagne’s prized possessions was his pet elephant, sent to his distant court by al-Rashid as a goodwill gift).

Already by al-Rashid’s reign, however, the Caliphate was splintering; it was simply too large to run efficiently without advanced bureaucratic institutions. North Africa west of Egypt seceded by 800, emerging as a group of rival Islamic kingdoms. Other territories followed suit during the rest of the ninth century, leaving the Caliphate in direct control of only the core lands of Mesopotamia. Within its remaining territory the caliphs faced uprisings as well. Even the idea of a united (Sunni) ummah was a casualty of this political breakdown – the ruler of the Spanish kingdom claimed to be the “true” caliph, with a Shia dynasty in Egypt known as the Fatimids contesting both claims since it rejected the very idea of a Sunni caliph.

The political independence of the Caliphate ended in 945 when it was conquered by Persian tribesmen, who took control of secular power while keeping the Caliph alive as a figurehead. In 1055, a Turkish group, the Seljuks (the same group then menacing Byzantium), seized control and did exactly the same thing. For the next two centuries the Abbasid caliphs enjoyed the respect and spiritual deference of most Sunni Muslims, but exercised no political power of their own. As Seljuk power increased, that of the Caliphate itself waned. Numerous independent, and rival, Islamic kingdoms emerged across the Middle East, North Africa, and northern India, leaving even the Middle Eastern heartland vulnerable to foreign invasion, first by European crusaders starting in 1095, and most disastrously during the Mongol invasion of 1258 (under a grandson of Genghis Khan). It was the Mongols who ended the Caliphate once and for all, murdering the last caliph and obliterating much of the infrastructure built during Abbasid rule in the process.

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Chapter 12: The Creation of Latin Christendom and Medieval Europe

Once the last remnants of Roman power west of the Balkans were extinguished in the late fifth century CE, the history of Europe moved into the period that is still referred to as “medieval,” meaning “middle” (between). Roughly 1,000 years separated the fall of Rome and the beginning of the Renaissance, the period of “rebirth” in which certain Europeans believed they were recapturing the lost glory of the classical world. Historians have long since dismissed the conceit that the Middle Ages were nothing more than the “Dark Ages” so maligned by Renaissance thinkers, and thus this chapter seeks to examine the early medieval world on its own terms – in particular, what were the political, social, and cultural realities of post-Roman Europe?

The Latin Church

After the fall of the western Roman empire, it was the Church that united Western Europe and provided a sense of European identity. That religious tradition persisted and spread, ultimately extinguishing the so-called “pagan” religions, despite the political fragmentation left in the wake of the fall of Rome. The one thing that nearly all Europeans eventually came to share was membership in the Latin Church (a note on nomenclature: for the sake of clarity, this chapter will use the term “Latin” instead of “Catholic” to describe the western Church based in Rome during this period, because both the western and eastern “Orthodox” churches claimed to be equally “catholic”: universal). As an institution, it alone was capable of preserving at least some of the legacy of ancient Rome.

That legacy was reflected in the learning preserved by the Church. For example, even though Latin faded away as a spoken language, all but vanishing by about the eighth century even in Italy, the Bible and written communication between educated elites was still in Latin. Latin went from being the vernacular of the Roman Empire to being, instead, the language of the educated elite all across Europe. An educated person (almost always a member of the Church in this period) from England could still correspond to an educated person in Spain or Italy, but that correspondence would take place in Latin. He or she would not be able to speak to their counterpart on the other side of the subcontinent, but they would share a written tongue.

Christianity displayed a remarkable power to convert even peoples who had previously proved militarily stronger than Christian opponents, from the Germanic invaders who had dismantled the western empire to the Slavic peoples that fought Byzantium to a standstill. Conversion often took place both because of the astonishing perseverance of Christian missionaries and the desire on the part of non-Christians to have better political relationships with Christians. That noted, there were also straightforward cases of forced conversions through military force – as described below, the Frankish king Charlemagne exemplified this tendency. Whether through heartfelt conversion or force, by the eleventh century almost everyone in Europe was a Christian, a Latin Christian in the west and an Orthodox Christian in the east.

Imperial Control and Foreign Threats to Byzantium

In 600 the empire still laid claim along the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, to most of the lands that Rome had ruled for centuries. But in the East the empire had been suffering recurrent losses to Persia. When Arab expansion began under Umar, the empire was militarily and financially exhausted. As the 7th century wore on, Arabs captured Syria, Palestine, and Mesopotamia and began a centuries long push into Anatolia. Where the West was concerned the Byzantines were powerless to stop Arab advance in North Africa and Spain. In Italy imperial control was confined to a few outposts around Rome and Sicily. By around 700 the empire was assuming the basic geographic shape it would hold for centuries. As its territory shrank, the Byzantines began to look inward. Specifically Byzantine culture came to be increasingly defined by the church. The massive Arab conquests that stripped Byzantium of so much territory also removed Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Antioch from effective contact with Constantinople. Deprived of this contact/stimulus/inspiration Byzantium turned inward and here we see the growth of a separate church.

While the losses of territory in Europe were mourned by Byzantines at the time, they proved something of a blessing in disguise to the empire: with its territory limited to the Balkans and Anatolia, the smaller empire had much more coherent and easily-defended borders. Thus, those core areas remained under Byzantine control despite various losses for many centuries to come. The emperor Leo the Isaurian (r. 717 – 741) recruited soldiers to both fight off Arab sieges of Constantinople and to cement control of Anatolia. By the end of his reign, Anatolia was secure from the Arabs and would remain the major part of the Byzantine

Empire for centuries.

In the Balkans, Slavic tribes proved a major ongoing problem for the Byzantines. A people known as the Avars invaded from the north in the sixth century and raided not just the Balkans but all across Europe, making it as far as the newly-created Frankish kingdom in present-day France. In the eighth century an even more ferocious nomadic people, the Bulgars (for whom the present-day country of Bulgaria is named), invaded. While the Avars had converted to Christianity during the period of their invasions, the Bulgars remained pagan. They destroyed the remaining Byzantine cities in the northern Balkans, slaughtered or enslaved the inhabitants, and crushed Byzantine armies. In one especially colorful moment in Bulgarian history, the Bulgar Khan, Krum, converted the skull of a slain emperor into a goblet in about 810 CE to toast his victory over a Byzantine army. Fifty years later, however, another Khan, Boris I, converted to Christianity and opened diplomatic relations with Constantinople.

This was an interesting and surprisingly common pattern: many “barbarian” peoples and kingdoms willingly converted to Christianity rather than having Christianity imposed on them through force. The Bulgars were consistently able to defeat Byzantine armies and they occupied territory seized from the Byzantine Empire, yet Boris I chose to convert (and to insist that his followers did as well). The major reason for this deliberate conversion revolved around the desire on the part of barbarian kings to, simply, stop being barbarians. Most kings recognized that Christianity was a prerequisite to entering into trade and diplomatic relations with Byzantium and the Christian kingdoms of the west. Once a kingdom converted, it could consider itself a member of the network of civilized societies, carry out alliances and trade with other kingdoms, and receive official recognition from the emperor (who still wielded considerable prestige and authority, even outside of the areas of direct Byzantine control).

An important figure in the history of eastern Christianity was St. Cyril, who in the ninth century created an alphabet for the Slavic languages, now called Cyrillic and still used in many Slavic languages including Russian. He then translated Greek liturgy into Slavonic and used it to teach and convert the inhabitants of Moravia and Bulgaria. Monasteries sprung up, from which monks would go further into Slavic lands, ultimately tying together a swath of territory deep into what would one day be Russia. The success of these missionary efforts united much of Eastern Europe and Byzantium in a common religious culture – that of Eastern Orthodoxy. Thus, up to the present, the Greek, Russian, Ukrainian, and Serbian Orthodox churches all share common historical roots and a common set of beliefs and practices.

Constantinople and the Emperors

A major factor in the success of Orthodox conversion among the Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe was the splendor of Constantinople itself. Numerous accounts survive of the sheer impact Constantinople’s size, prosperity, and beauty had on visitors. Constantinople was simply the largest, richest, and most glorious city in Europe and the Mediterranean region at the time. It enjoyed a cash economy, impregnable defensive fortifications, and abundant food thanks to the availability of Anatolian grain and fish from the Aegean Sea. Silkworms were smuggled out of China in roughly 550, at which point Constantinople became the heart of a European silk industry, an imperial monopoly which generated tremendous wealth. The entire economy was regulated by the imperial government through a system of guilds, which helped ensure steady tax revenues.

Theodosian Walls surrounding Constantinople

Constantinople’s Theodosian Walls, completed in 413 CE that protected the city for centuries <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/7...odosian-walls/>

Meanwhile, in the heart of the empire, the emperor held absolute authority. A complex and formal ranking system of nobles and courtiers, clothed in garments dyed specific colors to denote their respective ranks, separated the person of the emperor from supplicants and ambassadors. This was not just self-indulgence on the part of the emperors, of showing off for the sake of feeling important; this was part of the symbolism of power, of reaching out to a largely illiterate population with visible displays of authority.

The imperial bureaucracy held enormous power in Byzantium. Provincial elites would send their sons to Constantinople to study and obtain positions. Bribery was rife and nepotism was as common as talent in gaining positions; there was even an official list of maximum bribes that was published by the government itself. That said, the bureaucracy was somewhat like the ancient Egyptian class of scribes, men who maintained coherence and order within the government. The imperial office controlled the minting of coins, still the standard currency as far away as France and England because the coins were reliably weighted and backed by the imperial government. The emperor’s office also controlled imperial monopolies on key industries like silk, which were hugely lucrative. It was illegal to try to compete with the imperial silk industry, so enormous profits were directed straight into the royal treasury.

Constantinople housed as many as a million people in the late eighth century (as compared to no more than 15,000 in any “city”

in western Europe), but there were many other rich cities within its empire. As a whole, Byzantium traded its high-quality finished goods to western Europe in return for raw materials like ore and foodstuffs. Despite its wars with its neighbors to the east and south, Byzantium also had major trade links with the Arab states.

Orthodox Christianity and Learning

To return to Orthodox Christianity, it was not just because Constantinople was at the center of the empire that Byzantines thought it had a special relationship with God. Its power was derived from the sheer number of churches and relics present in the city, which in turn represented an enormous amount of *potentia* (holy power). Byzantines believed that God oversaw Constantinople and that the Virgin Mary interceded before God on the behalf of the city. Many priests taught that Constantinople was the New Jerusalem that would be at the center of events during the second coming of Christ, rather than the actual Jerusalem.

The piety of the empire sometimes undermined secular learning, however. Over time, the church grew increasingly suspicious of learning that did not either center on the Bible and religious instruction or have direct practical applications in crafts or engineering. Thus, there was a marked decline in scholarship throughout the empire. Eventually, the whole body of ancient Greek learning was concentrated in a small academic elite in Constantinople and a few other important Greek cities. What was later regarded as the founding body of thought of Western Civilization – ancient Greek philosophy and literature – was thus largely analyzed, translated, and recopied outside of Greece itself in the Arab kingdoms of the Middle Ages. Likewise, almost no one in Byzantium understood Latin well by the ninth century, so even Justinian's law code was almost always referenced in a simplified Greek translation.

This was a period in which, in both the Arab kingdoms and in Byzantium, there was a bewildering mixture of language, place of origin, and religious affiliation. For example, a Christian in Syria, a subject of the Muslim Arab kingdoms by the eighth century, would be unable to speak to a Byzantine Christian, nor would they be welcomed in Constantinople since they were probably a Monophysite Christian (one of the many Christian heresies, at least from the Orthodox perspective) instead of an Orthodox one. Likewise, men in their family might find themselves enlisted to fight against Byzantium despite their Christian faith, with political allegiances outweighing religious ones.

Iconoclasm

One of the greatest religious controversies in the history of Christianity was iconoclasm, the breaking or destroying of icons. Iconoclasm was one of those phenomena that may seem almost ridiculously trivial in historical hindsight, but it had an enormous (and almost entirely negative) impact at the time. For people who believed in the constant intervention of God in the smallest of things, iconoclasm was an enormously important issue.

The conundrum that prompted iconoclasm was simple: if Byzantium was the holiest of states, watched over by the Virgin Mary and ruled by emperors who were the “beloved of God,” why was the empire declining? Just as Rome had fallen in the west, Byzantium was beset by enemies all around it, enemies who had the depressing tendency of crushing Byzantine armies and occasionally murdering its emperors. Byzantine priests repeatedly warned their congregations to repent of their sins, because it was sin that was undermining the empire's survival. The emperor Leo III, who ruled from 717 – 741, decided to take action into his own hands. He forced communities of Jews in the empire to convert to Christianity, convinced that their presence was somehow angering God. He then went on to do something much more unprecedented than persecuting Jews: attacking icons.

Icons were (and are) one of the central aspects of Eastern Orthodox Christian worship. An icon is an image of a holy figure, almost always Christ, the Virgin Mary, or one of the saints, that is used as a focus of Christian worship both in churches and in homes. Byzantine icons were beautifully crafted and, in a largely illiterate society, were vitally important in the daily experience of most Christians. The problem was that it was a slippery slope from venerating God, Christ, and the saints “through” icons as symbols, versus actually worshiping the icons themselves as idols, something expressly forbidden in the Old Testament. Frankly, there is no question that thousands of believers did treat the icons as idols, as objects with *potentia* unto themselves, like relics.

Byzantine mosaic/icon depicting the Virgin Mary and Jesus

Byzantine mosaic of the enthroned Theotokos (“Mother of God”), Basilica of Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, c. 560 CE
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...the_throne.jpg

In 726, a volcano devastated the island of Santorini in the Aegean sea. Leo III took this as proof that icon veneration had gone too far, as some of his religious advisers had been telling him. He thus ordered the destruction of holy images, facing outright riots when workers tried to make good on his proclamation by removing icons of Christ affixed to the imperial palace. In the provinces, whole regions rose up in revolt when royal servants or “iconoclasts” (image breakers) showed up and tried to destroy

icons. In Rome, Pope Gregory II was appalled and excommunicated Leo. Leo, in turn, declared that the pope no longer had any religious authority in the empire, which for practical purposes meant the regions under Byzantine control in Italy, Sicily, and the Balkans.

When Leo III died in 741, his successor, Constantine V, continued the campaign, harshly persecuting idol worshipers. While Leo III allowed Christ to be portrayed in his human form, Constantine V deemed this as circumscribing God's divine nature and thus heretical. He purportedly even destroyed the largest Christian icon in Constantinople, the golden Christ above the emperor's own palace gates. Furthermore, Constantine V "held a public scorn" against monastic sects, ordering each monk to hold hands with women and allow themselves to be spat on and insulted by passing individuals at the Hippodrome. He burned other monasteries after pillaging them of their treasures and even stoned some monks to death who refused to conform with the destruction of icons.

Image showing the destruction of icons

Illustration from a 9th century CE manuscript, the Chludov Psalter, showing the destruction of icons in the Byzantine church
<https://www.worldhistory.org/image/7...ne-iconoclasm/>

The official ban of icons lasted until 843, over a century, before the emperors reversed it (it was an empress, named Theodora like the famous wife of Justinian centuries earlier, who led the charge to officially restore icons). The controversy weakened the empire by dividing it between iconoclasts loyal to the official policy of the emperors and traditionalists who venerated the icons, while the empire itself was still beset by invasions. Iconoclasm also lent itself to what would eventually become a permanent split between the eastern and western churches – Orthodoxy and Catholicism. The final and permanent split between the western and eastern churches, already de facto in place for centuries, was in 1054, when Pope Leo IX and Patriarch Michael I excommunicated each other after Michael refused to acknowledge Leo's preeminence – this event cemented the "Great Schism" (schism means "break" or "split") between the western and eastern churches.

In the wake of iconoclasm, the leaders of the Orthodox church, the patriarchs of Constantinople, would claim that innovations in theology or Christian practice were heresies. This attitude extended to secular learning as well – it was acceptable to study classical literature and even philosophy, but new forms of philosophy and scholarly innovation was regarded as dangerous. The long-term pattern was thus that, while it preserved ancient learning, Byzantine intellectual culture did not lend itself to progress.

As the Byzantines turned more and more deeply into their own traditions, more differences emerged between the two versions of Catholicism. Some of these were important, such as the dispute over from whom the Holy Spirit proceeded "from the father" (East) or from "the father and from the Son" (West). Greek monks shaved the front of their heads, whereas Western monks shaved a circlet on the top. The Greek Church used leavened bread with yeast to worship, whereas the Western Church used unleavened bread. Taken together these differences amounted to a sharpening of the divide between Christian groups whom we may now label "Orthodox" and "Roman Catholic". Neither group wished to see a division in the church, but physical separation and independent cultural evolution ultimately produced two different religious traditions.

With its new geographic shape and its Orthodox faith, Byzantium was at once something old and something new. In official Byzantine ideology, the Roman Empire was and always had been one and inseparable. It is interesting to ask how familiar Augustus Caesar would have found the empire of Constantine V in the 8th century. With its indebtedness to classical and Christian traditions, there can be no question that Byzantium was a part of the West. But in its comparatively modest size, its constantly threatened frontiers, and its Orthodox traditions, Byzantium faced quite a different future than the portions of Rome's former western provinces.

Catholic Kingdoms of the West

The Papacy

The Latin Church was distinguished by the at least nominal leadership of the papacy based in Rome – indeed, it was the papal claim to leadership of the Christian Church as a whole that drove a permanent wedge between the western and eastern churches, since the Byzantine emperors claimed authority over both church and state. The popes were not just at the apex of the western church, they often ruled as kings unto themselves, and they always had complex relationships with other rulers. For the entire period of the early Middle Ages (from the end of the western Roman Empire until the eleventh century), the popes were rarely acknowledged as the sovereigns of the Church outside of Italy. Instead, this period was important in the longer history of institutional Christianity because many popes at least claimed authority over doctrine and organization – centuries later, popes would look back on the claims of their predecessors as "proof" that the papacy had always been in charge.

An important example of an early pope who created such a precedent is Gregory the Great, who was pope at the turn of the seventh century. Gregory still considered Rome part of the Byzantine Empire, but by that time Byzantium could not afford troops to help defend the city of Rome, and he was keenly interested in developing papal independence. As a result, Gregory shrewdly played different Germanic kings against each other and used his spiritual authority to gain their trust and support. He sent missionaries into the lands outside of the kingdoms to spread Christianity, both out of a genuine desire to save souls and a pragmatic desire to see wider influence for the Church.

Gregory's authority was not based on military power, nor did most Christians at the time assume that the pope of Rome (all bishops were then called "pope," meaning simply "father") was the spiritual head of the entire Church. Instead, popes like Gregory slowly but surely asserted their authority by creating mutually-beneficial relationships with kings and by overseeing the expansion of Christian missionary work. In the eighth century, the papacy produced a (forged, as it turned out) document known as the Donation of Constantine in which the Roman emperor Constantine supposedly granted authority over the western Roman Empire to the pope of Rome; that document was often cited by popes over the next several centuries as "proof" of their authority. Nevertheless, even powerful and assertive popes had to be realistic about the limits of their power, with many popes being deposed or even murdered in the midst of political turmoil.

Excerpt of the "Donation of Constantine"

We ordain and decree that [the pope] shall have the supremacy as well over the four chief seats Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, and Jerusalem, as also over all the churches of God in the whole world. And he who for the time being shall be pontiff of that holy Roman Church shall be more exalted than, and chief over, all the priests of the whole world and, according to his judgment, everything which is to be provided for the service of God or the stability of the faith of the Christians is to be administered.

And we decree, as to those most reverend men, the clergy who serve, in different orders, that same holy Roman Church, that they shall have the same advantage, distinction, power and excellence by the glory of which our most illustrious senate is adorned; that is, that they shall be made patricians and consuls, we commanding that they shall also be decorated with the other imperial dignities. And even as the imperial soldiery, so, we decree, shall the clergy of the holy Roman church be adorned.

We also decreed this, that this same venerable one our father Sylvester, the supreme pontiff, and all the pontiffs his successors, might use and bear upon their heads, to the Praise of God and for the honor of St. Peter, the diadem – that is, the crown which we have granted him from our own head, of purest gold and precious gems. But he, the most holy pope, did not at all allow that crown of gold to be used over the clerical crown which he wears to the glory of St. Peter; but we placed upon his most holy head, with our own hands, a tiara of gleaming splendor representing the glorious resurrection of our Lord. And, holding the bridle of his horse, out of reverence for St. Peter, we performed for him the duty of groom; decreeing that all the pontiffs his successors, and they alone, may use that tiara in processions.

In imitation of our own power, in order that for that cause the supreme pontificate may not deteriorate, but may rather be adorned with power and glory even more than is the dignity of an earthly rule, behold we giving over to the oft-mentioned most blessed pontiff, our father Sylvester the universal pope, as well our palace, as has been said, as also the city of Rome and all the provinces, districts and cities of Italy or of the western regions; and relinquishing them, by our inviolable gift, to the power and sway of himself or the pontiffs his successors-do decree, by this our godlike charter and imperial constitution, that it shall be so arranged; and do concede that they (the palaces, provinces etc.) shall lawfully remain with the holy Roman Church. (Donation, 5-6)

Source: https://www.worldhistory.org/Donation_of_Constantine/

Thus, Christianity spread not because of an all-powerful, highly centralized institution, but because of the flexibility and pragmatism of missionaries and the support of secular rulers (the Franks, considered below, were critical in this regard). All across Europe, missionaries had official instructions not to battle pagan religious practice, but to subtly reshape it. It was less important that pagans understood the nuances of Christianity and more important that they accepted its essential truth. All manner of "pagan" practices, words, and traditions survive into the present thanks to the crossover between Christianity and old pagan practices, including the names of the days of the week in English (Wednesday is Odin's, or Wotan's, day, Thursday is Thor's day, etc.) and the word "Easter" itself, from the Norse goddess of spring and fertility named Eostre.

As an example, in a letter to one of the major early English Christian leaders (later a saint), Bede, Pope Gregory advised Bede and his followers not to tear down pagan temples, but to consecrate and reuse them. Likewise, the existing pagan days of sacrifice were to be rededicated to God and the saints. Clearly, the priority was not an attempted purge of pagan culture, but instead the introduction of Christianity in a way that could more easily truly take root. Monks sometimes squabbled about the nuances of worship, but the key development was simply the spread of Christianity and the growing influence of the Church.

Characteristics of Medieval Christianity

The fundamental belief of medieval Christians was that the Church as an institution was the only path to spiritual salvation. It was much less important that a Christian understand any of the details of Christian theology than it was that they participate in Christian worship and, most importantly, receive the sacraments administered by the clergy. Given that the immense majority of the population was completely illiterate, it was impossible for most Christians to have access to anything but the rudiments of Christian belief. The path to salvation was thus not knowing anything about the life of Christ, the characteristics of God, or the names of the apostles, but of two things above all else: the sacraments and the relevant saints to pray to.

The sacraments were, and remain in contemporary Catholicism, the essential spiritual rituals conducted by ordained priests. Much of the practical, day-to-day power and influence exercised by the Church was based on the fact that only priests could administer the sacraments, making access to the Church a prerequisite for any chance of spiritual salvation in the minds of medieval Christians. The sacraments are:

1. Baptism – believed to be necessary to purge original sin from a newborn child. Without baptism, medieval Christians believed, even a newborn who died would be denied entrance to heaven. Thus, most people tried to have their newborns baptized immediately after birth, since infant mortality was extremely high.
2. Communion – following the example of Christ at the last supper, the ritual by which medieval Christians connected spiritually with God. One significant element of this was the belief in transubstantiation: the idea that the wine and holy wafer literally transformed into the blood and body of Christ at the moment of consumption.
3. Confession – necessary to receive forgiveness for sins, which every human constantly committed.
4. Confirmation – the pledge to be a faithful member of the Church taken in young adulthood.
5. Marriage – believed to be sanctified by God.
6. Holy orders – the vows taken by new members of the clergy.
7. Last Rites – a final ritual carried out at the moment of death to send the soul on to purgatory – the spiritual realm between earth and heaven where the soul's sins would be burned away over years of atonement and purification.

Unlike in most forms of contemporary Christianity, which tend to focus on the relationship of the individual to God directly, medieval Christians did not usually feel worthy of direct contact with the divine. Instead, the saints were hugely important to medieval Christians because they were both holy and yet still human. Unlike the omnipotent and remote figure of God, medieval Christians saw the saints as beings who cared for individual people and communities and who would potentially intercede on behalf of their supplicants. Thus, every village, every town, every city, and every kingdom had a patron saint who was believed to advocate on its behalf. Along with the patron saints, the figures of Jesus and Mary became much more important during this period. Saints had served as intermediaries before an almighty and remote deity in the Middle Ages, but the high Church officials tried to advance veneration of Christ and Mary as equally universal but less overwhelming divine figures. Mary in particular represented a positive image of women that had never existed before in Christianity. The growing importance of Mary within Christian practice led to a new focus on charity within the Church, since she was believed to intervene on behalf of supplicants without need of reward.

Visigothic Spain

After their defeat by the Franks in 507 CE and move to Spain, the Visigoths came close to unifying all of the Iberian Peninsula and converted from Arianism to Roman Catholicism. The conversion of the Visigoths permitted close cooperation between the church and the monarchy and placed the resources of the church at the disposal of the king as he attempted to unite and govern the country. The career of Archbishop Isidore of Seville (560-636) is a prime indicator of those resources. He came from an old Hispano-Roman family, received a fine education, and wrote histories, biblical commentaries, and a learned encyclopedia. By the mid-seventh century economic prosperity, a high degree of assimilation between Goths and Hispano-Romans, and a brilliant culture marked the high point of Visigothic Spain.

Then in 711, Muslims from North Africa invaded Spain. Within five years Berbers (native North Africans and recent converts to Islam who were led by Arabs) completed the conquest of much of the Iberian Peninsula, except for the very northwest of the territory. The Berbers were stopped in 722 when the Visigoths, led by King Pelayo, were able to stop the Moors from further northward progress in the Battle of Covadonga, beginning the “Reconquest” of the peninsula that continued for 781 years. Slowly, battle by battle and village after village, the “Spaniards” were able to wrest the Iberian Peninsula from the hands of the Moors. To this day you can still see the impact of Moorish architecture on the parts of the Spain that they occupied.

Statue of King Pelayo, commemorating the victory against the Berbers in 722, against the background of the Picos de Europa mountains

Statue of King Pelayo, commemorating the victory against the Berbers in 722, Covadonga, Spain; Photo by author Erin Stone

Sacred Cave of Covadonga

Santa Cueva de Covadonga, housing the tomb of King Pelayo; photo by Erin Stone

Statue of King Pelayo, commemorating the victory against the Berbers in 722

Basilica de Santa Maria la real de Covadonga, 19th century monument celebrating the battle of Covadonga and the Virgin of Covadonga; photo by Erin Stone

Meanwhile, in 716 the caliph at Damascus introduced an emir who ruled from Cordoba. The emirate of Cordoba struggled to make good its authority over all of Spain but failed to do so. Christians in the rugged mountains of the northwest-the region called Asturias-could not be dislodged, and the Muslim part of Spain-known as al-Andalus-was plagued by the same divisions as the Islamic East: Arab factions against other Arab factions, Arabs against non-Arab Muslims, and Muslims against non-Muslims. Secure than in mountainous Asturias, Christian kings built a capital at Oviedo and in the 9th century launched attacks against al-Andalus, beginning the six hundred year conflict known as the *Reconquista* pitting Christians and Muslims against one another for control of the Iberian Peninsula. We will discuss this more when we look at the Crusades in the next chapter.

Anglo-Saxon England

Britain was less thoroughly Romanized and thus more quickly given up by the Romans. Already by about 400 CE, the Romans abandoned Britain. Their legions were needed to help defend the Roman heartland and Britain had always been an imperial frontier, with too few Romans to completely settle and “civilize” the territory. For the next three hundred years, Germanic invaders called the Anglo-Saxons from the areas around present-day northern Germany and Denmark invaded, raided, and settled England. They fought the native Britons (i.e. the Romanized, Christian Celts native to England itself), the Cornish, the Welsh, and each other. Those Romans who had settled in England were pushed out, either fleeing to take refuge in Wales or across the channel to Brittany in northern France. England was thus the most thoroughly de-Romanized of the old Roman provinces in the west: Roman culture all but vanished, and thus English history “began” as that of the Anglo-Saxons.

England’s one clear and deep connection to western Europe was Christianity and/or the Roman Catholic Church. Around 600 the small Anglo-Saxon kingdoms created in the 6th century took the first steps toward converting to Christianity, and joining England inseparably to the European World. The period between 600 and 900 saw only the faint beginnings of consolidation in the Celtic realms, where the development of the Catholic Church preceded large-scale political organization. In 597 Pope Gregory I sent a small band of missionaries under a Roman monk named Augustine to King Aethelbert of Kent, whose Christian wife, Bertha, had prepared the ground for the newcomers. From their base of operations at Canterbury in southeastern England, Augustine and his successors had limited success spreading Christianity, but a new field of influence was opened to them when Aethelbert’s daughter married a king of North Umbria and took missionaries to their new home. Slowly Christianity spread across the island, but it did so without a uniform design or plan.

So, in 668 the pope sent a new archbishop to England, Theodore, based out of Canterbury. He was a Syrian monk who travelled widely in the East, lived for a time in Rome, gained great experience in church administration, and acquired a reputation for both learning and discretion. The church in England was in an administrative shambles. Working tirelessly, Theodore built up a typical Roman ecclesiastical structure, introduced authoritative Roman canon law for the church, and promoted Christian education opening the first school in Canterbury. Theodore laid the foundations for a unified English church that contributed to the eventual political unification of England.

