Western Civilization: A Concise History - Volume 1

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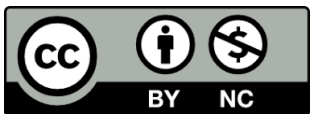
Version 3.0

Last Updated: May, 2024



This textbook is dedicated to my students at PCC, past, present, and future.

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The Idea of Western Civilization

Introduction

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, doesn't that imply that it is just to the east of something else?

In fact, we get the original term from ancient 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 and 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 out on the edges and inferior (or at least not part of the best version of civilization).

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 and Civilization

"The West" as a concept is rooted in the geography of Greece, but "civilization" is not. The word is linked to the Latin word for city, *civitas*, and it suggests a way of life centering on the products of an urbanized culture. Likewise, as noted above with the Greeks, civilization was usually seen as the opposite of barbarism, and historically it was nomadic, non-urbanized peoples who were most likely to be labeled as "barbarians." For the sake of historical analysis, however, we can set aside the pejorative distinction between civilization and barbarism and instead consider civilization as a set of essential technological advances and examine how those technologies altered human life on an enormous scale. That process began in the Middle East thousands of years before the first cities of ancient Greece existed.

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 first invented the most crucial technology necessary for the development of civilization: agriculture. The Mesopotamians also invented other things that are central to civilization, including towns and cities, the earliest writing systems, mathematics, engineering, and both organized religion and complex political systems. Similar advances happened in key regions across the globe,

including China, India, and Mesoamerica, but it happened first in Mesopotamia, and it was from Mesopotamia that civilization spread to the rest of western 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 is called the Hellenistic Age. The people who were part of that age were European, Middle Eastern, and North African, people who worshiped both Greeks gods and the gods of their own regions, spoke all kinds of 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 reluctantly acknowledged the civilized character of 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. Along with those factors, the Romans brought Greek and Roman science, learning, and literature to the reaches of their empire. 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 Middle East. 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 stage 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 worshiped the correct God, but in the wrong way, including Jews and Muslims, but also Christians who deviated from official orthodoxy) or pagans (those who worshiped 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 atrocities in the name of their religion. Likewise, medieval antisemitism (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 to live in places like the Muslim-ruled Ottoman Empire than 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. The connections were not just religious in nature, however: 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: “humanistic” 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 also morality and virtue. Combining the practical study of languages, history, mathematics, and rhetoric (among other subjects) with the cultivation of an ethical code the humanistics 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” - Greek and Roman literature - 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 Eurasia since prehistory to travel to the Americas (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 Indigenous Americans perished as a result. This catastrophic event, the greatest demographic collapse in world history, is remembered as the “Great Dying.” The subsequent conquest of the Americas by Europeans and their descendents 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 Indigenous Americans and, soon, Africans.

Thanks largely to the European conquest of the Americas and the exploitation of American resources and enslaved 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.

The Modern Era

Most of the world, however, was off limits to large-scale European expansion. Not only were there prosperous and sophisticated kingdoms in many regions of Africa, but (in an ironic reversal of the impact of European diseases on Americans) African diseases ensured that would-be European explorers and conquerors were initially unable to penetrate beyond the coasts of most of sub-Saharan Africa entirely. Meanwhile, the enormous and powerful empires and kingdoms of China, Japan, Southeast Asia, and South Asia (i.e. India) largely regarded Europeans as incidental trading partners of relatively little importance. The Middle East was dominated by two powerful and "western" empires of its own: Persia and the Ottoman Empire.

The explosion of European power, one that coincided with the fruition of the idea that Western Civilization was both distinct from and *better* than other branches of civilization, came as a result of a development in technology: the industrial revolution. Starting in Great Britain in the middle of the eighteenth century, Europeans learned how to exploit fossil fuels in the form of coal to harness hitherto unimaginable amounts of energy. That energy underwrote a vast and dramatic expansion of European technology, wealth, and military power, this time built on the backs not of outright slaves, but of workers paid subsistence wages.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the industrial revolution underwrote and enabled the transformation of Europe from regional powerhouse to global hegemon. By the early twentieth century, Europe and the American nations founded by the descendents of Europeans controlled roughly 85% of the globe. Europeans either forced foreign states to concede to their economic demands and political influence, as in China and the Ottoman Empire, or simply conquered and controlled regions directly, as in India and Africa. None of this

would have been possible without the technological and energetic revolution wrought by industrialism.

To Europeans and North Americans, however, the reason that they had come to enjoy such wealth and power was not because of a (temporary) monopoly of industrial technology. Instead, it was the inevitable result of their inherent biological and cultural superiority. The idea that the human species was divided into biologically distinct races was not entirely invented in the nineteenth century, but it became the predominant outlook and acquired all the trappings of a "science" over the course of the 1800s. By the year 1900, almost any person of European descent would have claimed to be part of a distinct, superior "race" whose global dominance was simply part of their collective birthright. Likewise, for the first time, the idea of "the West" started emerging among certain philosophers, although at the time the concept excluded all of eastern Europe, not just non-European regions and continents.

The conceit that the West represented the leading edge of human development arrived at its zenith in the first half of the twentieth century. The European powers themselves fell upon one another in the First World War in the name of expanding, or at least preserving, their share of global dominance. Soon after, the new (related) ideologies of fascism and Nazism put racial superiority at the very center of their worldviews. The Second World War was the direct result of those ideologies, when racial warfare was unleashed for the first time not just on members of races Europeans had already classified as "inferior," but on European ethnicities that fascists and Nazis now considered inferior races in their own right, most obviously the Jews. The bloodbath that followed resulted in approximately 60 million deaths, including the 6 million Jewish victims of the Holocaust and at least 25 million citizens of the Soviet Union, another "racial" enemy from the perspective of the Nazis.