Starting in the late eighth century, the Anglo-Saxons suffered waves of Viking raids (more on the Vikings later in the chapter) that culminated in the establishment of an actual Viking kingdom in what had been Anglo-Saxon territory in eastern England. It took until 879 for the surviving English kingdom, Wessex, to defeat the Viking invaders. For a few hundred years, there was an Anglo-Saxon kingdom in England that promoted learning and culture, producing an extensive literature in Old English (the best preserved example of which is the epic poem Beowulf). Raids started up again, however, and in 1066 William the Conqueror, a Viking-descended king from Normandy in northern France, invaded and defeated the Anglo-Saxon king and instituted Norman rule.

The Franks

The Franks created the most effective of the early Germanic kingdoms and were one of the first Germanic Kingdoms to convert to mainstream Roman Catholicism in the early 6th century. The former Roman province of Gaul is the heartland of present-day

France, ruled in the aftermath of the fall of Rome by the Franks, a powerful Germanic people who invaded Gaul from across the Rhine as Roman power crumbled. The Franks were a warlike and crafty group led by a clan known as the Merovingians. A Merovingian king, Clovis (r. 481 – 511) was the first to unite the Franks and begin the process of creating a lasting kingdom named after them: France. Clovis murdered both the heads of other clans who threatened him as well as his own family members who might take over command of the Merovingians. He then expanded his territories and defeated the last remnants of Roman power in Gaul by the end of the fifth century.

The Merovingian Dynasty

In 500 CE Clovis and a few thousand of his most elite warriors converted to Latin Christianity, less out of a heartfelt sense of piety than for practical reasons: he planned to attack the Visigoths of Spain, Arian Christians. By converting to Latin Christianity, Clovis ensured that the subjects of the Goths were likely to welcome him as a liberator rather than a foreign invader. He was proved right, and by 507 the Franks controlled almost all of Gaul, including formerly-Gothic territories along the border. The Visigoths were then pushed westward to Iberia.

It is through conquest that historians gain insight into Frankish religion. Clovis often utilized marriage to solidify military alliances with foreign powers. However, on Christmas Day in 496, 498, or 506 (records conflict on the actual year), Clovis I converted to Catholicism. Contemporary historian Gregory of Tours argues that it was Clovis' wife, Clothild, who urged conversion; however, it was not until his confrontation with the Alemanni at Tolbac that he vowed to convert upon victory. Clovis' conversion promoted the spread of Christianity within his followers, as religion intensely intertwined with societal and militaristic campaigns.

While Clovis' conversion to Christianity vastly influenced the Merovingian people, Clothild and subsequent queens prompted significant religious change. Known for her devout Christian faith, Queen Clothild built numerous churches and monasteries and was considered extremely charitable. This tradition continued with Queen Radegund (520-587 AD), who married Clothar I, son of Clovis and Clothild, in 532 AD. In the autobiographical account of her life, *The Life of the Holy Radegund*, author Venantius Fortunatus described Queen Radegund as a generous partner to God. Fortunatus further described her as charitable, donating to monasteries and the poor before establishing a nunnery in Athies. Despite the pagan past of the Merovingian kings, these queens aided in the transition of an empire.

Between 500 and 511, Clovis I issued the Salic Law and Pactus Legis Salicae. While the Salic Law mostly limited the succession to male heirs, Pactus' sixty-five chapters outlined simplistic, secular law with a minor Christian influence directed to the entirety of the Frankish kingdom. This showcased a direct Roman influence on the Merovingian Kingdom, as the transcription of law was not commonly practiced in Germanic communities. By expanding his territory, converting to Christianity, and codifying law, Clovis I ultimately united the tribal Franks into the Frankish Kingdom. While the Carolingians would later overthrow the Merovingian Dynasty, their legacy remains one of Western Europe's most powerful kingdoms.

The Carolingian Dynasty

The Merovingians held on to power for two hundred years. In the end, they became relatively weak and ineffectual, with another clan, the Carolingians, running most of their political affairs. Only the first few kings in the Merovingian dynasty of the Franks were particularly smart or capable. Throughout the 7th century the Carolingians gained power and prominence by forming alliances with powerful noble families as well as waging war against their enemies, eventually using war to expand the territorial integrity of their kingdom. It was a Carolingian, Charles Martel, who defeated the invading Arab armies at the Battle of Tours (also referred to as the Battle of Poitiers) in 732. Soon afterwards, Charles Martel's son Pippin seized power from the Merovingians in a coup, one later ratified by the pope in Rome, ensuring the legitimacy of the shift and establishing the Carolingians as the rightful rulers of the Frankish kingdom.

When Pippin seized control in 750 CE, he was merely assuming the legal status that his clan had already controlled behind the scenes for years. With booty from their wars, tribute from conquered peoples, and even lands seized from the church, the Carolingians attracted and rewarded more and more followers until no one was a match for them in Western Europe. The Carolingians also allied themselves very early with the leading churchmen, both regular and monastic. They aided missionaries in the work of converting central Europe, thereby expanding Frankish influence in that area. Then in 751, the Frankish leader Pippin III (son of Martel) made a formal alliance with the pope to achieve their own ends to be recognized as absolute King of all the Frankish territories. In exchange the Franks promised to protect the Papal States from any intruders. This was a huge shift, no longer would Rome and the Pope look east to Byzantium for help, but West to Europe.

Three years later when the pope visited the Frankish kingdom, he crowned and anointed Pippin III and his sons, including Charlemagne. The practice of anointing the head of a ruler with holy oil, which renders the recipient sacred dates back to the

kings of Israel. The head and hands of Catholic bishops also were anointed. The anointing of rulers and churchmen persisted throughout the Middle Ages and into the Modern World until the end of Absolute monarchs in the 20th century. The pope also forbade the Franks ever to choose a king from a family other than the Carolingians.

The problem facing the Franks was that Frankish tradition stipulated that lands were to be divided between sons after the death of the father. Thus, with every generation, a family's holdings could be split into separate, smaller pieces. Over time, this could reduce a large and powerful territory into a large number of small, weak ones. When Pippin died in 768, his sons Charlemagne and Carloman each inherited half of the kingdom. When Carloman died a few years later, however, Charlemagne ignored the right of Carloman's sons to inherit his land and seized it all (his nephews were subsequently murdered).

The Carolingian Empire reached its height under Charlemagne, 768-814. Charlemagne or "Charles the Great" was a complex and somewhat contradictory character. He was well learned in some ways (spoke and read Frankish, Latin, and some Greek), but never learned to write. He promoted Christian morality but perpetuated unspeakable brutalities on his enemies and enjoyed several concubines. Many battles were fought in his name, but he rarely accompanied his armies and fought no campaigns that are remembered for strategic brilliance. Determination and organization were the hallmarks of his 46 year reign. And perhaps most importantly was how he viewed the link between executive and religious power.

Golden bust of Charlemagne from the 14th century

The Bust of Charlemagne is a reliquary from around 1350 which is said to contain the top part of Charlemagne's skull
<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...harlemagne.png>

Charlemagne was one of the most important kings in medieval European history. Charlemagne waged constant wars during his long reign in the name of converting non-Christian Germans to his east and, equally, in the name of seizing loot for his followers. From his conquests arose the concept of the Holy Roman Empire, a huge state that was nominally controlled by a single powerful emperor directly tied to the pope's authority in Rome. In truth, only under Charlemagne was the Empire a truly united state, but the concept (with various emperors exercising at least some degree of authority) survived until 1806 when it was finally permanently dismantled by Napoleon. Thus, like the western Roman Empire that it succeeded, the Holy Roman Empire lasted almost exactly 1,000 years.

Charlemagne distinguished himself not just by the extent of the territories that he conquered, but by his insistence that he rule those territories as the new, rightful king. In 773, at the request of the pope, Charlemagne invaded the northern Italian kingdom of the Lombards, the Germanic tribe that had expelled Byzantine forces earlier. When Charlemagne conquered them a year later, he declared himself king of the Lombards, rather than forcing a new Lombard ruler to become a vassal and pay tribute. This was an unprecedented development: it was untraditional for a Germanic ruler to proclaim himself king of a different people – how could Charlemagne be "king of the Lombards," since the Lombards were a separate clan and kingdom? This bold move on Charlemagne's part established the answer as well as an important precedent (inspired by Pippin's takeover): a kingship could pass to a different clan or even kingdom itself depending on the political circumstances. Charlemagne created an entirely new concept of empire, combining various different Germanic groups, with himself (and by extension, the Franks) ruling over all of them.

Charlemagne based his right to rule over both the Franks and others within a religious framework. Not only did he, as well as his ancestors and those who would inherit his throne, believe his position came from the authority of the pope, but from God himself. Charlemagne firmly believed that as God was the sole legitimate ruler in heaven, he was the sole legitimate ruler on earth and had been divinely appointed. In other words Charlemagne believed that God had chosen him as King and it was directly from God that he received his authority. To Charlemagne, as to most Byzantine and Muslim rulers, no boundary existed between the church and the state. Church (or religion) and state were complementary attributes of a polity whose end was securing personal salvation. Charlemagne's ideological legacy was twofold. On the one hand, it created the origins of the bitter struggles later in the Middle Ages between secular rulers and ecclesiastical powers about the leadership of Christian society. On the other hand, it made it hard to define the state and its essential purposes in other than religious terms, a legacy lasting until the 18th century for most western Europe.

This leads us to the most disputed event in Charlemagne's reign, his imperial coronation in Rome on Christmas in 800 when pope Leo III crowned him as the Holy Roman Emperor. So how did Charlemagne come to be crowned as Emperor by the pope? The saga began in April 799 when some disgruntled papal bureaucrats and their supporters attacked Pope Leo III in an attempt to depose him, accusing him of perjury, adultery and threatening to blind him and cut his tongue out. Leo was saved by an ally of Charlemagne and then traveled all the way to Saxony, where the king was camped with his army. Charlemagne agreed to restore the pope to Rome and, as his ally and protector, to investigate those who had attacked him. Supposedly, no real offenses could be proved against the pope, who with Charlemagne appeared publicly in Rome to swear that all accusations were false. When Charlemagne went to Saint Peter's Basilica on Christmas Day, he prayed before the main altar and as he rose from prayer, Pope

Leo III placed a crown on his head and the assembled Romans acclaimed him as emperor.

Pope Leo Crowning Charlemagne on a tapestry

Pope Leo III crowning Charlemagne as Emperor on Christmas Day, 800, from *Chroniques de France ou de St Denis*, 14th century
<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...0436826%29.jpg>

While Charlemagne's biographers claimed that this came as a surprise to Charlemagne, it was anything but; Charlemagne completely dominated Leo and looked to use the prestige of the imperial title to cement his hold on power. Charlemagne had already restored Leo to his throne after Leo was run out of Rome by powerful Roman families who detested him. While visiting Italy (which was now part of his empire), Charlemagne was crowned and declared to be the emperor of Rome, a title that no one had held since the western empire fell in 476. Making the situation all the stranger was the fact that the Byzantine emperors considered themselves to be fully "Roman" – from their perspective, Leo's crowning of Charlemagne was a straightforward usurpation.

While some have taken this to mean that Charlemagne was the Emperor of Rome, he likely did not. He did believe that he was the Emperor of the Frankish kingdom, and protector of Rome, but not the leader of the city. His policies, priorities, and residence did not change after the coronation. He returned home to Saxony and continued fighting as needed to maintain and grow his empire. And it was a sizable empire, encompassing most of what we consider to be Western Europe today.

Map showing the growth of the Frankish territories/empires over the decades, eventually encompassing nearly all of Western Europe

Merovingian and Carolingian additions to the Frankish Kingdom

Despite his lofty aspirations of leading Rome or the Roman Empire, Charlemagne's empire was a poor reflection of ancient Rome. He had almost no bureaucracy, no standing army, not even an official currency. He spent almost all of his reign traveling around his empire with his armies, both leading wars and issuing decrees. He did insist, eventually, that these decrees be written down to form a "code" used to ensure their authenticity was simply that they were written in grammatically correct Latin, something that almost no one outside of Charlemagne's court (and some members of the Church scattered across Europe) could accomplish thanks to the abysmal state of education and literacy at the time.

Charlemagne organized his empire into counties, ruled by (appropriately enough) counts, usually his military followers but sometimes commoners, all of whom were sent to rule lands they did not have any personal ties to. He protected his borders with marches, lands ruled by margraves who were military leaders ordered to defend the empire from foreign invasion. He established a group of officials who traveled across the empire inspecting the counties and marches to ensure loyalty to the crown. Despite all of his efforts, rebellions against his rule were frequent and Charlemagne was forced to war against former subjects to re-establish control on several occasions.

Charlemagne also reorganized the Church by insisting on a strict hierarchy of archbishops to supervise bishops who, in turn, supervised priests. Likewise, under Charlemagne there was a revival of interest in ancient writings and in proper Latin. He gathered scholars from all of Europe, including areas like England beyond his political control, and sponsored the education of priests and the creation of libraries. He had flawed versions of the Vulgate (the Latin Bible) corrected and he revived disciplines of classical learning that had fallen into disuse (including rhetoric, logic, and astronomy). His efforts to reform Church training and education are referred to by historians as the "Carolingian Renaissance."

One innovation of note that arose during the Carolingian Renaissance was a major reform of handwriting, returning to the Roman practice of large, clear letters that are separated from one another and sentences that used spaces and punctuation, rather than the cursive scrawl of the Merovingian period. This new handwriting introduced the division between upper and lower-case letters and the practice of starting sentences with the former that we use to this day. Carolingian workshops produced over 100,000 manuscripts in the 9th century, of which some 6000 to 7000 survive. The Carolingians produced the earliest surviving copies of the works of Cicero, Horace, Lucretius, and Julius Caesar to name a few.

Despite all of its greatness the Carolingian Empire did not outlive the 9th century. Rome's empire lasted much longer, as did Byzantium's and Islam's. All of these realms were fatally weakened by similar problems, but those problems arose more quickly and acutely in the Carolingian world than elsewhere. By the end of the 9th century small political entities had replaced the unified Carolingian Empire. Size and ethnic complexity contributed to the disintegration of the empire. The empire included many small regions-Saxony, Bavaria, Brittany, and Lombardy, for example- that all had their own resident elites, linguistic traditions, and distinctive cultures, which had existed before the Carolingians came on the scene and persist to this day. The Merovingian and Carolingian periods were basically a unifying intrusion into a history characterized by regional diversity. The Carolingians made heroic efforts to build a common culture and to forge bonds of unity, but the obstacles were impossible to overcome.

And then of course were the issues arising from problems of succession. In 806 Charlemagne divided his empire among his three legitimate sons, but two of them died soon thereafter making Louis the Pious his sole heir when he died in 814. The problem, again, was the Frankish succession law. Without an effective bureaucracy or law code, there was little cohesion to the kingdom, and areas began to split off almost immediately after Charlemagne's death in 814 despite the presence of an heir. Then upon Louis's death things became even more complex as he divided the empire into three amongst his sons. The arrangement soon devolved into conflict.

After three years of internecine fighting, Louis's sons signed the Treaty of Verdun, in 843, that divided the empire into 3 realms: the West Frankish, the East Frankish, and the Middle Kingdoms, each ruled by one of the three grandsons of Charlemagne. After fierce battles among the brothers, each appointed 40 members to a study commission that traversed the empire to identify royal properties, fortifications, monasteries, and cathedrals so that an equitable division of these valuable resources could be made. Each brother needed adequate resources to solidify his rule and to attract and hold followers. The lines drawn on the map at Verdun did not last even for a generation.

In addition to internal difficulties and fragmentation, a new wave of attacks and invasions decisively ripped apart the already deteriorating Carolingian empire. In the middle decades of the 9th century, Muslims, Vikings, and Magyars wreaked havoc on the Franks. Based in North Africa and the islands of the western Mediterranean, Muslims attacked Italy and southern France. The Byzantines lost Sicily to raiders from North Africa in 827 and found themselves seriously challenged in southern Italy. In the 840s Muslims raised the city of Rome. These same brigands preyed on trade in the western Mediterranean and even set up camps in the Alps to rob traders passing back and forth over the mountains.

Meanwhile, in the northernmost reaches of the Carolingian Empire, along with Britain and Ireland, the Northmen or the Vikings began assaulting the empire. Supposedly, "From the fury of the Northmen, O Lord, deliver us," was a plaintive cry heard often in 9th century Europe. The Vikings were mainly Danes and Norwegians, seeking booty, glory, and political opportunity. Most Viking bands were formed by leaders who had lost out in the dawning institutional consolidation of the northern world. Some were opportunists who sought to profit from the weakness of Carolingian, Anglo-Saxon, and Irish rule. In the mid-9th century, Vikings began settling and initiated their own state-building activities in Ireland, England, northwestern France (Normandy), and early Russia.

All of these attacks were unpredictable and caused local regions to fall back on their own resources rather than look to the central government. Commerce was disrupted everywhere. Schools, based in ecclesiastical institutions suffered severe decline. The raids were all individually small, but together they amounted to despair and disruption on a massive scale.

But even as the Carolingian Empire itself disintegrated, the idea of Europe as "Christendom" as a single political-cultural entity, persisted. The Latin Christian culture promoted by Carolingian schools and rulers set the tone for intellectual life until the 12th century. Likewise, Carolingian governing structures were inherited and adapted by all of the successor states that emerged in the 9th and 10th centuries. In these respects the Carolingian experience paralleled the Roman, and the Islamic and Byzantine, too. A potent centralized regime disappeared but left a profound imprint on its heirs. For hundreds of years Western civilization would be played out inside the lands that had been Charlemagne's empire and between those lands and their Byzantine and Muslim neighbors.

Charlemagne's legacy was great. He brought together the lands that would become France, Germany, the Low Countries, and northern Italy and endowed them with a common ideology, government, and culture. He provided a model that Europeans would look back to for centuries as a kind of golden age. His vast supra-regional and supra-ethnic entity, gradually called "Christendom," drew deeply on the universalizing ideals of its Roman, Christian, and Jewish antecedents but was, nevertheless, original. With its Roman, Germanic, and Christian foundations, the Carolingian Empire represented the final stage in the evolution of the Roman Empire in the West.

Medieval Politics & Society or the "Dark Ages"

The term "Dark Ages" was coined in the 1330s, at the birth of the Renaissance, by humanist scholars to refer to the early Medieval Period or the early Middle Ages. For those living in the 14th century this was a clearly negative reference, however we know now that the "Dark Ages" were anything but dark. That being said, it was a period of slow to little intellectual, architectural, and artistic development, at least in comparison to the golden ages of Greece and Rome. And what innovations occurred were documented sparsely. There were many reasons for the downturn in intellectual development, and production of historical record, including invasions from new farther flung enemies, disruption in trade, and a turn to more rural lifeways. Yet, pockets of ancient Rome, Greek, or Byzantine culture still remained and prospered, eventually laying the foundation for the European Renaissance in the 14th and 15th centuries.

The Vikings

Until the eighth century, the Scandinavian region was on the periphery of European trade, and Scandinavians (the Norse) themselves did not greatly influence the people of neighboring regions. Scandinavian tribesmen had long traded amber (petrified sap, prized as a precious stone in Rome and, subsequently, throughout the Middle Ages) with both other Germanic tribes and even with the Romans directly during the imperial period. While the details are unclear, what seems to have happened is that sometime around 700 CE the Baltic Sea region became increasingly economically significant. Traders from elsewhere in northern Europe actively sought out Baltic goods like furs, timber, fish, and (as before) amber. This created an ongoing flow of wealth coming into Scandinavia, which in turn led to Norse leaders becoming interested in the sources of that wealth. At the same time, the Norse added sails to their unique sailing vessels, longships. Sailed longships allowed the Norse to travel swiftly across the Baltic, and ultimately across and throughout the waterways of Europe.

Viking ship in a museum in Norway

The Oseberg ship (Viking Ship Museum, Norway) https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...kipet_2016.jpg

The Norse, soon known as Vikings, exploded into the consciousness of other Europeans during the eighth century, attacking unprotected Christian monasteries in the 790s, with the first major raid in 793 and follow-up attacks over the next two years. The Vikings swiftly became the great naval power of Europe at the time. In the early years of the Viking period they tended to strike in small raiding parties, relying on swiftness and stealth to pillage monasteries and settlements. As the decades went on, bands of raiders gave way to full-scale invasion forces, numbering in the hundreds of ships and thousands of warriors. They went in search of riches of all kinds, but especially silver, which was their standard of wealth, and slaves, who were equally lucrative. Unfortunately for the monks of Europe, silver was most often used in sacred objects in monasteries, making the monasteries the favorite targets of Viking raiders. The raids were so sudden and so destructive that Charlemagne himself ordered the construction of fortifications at the mouth of the Seine river and began expanding his naval defenses to try to defend against them.

The word “Viking” was used by the Vikings themselves – it either meant “raider” or was a reference to the Vik region that spanned parts of Norway and Sweden. They were known by various other names by the people they raided, from the Middle East to France: the Franks called them “pagani” or “Northmen,” the Anglo-Saxons “haethene men,” the Arabs “al-Majus” (sorcerers), the Germanic tribes “ascomanni” (shipmen), and the Slavs of what would become Russia the “Rus” or “Varangians” (the latter are described below.) Outside of the lands that would eventually become Russia, the Vikings were universally regarded as a terrifying threat, not least because of their staunch paganism and rapacious treatment of Christians.

At their height, the Vikings fielded huge fleets that raided many of the major cities of early medieval Europe and North Africa. By the late ninth century they were formally organized into a “Great Fleet” based in their kingdom in eastern England (they conquered the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of East Anglia in the 870s). While the precise numbers will never be known, not least because the surviving sources bear a pronounced anti-Viking bias, it is clear that their raids were on a scale that dwarfed their earlier efforts. In 844 more than 150 ships sailed up the Garonne River in southern France, plundering settlements along the way. In 845, 800 ships forced the city of Hamburg in northern Germany to pay a huge ransom of silver. In 881, the Great Fleet pillaged across present-day Holland, raiding inland as far as Charlemagne’s capital of Aachen and sacking it. Then, in 885, at least 700 ships sailed up the Seine River and besieged Paris (note that their initial target, a rich monastery, had evacuated with its treasure; the wine cellar was not spared, however). In this attack, they extorted thousands of pounds of silver and gold. Vikings attacked Constantinople at least three times in the ninth and tenth centuries, extracting tribute and concessions in trade, and perhaps most importantly, they came to rule over what would one day become Russia. In the end, the Vikings became increasingly knowledgeable about the places they were raiding, in some cases actually working as mercenaries for kings who hired them to defend against other Vikings.

Starting in roughly 850 CE, the Vikings started to settle in the lands they raided, especially in England, Scotland, the hitherto-uninhabited island of Iceland, and part of France. Outside of Russia, their most important settlement in terms of its historical impact was Normandy in what is today northern France, a kingdom that would go on centuries later to conquer England itself. It was founded in 911 as a land-grant to the Viking king Rollo in order to defend against other Vikings. Likewise, the Vikings settled areas in England that would help shape the English language and literary traditions (for example, though written in the language of the Anglo-Saxons, the famous epic poem Beowulf is about Viking settlers who had recently converted to Christianity). Ultimately, the Vikings became so rich from raiding that they became important figures in medieval trade and commerce, trading goods as far from Scandinavia as Baghdad in the Abbasid Caliphate.

The Vikings were not just raiders, however. They sought to explore and settle in lands that were in some cases completely uninhabited when they arrived, like Iceland. They appear to have been fearless in quite literally going where no one had gone before. Much of their exploration required audacity as well as planning – they were the best navigators of their age, but at times

their travels led them to forge into areas completely unknown to Europeans. Vikings were the first Europeans to arrive in North America, with a group of Icelandic Vikings arriving in Newfoundland, in present-day Canada, around the start of the eleventh century. An attempt at colonization failed, however, quite possibly because of a conflict between the Vikings and the Indigenous people they encountered, and the people of the Americas were thus spared the presence of further European colonists for almost five centuries.

In what eventually became Russia, meanwhile, Viking exploration, conquest, and colonization had begun even earlier. The Vikings started traveling down Russian rivers from the Baltic in the mid-eighth century, even before the raiding period began farther west. Their initial motive was trade, not conquest, trading and collecting goods like furs, amber, and honey and transporting them south to both Byzantium and the Abbasid Caliphate. The Vikings were slavers as well, capturing Slavic peoples and selling them in the south. In turn, the Vikings brought a great deal of Byzantine and Abbasid currency to the north, introducing hard cash into the mostly barter-based economies of Northern and Western Europe. Eventually, they settled along their trade routes, often invited to establish order by the native Slavs in cities like Kiev, with the Vikings ultimately forming the earliest nucleus of Russia as a political entity. The very name “Russia” derives from “Rus,” the name of the specific Viking people (originally from Sweden) who settled in the Slavic lands bordering Byzantium.

Depiction of a Viking attack in an 11th century manuscript

Depiction of the Varangian Guard in an 11th century chronicle https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Skyla_Gate.jpg

As the Vikings settled in the lands they had formerly raided and as powerful states emerged in Scandinavia itself, the Vikings ceased being raiders and came to resemble other medieval Europeans. By the mid-tenth century, the kings of the Scandinavian lands began to assert their control and to reign in Viking raids. Conversion to Christianity, becoming very common by 1000, helped end the raiding period as well. Denmark became a stable kingdom under its king Harald Bluetooth in 958, Norway in 995 under Olaf Trygvason, and Sweden in 995 as well under Olof Skötkonung. Meanwhile, in northern France, the kingdom of Normandy emerged as the most powerful of the former Viking states, with its duke William the Conqueror conquering England itself from the Anglo-Saxons in 1066.

The Orders of Medieval Society

While most Europeans (excluding the Jewish communities, the few remaining pagans, and members of heretical groups) may have come to share a religious identity by the eleventh century, Europe was fragmented politically. The numerous Germanic tribes that had dismantled the western Roman Empire formed the nucleus of the early political units of western Christendom. The Germanic peoples themselves had started as minorities, ruling over formerly Roman subjects. They tended to inherit Roman bureaucracy and rely on its officials and laws when ruling their subjects, but they also had their own traditions of Germanic law based on clan membership.

The so-called “feudal” system of law was one based on codes of honor and reciprocity. In the original Germanic system, each person was tied to his or her clan above all else, and an attack on an individual immediately became an issue for the entire clan. Any dishonor had to be answered by an equivalent dishonor, most often meeting insult with violence. Likewise, rulership was tied closely to clan membership, with each king being the head of the most powerful clan rather than an elected official or even necessarily a hereditary monarchy that transcended clan lines. This unregulated, traditional, and violence-based system of “law,” from which the modern English word “feud” derives, stood in contrast to the written codes of Roman law that still survived in the aftermath of the fall of Rome itself.

Over time, the Germanic rulers mixed with their subjects to the point that distinctions between them were nonexistent. Likewise, Roman law faded away to be replaced with traditions of feudal law and a very complex web of rights and privileges that were granted to groups within society by rulers (to help ensure the loyalty of their subjects). Thus, clan loyalty became less important over the centuries than did the rights, privileges, and pledges of loyalty offered and held by different social categories: peasants, townsfolk, warriors, and members of the church. In the process, medieval politics evolved over time into a hierarchical, class-based structure in which kings, lords, and priests ruled over the vast majority of the population: peasants.

Eventually, the relationship between lords and kings was formalized in a system of mutual protection. A lord accepted pledges of loyalty, called a pledge of fealty, from other free men called his vassals; in return for their support in war he offered them protection and land-grants called fiefs. Each vassal had the right to extract wealth from his land, meaning the peasants who lived there, so that he could afford horses, armor, and weapons. In general, vassals did not have to pay their lords taxes (all tax revenue came from the peasants). Likewise, the Church itself was an enormously wealthy and powerful landowner, and church holdings were almost always tax-exempt; bishops were often lords of their own lands, and every king worked closely with the Church's leadership in his kingdom.

A vassal pledges fealty to his lord with a scribe documenting the ceremony
Homage ceremony in the Middle Ages <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...miniature.jpg>

This system arose because of the absence of other, more effective forms of government and the constant threat of violence posed by raiders. The system was never as neat and tidy as it sounds on paper; many vassals were lords of their own vassals, with the king simply being the highest lord. In turn, the problem for royal authority was that many kings had “vassals” who had more land, wealth, and power than they did; it was very possible, even easy, for powerful nobles to make war against their king if they chose to do so. It would take centuries before the monarchs of Europe consolidated enough wealth and power to dominate their nobles, and it certainly did not happen during the Middle Ages.

One (amusing, in historical hindsight) method that kings would use to punish unruly vassals was simply visiting them and eating them out of house and home – the traditions of hospitality required vassals to welcome, feed, and entertain their king for as long as he felt like staying. Kings and queens expected respect and deference, but conspicuously absent was any appeal to what was later called the “Divine Right” of monarchs to rule. From the perspective of the noble and clerical classes at the time the monarch had to hold on to power through force of arms and personal charisma, not empty claims about being on the throne because of God’s will.

Unsurprisingly, there are many instances in medieval European history in which a powerful lord simply usurped the throne, defeated the former king’s forces, and became the new king. Ultimately, medieval politics represented a “warlord” system of political organization, in many cases barely a step above anarchy. Pledges of loyalty between lords and vassals served as the only assurance of stability, and those pledges were violated countless times throughout the period. The Church tried to encourage lords to live in accordance with Christian virtue, but the fact of the matter was that it was the nobility’s vocation, their very social role, to fight, and thus all too often “politics” was synonymous with “armed struggle” during the Middle Ages.