Western Civilization Is Reinvented

It was against the backdrop of this descent into what Europeans and Americans frequently called "barbarism" - the old antithesis of the "true" civilization that started with the Greeks - that the history of Western Civilization first came into being as a textbook topic and, soon, a mainstay of college curriculums. Prominent scholars in the United States, especially historians, came to believe that the best way to defend the elements of civilization with which they most strongly identified, including certain concepts of rationality and political equality, was to describe all of human existence as an ascent from primitive savagery into enlightenment, an ascent that may not have strictly speaking started in Europe, but which they felt enjoyed its

greatest success there. The early proponents of the "Western Civ" concept spoke and wrote explicitly of European civilization as an unbroken ladder of ideas, technologies, and cultural achievements that led to the present. Along the way, of course, they included the United States as both a product of those European achievements and, in the twentieth century, as one of the staunchest defenders of that legacy.

That first generation of historians of Western Civilization succeeded in crafting what was to be the core of history curriculums for most of the twentieth century in American colleges and universities, not to mention high schools. The narrative in the introduction in this book follows a traditional Western Civilization curriculum's basic contours, without all of the qualifying remarks: it starts with Greece, goes through Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, then on to the growth in European power leading up to the recent past. The traditional story, however, usually made a distinction between Western Civilization as the site of progress, and the rest of the world (usually referred to as the "Orient," simply meaning "east," all the way up until textbooks started changing their terms in the 1980s) which were normally characterized as lagging behind. Outside of the West, went the narrative, there was despotism, stagnation, and corruption, so it was almost inevitable that the West would eventually achieve global dominance.

This was, in hindsight, a somewhat surprising conclusion given when the narrative was invented. The West's self-understanding as the most "civilized" culture had imploded with the world wars, but the inventors of Western Civilization as a concept were determined to not only rescue its legacy from that implosion, but to celebrate it as the *only* major historical legacy of relevance to the present. In doing so, they reinforced many of the intellectual dividing lines created centuries earlier: there was true civilization opposed by barbarians, there was an ongoing and unbroken legacy of achievement and progress, and most importantly, only people who were born in or descended from people born in Europe had played a significant historical role. The entire history of most of humankind was not just irrelevant to the narrative of European or American history, it was irrelevant to the history of the modern world for *everyone*. In other words, Africans and Asians, to say nothing of the people of the Pacific or Indigenous Americans, could have little of relevance to learn from their own history that was not somehow "obsolete" in the modern era. And yet, this astonishing conclusion was born from a culture that unleashed the most horrific destruction (*self*-destruction) ever witnessed by the human species.

The West: The Problems of the Concept

Today, the terms “The West” and “Western” remain prevalent in journalism, politics, and casual language alike. Rarely are they considered in much depth, however. To pick one particularly glaring example, Russia under the regime of its dictatorial president Vladimir Putin is usually described in terms of its opposition to the West, which is understood to mean the United States and Western Europe. Those countries correspond fairly neatly to the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which was originally created to limit the expansion of the Soviet Union during the Cold War that followed World War II. Is Russia, however, “Eastern”? As of the 2020s, it is in close political alliance with China, as well as other American political adversaries like Iran, but Russian cultural history is unquestionably linked more closely to Europe than to East Asia or the Middle East, and most contemporary Russians consider themselves Europeans.

When we consider the fact that the very term “the West” was not used in earnest until the later part of the nineteenth century, and then it generally only included European countries west of Poland, and when we reflect on the historical connections between nominally Western and (Middle) Eastern developments in the history of ideas, commerce, politics, and religion, it is clear that the very concept of the West is empirically (i.e. factually) questionable, even if most people today have at least a vague sense of what it is supposed to mean. None of this is to suggest that the idea is useless or should necessarily be abandoned, but it *is* to suggest that the concept should be subject to scrutiny even if we conclude that it remains useful for historical or political analysis.

The other obvious problem with the idea of the West is its appropriation by the contemporary far-right, which openly celebrates a neo-fascist form of politics tied to western chauvinism. The risk of studying the history of western civilization without applying a critical and thoughtful lens to the idea is that it may implicitly endorse the outdated and inaccurate concepts of western exceptionalism and triumphalism that came of age in the late 1800s and which continue to inspire racist and anti-democratic politics in the present. To be clear, the immense majority of people who use the idea of the West in academia, journalism, politics, or even casual conversation do not accept cultural chauvinism or racism, but it is impossible to disentangle the concept from its abuses over the last two centuries and should, therefore, be “unpacked” in a deliberate, thoughtful, and focused manner whenever possible.

This Textbook

This textbook has been revised significantly on two occasions to date. The original version of the textbook was released as an Open Educational Resource in March 2019. It was revised and released as "Version 2.0" in September of 2021. The current "Version 3.0" was released in May of 2024. Over time, in addition to routine factual corrections, the revisions have focused on three major areas: expanding coverage of gender roles and women's history, including the history of the Middle East as an integral part of the narrative, and incorporating a world-historical perspective, emphasizing connections and parallels between western history and the histories of other regions.

The core narrative of the textbook is a political history of the greater Mediterranean region in the ancient period in Volume 1, Europe and European empires in the medieval and early modern periods in Volume 2, and both European and world history in the modern period in Volume 3. Elements of intellectual, cultural, social, and religious history are present throughout, but the main focus of the text is politics over time.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to my colleagues at Portland Community College who have offered their comments and edits on past versions, especially Sylvia Gray, Robert Flynn, and Terri Barnes. Wendy Fall, at the time a PhD Candidate in literature at Marquette University, graciously edited the entire first volume in 2020 - my sincere thanks to Wendy for her efforts. Revisions for Version 2.0 of the textbook were supported by a grant from Open Oregon, a state-run consortium that supports Open Educational Resources. Revisions for Version 3.0 were supported by a grant from PCC's OER Steering Committee.