Emergence of Local Rule

But the Medieval Europe that the Vikings entered was not the Ancient world. It was not urban, except for the larger cities of Byzantium (Constantinople) and the Arab Empire (like Cordoba with 400,000 inhabitants and Baghdad with over 1 million residents). Instead the medieval world was a rural one. Fewer people lived in large towns and city life played a much less important role for the majority of people. Fewer government functions were based in towns, cultural life was less bound to the urban environment, and trade in luxuries, which depended on towns declined. During medieval times trade and exchanges were much more local, with most major trading centers remaining in the East, collecting Asian luxury goods at Byzantium and sending them out into the Mediterranean. Common trade goods, like food and other bulk goods never travelled very far to begin with because the cost was prohibitive. Most towns were supplied with foodstuffs by their immediate hinterlands, so the goods that traveled long distances had to be portable and valuable like silks or spices or ivories. Byzantium controlled this luxury trade.

But, while towns in the west lost Roman governmental and economic significance they did often survive as focal points of ecclesiastical administration. A cathedral church required a large corps of administrators. Western towns and churches began attracting burghs, or new settlements of merchants most outside of the actual center. Partially this was for safety. Vikings frequently raided these burghs, their existence then was precarious. Few of these towns were impressive in size, population, or military presence, so they were vulnerable to attacks by violent raiders. Even Rome only had about 30,000 inhabitants in 800, down from over a million when Augustus reigned.

Thus agriculture remained the most important element in medieval Europe’s economy and in the daily lives of most people. And within this rural society, one key institution developed, first in the Frankish West, called the manor or a bipartite estate. On the estate one part of the land was set aside as a reserve, or a demesne, and the rest was divided into tenancies. The reserve, consuming from one-quarter to one-half of the total territory of the estate, was exploited directly for the benefit of the landlord. The tenancies were generally worked by the peasants for their own support. The bipartite estate provided the aristocrats with a livelihood while freeing them for military and governmental service.

Estates were run in different ways. A landlord might hire laborers to farm his reserve, paying them with money exacted as fees from his tenants. Or he might require the tenants to work a certain number of days per week or weeks per year in his fields. The produce of the estate might be gathered into barns and consumed locally or hauled to local markets. The reserve might be a separate part of the estate, a proportion of common fields, or a percentage of the harvest. The tenants might have individual farms or work in common fields. Although the manor is one of the most familiar aspects of European life throughout the Middle Ages, large estates with dependent tenants also were evolving in the Byzantine and Islamic worlds.

The manor would be the central focus of the very local and stratified society of the medieval west. Outside of the manor, medieval

society was divided into three traditional sectors or orders of society. As Alfred the Great of England said once that every kingdom needed “men of prayer, men of war, and men of work.” This three way division reveals the way the elite looked at the world. It provided neat places for the clergy, warrior-aristocrats, and peasants. The clergy and the nobility agreed that they were superior to the “workers” but fierce controversies raged over whether ultimate leadership in society belonged to the “prayers” or the “fighters.” And this tripartite society obviously left a lot of people out including townspeople, workers who were not farmers, women, and Jews. We will see the controversies developing from all these issues shortly.

“Those who Pray”

As the church promoted its own vision of the tripartite ordering of society, it assigned primacy to the prayers-its own leaders. Within the clergy, however, sharp disagreements arose over whether the leading prayers were the monks in the monasteries or the bishops in their cathedrals. Whereas in the Carolingian world the clergy served occasionally as an avenue of upward social mobility for talented outsiders, in the High Middle Ages church offices were usually reserved for the younger sons of the nobility. The church was always hierarchical in organization and outlook, so the increasingly aristocratic character of the church’s leadership tended to reinforce those old tendencies.

Basically then in most towns churches were controlled by the local prince or noble, so there was no separation of religious and secular leadership, like with Charlemagne. Nobles would choose the clergy, usually a son of a Lord would serve as the abbot or head of the local monastery as a result. Often this was the role chosen for the second born son. And as marriage was still legal for priests and monks, it was in many ways just like another job for the nobility, who often did not take their responsibility all that seriously. And even if the church was led by someone other than a local noble, Lords and other nobility would simply secure their salvation through donations to the church. At least this is what they believed.

As a result of this and in the aftermath of the Carolingian collapse, a great spiritual reform swept Europe seeking to remove the corrupting influence of secular nobility from the church. It began in 910 when Duke William of Aquitaine founded the monastery of Cluny in Burgundy on land that he donated. At a time when powerful local families dominated almost all monasteries, Cluny was a rarity because it was free of all lay and episcopal control and because it was under the direct authority of the pope. Cluny’s abbots were among the greatest European statesmen of their day and became influential advisers to popes, French kings, German emperors, and aristocratic families.

Cluny sought a rededication to original monastic values, especially on prayer. The monks spent long hours in solemn devotions and did little manual work. Because Cluniac prayer was thought to be especially efficacious, nobles all over Europe donated land to Cluny and placed local monasteries under Cluniac control. Many independent monasteries also appealed to Cluny for spiritual reform. By the 12th century hundreds of monasteries had joined in a Cluniac order. Individual houses were under the authority of the abbot of Cluny, and their priors had to attend an annual assembly. Although the majority of houses reformed by Cluny were male, many convents of nuns also adopted Cluniac practices.

Remnants of the Cluny Abbey

A view of the surviving remnants of the Cluny Abbey church https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...-Paul_-19.jpg

Cluny promoted two powerful ideas. One was that the role of the church was to pray from the world, not to be implicated deeply in it. So the church, and especially its leaders should remain separate from secular practices and politics. The other was that freedom from lay control was essential if churches were to concentrate on their spiritual tasks. Followers and believers of Cluniac traditions and ideas condemned all clerical immorality and inappropriate lay interference in the church. They preached against clerical marriage and simony, the buying and selling of church offices.

Still others though wanted more profound changes. They criticized the monastery at Cluny, saying that it had become too opulent and successful, too immersed in worldly affairs. These critics sought to build new communities according to their vision of the apostolic church, featuring a life of poverty, self-denial, and seclusion, captivating the ascetics. Thus the 11th and early 12th centuries saw a proliferation of both male and female experiments in eremitic monasticism. Other Europeans believed that the apostolic calling demanded not only an austere regimen of personal renunciation but also an active life of Christian ministry. Cathedral clergy, called canons in particular, adapted the Rule of Saint Augustine so that they could live a communal life and also carry out priestly duties.

Nonetheless, and while some of these reform movements made a larger impact on the church and society than others, most were short lived due to the natural amassing of wealth that monasteries received from donors leading to corruption and still growing influence of the nobility.

“Those who Fight”

Ideally a Noble was a well-born, cultivated, office-holding soldier. As Lords were continually trying to expand their power, military prowess was key. At the same time the need for horses and for more expensive arms and armor made it almost impossible for ordinary freemen to be soldiers, even those who owned small pieces of land. These trends then came together as lords granted to their followers either military gear or lands, which would generate income necessary to obtain arms and horses. We call those followers “vassals” and the lands they obtained “fiefs”. Vassalage became a widespread institution all over Europe, and fief-holding became a normal accompaniment to vassalage.

Most of the vassals were also known as Knights. Some knights could even afford the military training, horse, and gear, but still needed protection from rival or greater lords. So they would attach themselves to one local powerful Lord for both land and security. As vassals of lords the Knights would care for the Lord’s land and pay the Lord a certain amount, often in goods produced off the land. Knights could also serve their Lord by military service or by serving at their court. To solidify this relationship of vassalage Knights would go through a ceremony to pledge their allegiance to the Lord. They would then owe loyalty to the Lord. This loyalty was a fundamental part of the Knight’s code of conduct or Chivalry.

Beyond loyalty to one’s lord, chivalry highly esteemed masculine, militant qualities. Military prowess was the greatest attribute; a knight who was not a great warrior was useless. Literature of the time exalts the knight who slays the fearsome beasts or the hero who single-handedly overwhelms impossible numbers of the enemy. Generosity was another characteristic. Instead of displaying one’s wealth publicly, they should show concern for their dependents and if possible entertain them at lavish banquets. The ideal knight was also a pious and moral Christian who acted with honor in all situations. We see this clearly displayed in works of literature like *Beowulf*, *The Song of Roland* and Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, written in the 1130s, which popularized the legend of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. For an excerpt of the anonymously authored *Song of Roland* that tells the tale of one of Charlemagne’s great battles versus the Muslims in Iberia see the link below.

<https://sourcebooks.web.fordham.edu/source/roland-ext.asp>

The system of vassalage began at the very top of society and trickled down. So the King of a region would have multiple lords as his vassals and then each of these lords would have lower lords as vassals, and then each of those would have knights as vassals and so on and so forth. But this system was decentralized, making Dukes and Earls (upper levels of the titled lords/nobility) essentially little kings who controlled local wealth through fees and duties. While there were many common practices and norms of behavior that prevailed over western Europe, there was in fact nothing systematic about how services were obtained or discharged by each knight or lord. Contemporary sources often call vassals knights, regardless of their birth or ancestry.

But, as time passed, into the 11th and 12th centuries, knights and nobles successfully secured tighter control of peasant labor, especially in areas where royal power was weak. This provided knights and nobles with the money to build castles and to acquire fine possessions. As governments expanded their competence, these nobles and knights often held high offices, or if they did not, they pressured kings to concede such offices to them. Lords also tended to gather their lands into coherent blocks and to name their castles after themselves. Families also began to produce genealogies tracing their ancestry back to relatives of the past, kings if possible. At the same time families began to practice primogeniture, reserving all lands, castles, and titles for the firstborn son. These allotments of the choicest inheritances to a shrinking group of men turned loose a large number of younger sons seeking their fortunes. Many of these would be the ones who entered the clergy.

Cardiff Castle of Wales, a 12th century castle

Cardiff Castle, Wales, 12th century, a fortress built upon 3rd century Roman ruins <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...Trennmauer.jpg>

But for the time being this was a warrior society, naturally violent, often with no one of higher authority to enforce peace. That is except for the church, which did attempt to limit warfare and violence. And they did succeed, at least a bit. Lords could not attack clergy or churches and no violence was acceptable on holy days. On the other hand some violence became symbolic with battles “fought” in jousts and festivals to allow an outlet for the violent behavior.

“Those who Work”

The lowest rung of Medieval society was also the largest, made up of the peasants or the “workers.” This segment included both freemen and slaves. Unlike Roman society, where the numbers of slaves was enormous, in Medieval Europe there were relatively few slaves, except perhaps in frontier zones where more were captured during conflicts. In fact by the end of the 11th century, few if any people were called slaves, but serfs. Serfs, people bound to the soil, constituted the majority of peasants, although their legal and social statuses differed considerably from place to place. And these individuals often did not start as serfs, but were small land holders who had had to seek protection, due to a crop a failure or other hardship, from the local lord. Life was

precarious in the middle ages and most lived one illness or freeze away from poverty.

As the farmer in question worked both his land and that of his lord, this more often than not eventually led to serfdom. Serfdom was a mixture of economic, legal, and personal statuses. But by and large serfs had few if any legal rights. Serfs could be flogged in public, attacked by dogs, were excluded from many judicial proceedings, required approval to contract a marriage, and were denied the right to the bear arms. Nevertheless, they were not slaves as they could not be sold. And serfdom was a fairly brief institution. Already by the 12th century the practice began to wane in parts of Western Europe as the region began to emerge from the so-called “Dark Ages” and enter into the High Middle Ages.

While the Vikings are important for various reasons – expanding Medieval trade, settling various regions, establishing the first European contact with North America, and founding the first Russian states – they are also included here simply for their inherent interest; their raids and expansion were one of the most striking and sudden in world history.

Far more important to the historical record were the larger patterns of state and society that formed in the early Middle Ages. Above all, the feudal system had a long legacy in forming the basis of later political structures, and the Latin Church became the essential European intellectual and spiritual institution for centuries to come. Early medieval Europe was defined by shared cultural traits, above all having to do with religion. Despite having lost the opulence and much of the learning of Rome, medieval Europe was not a static, completely backwards place. Instead, it slowly but surely constructed an entirely new form of society in place of what had been.

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Chapter 13: The High Middle Ages

Following the collapse of first the Roman Empire, with the brief resurgence of the Carolingian Empire/Renaissance, Western Europe took a rural turn and witnessed the development of quasi-feudal societies based upon vassalage and local rule. The early Middle Ages operated largely on the basis of subsistence agriculture and a barter economy. Economies were almost entirely local; local lords and kings extracted wealth from peasants, but because there was nowhere to sell a surplus of food, peasants tended to grow only as much as they needed to survive, using methods that went unchanged for centuries. There was a limited market for luxury goods even among those wealthy enough to afford them, and the only sources of reliable minted coins were over a thousand miles away, in Byzantium, Persia, and the Turkic and Arab kingdoms.

This descent into subsistence happened for various reasons over the course of the earlier centuries. The “fall” of the western empire of Rome strangled the manufacture and trade in high-quality consumer goods. Centuries of banditry, raids, and wars made long-distance travel perilous. In turn, the simple lack of markets meant that there was no incentive to grow more than was needed, and the nobility sought to become more wealthy and powerful not by concerning themselves with agricultural productivity (let alone commerce), but instead by raiding one another’s lands.

Portions of Western Europe enjoyed brief periods of relative stability, culminating around 800 CE during the Frankish king Charlemagne’s rise to power. During the rest of the ninth and tenth centuries, however, the invasions of the Magyars, Saracens, and Vikings undermined the stability of the fragile political order created by the Carolingians. Many accounts written at the time, almost exclusively by priests and monks, decried the constant warfare of the period, including the wars caused by invaders from beyond the European heartland and those between European rulers themselves. Things started to change around the year 1000 CE. The major causes for these changes were twofold: the end of full-scale invasions from outside of the core lands of Europe, and changes in agriculture that seem very simple from a contemporary perspective, but were revolutionary at the time. By 1100 Western Europe was beginning to flourish. The population rose sharply, towns were revived, technological gains were made, church reform was attempted, and scholastic renewal began. Essentially, we can see the very early origins of the Renaissance within the High Middle Ages. Inextricably linked to the growth of Medieval Europe were the Crusades, some of the most infamous and recorded events of the High Middle Ages, as they were supported by the revival of Western Europe and also influenced many of the advances of Europe that led to the Renaissance.

The End of the “Dark Ages”

The Medieval Agricultural Revolution

In 600 CE, Western Europe had a population of approximately 14 million. By 1300 it was 74 million. That 500% increase was due to two simple changes: the methods by which agriculture operated and the ebb in large-scale violence brought about by the end of foreign invasions. The first factor in the dramatic increase in population was the simple cessation of major invasions. With relative social stability, peasants were able to consistently plant *and* harvest crops instead of seeing them devoured by hungry invaders or trampled by armies. Those invasions stopped because the Vikings went from being raiders to becoming members of settled European kingdoms, beginning with the present day British Isles and Normandy. The Magyars likewise took over and settled in present-day Hungary while the Saracens were beaten back by increasingly savvy southern-European kingdoms. Warfare between states in Europe remained nearly constant, and banditry was still commonplace in the countryside, but it appears that the overall levels of violence did drop off over the course of the eleventh century.

Simultaneously, important changes were underway in agricultural technology. Early medieval farmers had literally scratched away at the soil with light plows, usually drawn by oxen or donkeys. Plows were like those used in ancient Rome: the weight of the plow was carried in a pole that went across the animal’s neck. Thus, if the load was too heavy the animal would simply suffocate. In turn, that meant that only relatively soft soils could be farmed, limiting the amount of land that could be made arable.

A series of inventions led to dramatic changes. Someone (sadly who exactly remains undocumented) developed a new kind of collar for horses and oxen that rested on the shoulders of the animal and thus allowed it to draw much heavier loads, enabling the use of heavier plows. Those plows were called *carruca*: a plow capable of digging deeply into the soil and turning it over, bringing air into the topsoil and refreshing its mineral and nutrient content. Simultaneously, iron horseshoes became increasingly common, which dramatically increased the ability of horses to produce usable muscle power, and iron plowshares proved capable of digging through the soil with greater efficiency.

In addition to the increase in available animal power thanks to those innovations, farmers started to take advantage of new techniques that greatly increased the output of the fields themselves. Up to that point, European farmers tended to employ two-field crop rotation, planting a field while leaving another “fallow” to recover its fertility for the next year. This system was sustainable but limited the amount of crops that could be grown. Starting around 1000 CE, farmers became more systematic about employing three-field crop rotation: working with three linked fields, they would plant one with wheat, one either with legumes (i.e. peas, beans, or lentils) or barley, and leave one fallow, allowing animals to graze on its weeds and leftover stalks from the last season, with their manure helping to fertilize the soil. After harvest, farmers would rotate: the fallow field would be planted with grain, the grain with legumes, and the legume field left fallow. This process enriched the soil by returning nutrients to it directly with legumes or at least allowing it to naturally recover while it lay fallow. Thus, the overall yields of edible crops dramatically increased. Likewise, with the greater variety, the actual nutritional content of food became better.

Starting in earnest in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, windmills and watermills became increasingly common for grinding grain into usable flour. The difference in speed between hand-grinding grain and using a mill was enormous – it could take most of a day to grind enough flour to bake bread for a family, but a mill could grind fifty pounds of grain in less than 30 minutes. While peasants resented having to pay for access to mills (which were generally controlled by landowners, often nobles or the Church), the enormous increase in productivity meant that much more food was available overall. Thus, mills were still cost effective for peasants, and milled flour became the norm across most of Europe by the end of the twelfth century.

As the 1000s progressed, and technology improved, everywhere in Europe new land was brought into cultivation. This was partially due to a warmer and dryer climate throughout continental Europe during the 11th to the 13th centuries. This allowed for the clearing of forested land throughout Europe that had been abandoned following the contraction of the Roman Empire and lain fallow for hundreds of years. It is possible that even escaped serfs found opportunities to begin cultivating the new land. And new land was not the only benefit of warmer climates. Not a single vegetable blight was recorded. By the late twelfth century an acre of farmland in a fertile region was yielding a crop 3 to 4 times larger than in the Carolingian era. Given the combination of more land under cultivation and more yield per acre, the overall gains in the food supply were enormous. Food was more abundant and more nutritious. Animals were increasingly reared for their meat, and higher meat consumption meant more protein in the diet. Beans and other legumes, also rich in protein, were more widely cultivated. Fine grains such as wheat replaced poorer cereals – like ryes – in many areas. People of every class and region were almost certainly eating better and living longer and healthier lives.

The medieval agricultural revolution had tremendous long-term consequences for peasants and, ultimately, for all of European society. Thanks to the increase in animal power and the effects of crop rotation, existing fields became far more productive. Additionally, whole new areas were opened to cultivation, thanks to the ability of the carruca to cut through rocky soil. As a result, there was a major expansion between 1000 – 1300 from the middle latitudes of Europe farther north and east, as the farming population took advantage of the new technology (and growing population) to clear and cultivate what had been forest, scrub, or swamp. In turn, the existence of a surplus encouraged lords to convert payment in kind (i.e. taxes and rents paid in actual foodstuffs and livestock) to cash rent. Likewise, the relative stability allowed smaller kingdoms to mint their own coins, and over the course of a century or so (c. 1000 – 1100) much of Europe returned to a cash economy from a barter economy. This gave peasants an added incentive to cultivate as much as possible.

Peasants actually did very well for themselves in these centuries; they were often able to bargain with their lords for stabilized rents, and a fairly prosperous class of landowning peasants emerged that enjoyed traditional rights vis-à-vis the nobility. Thus, the centuries between 1000 CE – 1300 CE were relatively good for many European peasants. Later centuries would be much harder for them. As an aside, it is important to bear in mind that the progressive view of history, namely the idea that “things always get better over time” is actually factually wrong for much of history, as reflected in the lives of peasants in the Middle Ages and early modern period.

Cities and Economic Change

The increase in population tied to the agricultural revolution had another consequence; beyond simply improving life for peasants and increasing family size, it led to the growth of towns and cities. Even though many peasants never left the area in which they were born, some did migrate to the nearest towns and cities and tried to make a life there; serfs (unfree peasants) who made it to a town and stayed a year and a day were even legally liberated from having to return to their former farm. Likewise, whole families and even villages migrated in search of new lands to farm, generally speaking to the east and north as noted above.

This period saw the rebirth of urban life. Since the “fall” of Rome most towns and cities consisted of little more than central hubs of local trade with a few thousand inhabitants. By the twelfth century, however, many cities were expanding rapidly, sometimes by as much as six times in the course of a few centuries. Likewise, the leaders of these cities were often merchants who grew

rich on trade, rather than traditional landowning lords. Exponential growth occurred in cities including Flanders, Bruges, Ghent, Paris, London, and across Italy. Ghent expanded its city walls 5 times between 1160 and 1300, a sure sign of growth even without reliable population statistics. For the first time since late antiquity, cities were becoming centers for many activities, of course still principally as trade hubs or market centers.

Map of Europe showing the various trade routes connecting different growing kingdoms and/or areas of urbanization in the late Medieval Age

Late Medieval Trade Routes <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/ade/Routes.jpg>

The basic trade routes and networks had existed since Carolingian times, but a novelty of the 12th century was the emergence of the Champagne fairs as a meeting point for the commerce of Northern and Southern Europe. Since the early Middle Ages, only a few locations hosted permanent fairs. By the middle of the 12th century, however, the spices, silks, and dyes of the Mediterranean, the wool of England, the furs and linens of Germany, and the leather products of Spain began to be sold in a series of six fairs held in the Champagne region of France. The fairs became more and more popular with merchants who took advantage of the fairs to be able to reliably sell their wares to a much wider clientele. This allowed for a specialization of goods in certain areas that merchants could then sell elsewhere. Tin would come from England, wool from northern Italy, and of course silks and spices from Asia, but all were available in one large market.

A detail from a stained glass window of Chartres Cathedral, France showing a vendor of spices from the 13th century

A detail from a stained glass window of Chartres Cathedral, France showing a vendor of spices. 13th century CE <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/9...pice-merchant/>

Even as the agricultural revolution laid the foundation for growth and the cities took advantage of it, other factors led to the economic boom of this period. Lords created new roads and repaired Roman ones from 1,000 years earlier, which allowed bulk trade to travel more cheaply and effectively. More important than bulk goods, however, were luxury goods, a trade almost entirely controlled by the Italian cities during this period. Caravans arrived in the Middle East bringing goods from China and Central Asia that were then sold to the Italian merchants waiting for them. From the Black Sea Region and what was left of Byzantium, the Italians then transported these goods back to the west. Silk and spices were worth far more than their weight in gold, and their trade created the foundation for early financial markets and banks.

Trade networks emerged not only linking Italy to the Middle East but southern to northern Europe. In the Champagne region of France annual fairs brought merchants together to trade their goods. German rivers saw the growth of towns and cities on their banks where goods were exchanged. Starting in the twelfth century, the German city of Lubeck became the capital of the Hanseatic League, a group of cities engaged in trade that came together to regulate exchange and maintain monopolies on goods. Even though cities did not “fit” in the medieval worldview very well, even the most conservative kings had to recognize the economic strength of the new cities. Just as peasants had been able to negotiate for better treatment, large towns and cities received official town charters from kings in return for stable taxation. In many cases, cities were practically politically independent, although they generally had to acknowledge the overall authority of the king or local lord.

The growth in trade did not, however, create a real “market economy” in the modern sense. For one thing, skilled trades were closely regulated by craft guilds, an innovative medieval institution, which maintained legal monopolies. Monopolies were granted to guilds by kings, lords, or city governments, and anyone practicing a given trade who was not a member of the corresponding guild could be fined, imprisoned, or expelled. Guilds jealously guarded the skills and tools of their trades – everything from goldsmithing to barrel making was controlled by guilds. Guilds existed to ensure that their members produced quality goods, but they also existed to keep out outsiders and to make the “masters” who controlled the guilds wealthy.

As cities grew, so did guilds. In 1200, for example, Paris had one guild of merchants and four or five craft or trade associations. By 1270 the city had 101 craft or trade guilds, and by 1292 the number had risen to 130. The guilds had many functions. Their main purpose was economic, though most began as religious or charitable organizations: to regulate standards of production, to fix prices, and to control membership in their respective trades. But as towns grew larger and more impersonal, these associations of people engaged in similar occupations fostered a sense of belonging, a feeling of community. Members tended to live in the same areas and to worship together in a parish church. The guilds indulged in elaborate festivals and celebrations, which sometimes turned into drunken debauches despite being held to honor saints. The guilds were also mutual assurance societies. That is, they assisted colleagues who fell on hard times, saw to the funeral expenses of members, and provided for widows or orphans.

But soon other institutions took up residence in growing towns. Governments, which required larger staffs of trained personnel, settled in towns. The towns of Italy and Flanders, though not national capitals, ruled over extensive hinterlands, requiring much more infrastructure. Schools and eventually universities sprung up in growing towns as they were and are urban institutions. Mercantile, industrial, and legal organizations were located in towns. Ecclesiastical organizations were always urban based, and

in many locals were the only surviving vestiges of Roman or Carolingian structures. Slowly, towns began to compete with royal and aristocratic courts as literary, intellectual, political, and religious centers.

The kingdoms of Europe up to this point were barely unified. In many cases, kings were simply the most powerful nobles, men who extracted pledges of loyalty from their subjects but whose actual authority was limited to their personal lands. Likewise, kings in the early Middle Ages were largely itinerant, moving from place to place all year long. They had to make an annual circuit of their kingdoms to ensure that their powerful vassals would stay loyal to them; a vassal ignored for too long could, and generally did, simply stop acknowledging the lordship of his king. Those patterns started to change during the High Middle Ages, and the first two kingdoms to show real signs of centralization were France and England.

In France, a series of kings named Philip (I through IV) ruled from 1060 to 1314, building a strong administrative apparatus complete with royal judges who were directly beholden to the crown. The kings ruled the region around Paris (called the Île-de-France, meaning the “island of France”), but their influence went well beyond it as they extended their holdings. Philip IV even managed to seize almost complete control of the French Church, defying papal authority. He also proved incredibly shrewd at creating new taxes and in attacking and seizing the lands and holdings of groups like the French Jewish community and the Knights Templar, both of whom he ransacked (the assault on the Knights Templar started in 1307).

In England, the line descending from William the Conqueror (following his invasion in 1066) was also effective in creating a relatively stable political system. All land was legally the king’s, and his nobles received their lands as “fiefs,” essentially loans from the crown that had to be renewed for payments on the death of a landholder before it could be inherited. Henry II (r. 1154 – 1189) created a system of royal sheriffs to enforce his will, created circuit courts that traveled around the land hearing cases, and created a grand jury system that allowed people to be tried by their peers. In 1215, a much less competent king named John signed the Magna Carta (“great charter”) with the English nobility that formally acknowledged the feudal privileges of the nobility, towns and clergy. The important effect of the Magna Carta was its principle: even the king had to respect the law. Thereafter English kings began to call the Parliament, a meeting of the Church, nobles, and well-off commoners, in order to get authorization and money for their wars.

The social consequences of urbanization were dramatic and widespread, yet the status of merchants (despite their wealth) in European society was troubled. They were resented by the poor, often held in contempt by traditional land-owning nobles, and frequently condemned by the Church. Usury, the practice of lending money and charging interest, was classified as a sin by the Church even though the Church itself had to borrow money and pay interest constantly. Likewise, antisemitic stereotypes about Jews as greedy and ruthless arose from the simple fact that dealing in money and money-lending was one of the only professions Jews were allowed to pursue in most medieval kingdoms and cities. Christian Europeans needed loans (as it happens, loans and banking are essential to a functioning cash economy), but despised the Jews they got those loans from – hence the origins of some of the longest-lasting antisemitic stereotypes.

The Revival of Knowledge

The dynamism so evident in the economic, social, and political life of Middle Ages Western Europe was just as apparent in cultural life. Despite the biases of later Renaissance thinkers that the medieval period was nothing but the “dark ages,” bereft of learning and culture, there were very important intellectual achievements in the period of 1000 – 1400 CE. Royal courts and churches were the greatest patrons of artists and authors. But in this period the number and geographic spread of patrons increased dramatically. One of the most important urban centers of culture became Paris, also the location of a new kind of academic institution: the University, which is arguably the period’s greatest legacy to the modern world.

A symptom of the growth of intellectual life in the High Middle Ages was the fact that literacy (which, at the time, meant the ability to read, not necessarily to write) finally revived, at least a bit, following the real nadir of literacy that had lasted from the collapse of the western Roman Empire until about 1050. As of 1050, perhaps 1% of the population could read, most of whom were priests, some of the latter only being able to stumble through the Latin liturgy without fully comprehending it. While it is impossible to calculate anything close to the exact literacy rates at any point before the modern era, it is still clear that literacy started to climb following the eleventh-century low point, with many regular merchants and even a few peasants acquiring at least basic reading knowledge by the fourteenth century. The explanation for this growth in literacy is an expansion of educational institutions that had only existed in a few pockets earlier in the Middle Ages.

The two forms of educational institutions available were tutoring offered within monasteries and schools associated with cathedrals. Both were, obviously, part of the church, and cathedral schools in particular focused on training future priests. Monasteries offered basic education in literacy (in Latin) to laypeople as well as the monks themselves, and even some prosperous farmers achieved a basic degree of literacy as a result. Cathedral schools in cities offered the same, and they

increasingly trained not only local elites, but even the children of artisans and merchants.

While they did offer basic education to laypeople, the official focus of cathedral schools was in training priests. They began to expand after 1000 CE, offering a more focused and rigorous grounding in sacred texts and, to an extent, ancient texts from Rome, to help educate church leaders and laypeople. The cathedral schools were supposed to be turning out not just spiritual leaders, but skilled bureaucrats, and that required a rigorous form of education that encouraged the study not just of the Bible, but of classics of Latin literature like the speeches of the great Roman politician Cicero and ancient Rome's great epic poet, Virgil author of the *Aeneid*. Thus, those priests-in-training who were lucky enough to attend one of the better cathedral schools acquired a strong command of classical Latin and were made aware of the high intellectual standards that had prospered in the glory days of Rome.