Christopher Brooks, PhD, Portland, Oregon, June 2024

Chapter 1: The Origins of Civilization

Introduction

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, archeology, 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 archeology remain closely intertwined, especially since so few written records remain from the remote past that most historians of the ancient world also perform archeological research, and all archeologists are also at least conversant with the relevant histories of their areas of study.

A note on dates: historians use the terms “Before Common Era” or “BCE” and “Common Era” or “CE” rather than “BC” and “AD.” BC and AD are terms originating from Christianity, meaning “Before Christ” and “*Anno Domini*,” the latter meaning “year of the lord” in Latin. Because historians work in a secular context and because most of the cultures under consideration in high-level histories like this textbook were not Christian, BCE and CE are the preferred terms. That being noted, the dates are identical: 1000 BCE is the same as 1000 BC, and 1950 CE is the same as 1950 AD.

Hominids

Human beings are members of a species of hominid. The term “hominid” refers to the biological “family” that encompasses a number of species, including great apes and Homo Sapiens. The earliest hominid ancestor of humankind was called *Australopithecus*: a biological species of African hominid that evolved about 3.9 million years ago. 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.

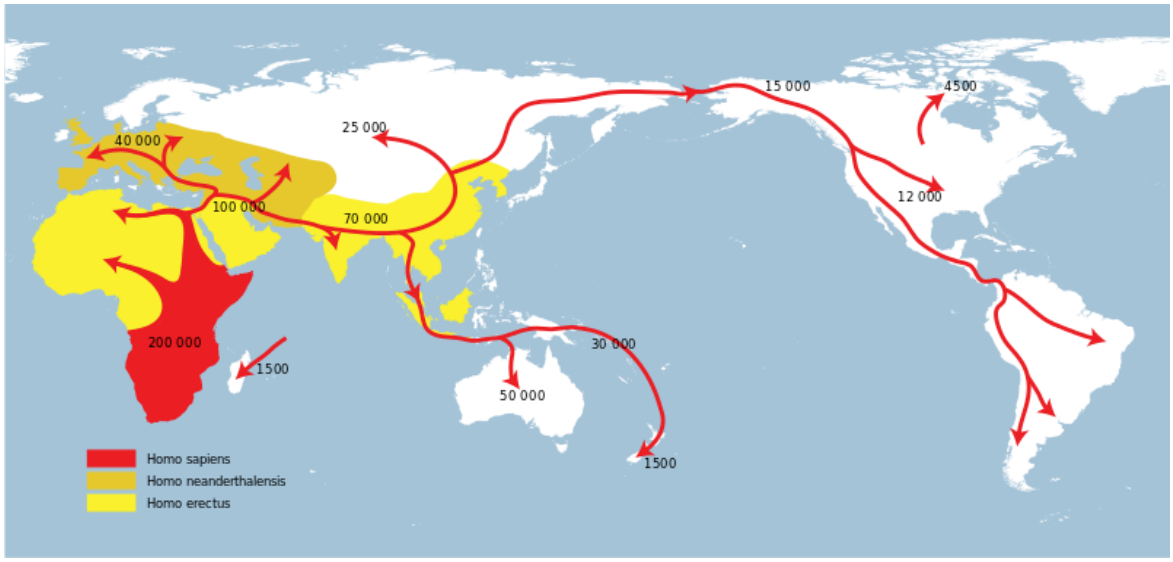
One noteworthy descendent of Australopithecus was *Homo erectus*, which gets its name from the fact that it was the first hominid to walk upright. It also benefited from a brain three-fourths the size of the modern human equivalent. Homo erectus developed more advanced stone tool-making than had Australopithecus, 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 foods 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 “thinking 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

(naturally, we have no idea how these exchanges were negotiated - the evidence of their lifestyle is drawn from fossils and archeology).

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 archeological discovery (in 2019) demonstrated that Homo sapiens sapiens reached Europe and the Near East by 210,000 years ago, but 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.

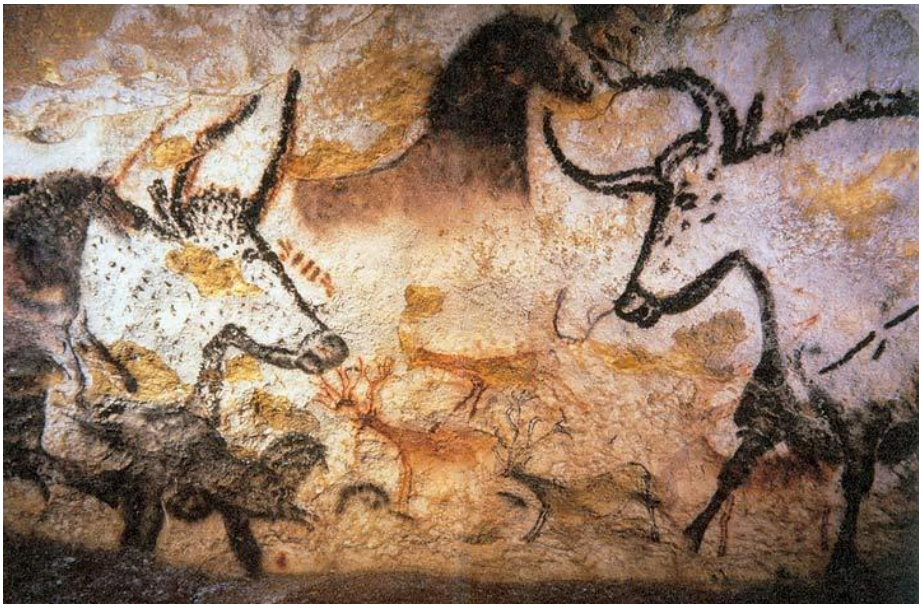


Of the advanced hominids, only homo sapiens spread around the entire globe.