Before the 12th century most higher education did not emphasize any sort of independent or analytical thought. Instead it was based on the memorization and repeating of texts. Partially this was due to the lack of books, so the professor would simply read the books to a room full of students while they copied his "lecture" word for word. But new monastic movements (discussed in the following section) began to encourage independent thought and analysis both within and outside of the church. Monks also began to promote the ideas that clergy should learn all disciplines, not just theology. And as members of the clergy sought new knowledge, other members of high society began to seek education as well. However, the growing population of would-be students had few options to pursue their education.

In the early decades of the 12th century students gathered wherever famous teachers might be found. The last decades of the 12th century saw a swarm of masters and students in Paris. The University of Paris was the result of these meetings. By 1300 universities had formed elsewhere in France, as well as in Italy, England, and western Germany. As universities were founded across Europe they became known for certain specializations, though they did all offer a standard or basic curriculum. Paris was the center for art and theology, Salerno in Italy and Montpellier in France for medicine, Oxford for mathematical and scientific subjects, and Bologna for law. Thanks to the Crusades and Moorish occupation of the Iberian Peninsula, 12th century Italians had rediscovered Roman law recorded by Justinian, the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, which formed the foundation of the new law schools.

A scholar/professor sits above a group of students reciting a text to them

A scholar and students at the University of Paris as depicted in a work of Gautier de Metz published in 1464 https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/e/e_du_Monde.jpg

Scholasticism

If there was a single event that changed education and scholarship in the late Middle Ages, it was the arrival of the lost works of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle was one of the greatest geniuses of the ancient world, producing learned works on philosophy, astronomy, physics, biology, literary criticism and, most importantly for medieval Europe, logic. Some of Aristotle's works had survived in Europe after the fall of Rome, but most of it had vanished. Over the course of the eleventh century, translations of Aristotle's work on formal philosophical logic re-emerged in Europe. Most had been preserved in the Middle East, where Aristotle was considered the single most important pre-Islamic philosopher and was studied with great rigor by Arab and Persian scholars. Enterprising scholars – many of them Jewish philosophers who lived in North Africa and Spain – translated Aristotle's work on logic from Arabic into Latin. Later, Greeks from Byzantium came to Europe with the originals in Greek and they, too, translated it into Latin.

The importance of the rediscovery of Aristotle is that his work on logic offered a formal system for evaluating complicated bodies of work like the Christian Bible itself. The inherent problem facing believers of any religion based on a single major text is figuring out what that text fundamentally means. To wit: the Christian Bible is full of parables, stories, and accounts of events that are often terrifically difficult to interpret. Even in the four gospels that describe the life of Christ, not all of Christ's actions or sayings are easy to understand, and the gospels sometimes offer conflicting accounts. What did Christ mean when he said "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24)? What did he mean with "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34)? Not to mention, how was a Christian to make sense of the stern, vengeful God described in the Old Testament and the deity of peace and forgiveness represented by Christ? Most medieval Christians were content to simply accept the sacraments and offer prayers to the saints without worrying about the theological details, but increasingly, educated priests themselves wanted to understand the nuances of their own religion.

Thus, Aristotle's formal approach to logic proved invaluable to the interpreters of the Bible. Armed with his newly-rediscovered system of logical interpretation, key figures within the church began to analyze the Bible and the works of early Christian thinkers with new energy and focus. The result was scholasticism, which was the major intellectual movement of the High Middle Ages.

Scholasticism was the rigorous application of methods of logic, originally developed by Aristotle, to Christian scriptures. And, because the cathedral schools of the late Middle Ages increasingly relied on scholasticism to train and teach new priests, it spread rapidly across all of Europe.

By roughly 1100 CE, a new form of formal education based on scholasticism was the method of instruction in cathedral schools. The instructor would read a short passage from the Bible or an early Christian intellectual leader, then cite various authorities on the meaning of the passage. This was called the lecture, which simply means the “reading.” Students would then consider the possible meanings of the passage in a period of meditation. Finally, and most importantly, students would be called on to debate their respective interpretations. In debates, students were expected to cite not only the passage itself but any supporting evidence they could come up with from the vast body of sacred and ancient writings. The result was that, at least at the better cathedral schools, large numbers of newly-minted priests emerged with a strong understanding of Christian thought and an equally strong grasp of rhetoric, debate, and logic.

The importance to scholasticism of what was called at the time “disputation” – the debating technique described above – cannot be overstated. Rather than merely presenting an interpretation of Christian thought and expecting students to absorb it verbatim, scholastic teachers used disputation with students to hone their students’ argumentative skills, insight, and logical analysis. One obvious example of a field that benefited from formal disputation was law: disputation as a technique easily transitioned from biblical questions to legal ones, and by the twelfth century new generations of lawyers (starting in Italy) used scholastic techniques both to revive aspects of Roman law and to hone their own skills as lawyers.

The new rigor of education and the expansion of cathedral schools led in turn to the emergence of the first true universities. Initially, they were comparable to craft guilds, with organizations of students and teachers negotiating over the cost of classes and preventing unauthorized lecturers from stealing students. A princely charter was granted to the law students of Bologna in northern Italy in 1158, which marks it as the first recognized university. The most significant medieval university was, however, the Sorbonne of Paris in 1257. It grew out of the cathedral school of Notre Dame and it is usually considered the oldest large university in the western world (it is still very much in operation today).

A Stately, building with marble columns in the middle of a bustling Parisian street

The Sorbonne, the University of Paris’s historic main campus <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4d/Sorbonne.jpg>

Medieval universities created a number of practices that live on to the present in higher education. They drew up a curriculum, established graduation requirements and exams, and conferred degrees. The robes and distinctive hats of graduation ceremonies are directly descended from the medieval models. Teachers were all members of the clergy, “professing” religion, hence the term “professor.” The core disciplines, which date back to Roman times, were divided between the liberal arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic (called the trivium) and what might now be described as a more “technical” set of disciplines: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (the quadrivium) – this division was the earliest version of a curriculum of “arts and sciences.” Finally, the four kinds of doctorates, the PhD (doctor of philosophy), the JD (doctor of jurisprudence, that is to say, of law), the ThD (doctor of theology, a priest), and the MD (doctor of medicine), are all derived from medieval degrees.

All students and professors were male, since the assumption was that the whole purpose of studies was to create better church officials; while some women did become important medieval thinkers, they were either exceptional individuals who had been tutored by men or were nuns who had access to the (often excellent) education of the convents. One outstanding example of a medieval woman who was known in her own lifetime as a major intellectual figure was Hildegard of Bingen (1098 – 1179), abbess of a German convent. While not formally educated in the scholastic tradition, Hildegard was nevertheless the author of several works of theological interpretation and of medicine. She was a musician and composer as well, writing music and musical plays performed by both nuns and laypeople. She carried on a voluminous correspondence with other learned people during her lifetime and was eventually sainted by the church. While Hildegard was exceptional in her range of intellectual production, many other women within the church also contributed to medieval learning and scholarship as a whole.

A wooden lecture room/theater with three rows of benches surrounding a center table

University of Bologna’s Anatomical Theatre, photo by author Erin Stone

The Podium at the front of the wooden room where the professor would deliver his lecture

Professor’s Lectern at the University of Bologna’s anatomical theatre, photo by author Erin Stone

While universities were a giant step forward, student life was not easy. First, most students had to be of considerable means to afford tuition and to be able to not work for years at a time. And beyond the price, most students had to travel long distances to reach universities and stay in basic, if not dirty or dangerous lodgings. Areas around England’s now famed Oxford and Cambridge were some of the few colleges that actually provided lodging. To the contrary, the University of Paris made no such promises, with

many students ending up in undesirable neighborhoods full of bars and prostitutes.

Architecture

The 12th century witnessed the emergence of Gothic architecture. The style began in France and was first employed in the construction of churches and cathedrals. One of the most familiar images of the Middle Ages is the inspiringly beautiful Gothic Cathedral. The first Gothic church was built outside of Paris, a monastery in Saint-Denis. The architect Abbot Suger sought to create a new style. He desired to achieve effects of lightness, almost weightlessness, in the stonework of his church and to admit huge amounts of light, creating a dazzling and mysterious aura on the inside. In particular he used pointed arches, flying buttresses, and filled the structure with stained glass. And while this was a new style, it too, like the Greek science and Justinian law taught at universities across Europe owed its debt to the Islamic world. First, the construction of these huge and elaborate structures was only possible after the recovery of Euclid's (a Greek mathematician) mathematical writings and their application to Aristotle's logic. Second, the very idea and use of the pointed arch was imported from the Islamic world, having been used in mosques. The famous Parisian cathedral Notre Dame is likely the most well-known example.

The front of Notre Dame Cathedral from along the Seine River

Notre Dame Cathedral, photo by Erin Stone

Close up image of a flying buttress on the outside of Notre Dame

Flying Buttresses of Notre Dame Cathedral https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...e_buttress.jpg

Heretics and Dissidents: Religious Reform

Heresy, as defined in Medieval European law, was a situation when "each man chooses for himself the teaching he believes to be the better one," that is he ignores official doctrines that he does not agree with. For many faith was and should be an individual matter, but for the Pope and leaders of the Catholic "Universal" Church of the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries this was not an acceptable opinion. To the contrary the church saw unity of belief amongst all its followers as crucial to the church and Christian Europe. In the 12th century, the church reacted ever more strictly to challenges to its teachings and/or to its exclusive right to teach. The effort by the church to define its law, theology, and bureaucratic procedures with greater precision drew lines more sharply than ever before between what was and was not acceptable.

Each sect or group of heretics, had different ideas and goals for the future of Christianity. Some questioned if Jesus was born of a virgin, while others still took a more Arian approach to the Trinity and Jesus's divinity, and then there were the Cathars pursuing the Zoroastrian like teachings in southern France who were subjected to the Crusaders in the 13th century. But in general, all of the movements shared a desire to cleanse the church. Most criticized the Church for recent immoral behaviors, namely the blatant pursuit of wealth. Some questioned the validity of tithes, others labelled clerics as whores and even churches as brothels due to the leniency with which the church viewed clerical marriage and mistresses.

Corruption in the Church

Monasteries and convents were not alone in their wealth. The upper ranks of the church – bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and the popes themselves – were almost exclusively drawn from the European nobility. Lower-ranking churchmen were, in turn, commoners, often drawn from the ranks of the same peasants that they ministered to from one of the small parish churches that dotted the landscape. All of the wealth that went into the church, from an obligatory tax called the tithe, was siphoned up to the upper reaches of the institutional church, and many of the high-level priests lived like princes as a result.

Morality in this setting was, predictably, lax. Despite the nominal requirement not to marry, many high-level priests lived openly with concubines and equally openly supported their children, seeing their sons set up as landowners or members of the church in their own right and marrying off daughters to noble families. Despite the injunction to live simply and avoid luxury, many priests (and monks, and nuns) were greedy and ostentatious; one notorious practice was of bishops or archbishops who controlled and received incomes from many different territories (called bishoprics) at once but never actually visited them. Another practice was of noblemen literally buying positions in the church for their sons – teenage boys might find themselves appointed bishops thanks to the financial intervention of their fathers, with church officials pocketing the bribe. Medieval depictions of hell were full of the images of priests, monks, and nuns all plummeting into the fire to face eternal torment for what a profoundly poor job they had done while alive in living up to the moral demands of their respective vocations. In other words, medieval laypeople were well aware of how corrupt many in the church actually were.

In addition, while medieval education and literacy was almost entirely confined to the church as an institution, many rural priests

were at best semi-literate. All church services were conducted in Latin, and yet some priests understood Latin only poorly, if at all (it had long since vanished as a vernacular language in Europe). Thus, some of the very caretakers of Christian belief in medieval society often had a very shallow understanding of what that belief was supposed to consist of theologically.

For all of the Middle Ages, however, the fact that the lay public knew that the church was corrupt and that many of its members were incompetent was of limited practical importance. There was no alternative. Without the church, without the sacraments only it could offer, without the prayers issued by monks and nuns for the souls of believers, and without its reassurance of a life to come after death, medieval Christians were certain that their eternal souls were damned to hell.

Monasticism

One special social category within medieval society deserves added attention: the monks and nuns. Monks and nuns took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience when they left their normal lives and joined (respectively) monasteries and convents. They did not, however, have to spend their time attending to the spiritual needs of laypeople (i.e. people outside of the Church), which was the primary function of priests. Instead, they were to devote themselves to prayer and to useful works, activities that were thought to encourage piety and devotion among the monks and nuns, and which often proved to be extremely profitable to the monasteries and convents themselves.

Monasteries and convents grew to become some of the most important economic institutions in medieval Europe, despite their stated intention of housing people whose full-time job was to pray for the souls of Christians everywhere. Monasteries and convents had to be economically self-sustaining, overseeing both agriculture and crafts on their lands. Over time, activities like overseeing agriculture on monastery lands, brewing beer or making wine, or painstakingly copying the manuscripts of books often became a major focus of life in monasteries and convents. In essence, many monasteries and convents became the most dynamic and commercially successful institutions in their home regions. Monks and nuns encouraged innovative new forms of agriculture on their lands, sold products (including textiles and the above-mentioned beer and wine) at a healthy profit, and despite their vows of poverty, successful monasteries and convents became lavishly decorated and luxurious for their inhabitants.

Simultaneously, one way that medieval elites tried to shore up their chances of avoiding eternal damnation was leaving land and wealth in their wills to monasteries and convents. Generations of European elites granted land, in particular, to monasteries and convents during life or as part of their posthumous legacy. The result was the astonishing statistic that monasteries owned a full 20% of the arable land of Western Europe by the late Middle Ages.

Mendicant Orders

Traditional monastic orders (Benedictine, Carmelite) continued to win adherents, but their interpretation of the apostolic life meant ascetic withdrawal from the world, not pastoral work and preaching. Early in the 13th century a new movement arose, the Mendicants (which literally means beggars). Mendicants were men who aimed to preach, to be poor, and to create formal but noncloistered religious orders. Though similar to the heretics in many ways, they submitted willingly to ecclesiastical authority.

The Mendicant phenomenon began when Francis of Assisi, the son of a rich Italian merchant, decided to renounce the wealth and status that were his birthright. He carried out his renunciation in a most public display before the bishop of Assisi in 1206. Francis had grown tired of a life of luxury and ease, but he also experienced a moment of spiritual insight when, by chance, his eyes fell on the passage in the Scriptures in which Christ commanded a rich young ruler, "Go, sell all you have, and follow me." Francis stripped himself naked so that "naked he might follow the naked Christ." For a few years Francis wandered about Italy begging for his meager sustenance, repairing churches, caring for the sick, and preaching repentance to all who would listen. By 1210 he had attracted many followers, and together they set out to see Pope Innocent III to win approval. After considering the matter, Innocent approved the order, all of whose members professed obedience to the Pope and to Francis. In the wake of the newly formed Franciscans, nine or ten other mendicant orders developed, including the Dominicans. Together the Franciscans and Dominicans would help to carry out the conversion of the native peoples of the New World.

The Crusades

In 1096 an army of Christian knights who called themselves pilgrims left Europe to liberate the Holy Land from the Muslim "infidel." This was the first of many crusades, so called because the warriors were *crucesignati* or "signed by the cross." By the late 11th century Europe was a fortress that had marshaled all of its resources for an attack on the world around it. Europe's expanding population, economic dynamism, and political consolidation made Europeans very optimistic. This optimism led them to the First Crusade, and many more over the next two centuries.

The crusades were a series of invasions of the Middle East by Europeans in the name of Christianity. They went on, periodically, for centuries. They resulted in a shift in the identity of western Christianity, great financial benefits to certain parts of Europe, and many instances of terrible bloodshed. The crusades serve as one of the iconic points of transition from the early Middle Ages to the high Middle Ages, in which the localized, barter-based economy of Europe transitioned toward a more dynamic commercial economic system. Likewise, the crusades were instrumental in forging lasting political and economic links between Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, centuries after those connections had been badly damaged after the fall of the western half of the Roman Empire.

The Background: East and West

From 867 to 1025 CE, the Byzantine Empire experienced a period of successful rule and stability. Along the Balkan frontier they kept the Bulgarians and Kievan Russians at bay while also neutralizing many smaller Slavic principalities. Emperor Basil II (976-1025) even received the nickname of the “Bulgar Slayer” as he wore down Bulgaria in a series of campaigns. In the West the Byzantines maintained an effective diplomacy with Venice that permitted lucrative commercial opportunities in the Adriatic. In the East the Byzantines profited from the gradual dissolution of the Abbasid caliphate by expanding their own frontier into Anatolia.

To the contrary, and perhaps allowing the Byzantine success, throughout the 9th and 10th centuries the ability of the caliphs in Bagdad to control their vast empire declined. Egypt and North Africa escaped Baghdad’s control almost completely, and religious strife between Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims further destabilized the Islamic state. The Muslim World splintered into numerous small states during the 900s, which were easy prey for expanding Seljuk Turks (Sunni Muslims) who were inspired to conquer by religious zeal. By the 1050s they had captured Baghdad and subjugated the Abbasid caliphate. Then slowly they settled throughout Asia minor, extending their control into Jerusalem, which had been under Muslim control since the 7th century. Next on the list was Byzantium.

After their emperor’s death in 1025, Byzantium suffered a long period of short reigns and abrupt changes in policy. In the capital factional squabbling swirled around the Imperial court, and in the person of Patriarch Michael Cerularius (1043-1058) the church sought to break out from two centuries of Roman domination. When in 1054 Cerularius and Pope Leo IX quarreled so bitterly over ecclesiastical customs that they excommunicated each other, the traditionally cooperative papal-Byzantine religious diplomacy gave way to a deep schism between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches that still exists. Religious tensions were complicated when the staunchly anti-Byzantine Normans began creating their kingdom in southern Italy.

The Turks at the Gates

It was into these divisive and chaotic circumstances that the Seljuk Turks appeared on the eastern frontier of Anatolia. Bands of Turks, peoples from central Asia, had been serving the caliphs as mercenaries since the 9th century. With new leaders at their head, and with both the caliphate and the empire distracted, the Turks broke into Anatolia with vengeance. In 1071 at Manzikert a skirmish between Byzantine and Turkish soldiers turned into a rout in which Byzantium lost an army, an emperor, and their reputation for military prowess. Ever since the emergence of the Turkish threat, in the early 11th century, the Byzantines had been seeking mercenary help. The imperial defeat at Manzikert made their search much more urgent and led to appeals to the West. Some troops were rounded up, but not enough, so in 1095, Emperor Alexius Comnenus sent envoys to ask Pope Urban II to support a plea for mercenary help against the Turks.

The only problem was that to most people in Western Europe the threat to Byzantium meant little. What did, however, alarm Westerners were alleged Turkish attacks on pilgrims to Jerusalem. The Pope saw in the plight of the Byzantines, and of Western pilgrims, some opportunities to manifest leadership of the Eastern church. The papacy also wanted very much to heal (or at least end) the Roman-Orthodox rift. The pope, therefore, placed a high value on aiding the Byzantines. The Church now just had to convince the secular kings, and of course the would-be crusaders.

Moreover, a crusade was perfectly consonant with the ethos of the knights of Western Europe. The literature of the age glorified war and warriors. But churchmen had for some years been advancing an ideal of Christian knighthood that stressed fighting only God’s enemies. In the late 10th century there arose, first in France and then in many other places, peace movements called the “Peace of God” or the “Truce of God.” These movements sought to prevent war in certain seasons, such as around Christmas and Easter, and on certain days of the week, chiefly Sunday. Peace movements also attempted to outlaw fighting near churches, protect noncombatants, and soften the treatment of enemies and captives. Together the movements induced knights to fight non-Christians outside Europe (similar to the Islamic concept of jihad). Along with religious zeal, a quest for fame and fortune motivated many young men whose political prospects at home were limited.

Pope Urban II's Call to Crusade

Pope Urban II received Alexius's envoys in 1095 and then left Italy for France. In November at Clermont, Urban delivered a rousing speech to a vast Christian assembly. In it he ignored the Eastern Emperor's appeal for aid for Byzantium and instead promised salvation to all soldiers who would enlist in a great struggle to free the Holy Land. Urban spoke of the supposed atrocities committed by the Turks, the richness of the lands that European knights might expect to seize, and the righteousness of the cause of aiding fellow Christians. The idea caught on much faster and much more thoroughly than Urban could have possibly expected; knights from all over Europe responded when the news reached them. The idea was so appealing that not only knights, but thousands of commoners responded, forming a "people's crusade" that marched off for Jerusalem, for the most part without weapons, armor, or adequate supplies.

Much of the impulse of the Crusades came from the fact that Urban II offered unlimited penance to the crusaders, meaning that anyone who took part in the crusade would have all of their sins absolved; furthermore, pilgrims were now allowed to be armed. Thus, the crusades were the first armed Christian pilgrimage, and in fact, the first "official" Christian holy war in the history of the religion. The fact that thousands of people were willing to leave everything they knew behind in the name of an incredibly dangerous armed voyage to foreign lands speaks directly to the power of religious belief in the pre-modern world.

The most important organizations of the crusades were the knightly orders: groups of knights authorized by the church to carry out wars in the name of Christianity. These orders came into being after the First Crusade, originally organized to provide protection to Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land. They were made up of "monk-knights" who took monastic vows (i.e. of obedience, poverty, and chastity) but spent their time fighting as well as praying. The concept already existed at the start of the crusading period, but the orders grew quickly thanks to their involvement in the invasions. Two orders in particular, the Hospitalers and the Templars, would go on to achieve great wealth and power despite their professed vows of poverty.

[Pope Urban II Speech at Clermont, 1095](#)

Despite the content of Urban's speech, to be clear, Jerusalem, though a part of the caliphate since 637 was in no new danger at this juncture. In fact, to the contrary Christians, Jews, and Muslims (all of whom viewed the city as one of the most holy sites for their faith, if not THE most holy) regularly made pilgrimages to the city. Few of these travelers if any were actually being attacked, in reality the only individuals suffering were traders and merchants trying to get goods to Byzantium. But of course a focus on trade impediments would not be sufficient to raise a holy army, so Pope Urban II, went with a more inflammatory version of reality. And thousands did respond to the Call for Crusade for both religious and monetary reasons. Many, including those of higher birth, sought land and enrichment, especially younger sons due to the practice of primogeniture.

The Peasant's or People's Crusade

While professional armies would eventually be organized (Pope Urban planned for the first crusade to begin in August of 1096), the first group to react to the call were petty nobles and peasants, many serfs, who immediately set off to Jerusalem with no other weapons than pitchforks, hardly any supplies, and no discipline. Most of these men would not even have known where Jerusalem was, let alone how to get there or how to carry out an extended battle. While the exact number of crusaders/participants in this endeavor is impossible to know, we can estimate that they numbered into the thousands.

Many were led by the charismatic leader, Peter the Hermit. Peter was the most successful of the preachers to take up Pope Urban's message, and developed an almost hysterical enthusiasm among his followers, even though he was not an "official" preacher sanctioned by Urban at Clermont. This group of crusaders took an interesting route to the Holy land travelling first through the Rhineland (what would be Northern Germany centuries later) targeting Jewish communities. In particular they attacked three cities with high Jewish populations: Speyer, Worms, and Mainz. The Crusaders were particularly affronted at the fact that Jews were specifically protected by Emperor Henry IV. They also argued that it would be ridiculous to travel so far to attack Muslims when so many "heretics or infidels" lived in their own backyard. The Rhineland Jews faced either conversion to Catholicism or death. Hundreds were massacred, preferring martyrdom over a false conversion.

After burning and pillaging their way through Europe, especially devastating much of Eastern Europe, the "people's crusade" eventually made it to Byzantium/Constantinople in August 1096. Their actions prompted Emperor Alexius to ferry the group of "crusaders" across the Bosphorus one week later, happy to rid himself of the "crusaders." After entering Asia, and despite the peasant's belief in God's will and protection, when they finally faced a Turkish force, their army was annihilated. Most of the peasants, and Peter the Hermit with them, were dead by the end of August.

Illuminated manuscript showing the "people's crusaders" in white facing a force of darker skinned Turks in battle
Medieval illuminated manuscript showing Peter the Hermit's People's Crusade of 1096 <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/de/Massacre.jpg>

The First Four Crusades

The First or Prince's Crusade

The First Crusade (1095 – 1099), lasting four years after the initial declaration by Pope Urban, was amazingly successful. What had once been the great power of the Middle East, the Abbasid Caliphate, had long since splintered apart, with rival kingdoms holding power in North Africa and the Middle East. The doctrinal differences between Sunni and Shia Muslims further divided the Muslim ummah. In addition, the Arab kingdoms battled the Seljuk Turks, who were intent on conquering everything, not just Christian lands. Thus, the crusaders arrived precisely when the Muslim forces were profoundly divided. Furthermore, Jerusalem and the surrounding region was not regarded by most Muslims of being of particular religious importance at the time; it was greatly overshadowed by the much greater importance of the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina. As a result, while local Muslim rulers certainly fought back against the crusaders, there was no coalition or alliance that opposed the crusade itself. As a result, in 1099 the crusaders had captured Jerusalem and much of the Levant, forming a series of Christian territories in the heart of the Holy Land. These were called "The Latin Principalities," kingdoms ruled by European knights.

Following Pope Urban's call, lords of Europe began to organize and by mid-1096 four large armies, which eventually swelled into perhaps a hundred thousand men (mostly French knights with a smattering of troops from other parts of Europe), assembled under the leadership of the pope's legate and various high-ranking nobles. The forces all met one another at Constantinople, where they expected a warm welcome from Emperor Alexius along with all the supplies they would need for the actual battles ahead. However, instead they were met with coldness, largely due to the ragtag band of peasants that had just preceded the Crusaders rippling through the Balkans like a plague of locusts. Second, Alexius had hoped that the Western armies would be fighting the Turks attacking the boundaries of Byzantium in Anatolia, not going on an expedition with the intent of "liberating" Jerusalem.

But after receiving promises of loyalty and the return or donation of any lands captured, Alexius moved the Crusaders into Anatolia, ferrying them across the Bosphorus as he had the People's crusaders. Almost immediately the Latin army defeated a Turkish force, thus earning a valuable though short-lived, reputation for invincibility. The troops then entered Syria and laid siege to Antioch, which did not fall until 1098. At this point rivalries among the Crusaders themselves emerged. One force went to the frontier of Armenia and carved out a principality there. One of the Normans kept Antioch for himself. The main army though pressed on to Jerusalem and after, a short but fierce siege, conquered it in July 1099.

Map showing the route from Byzantium into the Holy Land taken by the First Crusade

Map of the First Crusade <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/1...t-crusade-1096-1099/>

And while the Crusaders looked upon their mission as religious and divinely ordered, their actions speak to other motivations and influences. The seizure of Jerusalem was incredibly bloody, with the temple literally being filled ankle deep with blood. The Crusaders massacred all Muslims and Jews without regard as to whether they were fighting or not. So women, children, and unarmed men fell victim in addition to Islamic or Jewish soldiers.

At the end of the siege of Jerusalem, Godfrey of Bouillon, a leader of one battalion that had "liberated" Jerusalem, was named as the "Advocate of the Holy Sepulcher" and became ruler of the Christians in the East. He lived only a short time, but his brother, Baldwin, replaced him as King of Jerusalem in 1100. The King of Jerusalem was the overlord of numerous Feudal kingdoms that divided up the Holy Land. Soon after the military campaign the Holy Orders of the monks joined the Crusaders in Jerusalem. Feudal lords and monks then grew enormously wealthy controlling the trade routes through the Levant, in addition to the enormous amount of treasure they were able to collect during the battles and plundering themselves. So organized for war was this society that it produced a new and militant kind of monasticism: the Knights Templar. The Templars took vows of poverty and chastity. But unlike monks, they devoted themselves to warfare. Their first mission was to protect the pilgrimage routes from Palestine to Jerusalem. They also manned town garrisons and guarded money as it was transported from Europe to the Holy Land. In this way, the Order of Templars became enormously wealthy. They turned the wealth into investments, becoming bankers after the loss of Jerusalem in 1187.

Despite the violence and corruption that followed, the First Crusade was judged as a success. The Holy Land was retaken from the infidel, and the pilgrim routes were completely passable once more. Entirely uncertain, however, were the prospects of the crusader states, the future course of Western relations with Byzantium, and the reaction of the Islamic world once it recovered

from the shock of the unexpected attack. And unfortunately for the nascent crusader kingdoms, almost all the original Crusaders returned home after capturing Jerusalem, leaving the Crusader Kingdoms very vulnerable to Turkish aggression. In fact, the Turks almost immediately began to attack the Holy land, first taking back Odessa.

Second Crusade

Following the First Crusade, subsequent crusades were much less successful. The problem was that, once they had formed their territories, the westerners had to hold on to them with little but a series of strong forts up and down the coast. The European population centers were obviously hundreds or thousands of miles away and the Arabic and Turkic kingdoms nearby were militarily powerful. For several decades, the Latin Principalities both warred with and allied with Muslim-ruled kingdoms, and the original religious vision behind Christian rule of the Holy Land tended to fade into the background. While generations of Europeans continued to regard crusading as a worthwhile endeavor, that enthusiasm did ebb over time.

Crusading was intended to protect the Holy Land and keep open the pilgrim routes to Jerusalem. The creation of the small crusader states in the hostile environment of Syria and Palestine made continued crusading almost inevitable. In 1144 the tiny crusader state at Odessa on the Armenian frontier fell to a Muslim army. Although the news saddened Europeans, it took immense efforts by the papacy and other religious leaders to launch another crusade. Finally Conrad III of Germany and Lois VII of France agreed to lead it, but because neither would willingly submit to the other's authority, the Second Crusade accomplished little. In fact, the Second Crusade consisted of two crusades that happened simultaneously: some European knights sailed off to the Holy Land, while others fought against the Cordoban Caliphate, the Muslim kingdom of Spain, in the Iberian Peninsula. And the crusade's one small victory came from the Iberian conflict; in 1147 an army of English, French, and Flemish soldiers who were proceeding to the Holy Land by sea put in on the Iberian coast and captured Lisbon. This opened a new front in the Reconquista and laid the foundations for the later kingdom of Portugal.