That massive global emigration was mostly complete by about 40,000 years ago. The last lands to be inhabited were the Americas and Pacific Islands; recent discoveries have established that the Americas were populated as early as 23,000 years ago during another ice age, when humans traveled overland on the Bering Land Bridge, a chunk of land that used to connect eastern Russia to Alaska. 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.

Likewise, the absence of advanced technologies was not an impediment to the attempt to understand the world. One astonishing outgrowth of Homo sapiens' brain power was the creation of both art and spirituality. Early Homo sapiens painted on the walls of caves, most famously in what is today southern France, and at some point they also began the practice of burying the dead in prepared grave sites, indicating that they believed that the spirit somehow survived physical death. Artifacts that have survived from prehistory clearly indicate that Homo 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.



Part of the Lascaux cave paintings in southern France.

Civilization and Agriculture

Thus, 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 Latin (the language of the ancient Romans) word for city, as are related words like "civic" and "civil." The key element of the definition is the idea that a large number of people come together in a group that is too large to consist only of an extended family group. Once large groups had formed, 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. This way of life fundamentally *worked* for hundreds of thousands of years - it was the basis of life for the very people who populated the world as described above. 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 created agriculture, that is, the deliberate cultivation of edible plants. People discovered that certain seeds could be planted and crops could be reliably grown. Sometimes after that, people in the same regions began to domesticate animals, keeping herds of cattle, pigs, sheep, and goats in controlled conditions, defending them from predators, and 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.

One of the noteworthy aspects of this transition is that hunting-gathering people actually had much more leisure time than farmers did, and they were also healthier and longer-lived. Archaeologists and anthropologists have determined that hunter-gatherer people generally only "worked" for a few hours a day, and spent the rest of their time in leisure activities. Meanwhile, farmers have always worked incredibly hard for very long hours; in many places in the ancient world, there were groups of people who remained hunter-gatherers despite knowing about agriculture, and it is quite possible they did that because they saw no particular advantage in adopting agriculture. There were also many areas that practiced both – right up until the modern era, many farmers also foraged in areas of semi-wilderness near their farms.

It is thus misleading to think of the development of agriculture and the emergence of civilization as uncomplicated signs of "progress," in the sense of something good and desirable, in human history. As we will see, civilization introduced population growth and scientific progress, but it also introduced large-scale warfare, slavery, patriarchy, and pandemic diseases. The greatest tangible benefits of civilization were often enjoyed by social elites, while the majority of the population worked at difficult, tiring tasks like farming, artisanal crafts, and

building projects. Whether the development of agriculture was a glorious breakthrough or a terrible curse, or some of both, is influenced by the ethical and analytical perspective of the person considering the question. It is not a given that it was all (or mostly) good or bad.

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 first in the Middle East in a region known as the Fertile Crescent, then independently in China by 7000 BCE, and of course agriculture in the Americas (starting in western South America) had nothing to do with its earlier invention in Eurasia. The earliest sites of agriculture were:

- The Fertile Crescent, a region stretching from present-day Israel north and east through Lebanon, Syria, eastern Turkey, and Iraq, starting in approximately 9500 BCE.
- Northern China, starting in approximately 7000 BCE.
- Sub-Saharan Africa, starting in approximately 5000 BCE.
- Western South America and, fairly soon after, the Yucatan Peninsula and Central Mexico, starting in approximately 4000 BCE.

Other early sites of agriculture were probably related to these origin points. Egypt, for example, developed agriculture by about 5000 BCE, but in all likelihood both the methods and some of the key crops used in Egyptian agriculture traveled there from the Fertile Crescent (which was, of course, a neighboring region). Likewise, early agriculture in North America may have spread there from Mesoamerica sometime after 4000 BCE, but definitive evidence has not yet emerged either way.

The earliest sites of agriculture emerged in the Fertile Crescent, the region encompassing Egypt along the Nile river, the Near East, and Mesopotamia

Early agriculture, the kind of agriculture that made later advances in civilization possible, consisted of people simply planting seeds by hand or using shovels and picks. There were some important technological discoveries that took place over time that allowed much greater crop yields, however. These discoveries included crop rotation, which people in the Fertile Crescent devised 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. Ancient peoples from the

Fertile Crescent also invented the plow, which first came into use 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. All of the sites of early agriculture developed irrigation independently as well, starting once again in the Fertile Crescent around 5000 BCE, vastly increasing the agricultural potential of regions that would otherwise have been too dry for farming.

Animal domestication occurred at roughly the same time as plant domestication (note: "domestication" now usually refers to animals, but the term does apply to the deliberate cultivation of plants as well). Strikingly, almost all of the animal breeds most useful to humans, including sheep, goats, cows, and pigs, were native to the Middle East, including the Fertile Crescent. Another animal of key importance, horses, were native to Central Asia, north and east of the Fertile Crescent. Thus, not only did the people of the Fertile Crescent already have access to some of the best plant species for human cultivation, they also had ready access to some of the most useful animal species as well.

One interesting exception to the timing of domestication, surprisingly, is dogs. People in various regions domesticated dogs as early as 20,000 BCE, thousands of years before the invention of agriculture. Dogs were useful to hunter-gatherers as both hunting companions and as guards, and in turn dogs were fed consistently by their human companions. The human-canine relationship is thus much older than civilization itself.

The Fertile Crescent

The early civilization of the Fertile Crescent consisted of fairly small farming communities. A common theory is that they may have originally come together in order to coordinate the need for irrigation systems; in Mesopotamia, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers are notorious for flooding unpredictably, so it took a lot of human effort to create the dikes and canals necessary to divert floodwaters and irrigate the farmlands near the rivers. 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 of the 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 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 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.

From their remains 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 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 wealth, while others were buried with practically nothing. It is very clear that even at such an ancient time, there were already major divisions between rich and poor.

That wealth was 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 other 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 been around since the dawn of civilization itself.

In turn, the social divisions revealed 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 getting enough 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 – 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.

An example of a “Venus figurine” excavated at Çatal Höyük.

The earliest surviving work of literature in the world, the Mesopotamian story known as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, was obsessed with 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. In addition to many great scientific advances such as mathematics, astronomy, and engineering, political networks and forms of organization like kingdoms, empires, and bureaucracy all originated in Mesopotamia.

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 (natural varieties of which naturally occurred in the area, as noted above) and how to manage the sudden floods of both rivers.

Mesopotamia, the region defined by the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and corresponding to present-day Iraq.

Ancient 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 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 4000 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 millenia 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.

As a result of these new hierarchies, the first true cities emerged in the southern region of Sumer. There, the two rivers join in a large delta that flows into the Persian Gulf. Further 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.

The influence of Sumerian civilization was felt all over the Mesopotamian region. The above map depicts the "Urukean expansion," a period in the fourth millennium BCE in which Sumerian material culture (and presumably Sumerian people) spread hundreds of miles from Sumer itself.

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 not only taxed 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.

Meanwhile, the first kings were almost certainly war leaders who led their city-states against rival city-states and against 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. 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 a city-state engaged in long-distance trade, and 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 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.

All of the Mesopotamian cities worshiped the same gods, referred to as the Mesopotamian pantheon (pantheon means "group of gods.") As noted above, each city had its own specific patron deity who "owned" and took particular interest in the affairs of that city. By about 3,000 BCE, in the center of each city was a huge temple called a ziggurat, or

step-pyramid, a few of which still survive today. Unlike the Egyptian pyramids that came later, Mesopotamian ziggurats were not tombs, but temples, and as such they were the centerpieces of the great cities. 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.

Alongside the development of religious belief, 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 star 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 would go 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 science in the modern sense. Their goals were the same, and the Mesopotamians actively experimented to develop both systems in tandem.

The Mesopotamians also invented the first systems of writing, first developed in order to keep track of tax records sometime around 3000 BCE. Their style of writing is called *cuneiform*; it started out as a pictographic system in which each word or idea was represented by a symbol, but it eventually changed to include both pictographs and syllabic symbols (i.e. symbols that represent a sound instead of a word). While it was originally used just for record-keeping, writing soon evolved into the creation of true forms of literature.

An example of cuneiform script, carved into a stone tablet, dating from c. 2400 BCE.

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 Inanna 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 Inanna and, at one point, asking for the aid of the gods during a period of political turmoil.

Enheduanna did not record the first known written narrative, 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.

Along with literature, the other great written accomplishments of the Mesopotamians were their systems of law. The most substantial surviving law code is that of the Babylonian king Hammurabi, dating from about 1780 BCE. Hammurabi's law code went into great detail about the rights and obligations of Babylonians. It drew legal distinctions between the "free men" or aristocratic citizens, commoners, and slaves, treating the same crimes very differently. The laws speak to a deep concern with fairness – the code tried to protect people from unfair terms on loans, it provided redress for damaged property, it even held city officials responsible for catching criminals. Justice as detailed in Hammurabi's code famously assigned punishments for specific crimes, which included the death penalty and mutilation among other forms of retribution (e.g. "If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out"). It also included legal protections for women in various ways. While women were unquestionably secondary to men in their legal status, the Code still afforded them more rights and protections than did many codes of law that emerged thousands of years later.

War and Empire

Mesopotamia presents 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 were around for thousands of years (again, from about 3500 BCE), there were no *empires* yet. Cities warred on one another for territory, 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. 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 contemporaneous illustrations not only of soldiers, but of siege weapons and mining (digging under the walls of enemy fortifications to cause them to collapse).

The expansion of Sargon's empire, which eventually stretched from present-day Lebanon to Sumer.

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 his descendents did their

best to hold on to power, the resentment of the subject cities eventually resulted in the empire's collapse.

The next major Mesopotamian empire was the "Ur III" dynasty, named after the city-state of Ur which served as its capital and founded in about 2112 BCE. 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 off 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).

Finally, there was the great empire of Hammurabi (which lasted from 1792 – 1595 BCE), the author of the code of laws noted above. By about 1780 BCE, Hammurabi conquered many of the city-states near Babylon in the heart of Mesopotamia. He was not only concerned with laws, but also with ensuring the economic prosperity of his empire; while it is impossible to know how sincere he was about it, he wanted to be remembered as a kind of benevolent dictator who looked after his subjects. The Babylonian empire re-centered Mesopotamia as a whole on Babylon. It lasted until 1595 BCE when it was defeated by an empire from Anatolia known as the Hittites.

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 of what the surviving texts refer to as “bandits,” which in this context means the same thing as “barbarians.” To the north of Mesopotamia are 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.