Third Crusade

In 1187 an Egyptian Muslim general named Salah-ad-Din (his name is normally anglicized as Saladin) retook Jerusalem after crushing the crusaders at the Battle of Hattin. This prompted the Third Crusade (1189 – 1192), a massive invasion led by the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (Frederick Barbarossa), the king of France (Philip II), and the king of England (Richard I – known as “The Lion-Hearted”). It completely failed, with the English king negotiating a peace deal with Saladin after Frederick died (he drowned trying to cross a river) and Philip returned to France. After this, only a few small territories remained in Christian hands.

The Siege of Acre (1189-1191) was one of the most important battles of the Third Crusade and is one of the longest Western-led sieges in the Middle Ages. By the end of August 1188, King Guy (the exiled king of Jerusalem) arrived at Acre with upwards of 700 knights and 9,000 infantry. While the Christian forces knew the city's defenses and structure well, challenging Saladin's forces was no small feat. While Christian forces perceived the Muslim army as numbering in the hundreds of thousands, historians speculate that the reality is approximately 8,000 to 12,000, reaching upwards of 25,000-40,000 for critical battles. Upon their arrival to Acre, King Guy, his family, and military chiefs established a camp on the hill of Toron. Despite an uphill advantage, Muslim forces encircled the Crusaders, forcing them to build ramparts and dig ditches. In desperate need of reinforcements, Guy began fighting the Siege of Acre on two fronts.

A Medieval fortress under attack from Arab forces

Detail of a medieval miniature of the Siege of Antioch from Sébastien Mamerot's *Les Passages d'Outremer* <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...ofAntioch.jpeg>

In April 1191, King Phillip II Augustus of France arrived with six ships filled with supplies, soldiers, and horses. The following June, King Richard the Lionheart arrived with a fleet of twenty-five ships. These reinforcements marked the swift end of the siege as the Crusaders reclaimed the city between July and August. With the collapse of the city's fortified walls and the opening of the city's gates, the Crusaders claimed Acre. However, the siege did not end the Third Crusade, as Jerusalem remained the ultimate prize. The Crusaders continued south from Acre to the port city of Jaffa. Aware of the Christian's march, Saladin sent troops to harass and slow the approaching Crusaders. Tolerating these smaller attacks for a few days, King Richard faced the Muslim army on September 7th, 1191, in the Battle of Arsuf. The day-long battle resulted in Christian victory; however, neither force suffered substantial losses. After defeating the Muslim troops, King Richard marched on, passing through Jaffa and eventually reaching territories near Jerusalem, but King Richard ultimately knew he could not take the city alone. The Crusaders retreated, and following a year of skirmishes and other small-scale battles, King Richard and Saladin negotiated peace in October of 1192.

Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi:

Penned between 1194 and 1222, *Itinerarium* offers narrative insight into the Third Crusade. This entry and translation, provided by the Fordham Medieval Sourcebook, shows the Crusaders celebrating their victory in Acre.

When all the Turks had left the city, the Christians, on the orders of the two Kings, opened the gates and freely entered the city, joyfully dancing and exulting at the top of their voices. They glorified the Lord and gave thanks, for God had showed his great mercy to them and he had visited and worked redemption for his people. The banners and manifold flags of the Kings were run up atop the walls and towers. The city was equally divided by the two Kings. They also made a proportionally equal distribution of the supplies of arms and of food. The captives of the highest degree of nobility were divided between them by lot.... The King of France, moreover, for his part had the noble palace of the Templars with all its appurtenances. King Richard got the royal palace, to which he sent his queens with the children and their servants. Thus each of the Kings peacefully secured his position. The army was housed throughout the city. After the prolonged daybyday agonies of the siege, they now quietly refreshed themselves in much desired peace. On the night following our entry, Saladin and his army, out of fear of our people, left the place where they had camped and occupied a mountain further away.

Source: *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi*, ed. William Stubbs, Rolls Series, (London: Longmans, 1864) III, 1, 5, 13, 17-18 (pp. 210-11, 214-17, 224-26, 231-34), translated by James Brundage, *The Crusades: A Documentary History*, (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1962), 175-81.

Fourth Crusade

Arguably the most disastrous (in terms of failing to achieve its stated goal of controlling the Holy Land) crusade was the Fourth Crusade, lasting from 1199 – 1204. Disappointed with the results of the 3rd Crusade, Innocent III began calling for another crusade immediately on his election in 1198. Popular preachers summoned an army, once again largely French, and the pope and the 4th Crusade's military leaders engaged the Venetians to construct a fleet of war and transport ships. In less than 18 months, a tribute to the awesome capabilities of the Venetian shipyards, a fleet was ready to sail to Egypt. From Egypt the crusader army would proceed to Jerusalem. Ships, however, were expensive, and the Venetians drove hard bargains. When too few Crusaders and too little money appeared, the Venetians suggested that the Crusaders could discharge some of their debt by recapturing from the Hungarians the formerly Venetian port of Zara on the Dalmatian Coast. This idea outraged the pope, but he could do little about it.

At the same time, a pretender to the Byzantine throne appeared in the crusader camp, one who promised that if the Crusaders would help him to claim his patrimony, he would contribute to the cost of the Crusade. The Venetians urged the indebted Crusaders to accept this offer, and, to the horror of Innocent III, the Fourth Crusade turned to Constantinople. Once in Constantinople the Crusaders learned that their new ally had few friends in the Byzantine capital, but the venture hardly collapsed. The Venetians saw an opportunity to expand business opportunities in the East, and the soldiers welcomed a chance to plunder the Mediterranean's greatest city and to avenge what they regarded as a century of Byzantine perfidy. Thus the Fourth Crusade captured not Jerusalem but Constantinople and the Crusaders sacked Constantinople taking enormous wealth from the city. Byzantium was then divided up into Frankish kingdoms. Until 1261, the Eastern and Western churches were reunited under papal leadership, and substantial tracts of the Balkans fell to Western knights under a "Latin emperor" of Constantinople. Byzantium was never able to recover from the assault, resulting in continued Arab expansion into territory that once served as a bulwark against Islamic conquest.

In later decades popes began to take a more active role in planning crusades. No pope wanted to lose control of a crusade as Innocent had done, and all popes saw that the liberation of Jerusalem required a solid base of operations in the Eastern Mediterranean. Egypt was the objective of the 5th and 6th crusades. Despite a few victories, though, the Crusaders could not win a secure base. No further crusades to the East were organized in the 13th century. In 1291 Acre, the last Crusader stronghold fell, and the original crusading era ended, and ended ingloriously, losing more Christian land to Muslim peoples than they had had before the Crusades began.

Nonetheless many smaller crusades followed; popes would continue to authorize official large-scale invasions of the Middle East until the end of the thirteenth century, and the efforts of Christian knights in Spain during the Reconquest very much carried on the crusading tradition for centuries. Later crusades were often nothing more than politically-motivated power grabs on the part of popes, launched against a given pope's political opponents (i.e. fellow European Christians who happened to be at odds with a pope). Technically, the last crusade was the Holy League, an army drawn from various kingdoms in Central and Eastern Europe dispatched to fight the Ottoman Empire in 1684. None of the latter crusades succeeded in seizing land in the Middle East, but they did inspire a relentless drive to overthrow and destroy the now centuries-old Muslim kingdom of Spain, as noted above, and they also inspired the idea of the potential "holiness" of warfare itself among Christians.

Consequences of the Crusades

The crusades had numerous consequences and effects. Four were particularly important. First, the city-states of northern Italy, especially Venice, Genoa, and Pisa, grew rich transporting goods and crusaders back and forth between Europe and the Middle East. As the transporters, merchants, and bankers of crusading expeditions, it was northern Italians that derived the greatest financial benefit from the invasions. The crusades provided so much capital that the northern Italian cities evolved to become the banking center of Europe and the site of the Renaissance starting in the fifteenth century. Italian merchants also adopted mercantile practices they first learned in the Middle East, like the use of Arabic numerals, and they acquired the lion's share of trade in precious goods like spices that arrived in Europe via Middle Eastern trade routes.

Second, the ideology surrounding the crusades was to inspire European explorers and conquerors for centuries. The most obvious instance of this phenomenon was the Reconquest of Spain, which was explicitly seen through the lens of the crusading ideology at the time. In turn, the Reconquest was completed in 1492, precisely the same year that Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas. With the subsequent invasions of South and Central America by the Spanish, the crusading spirit, of spreading Catholicism and seizing territory at the point of a sword, lived on.

Third, there was a new concern with a particularly intolerant form of religious purity among many Christian Europeans during and after the Crusades. One effect of this new focus was numerous outbreaks of anti-Semitic violence in Europe; many crusaders attacked Jewish communities in Europe while the crusaders were on their way to the Holy Land, and anti-Jewish laws were enacted by many kings and lords inspired by the fervent, intolerant new brand of Christian identity arising from the Crusades. Thus, going forward, European Christianity itself became harsher, more intolerant, and more warlike because of the Crusades.

Fourth, Europe's relative isolation from the rest of Eurasia and North Africa came to an end with the crusades. The volume of trade between Europe and the Middle East increased dramatically as the religious fervor of the crusades weakened and the desire for eastern goods grew. Ideas and scholarship originating in the Middle East and Central Asia arrived in Europe alongside trade goods, and some of those ideas – like the concept of linear perspective in art – would go on to play a key role in Renaissance art and scholarship over time. This combination of trade and scholarship was closely related to both the wealth that funded the Renaissance, as noted above, and the longing for a direct route to the Asian sources for goods like spices that ultimately led to the European “voyages of discovery” that began in the fifteenth century. Put simply, the dynamism of European culture going into the Renaissance era was based in large part on the connections that were forged during the era of the crusades.

While it is tempting to characterize European intellectual life before about 1000 CE as part of a “dark age,” that was obviously no longer the case by the eleventh century. Educational institutions multiplied, diversified, and expanded, and the quality of education and scholarship increased along with that expansion. While most people – by definition, peasants – remained illiterate and largely ignorant of the world beyond their own villages, there was at least a current of real intellectual curiosity and rigorous scholarship expanding in the cities, monasteries, and convents of the High Middle Ages.

Chapter 14: Death, Dirt, and Disease in Medieval Europe

From a very “high level” perspective, the years between about 1000 CE – 1300 CE were relatively good ones for Europe. The medieval agricultural revolution sparked an expansion of population, urbanization, and economics, advances in education and scholarship paid off in higher literacy rates and a more sophisticated intellectual life, and Europe was free of large-scale invasions. A better diet allowed people to be healthier and live longer, while producing and supporting more children. However, this rate of population growth could not be maintained. After three centuries of dramatic growth, Europe was seriously overpopulated with estimates ranging from 80 to 100 million. In some parts of Europe population would not reach this same level until the late 18th century. Opportunities began to dwindle, famine, war, and epidemics proliferated, all of which brought changes in trade and commerce. Starting in the mid-thirteenth century in Eastern Europe, and spreading to Western Europe in the fourteenth century, a series of crises undermined European prosperity, security, and population levels. Historians refer to these events as the “crises of the Middle Ages.”

Crises of Medieval Europe

The “Little Ice Age” 1300-1700

In the 13th century, pack ice began advancing southwards in the North Atlantic, as did glaciers in Greenland. Anecdotal evidence suggests glaciers expanding worldwide at this point. Data based on radiocarbon dating of roughly 150 samples of dead plant material, collected from beneath ice caps on Baffin Island and Iceland, suggest that cold summers and ice growth began abruptly between 1275 and 1300, followed by “a substantial intensification” from 1430 to 1455. The drop in temperature, around 3 degrees Fahrenheit, was enough to bring about several crop failures. In general wet and cold weather repeatedly ruined crops in much of northern Europe. Food stocks were quickly exhausted, and mass starvation followed. People died so quickly, English chroniclers reported, that survivors could not keep up with the burials. At Ypres, in Flanders, 2800 (about 10% of the population) died in just six months. And shortages continued. The most severe years of the famine were 1315-1317, known as the Great Famine. There were reported cases of people eating horses, dogs, and even of cannibalism. And the famine, decrease of temperature, and consequences of overpopulation, were all only made much worse by the outbreak of Bubonic plague, otherwise known as the Black Death discussed later in the chapter.

Graph showing global average temperature changes decreasing in the 1300s and then going up from 1600 onward

Global Temperature Change https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...Ed_Hawkins.svg

During the “Little Ice Age” the Baltic Sea froze over twice, in 1303 and 1306–1307, and years followed of “unseasonable cold, storms and rains, and a rise in the level of the Caspian Sea”. The Little Ice Age brought colder winters to large parts of Europe and North America. Farms and villages in the Swiss Alps were destroyed by encroaching glaciers during the mid-17th century. Canals and rivers in Great Britain and the Netherlands were frequently frozen deeply enough to support ice skating and winter festivals.

Prolonged cold, dry periods brought drought upon many European communities and resulted in poor crop growth, poor livestock survival, and increased activity of pathogens and disease vectors. Disease intensified under the same conditions that unemployment and economic difficulties arose: prolonged cold, dry seasons. Disease and unemployment generated a lethal positive feedback loop. Although the communities had some contingency plans, such as better crop mixes, emergency grain stocks, and international food trade, they did not always prove effective. Communities often lashed out via violent crimes, including robbery and murder. Europeans sought explanations for the famine, disease, and social unrest that they were experiencing, and they blamed the innocent. Evidence from several studies indicate that increases in violent actions against marginalized groups, which were held responsible for the Little Ice Age, overlap with the years of particularly cold, dry weather.

One example of the violent scapegoating occurring during the Little Ice Age was the resurgence of witchcraft trials. Prior to the Little Ice Age, witchcraft was considered an insignificant crime, and victims (the supposed witches) were rarely accused. But beginning in the 1380s, European populations began to link magic and weather-making. The first systematic witch hunts began in the 1430s, and by the 1480s witches were blamed for direct and indirect consequences of the Little Ice Age: livestock epidemics, cows that gave too little milk, late frosts, and unknown diseases. In general, the number of witchcraft trials rose as the temperature dropped, and trials decreased when temperature increased. The peaks of witchcraft persecutions overlap with the hunger crises that occurred in 1570 and 1580, the latter lasting a decade. The trials targeted primarily poor women, many of them widows.

Jewish populations were also blamed for climatic deterioration during the Little Ice Age. The Western European states experienced waves of anti-Semitism, directed against the main religious minority in their otherwise Christian societies. There was no direct link made between Jews and the weather; they were blamed only for indirect consequences such as disease. Some populations blamed the cold periods and the resulting famine and disease during the Little Ice Age on a general divine displeasure. Particular groups took the brunt of the burden in attempts to cure it. In Germany, regulations were imposed upon activities such as gambling and drinking alcohol, which disproportionately affected the lower class. Other regulations affected the wider population, such as prohibiting dancing, sexual activities and moderating food and drink intake.

The Black Death

Historians have now arrived at a consensus that the deadliest epidemic in medieval and early-modern history began in the Mongol khanates and spread west along trade routes: the Black Death, or simply “the plague,” of the fourteenth century. The plague devastated the areas it affected, none more so than Europe. That devastation was in large part due to the vulnerability of the European population to disease thanks both to poor harvests and the lack of practical medical knowledge. A series of bad harvests led to periods of famine in Europe starting in the early fourteenth century. Conditions in some regions were so desperate that peasants reportedly resorted to cannibalism on occasion. When harvests were poor, Europeans not only died outright from famine, but those who survived were left even more vulnerable to epidemics because of weakened immune systems. By the time the plague arrived in 1348, generations of people were malnourished and all the more susceptible to infection as a result.

Medicine was completely ineffective in holding the plague in check. Europeans did not understand contagion – they knew that disease spread, but they had absolutely no idea how to prevent that spread. The prevailing medical theory was that disease was spread by clouds of foul-smelling gasses called “miasmas,” like those produced by stagnant water and decay. Thus, people sincerely believed that if one could avoid the miasmas (which of course never actually existed), they could avoid sickness. Over the centuries, doctors advocated various techniques that were meant to dispel the miasmas by introducing other odors, including leaving piles of onions on the streets of plague-stricken neighborhoods and, starting in the seventeenth century, wearing masks that resembled the heads of birds, with the “beaks” stuffed with flower petals.

Not surprisingly, given the dearth of medical knowledge, epidemics of all kinds regularly swept across Europe. When harvests failed, the poor often went to the cities in search of some kind of respite, either work or church-based charity. In 1330, for instance, the official population of the northern Italian city of Florence was 100,000, but a full 20,000 were paupers, most of whom had come from the countryside seeking relief. The cities became incubators for epidemics that were even more intense than those that affected the countryside.

Thus, a vulnerable and, in terms of medicine, ignorant population fell victim to the virulence of the Black Death from 1348 to 1351. Historians still debate as to exactly which (identifiable with contemporary medical knowledge) disease or diseases the Black Death consisted of, but the prevailing theory is that it was bubonic plague. Bubonic plague is transmitted by fleas, both those carried by rats and transmitted to humans, and on fleas exclusive to humans. In the unsanitary conditions of medieval Europe, there were both rats and fleas everywhere. In turn, many victims of bubonic plague developed the “pneumonic” form of the disease, spread by coughing, which made it both incredibly virulent and lethal (about 90% of those who developed pneumonic plague died).

The theory that the Black Death was the bubonic plague runs into the problem that modern outbreaks of bubonic plague do not seem to travel as quickly as did the Black Death, although that almost certainly has much to do with the vastly more effective sanitation and treatment available in the modern era as compared to the medieval setting of the Black Death. One hypothesis is that those with bubonic plague may have caught pneumonia as a secondary infection, and that pneumonia was thus another lethal component of the Black Death. Regardless of whatever disease or combination of diseases the Black Death really was, the effects were devastating.

The plague exploded across Europe starting at the end of the 1340s. All of Southern Europe was affected in 1348; it spread to Central Europe and England by 1349 and Eastern Europe and Scandinavia by 1350. It went on to spread even further and continued to fester until 1351, when it had killed so many people that the survivors had developed a resistance to it. The death toll was astonishing: in the end, the Black Death killed about one-third of the population of Europe in just three years (that is a conservative estimate – some present-day historians have calculated that it was closer to half). Some cities lost over half of their population; there are even cases of villages where there was only a single survivor. This was an enormous demographic shift in a very short amount of time that had lasting consequences for European society, thanks mostly to the labor shortage that it introduced.

Map showing the spread of the plague from southern Europe to the north with lighter colors marking later infection

Map of the Spread of the Black Death <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/1...in-europe-1346—1/>

Searching for Meaning and the Cause

The only somewhat effective response to the Black Death was the implementation of quarantines (quarantine comes from the Italian word *quaranta* or forty as most quarantines of ships or individuals lasted forty days). The more fast-acting city governments of Europe locked those who had plague symptoms in their homes, often for more than a month, and sometimes whole neighborhoods or districts were placed under quarantine. In the countryside, people refused to travel to larger cities and towns out of fear of infection. Even though quarantines slowed the spread of the plague in some cases, overall they did little but delay it. Following medical ideas held since ancient Greece, most believed that bad odors or “miasmas” caused disease. Therefore, another more scientific method to attack the spread of the disease was to clean the excrement filled streets of European cities. While largely ineffective at the time, these efforts eventually helped to lead to safer and cleaner cities.

More common than practical measures like quarantines, however, was prayer and the search for scapegoats to blame for the devastation. The spiritual reaction to the plague was, among Christian Europeans, to implore God for relief, beg for forgiveness, and to look for outsiders to blame. Building on the murderous anti-Semitism that had begun in earnest during the period of the crusades, Jews were often the victims of this phenomenon. There was a huge spike in anti-Semitic riots during plague outbreaks, as Jews were blamed for somehow bringing the plague (a frequent accusation was that Jews had poisoned wells), and thousands of Jews were massacred as a result.

Religious movements also emerged in response to the plague, like the Flagellants: groups of penitents who roamed the countryside, villages, and towns whipping themselves and begging God for forgiveness. The Flagellants, among others, sincerely believed that the plague was God’s punishment for the Catholic Church’s rampant sins; from simony to possessing exorbitant wealth to the papal crisis. When priests began to refuse to conduct last rites out of fear of contagion (though they would not have been able to describe it as such) while the church inherited hundreds of estates as entire families perished, cries against the institution surged. Many people sincerely believed that the Black Death was the opening salvo of the End Times, since the history of Europe in the fourteenth century so clearly involved both famine and pestilence – two of the four “horsemen” that were to accompany the end times according to the Bible (the others, war and death, were ever-present as well).

And just as Europe could begin to contemplate recovery, the plague returned in 1360, and again in 1372. On average, it returned every eleven years. And Medieval Europe was not prepared for the onslaught of the disease. Lacking an understanding of either contagion or infection, 14th century doctors depended on traditional theories inherited from the Greeks, especially the work of Galen, to treat the plague. In Galenic medicine good health depended on the proper balance of bodily and environmental forces, which could be upset by corrupt air, the movement of planets, and even a violent shift in the emotions or humors.

But it was actually the Black plague that began to make people realize the rhythms of the infestations; and some officials and governments even began to perceive the infectious nature of disease and began to institute or at least *try* to institute quarantines and embargoes to restrict the movement of goods and people from areas where the plague was raging. Other officials focused on trying to clean up cities in the hopes that a more cleanly environment would stop the spread, for example decrees were issued to keep dung and mud out of the same space where raw meat was being sold.

Unintended Consequences of the Plague

The Black Death ended in 1351, but the plague returned roughly every twenty years in some form. Some cases were as devastating, at least in limited areas, as the Black Death had been in its first iteration. The plague did not stop entirely until the early eighteenth century – to this day it is not clear what brought an end to large-scale plague outbreaks, although one theory is that a species of brown rat that was not as vulnerable to the plague overwhelmed the older black rats that had infested Europe.

Ironically, the immediate economic effects of the plague after it ended were largely positive for the survivors. The demographic consequences of the Black Death, namely its enormous death toll, resulted in a labor shortage across all of Europe. One immediate effect was that despite the death toll, lords tried to keep their peasants from fleeing the land while also keeping wages at the same low levels as before the plague, sparking various peasant uprisings. Even though those uprisings were violently put down, the overall trend was that laborers had to be paid more; their labor was simply more valuable. In the decades that followed, then, many peasants benefited from higher wages for their labor and prices for their crops. The result was the beginning of the end of serfdom across most of Europe and the growth of wage labor.

For those who left the farms or manors, they found new opportunities in recently de-populated cities. With millions perishing,

there were now hundreds if not thousands of openings from doctors to lawyers to merchants. With a new demand for many skilled professions, new universities emerged across Europe, while traditional institutions expanded (like Cambridge England and the Universities of Bologna and Florence in Italy). For the peasant survivors of the plague new economic, social, and educational opportunities abounded.

Another group that benefited was women. For roughly a century after the plague, women had more legal rights in terms of property ownership, the right to participate in commerce, and land ownership, than they had enjoyed before the plague's outbreak. Women were even able to join certain craft guilds for a time, something that was almost unheard of earlier. The reason for this temporary improvement in the legal and economic status of women was precisely the same as that of peasants: the labor shortage.

The plague also ushered in a cultural change that came about because of the prevalence of death in the fourteenth century. Europeans became so used to death that they often depicted it graphically and quite terribly in art. Paintings, stories, and theatrical performances emerged having to do with the "dance of death," a depiction of the futility of worldly possessions and status vis-à-vis the inevitability of death. Likewise, graves and mausoleums came to be decorated with statues of grotesque skeletons and writhing bodies. When people were dying, their families and friends were supposed to come and view them, inoculating everyone present against the temptation to enjoy life too much and encouraging them to greater focus on preparing their souls for the afterlife. Within the "dance of death" that depicted real, daily life in 14th century Europe, we also see the kernels of Renaissance art, in particular the new focus on real people, including their emotions.

Fresco showing the "Dance of Death" with skeletons intermingling with the living

The fresco at the back wall of the Church of St. Mary of the Rocks in the Istrian town of Beram (1474) depicting the "Dance of Death," painted by Vincent of Kastav, Croatia https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4a/Fels_Beram.JPG

The Hundreds' Years' War

The plague happened near the beginning of the conflict between England and France remembered as the Hundred Years' War, which lasted from 1337 – 1453. That conflict was not really one war, but instead consisted of a series of battles and shorter wars between the crowns of England and France interrupted by (sometimes fairly long) periods of peace.

The war began because of simmering resentments and dynastic politics. The root of the problem was that the English kings were descendants of William the Conqueror, the Norman king who had sailed across the English Channel in 1066 and defeated the Anglo-Saxon kings who then ruled England. From that point on, the royal and noble lines of England and France were intertwined, and as marriage between both nobles and royalty often took place across French – English lines, the inheritance of lands and titles in both countries was often a point of contention. The culture of nobility in both countries was so similar that the "English" nobles generally spoke French instead of English in day-to-day life.

This confusion very much extended to the kings themselves. The English royal line (the Plantagenets) often enjoyed pledges of fealty from numerous "French" nobles, and "English" kings often thought of themselves as being as much French as English – the English King Richard the Lion-Hearted, for instance, spent most of his career in France battling for control of more French territory. Likewise, a large region in southwestern France, Aquitaine, was formally the property of the English royal line, with the awkward caveat that, while a given English king might be sovereign in England, his lordship of Aquitaine technically made him the vassal of whoever the French king happened to be. Thus, hundreds of years after William's conquest, the royal and noble lines of England and France were often hard to distinguish from one another.

The war began in the aftermath of the death of the French King Charles IV in 1328. The king of England, Edward III, was next in line for succession, but powerful members of the French nobility rejected his claim and instead pledged to give the crown to a French noble of the royal line named Philip VI. When Philip began passing judgments to do with the English-controlled territory of Aquitaine, Edward went to war, sparking the Hundred Years' War.

The war itself consisted of a series of raids and invasions by English forces punctuated by the occasional large battle. English kings and knights kept the war going because it was a way to enrich themselves – they would arrive in France with a moderately-sized force of armed men to loot and pillage. English forces tended to be better organized than were their French counterparts, so even France's much greater wealth and size did prevent major English victories. The most famous of those victories was the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, in which a smaller English force decimated the elite French cavalry through effective use of longbows, a weapon that could transform an English peasant into more than the equal of a mounted French knight. The aftermath of Agincourt saw most of the French nobility accept the English king, Henry V, as the king of France. Henry V promptly died, however, and the conflict exploded into a series of alliances and counter-alliances between rival factions of English and French nobles (one French territory, Burgundy, even declared its independence from France and became a staunch English ally for a time).

Decades into the war, the French received an unexpected boost in their fortunes thanks to the intervention of one of the future patron saints of France itself: Joan of Arc. Joan of Arc's story begins in the small village of Domrémy. Following an English cattle raid in 1425, Joan received a vision of the Archangel Michael and Saints Catherine of Alexandria and Margaret of Antioch. Joan stated these voices instructed her to go to the French court to speak to Robert de Baudricourt. The voices said that Baudricourt would allow Joan to speak with the king. Baudricourt initially denied her request to meet with the Dauphin (king to be) twice before allowing her passage. Escorted by a knight, a squire, and four servants, Joan of Arc reached Chinon and requested to see Charles, Dauphin.

Black and white sketch of Joan of Arc dressed in a gown holding a large sword and French flag

Earliest extant representation of Joan of Arc, drawing by Clément de Fauquembergue (May 1429, French National Archives)

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5d/Joan_of_Arc.jpg

Skeptical of Joan's divine visions, the Dauphin disguised himself as a commoner within his court. However, upon her arrival, Joan immediately identified the King, shocking him and his counsel. The King tasked theologians to prove her faith and to ensure she was not a witch or heretic. After proving herself a Good Christian, meaning a virgin, the Dauphin granted her an army and sent her to the frontline at the Siege of Orleans. There, she famously dictated a letter to the English, stating to return the cities they had seized and that "If you do not believe the news written of God and the Maid, then in whatever place we may find you, we will soon see who has the better right, God, or you."

Joan's presence on the battlefield quickly shifted the Siege of Orleans, leading to a French victory in just four days. The French saw continued victories with Joan leading the charge, including battles at Meung, Beaugency, Jargeau, and Patay. Following Joan's victory at Patay, she led Charles Dauphin to Reims, where he was crowned King of France on July 17th, 1429. Despite Joan urging now crowned King Charles VII to continue fighting against the British and to reclaim Paris, he opted to negotiate peace with the Duke of Burgundy. King Charles VII ennobled her family and exempted her home village of Domrémy from taxation.

While this peace negotiation should have ended Joan's service, her leadership was requested to help lift a siege at Compiègne in May of 1430. Unfortunately, this battle led to the capture of Joan of Arc, as her troops attempted to surprise the Burgundian and English armies, only to be ambushed themselves. Following her capture, she was sold to the English, where she was tried for heresy, witchcraft, and wearing men's clothes. On May 30th, 1431, Joan was led to the stake at Vieux-Marché in Rouen, where she was burned for her crimes. Despite her tragic end, Joan became a martyr to the French cause and, eventually, one of the most significant French nationalist symbols. And by 1453 the French forces finally ended the English threat and the 100s Years War.

While Joan of Arc's story came to a tragic end, she was an outlier within Medieval History, both as a woman and in terms of sources. Between letters and her trial records, she is one of the most well-documented individuals of the fifteenth century. Furthermore, she remains relevant in historical and medical histories as scholars try to decipher if her visions and spiritual guidance were divine intervention or mental illness. Regardless, her youth and ferocity on the battlefield express her title as Saint of France, as the Catholic Church officially canonized her in 1920.