Conclusion: Writing, World-Historical Comparison, and Facts

While the civilization of the Fertile Crescent, and with it Mesopotamia, was the first to come into being, people in other world regions also invented agriculture and developed civilization. Two noteworthy examples are China, where agriculture emerged by 7000 BCE, and Mesoamerica (i.e. Central America, especially the region of present-day central Mexico), where agriculture was practiced by 4000 BCE. Just as it took thousands of years between the initial creation of agriculture in the Fertile Crescent and the first true cities and large states of Mesopotamia, so too was there a long period of time between agriculture and the first states of China and Mesoamerica. China’s Xia Dynasty, the earliest known Chinese kingdom in the Yellow River region of northern China, began in c. 1900 BCE, based on an earlier urban network referred to as the Longshan Culture by archeologists. Mesoamerica saw a lengthy period of historical evolution that culminated in the Olmec civilization that began in c. 1400 BCE, based on Gulf coast of central Mexico. Both the Xia and the Olmecs created monumental architecture and ruled over significant territories.

Archeologists have discovered a great deal about early Chinese and Mesoamerican civilization, but many of the details of politics, beliefs, religion, and social organization are permanently lost - there are no law codes, sacred texts, or royal proclamations that have survived from either culture. What is striking about comparing early civilizations is how much more detail we have available to describe Mesopotamia, even though its fully developed urban culture was established well over a thousand years before those of China and Mesopotamia.

The reason for this is straightforward: because the Mesopotamian writing system was the first to develop, because it was used to record detailed records, poetry, prayers, literature, and laws, and especially because a fair amount of it survived the millennia intact, historians are able to reconstruct how Mesopotamian society operated in much more detail and with much greater assurance. The earliest known Chinese writing dates from the Shang Dynasty (1600 - 1046 BCE) that followed the Xia, and while the Olmec left behind hieroglyphic symbols, very few survive and it is not clear if they represented a true writing system at the time. Either way, hard evidence exists for the beliefs, laws, and politics of Mesopotamia whereas the sources just are not present for the Xia or Olmecs.

This comparison speaks to a fundamental truth about ancient history: we can only know about the ancient past based on what survives to the present, and we should avoid speculating about subjects of ancient history when there is no evidence. Historians are particularly reliant on written records, and the information on which this entire textbook is based can be traced back to surviving historical sources (called “primary sources”: documents produced at the time in history), supplemented by archeological findings. In contrast, the childish pop-culture obsession with stories of “ancient aliens,” and historical myth-making more generally, boils down to a combination of outright fabrication (i.e. lies) and baseless speculation.

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Chapter 2: Egypt

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.

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).

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 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.

Also, a note on nomenclature: the term "pharaoh" means "great house," the term used for the royal palace and its vast supporting bureaucracy. It came to be used to refer to the king himself starting in the New Kingdom period; it would be as if the American president was called "the White House" in everyday language. This chapter will use the term "king" for the kings of Egypt leading up to the New Kingdom, then "pharaoh" for the New Kingdom rulers to reflect the accurate use of the term.

The Political history of ancient Egypt

Egypt was divided between "Upper Egypt," the southern stretch of the Nile Valley that relied on the Nile floods for irrigation, and "Lower Egypt," the enormous delta region where the Nile meets the Mediterranean. The two regions had been politically distinct for centuries, but (according to both archeology 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. The date used for the founding of the Old Kingdom of Egypt, 2680 BCE, is when the third royal dynasty to rule all of Egypt established itself. Its king, Djoser, was the first to commission an enormous tomb to house his remains when he died: the first pyramid. The Old Kingdom represented a long, unbroken line of kings that presided over the first full flowering of Egyptian culture, architecture, and prosperity.

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 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* - sacred order and balance).

A present-day picture of the Great Pyramid, outside of Cairo.

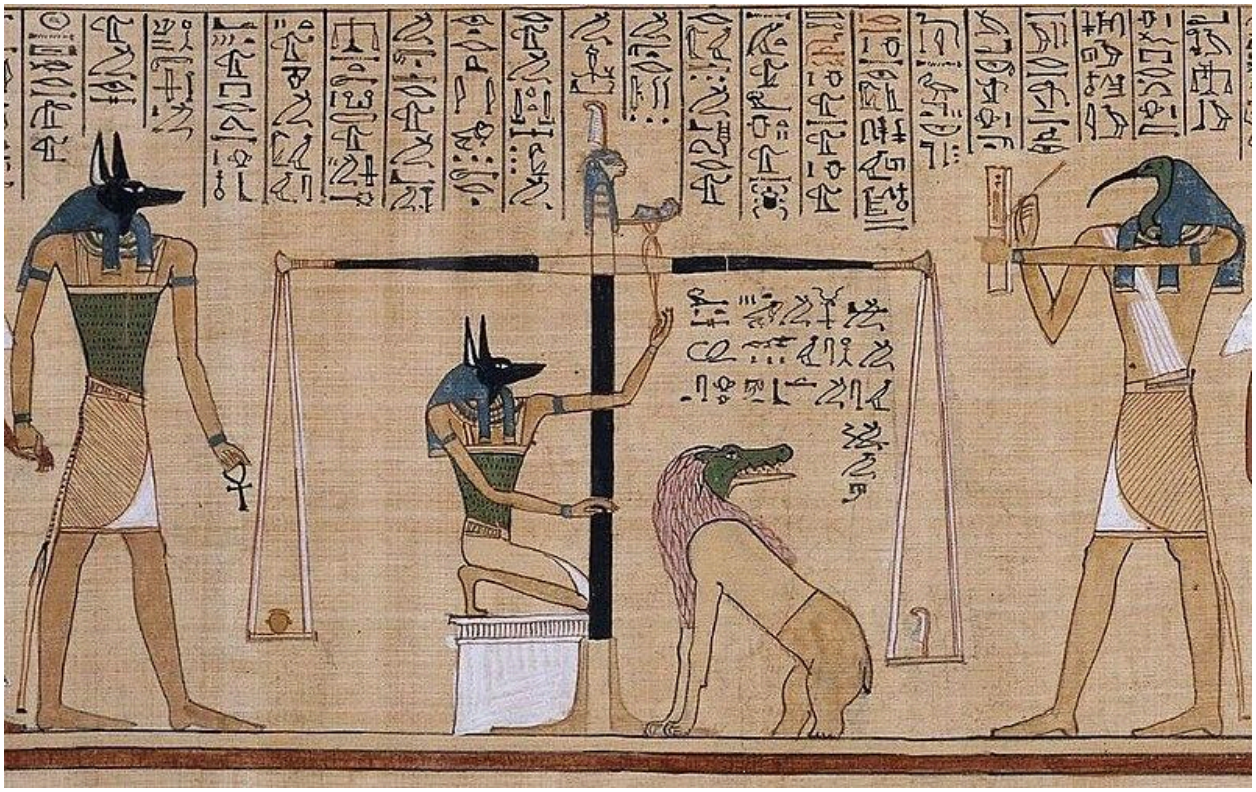
The pyramids are justly famous as the ultimate example of Egyptian prosperity and ingenuity. The Great Pyramid of Khufu, the single largest pyramid of the period, contained over 2.5 million stone blocks, each weighing approximately 2.5 tons. The sheer amount of energy expended on the construction of 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.

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.

Around 2200 BCE, two hundred years after the last pyramids were built, the Old Kingdom collapsed. The cause of the collapse was a prolonged drought which undermined the entire social and economic system based on the Nile floods. There are written records from this period of instability, known as the First Intermediate Period, 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.

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 are no records with details about how most people would fare after they died. This changed during the First Intermediate Period, when the 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, 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 and the soul would be rewarded with eternal life. Otherwise, their heart would be tossed to a crocodile-headed demon and devoured, the soul perishing in the process.



The judgment of the soul according to the Egyptian 'Book of the Dead.' Anubis, the jackal-headed god, carries out the weighing of the heart, which must balance with ma'at or be devoured by the demon Ammit. Thoth, scribe of the gods, records the results on the right.

Monumental building ceased during the Intermediate Period – there were no more pyramids, palaces, or temples being 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 on 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 ever 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, the form of paper made from Nile reeds monopolized by Egypt for centuries, 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.

Things spun out of control for the Middle Kingdom starting in about 1720 BCE, roughly 300 years after it had been founded, leading in turn to the Second Intermediate Period. Settlers from Canaan (present-day Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, and parts of Syria) had been streaming into Egypt for generations, initially settling and assimilating into Egyptian society. By about 1650 BCE, however, a group of Canaanites founded what was known as the "Hyksos" dynasty, an Egyptian term which simply means "leaders of foreigners," after they overthrew the king and seized power in Lower Egypt. 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.

The most significant innovation introduced by the Hyksos was the use of bronze (it should be noted that they introduced horses and chariots as well). 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.

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.

While the Egyptians had always considered themselves to be the favored people of the gods, dwelling in the home of spiritual harmony in the universe, it was really during the New Kingdom that they actively campaigned to take over foreign lands. 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. By 1500 BCE, only 50 years after the founding of the new kingdom, Egypt had conquered Canaan and much of Syria. It then conquered northern Nubia. The pharaohs dispatched communities of Egyptians to settle conquered lands, both to pacify those lands and to exploit natural resources in order to increase royal revenue.

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 to 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.

The New Kingdom was also the great bureaucratic empire of Egypt. The pharaohs divided Egypt into two administrative regions: Upper Egypt, up the Nile and governed from the city of Thebes, and Lower Egypt, near the Nile delta where it drained into the Mediterranean and ruled from the city of Memphis. Regional administrators did the important work of drafting laborers, extracting taxation, and making sure that agriculture was on track. A single royal official of vast personal power, the vizier, supervised the whole system and personally decided when to open the locks on the Nile to allow the floodwaters out each year.

While royal officials and the priesthoods of the gods held significant power and influence during the New Kingdom, the king (now known as the pharaoh) still ruled as a living god. The pharaohs were still thought to be divine, but that did not mean they simply bullied their subjects. Many letters have survived between pharaohs and their subordinates, as well as between pharaohs and other kings in foreign lands. They played tax breaks, gifts, and benefits off to encourage loyalty to Egypt rather than simply threatening people with divine power or armies.

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.

The imposing entrance to the Great Temple of Abu Simbel.

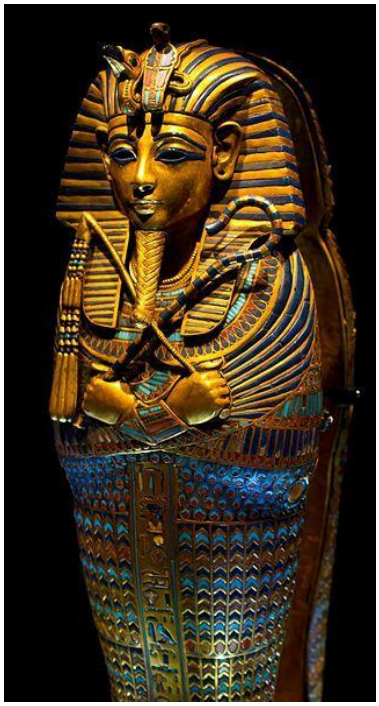
Detailed records of noteworthy pharaohs survive from the New Kingdom. The New Kingdom saw the only known female pharaoh, a woman who ruled from 1479 to 1458 BCE. Her name was Hatshepsut; she originally ruled as a regent (i.e. someone who is supposed to rule until the young king comes of age) for her stepson, but then claimed the title of pharaoh and ruled outright. 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. 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. 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, sacked the temples of other gods, and even had agents chisel off references to the 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. 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.