Primary Source: Letter to the King of England, 1429:

King of England, if you do not do these things, I am the commander of the military; and in whatever place I shall find your men in France, I will make them flee the country, whether they wish to or not; and if they will not obey, the Maid will have them all killed. She comes sent by the King of Heaven, body for body, to take you out of France, and the Maid promises and certifies to you that if you do not leave France she and her troops will raise a mighty outcry as has not been heard in France in a thousand years. And believe that the King of Heaven has sent her so much power that you will not be able to harm her or her brave army.

Source: Joan of Arc. "Letter to the King of England," 1429. Internet Medieval Sourcebook. <https://origin-rh.web.fordham.edu/halsall/source/joanofarc.asp>.

But the war had a devastating effect on France. Between the fighting and the plague, its population declined by half. Many French regions suffered economically as luxury trades shut down and whole regions were devastated by the fighting. The French crown introduced new taxes, such as the Gabelle (a tax on salt) and the Taille (a household tax) that further burdened commoners. On the cultural front, the English monarchy and nobility severed their ties with France and high English culture began to self-consciously reshape itself as distinctly English rather than French, leading among other things to the use of the English language as the language of state and the law for the first time.

The Hundred Years' War was also a time of rapid military evolution. Weapons, tactics, army structure and the social meaning of war all changed, partly in response to the war's costs, partly through advancement in technology and partly through lessons that warfare taught. Before the Hundred Years' War, heavy cavalry was considered the most powerful unit in an army, but by the war's

end, this belief had shifted. The heavy horse was increasingly negated by the use of the longbow (and, later, another long-distance weapon: firearms). Edward III was famous for dismounting his men-at-arms and having them and his archers stand in closely integrated battle lines; the horses only being used for transport or pursuit.

By the end of the Hundred Years' War, these various factors caused the decline of the expensively outfitted, highly trained heavy cavalry and the eventual end of the armoured knight as a military force and of the nobility as a political one. In 1445 the first regular standing army since Roman times was organized in France partly as a solution to marauding free companies. The mercenary companies were given a choice of either joining the Royal army on a permanent basis, or being hunted down and destroyed if they refused. France gained a total standing army of around 6,000 men, and these were sent out to gradually eliminate the remaining mercenaries who insisted on operating on their own. The new standing army had a more disciplined and professional approach to warfare than its predecessors.

The war also, significantly, stimulated nationalistic sentiment. It devastated France as a land, but it awakened French nationalism. The Hundred Years' War accelerated the process of transforming France from a feudal monarchy to a centralized state, the first in European history.

The Babylonian Captivity and the Great Western Schism

Even as the French and English were at each other's throats, the Roman Catholic Church fell into a state of disunity, sometimes even chaos. The cause was one of the most peculiar episodes in late medieval European history: the "Babylonian Captivity" of the popes in the fourteenth century. The term originally referred to the Biblical story of the Jews' enslavement by the Babylonian Empire in the sixth century BCE, but the late-medieval Babylonian Captivity refers instead to the period during which the popes no longer lived in their traditional residence in Rome, but instead in Avignon, France.

The context for this strange event was the state of the Roman Church as of the early fourteenth century. The church was a very diverse, and somewhat diffuse, institution. Due to the simple geographical distance between Rome and the kingdoms of Europe, the popes did not exercise much practical authority over the various national churches, and high-level churchmen in European kingdoms were often more closely associated with their respective kings than with Rome. Likewise, there were many times during the Middle Ages when individual popes were weak and ineffectual and could not even command obedience within the church hierarchy itself.

Over the centuries the papacy struggled, and often failed, to assert its control over the church as an institution and to hold the pretensions of kings in check. Those weaknesses were reflected in a simple fact: there had been a number of times over the centuries in which there were rival popes, generally appointed by compliant church officials who answered to kings. Obviously, having rival popes undermined the central claim of the papacy to complete authority over the church itself and over Christian doctrine in the process (let alone the occasional insistence by popes that their authority superseded that of kings).

The Babylonian Captivity began when Pope Boniface VIII issued a papal bull (formal commandment) in 1303 to the effect that all kings had to acknowledge his authority over even their own kingdoms, a challenge he issued in response to the taxes kings levied on church property. Unfortunately for Boniface, he lacked both influence with the monarchs of Europe and the ability to defend himself. Infuriated, the French king, Philip IV, promptly had the pope arrested and thrown in prison; he was released months later to be transferred to Paris to stand trial, but died either en route or still in Rome after a possible beating depending upon the source.

Portrait of a stoic looking popePortrait of Pope Boniface VIII by Cristofano dell'Altissimo, commissioned 1552
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikiped...%2C_Uffizi.jpg

Philip supported the election of a new pope, Clement V, in 1305. Clement was a Frenchman with strong ties to the French nobility. At the time, Rome was a very dangerous city, with rival noble families literally fighting in the streets over various feuds, so Clement moved himself and the papal office to the French city of Avignon, which was much more peaceful. This created enormous concern among non-French church officials (most of them Italian), who feared that the French king, then the most powerful ruler in Europe, would have undue influence over the papacy. Their fears seemed confirmed when Clement started appointing new cardinals, a pattern that saw 113 French cardinals instated out of the 134 who were appointed in the following decades.

From 1305 to 1378, the popes continued to live and work in Avignon (despite the English invasions of the 100 Years' War). They were not directly controlled by the French king, as their opponents had feared, but they were definitely influenced by French politics. They also came to accept bribes and kickbacks for the appointment of priests and bishops, along with suspicious schemes with church lands. This situation was soon described as a new Babylonian Captivity by clerics and laypeople alike

(especially in Italy), comparing the presence of the papacy in France to the enslavement of the ancient Jews in Babylon.

1. A 3D map of Rome with a woman clothed in black at the center appearing to cry
A map of Rome, showing an allegorical figure of Rome as a widow in black mourning the Avignon Papacy, 1447
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/Fol_18r.jpg

While Italians struggled with the Pope ruling from French territory, for the popes in question the exile from Rome was not an uncomfortable one. For example, Clement's successor, Pope John XXII celebrated the marriage of his grandniece in 1324 with a feast during which the numerous guests consumed 4,012 loaves of bread, 8 and $\frac{3}{4}$ oxen, 55 and $\frac{1}{4}$ sheep, 8 pigs, 4 boars, and vast quantities of fish, partridges, rabbits, ducks, and chickens. The guest washed down the feast with about 450 liters of wine. The papacy and its new residence in Avignon became a major religious, diplomatic, and commercial center, with its court growing exponentially in the 14th century.

Papal palace at Avignon, a beautiful stone building with several towers
Papal Palace at Avignon https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/JM_Rosier.jpg

In 1378, the new pope, Urban VI, announced his intention to move the papacy back to Rome. As rival factions developed within the upper levels of the church hierarchy, a group of French cardinals elected another, French, pope (Clement VII), and Europe thus was split between two rival popes, both of whom excommunicated each other as a heretic and impostor (the term used at the time was "antipope.") This led to the Great Western Schism, a period from 1378 to 1417 during which there were as many as three rival popes vying for power. For almost forty years, the church was a battlefield between rival popes and their respective followers, and laypeople and monarchs alike were generally able to go about their business with little fear of papal intervention. But the issue and uncertainty was untenable for the Church.

The Great Western Schism finally ended after a series of church councils, the Conciliar Movement (which also sought general church reform and the reconciliation of current heresies), succeeded in establishing the authority of a single pope in 1417 at the end of a multi-year meeting. In 1414 the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Sigismund forced the calling of a general church council. The council, known as the Council of Constance, met from 1414-1417 in the German imperial city of Constance. Sigismund truly believed that a council could help him heal the deep religious and civil divisions within the Catholic Church at large, and particularly within his home of Prague where a religious reformer named Jan Hus was causing quite a stir.

Jan Hus was a Czech theologian and philosopher who became a Church reformer and an early inspiration of Hussitism, a key predecessor to the Protestant Reformation. After being ordained as a Catholic priest, Hus began to preach in Prague. He opposed many aspects of the Catholic Church in Bohemia, such as its views on simony, the Eucharist, celibacy, poverty of the clergy, and other theological and moral topics. He was also a follower of Wycliffe, who advocated for the publication of vernacular bibles, thus making theological writings available to larger populations. Eventually, he became one of the first religious leaders to criticize the selling of indulgences, something advocated by one of the rival popes John XXIII.

When the Council of Constance assembled, Hus was asked to be there and present his views on the dissension within the Church. Sigismund hoped that the papal hierarchy and Hus could come to a compromise at the council. But this was not to be. Instead upon his arrival Hus was ordered to recant all his beliefs. He refused. The council condemned him as a heretic and burned him at the stake on July 6, 1415. But this did not end the conflict. Followers of Hus continued to demand reform in the church and remained a bastion of religious dissidence until the Protestant Reformation while the Catholic Church refused to meaningfully address any Hussite criticisms or ideas. This opportunity for reform from within was lost. All services would still be conducted only in Latin and all Bibles would only be written in Latin. The hierarchy would be maintained.

Jan Hus in the center of the image wearing white as he is burned at the stake with crowds watching on either side
Jan Hus at the stake, Jena codex (c. 1500) https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/the_Stake.jpg

The movement, however, did elect a new pope, Martin V, and made the claim that church councils could and should hold the ultimate authority over papal appointments – this concept was known as the *via concilii*, the existence of a great council with binding powers over the church's leadership. This, however, undermined the very concept of what the papacy was: the "Doctrine of the Keys" held that the pope's authority was passed down directly from Christ, and that even if councils could play a role in the practical maintenance of the church, the pope's authority was not based on their approval. Ultimately, a powerful pope, Eugene IV, reconfirmed the absolute power of the papacy in 1431. Thus, this attempt at reform failed in the end, inadvertently setting the stage for more radical criticisms of papal power in the future.

Regarding the other goals of the council, it did succeed on one count. They did agree on one pope. Shortly after the convening of the council Pope Gregory XII realized he had lost most of his supporters and agreed to resign as Pope of Rome. But, Benedict

III, the French Pope refused to resign, so he was forcibly deposed. Finally in 1417, the council elected a Roman nobleman as Pope Martin V. The council also once and for all determined that the pope could no longer expect to remain unchallenged if they made any claims of absolute dominion, and ecclesiastical rights and jurisdictions were increasingly matters of negotiation. But this negotiation and spreading of leadership would remain in the circle of Cardinals, so firmly still within the Catholic Church elite. Also left out were secular leaders who had sought to have more power over the churches within their states. These issues would all soon be raised again by Martin Luther.

The most important consequence of the Babylonian Captivity and the Great Western Schism was simple: the moral and spiritual authority of the church hierarchy was seriously undermined. While no one (yet) envisioned rejecting the authority of the church altogether, many people regarded the church's leadership as just another political institution.

Some of the trends, patterns, and phenomena that were to take shape during the Renaissance era, beginning around 1300, actually began in the midst of the crises of the Middle Ages. France and England emerged from the 100 Years War to become stronger, more centralized states. The labor shortage in the aftermath of the Black Death spurred a period of modest economic growth. And, while European culture may have become more pessimistic and xenophobic as a whole, one region was rising to wealth and prominence precisely because of its long-distance trade and cultural connections: Northern Italy. It was there that the Renaissance began.

Chapter 15: Rebirth and Discovery in Early Modern Europe

The Renaissance or “Rebirth” of Europe was a time of intense creativity and change within Europe, most famously in the arts. It was a period when much of Europe, beginning with Italy looked back to the Roman and Greek periods for inspiration as well as for answers to current problems. And as we have very recently discussed the 13th and 14th centuries are not remembered for being peaceful or easy. Nonetheless in the midst of the hardships, population decline, and warfare the cultural movement known as the Renaissance emerged, in the end significantly changing European society and helping to inspire later movements such as the Protestant Reformation, European Exploration, and the Enlightenment. But the Renaissance did not simply defy and conquer the so called “Middle or Dark Ages.” In many ways the movement was also a reflection on and in some cases a continuation of developments from late Medieval Europe. In reality the Renaissance can be seen more as a natural maturation of medieval society than a dramatic break with it.

The background of the Renaissance is found in the prosperity of northern Italy. Italy did not face a major, ongoing series of wars like the Hundred Years’ War in France. It was hit hard by the plague, but no more so than most of the other regions of Europe (though earlier). One unexpected “benefit” to Italy was actually the Babylonian Captivity and Great Western Schism: because papal authority was so limited, the Italian cities found it easy to operate with little papal interference, and powerful Italian families often intervened directly in the election of popes when it suited their interests. Likewise, the other powers of Europe either could not or had no interest in troubling Italy: England and France were at war, the Holy Roman Empire was weak and fragmented, and Spain was not united until the late Renaissance period. In short, the crises of the Middle Ages actually benefited Italy, because they were centered elsewhere.

In this relatively stable social and political environment, Italy also enjoyed an advantage over much of the rest of Europe: it was far more urbanized. Because of its location at a crossroads between east and west, Italian cities were larger and there were simply more of them as compared to other kingdoms and regions of Europe, with the concomitant economic prosperity and sophistication associated with urban life. By 1300, northern Italy boasted twenty-three city-states with populations of 20,000 or more, each of which would have constituted an enormous metropolis by medieval standards.

Italian cities, clustered in the north, represented about 10% of Italy’s overall population. While that means that 90% of the population was either rural or lived in small towns, there was still a far greater concentration of urban dwellers in Italy than anywhere else in Europe. Among those cities were also several that boasted populations of over 100,000 by the fifteenth century, including Florence and Milan, which served as centers of banking, trade, and craftsmanship. Italian cities had large numbers of very productive craft guilds and workshops producing luxury goods that were highly desirable all over Europe.

Origins of the Renaissance

Economics

Italy lay at the center of the lucrative trade between Europe and the Middle East, a status determined both by its geography and the role Italians played in transporting goods and people during the crusading period. Along with the trade itself, it was in Italy that key mercantile practices emerged for the first time in Europe. From the Arab world, Italian merchants learned about and ultimately adopted a number of commercial practices and techniques that helped Italy stay at the forefront of the European economy as a whole. For example, Italian accountants adopted double-entry bookkeeping (accounts payable and accounts receivable) and Italian merchants invented the *commenda*, a way of spreading out the risk associated with business ventures among several partners, amounting to an early form of insurance for expensive and risky commercial projects. Italian banks had agents all over Europe and provided reliable credit and bills of exchange, allowing merchants to travel around the entire Mediterranean region to trade without having to literally cart chests full of coins to pay for new wares.

One other noteworthy innovation first employed in Europe by Italians was the use of Arabic numerals (originally invented in India and then passed through Persia to the rest of the Middle East, possibly reaching Italy via the Crusades) instead of Roman numerals, since the former are so much easier to work with; imagine trying to do complicated multiplication or division using Roman numerals like “CLXVIII multiplied by XXXVIII,” meaning “168 multiplied by 38” in Arabic numerals. Clearly, it was simply far easier to introduce errors in calculation using the former. Overall, Italian merchants, borrowing from their Arab and Turkic trading partners, pioneered efforts to rationalize and systematize business itself in order to make it more predictable and reliable.

Benefiting from the fragmentation of the church during the era of the Babylonian Captivity and the Great Western Schism, Italian bankers also came to charge interest on loans, becoming the first Christians to defy the church's ban on "usury" in an ongoing, regular fashion. The stigma associated with usury remained, but bankers (including the Medici family that came to completely dominate Florentine politics in the fifteenth century) became so wealthy that social and religious stigma alone was not enough to prevent the spread of the practice. This actually led to more antisemitism in Europe, since the one social role played by Jews that Christians had grudgingly tolerated – money-lending – was increasingly usurped by Christians.

A group dressed in medieval clothing preparing for a voyage

The Adoration of the Magi includes several generations of the Medici family and their retainers. Sixteen-year-old Lorenzo is to the left, with his horse, prior to his departure on a diplomatic mission to Milan https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...agi_uffizi.jpg

Much of the prosperity of northern Italy was based on the trade ties (not just mercantile practices) Italy maintained with the Middle East, which by the fourteenth century meant both the remains of the Byzantine Empire in Constantinople as well as the Ottoman Turkish empire, the rising power in the east. From the Turks, Italians (especially the great mercantile empire controlled by Venice) bought precious cargo like spices, silks, porcelain, and coffee, in return for European woolens, crafts, and bullion. The Italians were also the go-betweens linking Asia and Europe by way of the Middle East: Italy was the European terminus of the long-distance trade routes that had evolved out of the ancient Silk Road that began in China.

The Italian city-states were sites of manufacturing as well. Raw wool from England and Spain made its way to Italy to be processed into cloth, and Italian workshops produced luxury goods sought after everywhere else in Europe. Italian luxury goods were superior to those produced in the rest of Europe, and soon even Italian weapons were better-made. Italian farms were prosperous and, by the Renaissance period, produced a significant and ongoing surplus, feeding the growing cities.

These wealthy merchants, bankers, lenders, and entrepreneurs also sought access to education, and not simply religious education for priests. In Northern Europe education was organized to provide clergy for local churches. But in towns in Italy, education was more likely to be supervised by town governments to provide training for the merchant community in accounting, arithmetic, grammar, and business letters. And education was open to many more people. In cities with populations close to 100,000 as many as 10,000 young girls and boys received elementary education and 1,000 continued on to higher education. So even before the Renaissance, education was much more secular and broad based in Italy, lending itself to exploit more of the innovations brought about during the Renaissance.

One result of the prosperity generated by Italian mercantile success was the rise of a culture of conspicuous consumption. Both members of the nobility and rich non-nobles spent lavishly to display their wealth as well as their culture and learning. All of the famous Renaissance thinkers and artists were patronized by the rich, which was how the artists and scholars were able to concentrate on their work. In turn, patrons expected "their" artists to serve as symbols of cultural achievement that reflected well on the patron. The florescence of Renaissance art and learning was a consequence of that very specific use of wealth: mercantile and banking riches translated into social and political status through art, architecture, and scholarship.

Politics

Even though the western Roman Empire had fallen apart by 476 CE, the great cities of Italy survived in better shape than Roman cities elsewhere in the empire. Likewise, the feudal system had never taken hold as strongly in Italy – there were lords and vassals, but especially in the cities there was a large and strong independent class of artisans and merchants who balked at subservience before lords, especially lords who did not live in the cities. Thus, by 1200, most Italian cities were politically independent of lords and came to dominate their respective hinterlands, serving as lords to "vassal" towns and villages for miles around.

Instead of kings and vassals, power was in the hands of the *popoli grossi*, literally meaning the "big people," but here meaning simply the rich, noble and non-noble alike. About 5% of the population in the richest cities was among them. The culture of the *popoli grossi* was rife with flattery, backstabbing, and politicking, since so much depended on personal connections. Since noble titles meant less, more depended on one's family reputation, and the most important thing to the social elite was honor. Any perceived insult had to be met with retaliation, meaning there was a great deal of bloodshed between powerful families – Shakespeare's famous play *Romeo and Juliet* is set in Renaissance Italy, featuring rival elite families locked in a blood feud over honor. There was no such thing as a police force, after all, just the guards of the rich and powerful and, usually, a city guard that answered to the city council. The latter was often controlled by powerful families on those councils, however, so both law enforcement and personal vendettas were generally carried out by private mercenaries.

Another aspect of the identity of the *popoli grossi* was that, despite their penchant for feuds, they required a peaceful political setting on a large scale in order for their commercial interests to prosper. Thus, they were often hesitant to embark on large-scale

war in Italy itself. Likewise, the focus on education and culture that translated directly into the creation of Renaissance art and scholarship was tied to the identity of the *popoli grossi* as people of peace: elsewhere in Europe noble identity was still very much associated with war, whereas the *popoli grossi* of Italy wanted to show off both their mastery of arms and their mastery of thought (along with their good taste).

The central irony of the prosperity of the Renaissance was that even in northern Italy, the vast majority of the population benefited only indirectly or not at all. While the lot of Italian peasants was not significantly worse than that of peasants elsewhere, poor townsfolk had to endure heavy taxes on basic foodstuffs that made it especially miserable to be poor in one of the richest places in Europe at the time. A significant percentage of the population of cities were “paupers,” the indigent and homeless who tried to scrape by as laborers or sought charity from the Church. Cities were especially vulnerable to epidemics as well, adding to the misery of urban life for the poor.

The Great City-States of the Renaissance

In the fourteenth and the first half of the fifteenth centuries, the city-states of northern Italy were aggressive rivals; most of the formerly-independent cities were swallowed up by the most powerful among them. However, as the power of the French monarchy grew in the west and the Ottoman Turks became an active threat in the east, the most powerful cities signed a treaty, the Peace of Lodi, in 1454 which committed each city to the defense of the existing political order. For the next forty years, Italy avoided major conflicts, a period that coincided with the height of the Renaissance.

The great city-states of this period were Milan, Venice, and Florence. Milan was the archetypal despot-controlled city-state, reaching its height under the Visconti family from 1277 – 1447. Milan controlled considerable trade from Italy to the north. Its wealth was dwarfed, however, by that of Venice.

Venice

Venice was ruled by a merchant council headed by an elected official, the Doge. Its Mediterranean empire generated so much wealth that Venice minted more gold currency than did England and France combined, and its gold coins (ducats) were always exactly the same weight and purity and were accepted across the Mediterranean as a result. Its government had representation for all of the moneyed classes, but no one represented the majority of the city's population that consisted of the urban poor.

The main source of Venice's prosperity was its control of the spice trade. It is difficult to overstate the value of spices during the Middle Ages and Renaissance – Europeans had a limitless hunger for spices. Unlike other luxury goods that could be produced in Europe itself, spices could only be grown in the tropical and subtropical regions of Asia, meaning their transportation to European markets required voyages of many thousands of miles, vastly driving up costs. The European terminus of much of that trade was Venice. In about 1300 40% of all ships bearing spices offloaded in Venice, and by 1500 it was up to 60%. The prices commanded by spices ensured that Venetian merchants could achieve incredible wealth. For example, nutmeg (grown in Indonesia, halfway around the world from Italy) was worth a full 60,000% of its original price once it reached Europe. Likewise, spices like pepper, cloves, and cinnamon could only be imported rather than grown in Europe, and Venice controlled the majority of that hugely lucrative trade. Spices were, in so many words, worth far more than their weight in gold.

Based on that wealth, Venice was the first place to create true banks (named after the desks, *banchi*, where people met to exchange or borrow money in Venice). Furthermore, innovations like the letter of credit were necessitated by Venice's remoteness from many of its trade partners; it was too risky to travel with chests full of gold, so Venetian banks were the first to work with letters of credit between branches. A letter of credit could be issued from one bank branch at a certain amount, redeemable only by the account owner. That individual could then travel to any city with a Venetian bank branch and redeem the letter of credit, which could then be spent on trade goods.

In addition, because Venice needed a peaceful trade network for its continuing prosperity, it was the first power in Europe to rely heavily on formal diplomacy in its relations with neighboring states. By the late 1400s practically every royal court in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa had a Venetian ambassador in residence. The overall result was that Venice spearheaded many of the practices and patterns that later spread across northern Italy and, ultimately, to the rest of Europe: the political power of merchants, advanced banking and mercantile practices, and a sophisticated international diplomatic network.

Tower and palace from a Venetian canal
Plaza San Marco, the very center of Venice, photo by author Erin Stone

Gondola traveling on a small Venetian canal surrounded by medieval residences

Venetian Canal, photo by Erin Stone

Florence and Rome

Florence was a republic with longstanding traditions of civic governance. Citizens voted on laws and served in official posts for set terms, with powerful families dominating the system. By 1434 the real power was in the hands of the Medici family, who controlled the city government (the Signoria) and patronized the arts. Rising from obscurity from a resolutely non-noble background, the Medici eventually became the official bankers to the papacy, acquiring vast wealth as a result. The Medici spent huge sums on the city itself, funding the creation of churches, orphanages, municipal buildings, and the completion of the great dome of the city's cathedral, at the time the largest freestanding dome in Europe. They also patronized most of the most famous Renaissance artists (at the time as well as in the present), including Donatello, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo.

Photo of a large Dome with the city of Florence spreading out beneath

Duomo (dome) of Florence, photo by author Erin Stone

Religious themed painting on the inside of the dome

Inside of the Duomo, photo by Erin Stone

Florence benefited from a strong culture of education, with Florentines priding themselves not just on wealth, but knowledge and refinement. By the fifteenth century there were 8,000 children in both religious and civic schools out of a population of 100,000. Florentines boasted that even their laborers could quote the great poet, and native of Florence, Dante Alighieri (author of *The Divine Comedy*). At the height of the Medicis' power in the second half of the fifteenth century, Florence was unquestionably the leading city in all of Italy in terms of art and scholarship. That central position diminished by about 1500 as foreign invasions undermined Florentine independence.

The city of Rome, however, remained firmly in papal control despite the decline in independence of the other major Italian cities, having become a major Renaissance city after the end of the Great Western Schism. The popes re-asserted their control of the Papal States in central Italy, in some cases (like those of Julius II, r. 1503 – 1513) personally taking to the battlefield to lead troops against the armies of both foreign invaders and rival Italians. The popes usually proved effective at secular rule, but their spiritual leadership was undermined by their tendency to live like kings rather than priests; the most notorious, Alexander VI (r. 1492 – 1503), sponsored his children (the infamous Borgia family) in their attempts to seize territory all across northern Italy. Thus, even when “good popes” came along occasionally, the overall pattern was that the popes did fairly little to reinforce the spiritual authority they had already lost because of the Great Schism, the Avignon Papacy, and other issues like their reaction to the Black Plague.

Regardless of their moral failings, the popes restored Rome to importance as a city after it had fallen to a population of fewer than 25,000 during the Babylonian Captivity. Under the so-called “Renaissance popes,” the Vatican itself became the gloriously decorated spectacle that it is today. Julius II paid Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, and many of the other famous works of Renaissance artists stud the walls and facades of Vatican buildings. In short, popes after the end of the Avignon Papacy were often much more focused on behaving like members of the *popoli grossi*, fighting for power and honor and patronizing great works of art and architecture, rather than worrying about the spiritual authority of the Church to laypeople.

Print

In general, the Renaissance did not coincide with a great period of technological advances. As with all of pre-modern history, the pace of technological change during the Renaissance period was glacially slow by contemporary standards. There was one momentous exception, however: the proliferation of the movable-type printing press. Not until the invention of the typewriter in the late nineteenth century and the Internet in the late twentieth century would comparable changes to the diffusion of information come about. Print vastly increased the rate at which information could be shared, and in turn, it underwrote the rise in literacy of the early modern period. It moved the production of text in Europe away from a “scribal” tradition in which educated people hand-copied important texts toward a system of mass-production.

In the centuries leading up to the Renaissance, of course, there had been some major technological advances. The agricultural revolution of the high Middle Ages had been brought about by technology (heavier plows, new harnesses, crop rotation, etc.). Likewise, changes in warfare were increasingly tied to military technology: first the introduction of the stirrup, then everything associated with a “gunpowder revolution” that began in earnest in the fifteenth century. Print, however, introduced a revolution in ideas. By making the distribution of information fast and comparatively cheap, more people had access to that information than

ever before.

The printing press works by coating a three-dimensional impression of an image or text with ink, then pressing that ink onto paper. The concept had existed for centuries, first invented in China in the ninth century CE, but there is no evidence that the concept was transmitted from Asia to Europe (it might have, but there is simply no proof either way). In the late 1440s, a German goldsmith named Johannes Gutenberg from the city of Mainz struck on the idea of carving individual letters into small, movable blocks of wood (or casting them in metal) that could be rearranged as necessary to create words. That innovation, known as movable type, made it viable to print not just a single page of text, but to simply rearrange the letters to print subsequent pages. With movable type, an entire book could be printed with clear, readable letters, and at a fraction of the cost of hand-copying.

A man in 15th century garb demonstrates how a printing press works

Replica of the Gutenberg press at the International Printing Museum https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...intMus_038.jpg

Gutenberg himself pioneered the European version of the printing process. After developing a working prototype, he created the first true printed book to reach a mass market, a copy of the Latin Vulgate (the official version of the Bible used by the Church). Later dubbed the “Gutenberg Bible,” it became available for purchase in 1455 and in turn became the world’s first “best-seller.” One advantage it possessed over hand-written copies of the Bible that quickly became apparent to church officials was that errors in the text were far less likely to be introduced as compared to hand-copying. Likewise, once new presses were built in cities and towns outside of Mainz, it became cheaper to purchase a printed Bible than one written in the scribal tradition.

Print spread quickly. Within about twenty years there were printing presses in all of the major cities in western and southern Europe. Gutenberg personally trained apprentice printers, who became highly sought-after in cities everywhere once the benefits of print became apparent. By 1500, about fifty years after its invention, the printing press had already largely replaced the scribal tradition in book production (there was a notable lengthy delay in its diffusion to Eastern Europe, especially Russia, however – it took until 1552 for a press to come to Russia). Presses tended to operate in large cities and smaller independent cities, especially in the Holy Roman Empire. The free cities of the German lands and Italy were thus as likely to host a press as were larger capital cities like Paris and Rome.

Gutenberg would go on to invent printed illustration in 1461, using carved blocks that were sized to fit alongside movable type. Printed illustration became crucial to the diffusion of information because literacy rates remained low overall; even when people could not read, however, they could look at pamphlets and posters (called “broadside”) with illustrations. Mere decades after the invention of the press, cheap printed posters and pamphlets were commonplace in the major cities and towns, often shared and read aloud in public gatherings and taverns. Thus, even the illiterate enjoyed an increased access to information with print.

Printing had various, and enormous, consequences. Information could be disseminated far more quickly than ever before. Whereas with the scribal tradition, readers tended to hold books in reverence, with the reader having to seek out the book, now books could go to readers. In turn, there was a real incentive for all reasonably prosperous people to learn to read because they now had access to meaningful texts at a relatively affordable price. While religious texts dominated early print, both literary works and political commentaries followed. Overall, print led to a revolutionary increase in the sheer volume of all kinds of written material: in the first fifty years after the invention of the press, more books were printed than had been copied in Europe by hand since the fall of Rome.

Not all writing shifted to print, however. A scribal tradition continued in the production of official documents and luxury items. Likewise, personal correspondence and business transactions remained hand-written, with the legacy of good penmanship surviving well into the twentieth century (in part because it was not until the typewriter was invented in the nineteenth century that printed documents could be produced ad hoc). Nevertheless, by the late fifteenth century, whenever a text could be printed to serve a political purpose or to generate a profit, it almost certainly would be.

There were other, unanticipated, issues that arose because of print. In the past, while the church did its best to crack down on heresies, it was not necessary to impose any kind of formal censorship. No written material could be mass-produced, so the only ideas that spread quickly did so through word of mouth. Print made censorship both much more difficult and much more important, since now anyone could print just about anything. As early as the 1460s, print introduced disruptive ideas in the form of the next best-seller to follow the Bible itself, a work that advocated the pursuit of salvation without reference to the Church entitled *The Imitation of Christ*. The Church would eventually (in 1571) introduce an official Index of Prohibited Books, but several works were already banned by the time the Index was created.

While there were other effects of print, one bears particular note: it began the process of standardizing language itself. The long, slow shift from a vast panoply of vernacular dialects across Europe to a set of accepted and official languages was impossible without print. Print necessitated standardization, so that people in different parts of “France” or “England” were able to read the

same works and understand their grammar and their meaning. For the first time, the very concept of proper spelling emerged, and existing ideas about grammar began the process of standardization as well.

Patronage

The most memorable, or at least iconic, effects of the Renaissance were artistic. To understand why the Renaissance brought about such a remarkable explosion of art, it is crucial to grasp the nature of patronage. In patronage, a member of the *popoli grossi* would pay an artist in advance for a work of art. That work of art would be displayed publicly – most obviously in the case of architecture with the beautiful churches, orphanages, and municipal buildings that spread across Italy during the Renaissance. In turn, that art would attract political power and influence to the person or family who had paid for it because of the honor associated with funding the best artists and being associated with their work. While there was plenty of bloodshed between powerful Renaissance families, their political competition often took the form of an ongoing battle over who could commission the best art and then “give” that art to their home city, rather than actual fighting in the streets.

Perhaps the most spectacular example of patronage in action was when Cosimo de Medici, then the leader of the Medici family and its vast banking empire, threw a city-wide party called the Council of Florence in 1439. The Council featured public lectures on Greek philosophy, displays of art, and a huge church council that brought together representatives of both the Roman Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church in a (doomed) attempt to heal the schism that divided Christianity. The Roman Catholic hierarchy also used the occasion to establish the canonical and in a sense “final” version of the Christian Bible itself (in question were which books ought to be included in the Old Testament). The entire affair was paid by Cosimo out of his personal fortune – he even paid for the travel expenses of visiting dignitaries from places as far away as India and Ethiopia. The Council clinched the Medici as the family of Florence for the next generation, with Cosimo being described by a contemporary as a “king in all but name.”

Thus the Italians of the Renaissance, whether as public or private patrons, could afford to use consumption of art as a form of competition for social and political status, again here the Medici family provides the best example, funding statues of David and commissioning Botticelli's *Venus* among others. Even modest or middle class families could afford art, especially smaller religious paintings, storage chests and other decorative platters, pitchers, etc.. Art was also commissioned for religious purposes, for example the frescoes of the Arena Chapel by Giotto were funded by a merchant anxious to pay for relief from some of his sins. As the market for art increased in the 14th and 15th centuries so did the number of studios and shops where artists could be trained, only further fueling the art movement of the Renaissance.

Nude, bronze statue of a feminine looking boy with his foot on a severed head.

Donatello, the bronze David (1440s), Florence <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikiped...Florenz-02.jpg>

Painting of a nude woman emerging from a seashell with angels surrounding her

Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1484–1486) https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/F...t-_edited.jpg

Art and learning benefited enormously from the wealth of northern Italy precisely because the wealthy and powerful of northern Italy competed to pay for the best art and the most innovative scholarship – without that form of cultural and political competition, it is doubtful that many of the masterpieces of Renaissance art would have ever been created.

Humanism

The starting point to study the intellectual and artistic achievements of the Renaissance is recognizing what the word means: rebirth. But what was being reborn? The answer is the culture and ideas of classical Europe, namely ancient Greece and Rome. Renaissance thinkers and artists very consciously made the claim that they were reviving long-lost traditions from the classical world in areas as diverse as scholarship, poetry, architecture, and sculpture. The feeling among most Renaissance thinkers and artists was that the ancient Greeks and Romans had achieved truly incredible things, things that had not been, and possibly could never be, surpassed. Much of the Renaissance began as an attempt to mimic or copy Greek and Roman art and scholarship (correspondence in classical Latin, for example), but over the decades the more outstanding Renaissance thinkers struck out on new paths of their own – still inspired by the classics, but seeking to be creators in their own right as well.

Of the various themes of Renaissance thought, perhaps the most important was humanism, an ancient intellectual paradigm that emphasized both the beauty and the centrality of humankind in the universe. Humanists held that humankind was inherently rational, beautiful, and noble, rather than debased, wicked, or weak. They sought to celebrate the beauty of the human body in their art, of the human mind and human achievements in their scholarship, and of human society in the elegance of their architectural design. Humanism was, among other things, an optimistic attitude toward artistic and intellectual possibility that

cited the achievements of the ancient world as proof that humankind was the crowning achievement of God's creation.

Humanists, first emerging in the northern Italian city-states in the early 14th century, found Roman history and literature more stimulating and useful than medieval philosophy. Humanists also looked back to Roman politicians and policies in the hopes of solving modern issues, specifically with reform in mind. For many, the Black Death was the perfect symbol for the decline of the old medieval order and the need for a new, modern approach to society.

Renaissance humanism was the root of some very modern notions of individuality, along with the idea that education ought to arrive at a well-rounded individual. The goal of education in the Renaissance was to realize as much of the human potential as possible with a robust education in diverse disciplines. This was a true, meaningful change over medieval forms of learning in that education's major purpose was no longer believed to be the clarification of religious questions or better intellectual support for religious orthodoxy; the point of education was to create a more competent and well-rounded person instead.

Along with the idea of a well-rounded individual, Renaissance thinkers championed the idea of civic humanism: one's moral and ethical standing was tied to devotion to one's city. This was a Greek and Roman concept that the great Renaissance thinker Petrarch championed in particular. Here, the Medici of Florence are the ultimate example: there was a tremendous effort on the part of the rich and powerful to invest in the city in the form of building projects and art. This was tied to the prestige of the family, of course, but it was also a heartfelt dedication to one's home, analogous to the present-day concept of patriotism.

Practically speaking, there was a shift in the business of education from medieval scholasticism, which focused on law, medicine, and theology, to disciplines related to business and politics. Princes and other elites wanted skilled bureaucrats to staff their merchant empires; they needed literate men with a knowledge of law and mathematics, even if they themselves were not merchants. City governments began educating children (girls and boys alike, at least in certain cities like Florence) directly, along with the role played by private tutors. These schools and tutors emphasized practical education: rhetoric, math, and history. Thus, one of the major effects of the Italian Renaissance was that this new form of education, usually referred to as "humanistic education" spread from Italy to the rest of Europe by the late fifteenth century. By the sixteenth century, a broad cross-section of European elites, including nobles, merchants, and priests, were educated in the humanistic tradition.

A "Renaissance man" was a man who cultivated classical virtues, which were not quite the same as Christian ones: understanding, benevolence, compassion, fortitude, judgment, eloquence, and honor, among others. Drawing from the work of thinkers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Virgil, Renaissance thinkers came to support the idea of a virtuous life that was not the same thing as a specifically Christian virtuous life. And, importantly, it was possible to become a good person simply through studying the classics – all of the major figures of the Renaissance were Christians, but they insisted that one's moral status could and should be shaped by emulation of the ancient virtues, combined with Christian piety. While the Renaissance case for the debasement of medieval culture was overstated (medieval intellectual life prospered during the late Middle Ages) there was definitely a distinct kind of intellectual courage and optimism that came out of the return to classical models over medieval ones during the Renaissance.

One important caveat must be included in discussing humanistic education, however. While most male humanists supported education for girls, they insisted that it was to be very different than that offered to boys. Girls were to read specific texts drawn from the Bible, the "Church Fathers" (important theologians in the early history of the Church), and from classical Greek and Roman writers that emphasized morality, modesty, and obedience. An educated girl was trained to be an obedient, companionable wife, not an independent thinker in her own right. That theme would remain in place in the male-dominated realm of education in Europe for centuries to come, although it is clear from the number of independent, intellectually courageous women writers throughout the early modern period that girls' education did not always succeed in creating compliant, deferential women in the end.

Likewise, humanism contributed to an important, ongoing public debate that lasted for centuries: the *querelles des femmes* ("debates about women"). Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries various intellectuals in universities, churches, and aristocratic courts and salons wrote numerous essays and books contesting whether or not women were naturally immoral, weak, and foolish, or if instead education and environment could lead to intelligence and morality comparable with those of men. While men had dominated these debates early on, women educated in the humanist tradition joined in the *querelles* in earnest during the Renaissance, arguing both that education was key to elevating women's competence and that women shared precisely the same spiritual and moral nature as did men. Unfortunately, while a significant minority of male thinkers came to agree, most remained adamant that women were biologically and spiritually inferior, destined for their traditional roles and ill-served by advanced education.

Important Thinkers

The Renaissance is remembered primarily for its great thinkers and artists, with some exceptional individuals (like Leonardo da Vinci) being renowned as both. What Renaissance thinkers had in common was that they embraced the ideals of humanism and used humanism as their inspiration for creating innovative new approaches to philosophy, philology (the study of language), theology, history, and political theory. In other words, reading the classics inspired Renaissance thinkers to emulate the great writers and philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome, creating poetry, philosophy, and theory on par with that of an Aristotle or a Cicero. Some of the most noteworthy include the following.

Dante (1265 – 1321)

Durante degli Alighieri, better remembered simply as Dante, was a major figure who anticipated the Renaissance rather than being alive during most of it (while there is no “official” start to the Renaissance, the life of Petrarch, described below, lends itself to using 1300 as a convenient date). Experiencing what would later be called a mid-life crisis, Dante turned to poetry to console himself, ultimately producing the greatest written work of the late Middle Ages: *The Divine Comedy*. Written in his own native dialect, the Tuscan of the city of Florence, *The Divine Comedy* describes Dante’s descent into hell, guided by the spirit of the classical Roman poet Virgil. Dante and Virgil emerge on the other side of the earth, with Dante ascending the mountain of purgatory and ultimately entering heaven, where he encounters the divine presence.

Dante’s work, which soon became justly famous in Italy and then elsewhere in Europe, presaged some of the essential themes of Renaissance thought. Dante’s travels through hell, purgatory, and heaven in the poem are replete with encounters with two categories of people: Italians of Dante’s lifetime or the recent past, and both real and mythical figures from ancient Greece and Rome. In other words, Dante was indifferent to the entire period of the Middle Ages, concentrating instead on what he imagined the spiritual fate of the great thinkers and heroes of the classical age would have been (and gleefully relegating Italians he hated to infernal torments). Ultimately, his work became so famous that it established Tuscan as the basis of what would eventually become the language of “Italian” – all educated people in Italy would eventually come to read the *Comedy* as a matter of course and it came to serve as the founding document of the modern Italian language in the process.

Petrarch (1304 – 1374)

Francesco Petrarca, known as Petrarch in English, was in many ways the founding father of the Renaissance. Like Dante, he was a native of the city of Florence and single-handedly spearheaded the practice of studying and imitating the great writers and thinkers of the past. Petrarch personally rediscovered long-lost works by Cicero, widely considered the greatest writer of ancient Rome during the republican period, and set about training himself to emulate Cicero’s rhetorical style. Petrarch wrote to friends and associates in a classical, grammatically spotless Latin (as opposed to the often sloppy and error-ridden Latin of the Middle Ages) and encouraged them to learn to emulate the classics in their writing, thought, and values. He went on to write many works of poetry and prose that were based on the model provided by Cicero and other ancient writers.

Petrarch additionally discovered, reorganized, and annotated fragments of Livy’s Roman History an incredibly important source for the history of ancient Rome. In many ways the current discipline of history begins with Humanism and Petrarch. He also wrote *The Lives of Illustrious Men*, biographies of men from antiquity whose thoughts and actions he deemed worth emulation. To spread humanistic values Petrarch published Italian poems, collections of Roman letters, and writings of classical authors.

So foundational to the Renaissance era, Petrarch was even responsible for coming up with the very idea of the “Dark Ages” that separated his own era from the greatness of the classical past. His own poetry and writings became so popular among other educated people that he deserves a great deal of personal credit for sparking the Renaissance itself; following Petrarch, the idea that the classical world might be “reborn” in northern Italy acquired a great deal of popularity and cultural force.

Christine de Pizan (1364 – 1430)

Christine de Pizan was the most famous and important female thinker and writer of the Renaissance era. Her father, the court astrologer of the French king Charles V, was exceptional in that he felt it important that his daughter receive the same quality of education afforded to elite men at the time. She went on to become a famous poet and writer in her own right, being patronized (i.e. receiving commissions for her writing) by a wide variety of French and Italian nobles. Her best-known work was *The Book of the City of Ladies*, in which she attacked the then-universal idea that women were naturally unintelligent, sinful, and irrational; it was a key text in the querelles des femmes noted above. Instead, she argued, history provided a vast catalog of women who had

been moral, pious, intelligent, and competent, and that it was men's pride and the refusal of men to allow women to be properly educated that actually held women back. In many ways, the City of Ladies was the first truly feminist work in European history, and it is striking that she was supported by elite men due to her obvious intellectual gifts despite their own deep-seated sexism.

Showing women engaged in various form of study or learned endeavors (like playing a musical instrument)

Illustration from the Book of the City of Ladies by Christine de Pizan, 1405 https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...mes%27_002.jpg

Desiderius Erasmus (1466 – 1536)

Erasmus was an astonishingly erudite priest who benefited from both the traditional scholastic education of the late-medieval church and the new humanistic style that emerged from the Renaissance. Of his various talents, one of the most important was his mastery of philology: the history of languages. Erasmus became completely fluent not just in classical and medieval Latin, but in the Greek of the New Testament (i.e. most of the earliest versions of the New Testament of the Bible are written in the vernacular Greek of the first century CE). He also became conversant in Hebrew, which was very uncommon among Christians at the time.

Armed with his lingual virtuosity, Erasmus undertook a vast study and re-translation of the New Testament, working from various versions of the Greek originals and correcting the Latin Vulgate that was the most widely used version at the time. In the process, Erasmus corrected the New Testament itself, catching and fixing numerous translation errors (while he did not re-translate the Old Testament from Hebrew, he did point out errors in it as well).

Erasmus was criticized by some of his superiors within the Church because he was not officially authorized to carry out his studies and translations; nevertheless, he ended up producing an extensively notated re-translation of the New Testament with numerous corrections. Importantly, these corrections were not just a question of grammatical issues, but of meaning. The Christian message that emerged from the “correct” version of the New Testament was a deeply personal philosophy of prayer, devotion, and morality that did not correspond to many of the structures and practices of the Roman Church. Erasmus was also an advocate of translations of the Bible into vernacular languages, although he did not produce such a translation himself.

Some of his other works included *In Praise of Folly*, a satirical attack on corruption within the church, and *Handbook of the Christian Soldier*, which de-emphasized the importance of the sacraments. Erasmus used his abundant wit to ridicule sterile medieval-style scholars, the corruption of “Christian” rulers who were essentially glorified warlords, and even the very idea of witches, which he demonstrated relied on a faulty translation from the Hebrew of the Old Testament.

Niccolo Machiavelli (1469 – 1527)

Machiavelli was a “courtier,” a professional politician, ambassador, and official who spent his life in the court of a ruler – in his case, as part of the city government of his native Florence (the Medici). While in service of the Medici, Machiavelli wrote various works on politics, most notably a consideration of the proper functioning of a republic, like Florence itself. Unfortunately for him, Machiavelli was caught up in the whirlwind of power politics at court and ended up being exiled by the Medici.

While in exile, Machiavelli undertook a new work of political theory which he titled *The Prince*. Here, Machiavelli detailed how an effective ruler should behave: training constantly in war, forcing his subjects to fear (but not hate) him, studying the ancient past for role models like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, and never wasting a moment worrying about morality when power was on the line. In the process, Machiavelli created what was arguably the first work of “political science” that abandoned the moralistic approach of how a ruler should behave as a good Christian and instead embraced a practical guide to holding power. He dedicated the work to the Medici in hopes that he would be allowed to return from exile (he detested the rural “bumpkins” he lived among in exile and longed to return to cosmopolitan Florence). Instead, *The Prince* caused a scandal when it came out for completely ignoring the role of God and Christian morality in politics, and Machiavelli died not long after. That being noted, Machiavelli is now remembered as a pioneering political thinker. It is safe to assume that far more rulers have consulted *The Prince* for ideas of how to maintain their power over the years than one of the moralistic tracts that was preferred during Machiavelli's lifetime.

Baldassarre Castiglione (1478 – 1529)

Castiglione was the author of *The Courtier*, published at the end of his life in 1528. Whereas Machiavelli's *The Prince* was a practical guide for rulers, *The Courtier* was a guide to the nobles, wealthy merchants, high-ranking members of the Church, and other social elites who served and schemed in the courts of princes: courtiers. The work centered on what was needed to win the

prince's favor and to influence him, not just avoiding embarrassment at court. This was tied to the growing sense of what it meant to be "civilized" – Italians at the time were renowned across Europe for their refinement, the quality of their dress and jewelry, their wit in conversation, and their good taste. The relatively crude tastes of the nobility of the Middle Ages were "revised" starting in Italy, with Castiglione serving as both a symptom and cause of this shift.

The effective courtier, according to Castiglione, was tasteful, educated, clever, and subtle in his actions and words, a true politician rather than merely a warrior who happened to have inherited some land. Going forward, growing numbers of political elites came to resemble a Castiglione-style courtier instead of a thuggish medieval knight or "man-at-arms." When he died, no less a personage than the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V lamented his loss and paid tribute to his memory.

Art and Artists

Perhaps the most iconic aspect of the Renaissance as a whole is its tremendous artistic achievements – figures like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti are household names in a way that Petrarch is not, despite the fact that Petrarch should be credited for creating the very concept of the Renaissance. The fame of Renaissance art is thanks to the incredible creativity of the great Renaissance artists themselves, who both imitated classical models of art and ultimately forged entirely new artistic paths of their own.

Medieval art (called "Gothic" after one of the Germanic tribes that conquered the Roman Empire) was unconcerned with realistic depictions of objects or people. Medieval paintings often presented things from several angles at once to the viewer and had no sense of three-dimensional perspective. Likewise, Gothic architecture tended to be bulky and overwhelming rather than refined and delicate; the great examples of Gothic architecture are undoubtedly the cathedrals built during the Middle Ages, often beautiful and inspiring but a far cry from the symmetrical, airy structures of ancient Greece and Rome.

Gothic style sculpture of 4 priests within a cathedral

South portal of Chartres Cathedral (c. 1215–20), one of the earliest examples of Gothic Sculpture https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/_/S_TTaylor.JPG

In contrast, Renaissance artists studied and copied ancient frescoes and statues in an attempt to learn how to realistically depict people and objects. And, just as Petrarch "invented" the major themes of Renaissance thought by imitating and championing classical humanist thought, a Florentine artist, architect, and engineer named Filippo Brunelleschi "invented" Renaissance art through the imitation of the classical world.

Filippo Brunelleschi (1377 – 1446)

Brunelleschi was an astonishing artistic and engineering genius. He became a prominent client of the Medici, and with their political and financial support he undertook the construction of what would be the largest free-standing domed structure in all of Europe: the dome of the cathedral of Florence. For generations, the cathedral of Florence had stood unfinished, its main tower having been built too large and too tall for any architect to complete. Literally no one knew how to build a freestanding stone dome on top of a tower over 350 feet high. By studying ancient Roman structures and employing his own incredible intellect, Brunelleschi built the dome in such a way that it held its internal structure together during the construction process. He invented a giant, geared winch to raise huge blocks of sandstone hundreds of feet in the air and was even known to personally ascend the construction to place bricks. The dome was completed in 1413, crowning both his fame as an architect and the Medici's role as the greatest patrons of Renaissance art and architecture at the time.

While the dome is usually considered Brunelleschi's greatest achievement, he was also the (re-)inventor of one of the most important artistic concepts in history: linear perspective. He was the first person in the western world to determine how to draw objects in two dimensions, on a piece of paper or the equivalent, in such a way that they looked realistically three-dimensional (i.e. having depth, as in looking off into the distance and seeing objects that are farther away "look smaller" than those nearby). Here, Brunelleschi was unquestionably influenced by a medieval Arab thinker, Ibn al-Haytham, whose *Book of Optics* laid out theories of light and sight perception that described linear perspective. *The Book of Optics* was available to Brunelleschi in Latin translation, and, crucially, Brunelleschi applied the concept of perspective to actual art (which al-Haytham had not, focusing instead on the scientific basis of optics). In doing so, Brunelleschi introduced the ability for artists to create realistic depictions of their subjects. This innovation spread rapidly and completely revolutionized the visual arts, resulting in far more lifelike drawings and paintings.

Sandro Botticelli (1445 – 1510)

Botticelli exemplified the life of a successful Renaissance painter during the height of the most productive artistic period in Florence and Rome. Likewise, his works focused on themes central to the Renaissance as a whole: the importance of patronage, the celebration of classical figures and ideas, the beauty of the human body and mind, and Christian piety. Botticelli was patronized by various members of the Florentine popolo grosso, by the Medici, and by popes, producing numerous frescos (wall paintings done on plaster), portraits, and both biblical and classical scenes. Two of his most famous works capture different aspects of Renaissance art:

Close up of a portion of a Renaissance painting showing a group of men all looking to the left, while a lone figure looks directly at the viewer

Detail of the Adoration of the Magi, self-portrait of Botticelli https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/.../_WGA2704.jpg

The Adoration of the Magi (1475), above, depicts members of the Medici family, Botticelli's patrons, as taking part in one of the key scenes from the birth of Christ. Botticelli even included himself in the painting; his self-portrait is the figure on the far right. Note how all of the figures are dressed as wealthy Italians of the fifteenth century, not Jews, Romans, and Persians of the first century. Despite the abundance of biblical scenes in Renaissance painting, no attempt was made to depict people as they might have appeared at the time. Instead, the paintings projected the world of the *popoli grossi* back in time, sometimes (as with this example) even including portraits of actual important Italians.

The Birth of Venus (1485) celebrates a key moment in Greek mythology when the goddess of love, sexuality, and beauty is born from the sea. Here Botticelli pushed the boundaries of Renaissance art (and what was culturally acceptable by his contemporaries) by glorifying not just the beauty of the human body, but by openly celebrating Venus's sexuality. The painting thus completely rejected the asceticism associated with Christian piety during the Middle Ages, suggesting instead a kind of joyful sensuality.

Leonardo da Vinci (1452 – 1519)

Da Vinci was famous in his own time as both one of the greatest painters of his age (he painted both one of the most famous depictions of the Last Supper and the infamous *Mona Lisa*) and as what we would now call a scientist – at the time, he was sought after for his skill at engineering, overseeing the construction of the naval defenses of Venice and swamp drainage projects in Rome at different points. He was hired by a whole swath of the rich and powerful in Italy and France; in his old age he was the official chief painter and engineer of the French king, living in a private chateau provided for him and receiving admiring visits from the king.

Faded manuscript page with a drawing of a large wing with calculations above it

Da Vinci's design of a Flying Machine based closely off of the wings of a bat https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/...uc_Viatour.jpg

Series of sketches of a skeletal human arm in various positions

Leonardo Da Vinci, Investigating the Motion of the Arm, 1510 <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/...c.1510-11.jpg>

Leonardo's scientific work was often closely related to his artistic skills. While the practice of autopsy for medical knowledge was nothing new – doctors in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe alike had used autopsies to further medical knowledge for centuries – Leonardo was able to document his findings in meticulous detail thanks to his artistic virtuosity. He undertook dozens of dissections of bodies (most of them executed criminals) and drew precise diagrams of the parts of the body. He also created speculative diagrams of various machines, from practical designs like hydraulic engines and weapons to fantastical ones like flying machines based on the anatomy of birds.

Da Vinci is remembered today thanks as much to his diagrams of things like flying machines as for his art. Ironically, while he was well known as a practical engineer at the time, no one had a clue that he was an inventor in the technological sense: he never built physical models of his ideas, and he never published his concepts, so they remained unknown until well after his death. Likewise, while his anatomical work anticipated important developments in medicine, they were unknown during his own lifetime.

Faded frescoe of the Last Supper painted above a doorframe

The Last Supper, Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, Italy, 1498 https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/...tion_32x16.jpg

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475 – 1564)

Michelangelo was the most celebrated artist of the Renaissance during his own lifetime, patronized by the city council of Florence

(run by the Medici) and the pope alike. He created numerous works, most famously the statue of the Old Testament figure David and the paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The latter work took him four years to complete, during which he argued constantly with the Pope, Julius II, who treated him like an artisan servant rather than the true artistic genius Michelangelo knew himself to be. Michelangelo was already the most famous artist in Europe thanks to his sculptures. By the time he completed the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he had to be accepted as one of the greatest painters of his age as well, not just the single most famous sculptor of the time.

Nude statue of a physically perfect man

Michelangelo's David in the Galleria dell' Accademia, Florence https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...h_pedestal.jpg

In the end, a biography of Michelangelo written by a friend helped cement the idea that there was an important distinction between mere artisans and true artists, the latter of whom were temperamental and mercurial but possessed of genius. Thus, the whole idea of the artist as an ingenious social outsider derives in part from Michelangelo's life.

Renaissance art and scholarship was enormously influential. While the process took many decades, both humanist scholarship and education on the one hand and classically-inspired art and architecture on the other spread beyond Italy over the course of the fifteenth century. By the sixteenth century, the study of the classics became entrenched as an essential part of elite education itself, joining with (or rendering obsolete) medieval scholastic traditions in schools and universities. The beautiful and realistic styles of sculpture and painting spread as well, completely surpassing Gothic artistic forms, just as Renaissance architecture replaced the Gothic style of building. Renaissance learning and art helped bring about the definitive end of the Middle Ages and both inspired and made possible exploration into the Atlantic.

European Exploration and Conquest

Europe was not a particularly important place, in the context of global empires, economies, or cultural influence during the medieval period. While it invaded the Middle East during the crusades and the European states themselves warred against one another almost constantly, on balance Europe was quite weak and poor compared to other regions farther east. China and India are both outstanding examples of regions that produced far greater wealth, had far larger populations, and were far more militarily powerful than any European kingdom was; in the case of China under the Ming dynasty of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, China was probably more powerful than all of Europe put together. Likewise, China's cultural influence on its neighbors was profound.

Nevertheless, the long expansion of European power to the rest of the world began in the fifteenth century. One of the great world-historical conundrums is why European states expanded so rapidly and aggressively, in the long run, while other powers like that of China, the Ottoman Empire, or the Indian kingdoms did not. Why was it Europe that took over the Americas (and, much later, much of the rest of the world) rather than Persia, the Ottoman Empire, India, or China?

Ironically, one of the most likely answers to that question is that it was Europe's relative poverty as compared to the states of the Middle East and Asia that led Europeans to seek out new sources of wealth. Whereas the intra-Asian trade routes linking China, Korea, Japan, the islands of the western Pacific, Southeast Asia, and India ensured that Asian states enjoyed access to wealth and luxury goods, Europeans had to rely on the hugely expensive long-distance trade between Asia, the Middle East, and Europe to access goods like spices and porcelain that Europeans desperately wanted (so we can conclude based on the prices elite Europeans were willing to pay for them) but could not produce themselves. One of the major motivations for European explorers was the pursuit of direct access to luxury goods that bypassed the eastern mercantile networks that had traditionally profited off of the long-distance East – West trade routes.

The demand for trade with the east was limitless in European society. Luxury goods from South and East Asia were always among the most sought-after commodities in Europe, stretching all the way back to Roman times. Spices were worth far more than their weight in gold, and Chinese goods like porcelain were also highly prized. Enterprising merchants who were able to position themselves somewhere along the Indian Ocean trade routes or the famous Silk Road between Europe and China stood to make a fortune, but the distances covered were so vast that it was very difficult and perilous to take part in mercantile ventures. Thus, Isabella of Spain was not alone in funding explorers who sought to reach the east via easier routes when she supplied Columbus with his ships and sailors.

The situation became even more difficult for Europeans thanks to the rise of the Ottoman Empire. When Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453, the traditional trade routes to Asia were disrupted, particularly as the Turks started taking over the Venetian maritime empire. Likewise, Europeans had long traded with Muslim merchants in North Africa for gold, ivory, and spices, and they longed to cut out the middlemen and get to the sources farther south. Some of this was doubtless born of anti-Muslim prejudice,

but there was also the simple fact that the Ottomans now directly controlled a major link in the East – West trade axis, deriving profits that Europeans desired for their own.

In addition, the crusading tradition, especially that inspired by the Reconquest of Spain and Portugal, served as an inspiration for European explorers. The Reconquest was only completed in 1492, the same year that Columbus sailed in search of a western route to Asia, and many of the Spanish conquistadors (conquerors) who invaded South and Central America afterwards had acquired their military experience from what they considered to be the holy wars against the Muslim inhabitants of the Iberian peninsula. That crusading ideology was easily adapted for the purposes of conquering vast American territories and forcibly converting the Native American inhabitants to Christianity.

There were thus economic and cultural reasons that Europeans wanted to reach African and Asian commodities and wealth. They were able to access that wealth thanks to technological advances. Until about 1400, Europeans had no ships capable of sailing across an entire ocean (the Viking longboats of the Middle Ages were an exception, but they were no longer in use by the Renaissance era), and the European understanding of geography and navigation was extremely primitive. From about 1420 on, however, maritime technology improved dramatically and it became feasible to launch voyages that could cross the entire Atlantic Ocean with a reasonable degree of certainty that they would succeed. The key here was the invention of carracks and caravels, new kinds of ships that were able to sail both with the wind and against lateral winds; as long as the wind was not blowing in the opposite direction one wanted to travel in, it was possible to keep moving in the right direction. Reasonably effective compasses came into European hands from the Middle East around 1400 as well. Thus, by 1400 Europeans had both a number of reasons to want to explore and for the first time had the technological means to do so.

A close up of a triangular sail on a sailboat

What is believed to be the most accurate depiction of a lateen caravel, featured in the 16th century *Retábulo de Santa Auta*, now at the National Museum of Ancient Art, Lisbon https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/rte_Antiga.jpg

Despite those advances, the European grasp of geography remained very shaky. As of 1400, Europeans had terribly imprecise knowledge about the rest of the world. They did not, of course, know anything about the Americas. They tended to confuse “India,” “Cathay,” and “Japan” with Asia itself. They had a vague notion that all of Asia was ruled by khans, in part because of the popularity of the Venetian merchant Marco Polo’s famous account of his travels undertaken in the latter part of the thirteenth century. Polo was a Venetian merchant who had traveled to the court of the Mongol Khan Kublai and eventually returned to Europe, but his account merely reinforced just how far away, and difficult to reach, Asia was taking the usual eastern routes. Many sincerely believed that monsters occupied the interiors of Africa and Asia, and besides Polo, no Europeans had ever made the trek to the far east and returned to tell the tale.

World-Historical Comparison: China and Europe

The idea of the “age of discovery” described in this chapter is European in origin, but it is useful in describing major voyages of discovery launched by non-European empires at the time as well. The exemplary case is that of the great voyages of Zheng He, admiral of an enormous fleet of Chinese ships that sailed between 1405 – 1433, during China’s Ming Dynasty. The sheer size of the fleets commanded by Zheng He was staggering. Whereas Columbus would later sail with three small ships and 90 sailors, the first of the seven Chinese expeditions led by Zheng He boasted 300 ships and over 27,000 men, including diplomats, scholars, translators, and what amounted to an actual army of soldiers. The expeditions were launched on the order of the Yongle Emperor (r. 1402 – 1424), third emperor of the Ming Dynasty, who sought to more directly connect China to the outside world. His goals in sponsoring the expeditions were twofold: to establish stronger maritime trade connections and to ensure that foreign states acknowledged the political supremacy of China.

The Zheng He expeditions traveled from southeastern China, following the monsoon winds south and west, visiting kingdoms and trade cities along the way in the regions corresponding to present-day Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, India, and Sri Lanka. Later voyages visited the trade city of Hormuz on the Persian Gulf and sailed up the Red Sea, visiting the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina. One voyage sailed directly to Mogadishu in east Africa, bringing back (among other things) a giraffe to the Ming court on its return voyage. The voyages benefited from the fact that most of the territories they visited were either entirely or partly populated by Muslims, and Arabic was one of the shared languages of the entire Indian Ocean region. Zheng He himself spoke Arabic, as did many of his navigators and sailors, and it was thus easy to communicate despite the enormous distances separating the regions they visited from China itself.

Along the way, the voyages succeeded in the major goals defined by the Yongle Emperor. First, they exchanged precious trade goods in huge volumes, deliberately seeking out cities tied to maritime trade (like Calcutta in South Asia) and establishing strong trade links for Chinese merchants going forward. Second, they took both diplomats and gifts back from many of the kingdoms

they visited, which according to Chinese political theory implied that foreign kingdoms were making good on their obligation to acknowledge Chinese sovereignty. In one case, Zheng He was forced to seize the king of Sri Lanka, Alagakkonara, after the latter tried to plunder some of the expedition's ships. Alagakkonara was taken back to China, where he begged for forgiveness and promised to send gifts and tribute in the future. That said, the expeditions were essentially peaceful in nature. They did not conquer the regions they encountered, their impressive military power was only used defensively, and almost all of the rulers of the kingdoms to which they traveled welcomed them.

One of the great world-historical conundrums is thus why the expeditions not only ended, but in their aftermath the entire state-sponsored Chinese presence on the Pacific and Indian Oceans vanished entirely. Many people, and not only historians, have noted that world history might have gone very differently if China had maintained direct political and economic ties to the countries visited by Zheng He's expeditions. Instead, the last voyage sailed in 1431, never to be repeated. By the time the Portuguese arrived in the Indian Ocean in 1497, there were no Chinese ships and just a handful of independent Chinese merchants in the entire, vast trade zone.

The reasons for this apparent about-face are threefold. First, the expeditions were incredibly expensive. They required a staggering commitment of wealth and manpower, not to mention vast natural resources. The entire region of southeastern China from which the expeditions sailed was deforested to build the ships, and the cost to the imperial government was enormous. Second, many in the Ming court had long argued that the resources spent on the expeditions were better used defending China from the Mongol, Manchu, and Turkic threats to the north. The memory of the Yuan Dynasty founded by the Mongols was still fresh, and northern China continued to face serious military threats from the semi-nomadic peoples of the steppe. The Yongle Emperor, the great sponsor of the expeditions, died in 1424, and while the last expeditions would continue under his immediate successors (the Hongxi and Xuande emperors), the priority of the state shifted to containing the nomadic threats to the north.

The third, and perhaps most straightforward reason for the end of the expeditions is simply that they had succeeded in their goals. In contrast to the rapacity of the European voyages of discovery, which were expressly focused on seizing riches and territory, the Zheng He expeditions made good on their goals of forging economic links and "reminding" foreign rulers of their secondary position in relation to China. China would remain the powerhouse of East Asia, surrounded by smaller kingdoms that did acknowledge Chinese predominance, but no one in a position of significant political power for the rest of the Ming Dynasty, or the Qing Dynasty that followed it, sought to extend the Yongle Emperor's efforts to turn China into a maritime power.

Spain, Columbus, the Great Dying, and the Columbian Exchange

The most important voyages of discovery of the early modern period were undertaken by agents of the Spanish monarchy, starting with that of Christopher Columbus in 1492. They were inspired by religious fervor as much as a practical desire for riches – fresh off the successful Reconquest, Queen Isabella agreed with Columbus's vision of flanking the Muslim forces of the Middle East and recapturing the Holy Land as much as she also wanted new trade routes to Asia. The voyage was thought to be feasible both because all educated people already accepted that the world was round (common knowledge since the days of ancient Greece) and because the circumference of the globe was not really clear to them: it simply was not known how long one would have to sail west to reach the far east.

Columbus himself had totally inaccurate beliefs about the distance between Europe and Asia – he based his geography on an ancient (and completely inaccurate) account by the Greek philosopher Ptolemy and he thought that Asia was not far west of Europe. Despite being disliked and distrusted by most of the rulers he had approached in the past, Columbus succeeded in winning Isabella over to his vision, and she supplied him with a tiny fleet (she even sent him with letters of introduction to the Great Khan, who she presumed still ruled in Asia). Columbus departed in August of 1492 with three small boats (only one caravel) – the Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria – and 90 men. They arrived in the Bahamas in October.

Map showing the trajectories of the four Columbus voyages, each voyage with a different color line

The four voyages of Columbus between 1492 and 1504. 'Juana' is present-day Cuba, and 'Hispaniola' is present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/colon_en2.svg

On October 28th, 1492 Columbus and his ships arrived in Cuba, which he renamed Juana. Within a few days Columbus had convinced himself that Cuba was a part of the Asian mainland and sailed northwest along the Cuban coast in search of a river that would lead him to the king's court. In planning his approach to the king, Columbus followed precedent from the Portuguese in Africa. He would send emissaries with presents for the king and a copy of a letter from the Spanish monarchs. To lead the expedition he selected a sailor who had participated in the same sort of mission in Africa. By Nov. 1, Columbus believed that he was only about 100 leagues from Zayto and Quinsai, cities figuring prominently on European maps of Asia. On the 2nd of

November, he made up his embassy, consisting of Rodrigo de Jerez (the man with the African experience), linguist Luis de Torres, and two Indians (one from the Bahamas and the other from Cuba). The embassy carried strings of beads to exchange for food during the 6 days allotted for the journey. They also carried samples of spices to compare with what they might find, and Columbus instructed them carefully on what to say to the king once they arrived.

Throughout the entire month of November Columbus explored the Cuban coastline, but by December 5th he reached its end and soon thereafter landed on the northwestern coast of Hispaniola. Here the group founded the first European settlement in the Americas. But not on purpose. On Christmas Day, the Santa Maria, their principal ship, ran aground destroying the vessel. The loss of the ship forced Columbus to leave a group of men behind since there was not room on the two remaining vessels for all the Europeans to return. Near present day Port Paix on the northern coast of Haiti, the Spaniards built a small fort named La Navidad. Housing thirty-nine men, the outpost was completely dependent upon the good will and help of its indigenous neighbors until Columbus's return.

Nearly a year later Columbus, along with another 1200 men, returned to the Caribbean, and after exploring some of the Eastern islands, headed for La Navidad. Unfortunately, all that was left of the colony were a few decomposing bodies, though the fact that they once had beards could still be discerned (meaning they were European corpses), and smoldering ashes. Within only one year the hope of a peaceful conquest of the Americas was dashed. In response, Columbus abandoned the ruins of Navidad and sailed eastward along the northern coast of the island. It was not until nearly a month later that the group decided upon a site, dropping anchor and performing the first mass on January 2nd of 1494. They named the new colony in honor of the Queen, La Isabela. While the Spanish celebrated the new colony, it was not until 1503 that the entire island of Hispaniola was fully under the control of Spanish colonists.

Graveyard with several small crosses marking the graves and tropical trees rising above

Graveyard at La Isabela, what little is left at the settlement, abandoned in 1500 when Santo Domingo replaced it as the colony's capital, photo by Erin Stone

Plaza with a Cathedral, several benches, and pigeons flying about

Catedral Primada, the first Cathedral in the Americas built in 1504, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, photo by Erin Stone

Columbus ended up spearheading everything the Spanish empire was to represent in the Americas: brutality against the native "Indians" (stemming Columbus's term, *indios*, which he used assuming he had indeed arrived in "the Indies" of Asia), attempts to convert by force, intense greed for precious metals, and the introduction of pathogens against which the Native people had no resistance. With Columbus, the traffic in goods and commodities between the two hemispheres began. While Europeans at the time were obsessed with the vast mineral wealth found in the Americas, it is clear in historical hindsight that far more important than precious metals were the living things exchanged between the western and eastern hemispheres of the globe starting in 1492. Historians now refer to that enormous distribution of plant and animal species, as well as bacteria and viruses, as the Columbian Exchange.

From the New World, Europeans brought back corn, potatoes, tobacco, chocolate, and tomatoes, just to name the most important of the crops that soon flourished across Africa and Eurasia. From the Old World, Europeans imported all of the large domesticated animals – horses, cows, sheep, goats, pigs, – as well as numerous crops like rice, wheat, sugarcane, and coffee. Potatoes alone would go on to reshape the demography of all of northern Europe and various other regions in the world because they provide a great deal of nutrition and calories and can grow in poor, rocky soils. The poor of many European regions (Ireland, most famously) became largely dependent on potatoes for nourishment by the nineteenth century.

That noted, the single most significant biological entity to be exchanged between the hemispheres was the smallpox virus, which was at the heart of the worst epidemic in world history. Isolated from the western hemisphere for thousands of years, Indigenous Americans had no resistance to Eurasian diseases. Because almost all diseases that affect humans are mutated strains of diseases affecting domestic animals, referred to as zoonotic diseases, and all of the large animal species that can be domesticated were Eurasian in origin except llamas, Eurasians and Africans had spent thousands of years both suffering from and building up resistance to epidemics while Native Americans had not. Those epidemic pathogens arrived all at once with the European invasion of the New World that began with Columbus.

Historians refer to the demographic catastrophe that accompanied the European encounter with the Americas as the Great Dying. As much as 90% of the Indigenous people of the Americas died within a few generations of Columbus's arrival. While the Spanish and Portuguese did win some noteworthy military engagements, due largely to their use of horses, gunpowder, and steel, their true military advantage lay in germ warfare, something they certainly did not anticipate unleashing on their arrival. Spanish explorers in the early sixteenth century encountered whole regions with abundant evidence of sophisticated cultures that were already abandoned, their former inhabitants wiped out by disease. Put simply, the conquest of the Americas by Europeans was

made possible not because Europeans were significantly more militarily powerful than were Native Americans, but because so many of the latter were already dead thanks to disease.

The Columbian Exchange, and the Great Dying that was part of it, began with Columbus's initial voyage. Almost immediately after Columbus's return to Spain after his expedition, Ferdinand and Isabela of Spain grasped the significance of his discovery and actively funded more expeditions and, soon, colonists. The Spanish crown also quickly tried to cement its hold on the New World, petitioning the pope to grant them everything across the Atlantic. After papal intervention and negotiations between the Spanish and Portuguese, the Spanish were to receive everything west of an arbitrary line on the map 1,100 miles west of the Cape Verde Islands, with everything to the east granted to the Portuguese. Practically speaking, this meant that the Portuguese concentrated their colonization efforts on Brazil, Africa, and India, while the Spanish concentrated on the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. Needless to say, the other European powers were not about to honor this agreement, called the Treaty of Tordesillas and signed in 1494, but it gave the Spanish and Portuguese a considerable head start.

Page of manuscript with fancy calligraphy written on it

Treaty of Tordesillas, 1494 <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0d/Tordesillas.jpg>

Map of the globe with a line dividing the Atlantic Ocean

Map Demarcating the Treaty of Tordesillas that split the world between Spain and Portugal <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0d/Tordesillas.jpg>

By the 1520s, Europeans recognized that Columbus had been completely wrong about the New World being part of Asia. The term "America" was invented by another Italian, Amerigo Vespucci, another early explorer (he led two expeditions between 1497 and 1503) and was the first to grasp the immensity of the western hemisphere. Vespucci coined the phrase "New World" in the first place, hence "America" rather than "Columbia" – Vespucci's accounts were printed first. He was also a relentless self-promoter, whereas Columbus did not attempt to publicize his discoveries with the same focus.

Even though Europeans quickly realized that the Americas were whole new continents, they persisted in their quest to find a western route to Asia. The Spanish dispatched explorers and sailors who sought Asia by going around the Americas. This led to the voyage of Ferdinand Magellan (1480 – 1521), who commanded a small fleet of five ships funded by the Spanish crown and who tried to find a western route to Asia in 1519. He succeeded in rounding South America and crossing the Pacific, but was then killed by inhabitants of the Philippines in 1521. There, his Basque navigator Juan Sebastián Elcano took over and managed to guide one ship all the way back to Spain, arriving in 1522 (Magellan is much better remembered than Elcano, but it was Elcano who actually made it back). The voyage proved definitively that it was possible to sail around the world. The Spanish would subsequently use the Philippines as the basis of their Pacific trade network, ultimately linking together Europe, the Americas, and Asia and fulfilling the original vision of a western route to Asia that had inspired Columbus's expedition in the first place.

Indigenous American Empires and The Conquistadors

There were two significant empires in the Americas at the time of the Spanish invasion, along with hundreds of smaller states and free associations. In both cases, the empires in question – the Aztecs of central Mexico and the Inca of the western Andes in South America – were relatively young states that faced considerable internal and external pressures. In other words, the Spanish did not set out to conquer ancient empires stretching back to some prehistoric past; they faced states that, like Spain itself, were only recently united and which experienced considerable turmoil.

The Aztec Empire originated as a settlement of a nomadic people known as the Mexica ("Aztec" is used in later histories of their culture, but their actual name was Mexica). According to their own origin stories, the Aztecs had arrived from the north, following a prophecy that their new home would be found where they discovered an eagle eating a snake while perched on a cactus. In approximately 1325 CE, the Aztecs arrived at a lake surrounded by brackish marshlands in central Mexico and they found just such an eagle. The area was already the site of thousands of years of Mesoamerican civilization, with several major cultures having already risen and fallen over the course of more than a thousand years of pre-Aztec history, and initially the Aztecs were forced to create their settlement on islands in Lake Texcoco, rather than the more desirable areas that surrounded it. This settlement, Tenochtitlan, rapidly expanded and eventually came to dominate the surrounding region.

The success of the Aztecs in expanding their power was based initially on their creation of farms built on partly-submerged artificial islands of rich compost known as chinampas. The Aztec population expanded rapidly, and in 1428 they entered into a "triple alliance" with the neighboring cities of Texcoco and Tlacopan, building a causeway between Tenochtitlan and Texcoco and constructing monumental architecture in the cities themselves. While the members of the triple alliance were allies, the Aztecs dominated, and over the course of the next eighty years they launched a series of wars against other states in the neighboring regions. These wars were focused not on actual conquest, but on two things guaranteed to cause enormous hatred directed at

the Aztecs: ongoing demands of tribute and, as importantly, the capture of enemy warriors to be sacrificed to the gods back in Tenochtitlan. These wars are remembered historically as “sacred” or “divine” wars because of this religious motivation, which was truly central to the Aztec practice of warfare itself. When the Spanish arrived, they found it relatively easy to form their own alliances with the enemies of the Aztecs, who were eager to strike back against the dominant state that had extracted so much wealth, and taken so many young men, from them over the preceding decades.

Meanwhile, in the western Andes of South America, another empire had only recently arisen. The region had long been dominated by family networks known as *ayllus*, each of which was part of a system of labor obligations, marriage alliances, and economic exchange, all bound together by a shared culture and religious rituals. The royal ayllu was led by the Inca, meaning “emperor,” who claimed to be descended from the sun god Inti. In 1471, mere decades before the arrival of the Spanish, the Inca Pachacuti conquered the core region of the western Andes in what later became Ecuador, Peru, and northern Chile. His son and grandson, Topa Inca and Huayna Capac, expanded the empire considerably, until it encompassed the entirety of the western Andes and extended across the mountains in many regions to the jungles and plains to the east. The next generation of Inca rule, however, saw a civil war which created rival factions still in conflict at precisely the time the Spanish arrived (described below).

Stone ruins atop a mountain with even higher peaks rising in the distance

City of Machu Picchu, treasure of the Incas, photo by Erin Stone

The Conquistadors and the Creation of the Spanish Empire

The Conquistadors were the military explorers sent by the Spanish crown to the Americas to claim land, convert “heathens,” and enrich both themselves and the crown. They were usually poor noblemen with few prospects back in Spain; in the first generation of explorers many were essentially unemployed knights. Some conquistadors simply launched expeditions to the New World without royal authorization, hoping to seize enough plunder to receive retroactive royal approval. Officially, all conquistadors were obliged to turn over the “royal fifth” – 20% of all precious metals discovered or mined – of all loot to the crown.

The most significant conquistador was Hernán Cortés (1485 – 1547). A poor knight with few prospects in Spain, he jumped at the chance to travel to the New World. Cortés proved brilliant at allying with Indigenous peoples he encountered in Mexico, where he arrived in 1519 with 450 Spanish troops and 15 horses. Working through a translator, Malinche, who had already learned Spanish, Cortés was able to convince groups resentful of the Aztecs to fight alongside the Spanish. Practically speaking, this meant that the Spanish were almost completely dependent on their allies militarily, particularly the Tlaxcaltec Confederation, an independent rival of the Aztec state. After securing the alliance with the Tlaxcaltecs, the Spanish made their way to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, where they were initially welcomed by the emperor Montezuma II. Once the Aztecs realized the extent of the rapacious designs of the Spanish they chased them from the city, but then an epidemic of smallpox undermined their ability to fight.

A group of Spanish on the right meet a group of Aztec royalty on the left

A 17th-century CE oil painting depicting the meeting of Spanish Conquistador Hernán Cortés and Aztec ruler Montezuma in 1519 (Jay I. Kislak Collection) <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/5...-meets-cortes/>

Ultimately, the Tlaxcaltecs took advantage of the situation to launch a full-scale invasion, nominally “led” by the Spanish but in fact representing a settling of scores between the Aztecs and Tlaxcaltecs. It is important to emphasize the vast disparity in numbers involved: the Tlaxcaltec forces numbered approximately 200,000 soldiers, with Cortés leading a mere 900 Spanish soldiers and 80 cavalry (after he received reinforcements). That noted, there is no question that Cortés was excellent at forming new alliances by supporting the existing ambitions of Central American kingdoms. Along with the Tlaxcaltecs, the Spanish allied with the Tarascan kingdom of northern Mexico to help complete the conquest of the Aztecs, with Tarascan elites going on to marry Spanish noblewomen, formally recognized as Spanish nobility themselves. Thanks to the devastation of the smallpox epidemic and the military power of the Tlaxcaltecs and Tarascans, the remaining Aztec forces surrendered in 1522. Cortés then declared a new Spanish colony of New Spain in the center of Mexico.

A wall made of Indigenous stones/foundations with a Spanish Cathedral rising above

Catedral Metropolitana constructed on the Aztec Templo Mayor, Mexico City, Mexico, photo by Erin Stone

The other noteworthy conquistador of the first generation following Columbus was Francisco Pizarro (1478 – 1541). Inspired by Cortés’ success in Mexico, Pizarro set off (with 180 Spanish troops and 30 horses) for an empire the Spanish had learned of in the Andes of western South America in 1531. Fortunately for the Spanish, the Inca Empire was in the immediate aftermath of a civil war and rival factions were eager for alliances that could increase their power. Shortly after arriving, Pizarro ambushed the Inca emperor Atahualpa and captured him, demanding a building full of gold for his release. Instead, once the ransom was paid,

Pizarro had the emperor killed and then marched on the Inca capital of Cuzco.

Just as Cortés had farther north, Pizarro allied with Atahualpa's former enemies within the empire, with the Spanish "tagging along" in what really amounted to a continuation of the Inca civil war. Inca allies of the Spanish not only retained their wealth and status but were confirmed as Spanish nobility, and the resulting power structure remained squarely rooted in pre-existing Inca political traditions (such as the *mita*, labor tithes owed by communities to the state). By 1533, Spain claimed sovereignty over the former Inca Empire, but the new Spanish colony would have seemed to an outside observer to have changed relatively little from its Inca foundations, at least for the first few generations of its existence. Likewise, it took until 1572 for the Spanish and their allied Inca factions to defeat the last anti-Spanish leader, Tupac Amaru.

Thus, less than fifty years after Columbus's initial landing, the two greatest empires of Central and South America had already fallen to the Spanish. By 1600, practically every part of Central and South America was nominally under Spanish (or, in the case of Brazil, Portuguese), control. Spain and Portugal would go on to retain their respective American colonies until the early nineteenth century. While it is not possible to go into great detail here, however, it is important to emphasize that the conquest represented both the imposition of new hierarchies, very much including many grotesque examples of exploitation, and the integration and adaptation of Indigenous American social structures, cultures, and beliefs.

New World Wealth and Latin American Society

The Spanish discovered huge sources of wealth in South and Central America. The most important source of wealth in all of the Americas for the Spanish crown was discovered in 1545: the mountain of Potosi in present-day Bolivia. Potosi had the most enormous silver deposits in the world at the time, producing thousands of tons of silver for the crown. It also represented a horrific site of slave labor for the native people of the entire extended area. Building on the Inca labor system known as the *mita* (noted above), Spanish officials forced thousands of Indigenous inhabitants of the region to toil in atrocious conditions, often until they died from exhaustion. Whereas the Great Dying might be the most iconic aspect of the Columbian Exchange, Potosi is probably the greatest symbol of the humongous influx of mineral wealth that flooded into Spanish coffers for over a century, as well as the site of the greatest human misery caused by that lust for bullion.

A group of royal Spanish officials entering the city walls of Potosi

Entrance of Archbishop Viceroy Morcillo in Potosi by Melchor Pérez de Holguín, 1716. Painting located at Museo of the Americas
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/o_Morcillo.jpg

The irony of the wealth generated by American mines is that it undermined the vitality of the Spanish state itself in the long run. Spain did not have to cultivate trade or pursue technological or bureaucratic innovation in the same manner as the rest of the European powers because it had such an enormous surplus of precious metals. Thus, even though Spain was the most powerful state in Europe in the sixteenth century, its longer-term trajectory was one of decline, in large part because of its commercial stagnation. In addition, so much bullion was shipped back to Europe that inflation undermined its value, another factor that weakened Spanish power over time.

That noted, Spain's relative decline in relation to other European states did not occur for well over a century after the initial invasions. Back in Europe, funded by the incredible wealth of the New World, the still recently-united Spain became the greatest European power in the sixteenth century. In the New World, royal authority was enforced by two viceroys, royal officials who ruled over the northern and southern parts of the territory. Under them, rich nobles (often originally successful conquistadors) ran *encomiendas*, feudal estates with the legal right to exploit Indigenous labor. Those often evolved into even larger haciendas, the size of whole states back in Europe.

The Spanish crown and members of the clergy sought to not just derive economic benefits from their rule, however, but to win souls. Conversion to Christianity was always a major driving force behind Spanish conquest, but many Spanish missionaries felt considerable discomfort in discovering people who had quite obviously never been in contact with the Christian world. The Christian Bible did not explain their origins, so the Spanish invented various hypotheses: Indigenous Americans were descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel described in the Old Testament of the Bible, they were somehow created and ruled by the devil, they simply were not human beings but strange, human-like animals, and so on. The consensus by the 1530s was that, wherever they were from, Indigenous Americans were blank slates who had to be conquered for their own good. The pope recognized the humanity of the Indigenous Americans in 1537, but the church continued to support forcible conversion, and over time the vast majority of the inhabitants of Latin America accepted Catholicism. That said, just as Indigenous elites were part of the colonial power structure, pre-Christian religious and spiritual traditions were often incorporated into Latin American Catholic ritual.

Because the majority of Spanish immigrants were men, even attempts to ban marriage between Spanish men and Native women

did not prevent the growth of a large “mixed” class of mestizos, the children of Spanish – Indigenous unions who were usually recognized as the legitimate children of the former. By the seventeenth century the Spanish crown oversaw a hardening of racial lines, distinguishing between Spanish-born elites, Spanish creoles (those of unmixed Spanish ancestry born in the Americas), mestizos, and “indios.” Practically speaking, however, there was much more flexibility in Latin American societies than would be the case in North American states later in history, both because of the number of people of mixed racial backgrounds and because of the necessity of Spanish-Indigenous alliances (still very much the case all the way until the wars of Latin American independence in the nineteenth century). In short, there was still a racialized hierarchy in New World society, but more ethnic mixing occurred in Central and South America than in North America.

Overall understandings of the Spanish and Portuguese invasions of the Americas have been revised considerably by historians in recent decades. They did not represent overwhelming, triumphant conquests, despite the self-serving propaganda written by conquistadors like Cortés at the time. The Spanish and Portuguese successfully imposed their own authority, but Central and South American societies were as much about alliance and integration as top-down authority and hierarchy. Starting with the Tlaxcaltecs and Tarascans who played such a pivotal role in the defeat of the Aztecs, the Spanish were obliged to work with Indigenous power structures everywhere they went. Indigenous leaders, usually referred to as caciques by the Spanish (“lord” or “chief” in the Arawak language, which eventually became the universal term for Indigenous leadership within the Spanish Empire), were acknowledged as Spanish nobles, operating with considerable power and autonomy within the empire. Spanish became one of the prevailing languages of the entire continent-spanning territory, but so too were countless pre-Spanish languages that thrive into the present (e.g. Quechua in Peru, Mayan and Nahuatl in Mexico, etc.). The culture and identity of Indigenous Americans in the Spanish-ruled lands also thrived despite the violence of the conquests.

None of this is to diminish that violence. Spanish soldiers were often horribly cruel in seizing lands and extending Spanish rule. Especially before legal reforms in the 1540s, Spanish authorities routinely enslaved whole Indigenous communities. Resistance was met with lethal violence, including the use of mastiffs trained to tear people apart on command and numerous outright massacres. Likewise, the effects of the Great Dying were felt for decades, with periodic epidemics that effected Indigenous communities with greater severity than they did Spanish settlements. The point of this section is instead to emphasize that alliance and cultural blending were also powerful and long-lasting elements of the Spanish Empire in the Americas, and Indigenous cultures were not simply the passive victims of Spanish conquest.

That noted, in one highly significant way the European invasions did represent a brutal and novel form of hierarchy, through the creation of one of the largest-scale and most significant slave systems in world history. The use of slave labor only grew over time, although by the middle of the sixteenth century Europeans were increasingly turning to African slaves, spawning one of the most horrendous injustices in history: the Transatlantic Slave Trade. European states in the Americas were thus built on the backs and with the blood of both the Indigenous inhabitants and, increasingly over time, enslaved Africans.

The impact of the conquests on Europe took longer to become entirely evident, but in the long run the conquest of the Americas sparked the beginning of the process by which Europe became one of the dominant global regions. Europeans now had access to not only enormous quantities of precious metals, but vast new natural resources (from huge stocks of fish to millions of acres of fertile land) that were to bolster European power for centuries to come. It is no coincidence that the year 1492 is often used as the starting point of what historians refer to as the early modern period: when both global hemispheres came into sustained contact for the first time, it was the starting point of massive change for the human species as a whole.

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GLOSSARY

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