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. 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.



The sarcophagus of King Tutankhamun.

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 took the form of the first of 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. A long period of 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 would, one after the other, add Egypt to their respective empires.

Continuities in Egyptian History

The long-term pattern in Egyptian history is that there were long periods of stability and prosperity disrupted by periodic invasions and disasters. Throughout the entire period, however, there were many cultural, spiritual, and intellectual traditions that stayed the same. In terms of the spiritual beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, those traditions most often focused on the identity and the role of the king in relation to the gods. In prosaic politics and social organization, they revolved around the role of the scribes. In terms of foreign relations, they evolved over time as Egypt developed stronger ongoing contacts with neighboring states and cultures.

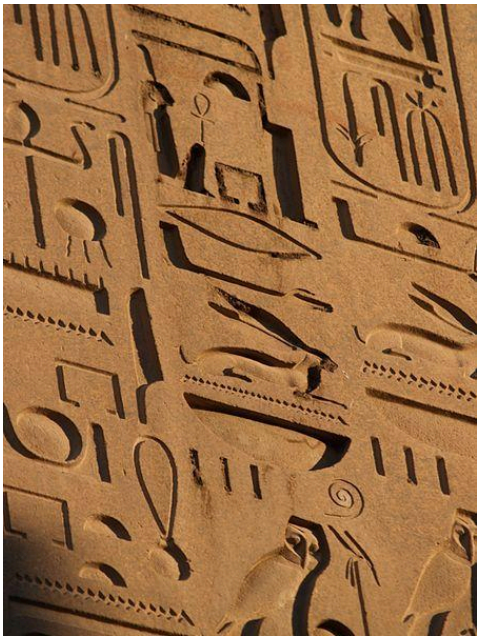
The most important figure in Egyptian spiritual life was the king; he (or sometimes she) was believed to form a direct connection between the gods and the Egyptian people. Each king had five names – his birth name, three having to do with his divine status, and one having to do with rulership of the two unified kingdoms. One of the divine names referred to the divine

kingship itself, temporarily linked to the current holder of that title: whoever happened to be king at the time.

The Egyptians had a colorful and memorable set of religious beliefs, one that dominated the lives of the kings, who claimed to be not just reflections of or servants of the gods, but gods themselves on earth. 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, to maintain harmony through proper rituals and through making sure that Egyptian society was stable. For Egyptians the world was divided between themselves and everyone else. This was not just a function of arrogance, however, but instead reflected a belief that the gods had designated the Egyptians to be the sacred keepers of order.

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.

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 conspired to preserve them. Second, Egypt developed an important social class of scribes whose whole vocation was mastering the complex Egyptian writing systems and keeping extensive records of almost every aspect of life, from religious ritual to mundane record-keeping.



An example of hieroglyphics - the above depicts the sacred style used in temple and tomb carvings, as opposed to the "cursive" form used for everyday record keeping.

The writing of ancient Egypt was in hieroglyphics, which are symbols that were adapted over time from pictures. There were several different forms of hieroglyphics, including two distinct alphabets during the period covered in this chapter, all of which were very difficult to master. It took years of training to become literate in hieroglyphics, training that was only afforded to the scribes. Scribes recorded everything from tax records, to mercantile transactions, to the sacred prayers for the dead on the walls of the tombs of kings and nobles. They served as an essential piece of the continuity of Egyptian politics and culture for thousands of years. In other words, because they used the same language and the same alphabets of symbols, and because they recorded the rituals and transactions of Egyptian society, scribes were a kind of cultural glue that kept things going from generation to generation. In all three of the great dynasties and during the Intermediate Periods, it was the scribes who provided continuity.

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. Unlike Mesopotamian ziggurats, which were always temples, the pyramids were always tombs. The purpose of the pyramids was to house the king with all of the luxuries and equipment he would need in his journey to the afterlife, as well as to celebrate the king's legacy and memory.

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 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. 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.

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, carefully recorded in hieroglyphics by scribes. 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.

Even though the essential characteristic of Egyptian religion and social structure was continuity, its relationships with neighboring cultures did change over time. One important neighbor of Egypt was the kingdom of Nubia to the south, in present-day 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. At the start of the Middle Kingdom, Mentuhotep II managed to not only reunite Egypt, but to conquer the northern portion of Nubia as well. Kings continued this pattern, holding on to Nubian territory and building a series of forts and garrisons to ensure the speedy extraction of Nubian wealth. (Much later, a Nubian king, Piankhy, returned the favor by conquering Egypt - he claimed to be restoring a purer form of Egyptian rule than had survived in Egypt itself!)

Trade contact was not limited to Nubia, of course. Despite the fact that the Egyptians thought of themselves as being superior to other cultures and civilizations, they actively traded with not only Nubia but the various civilizations and peoples of the Near and Middle East. Starting in earnest with the Middle Kingdom, trade caravans linked Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Egypt (and, later, Greece as well). There was a rich diplomatic exchange between the Egyptian kings and the kings of their neighboring lands – overall, they spent far more time trading with their neighbors and sending one another gifts than waging war. Likewise, as noted above in the section on the New Kingdom, military expansionism did not preclude Egypt's membership in a "brotherhood" of other states during the Bronze Age.

That being said, by the time of the Middle Kingdom, there was an organized and fortified military presence on all of Egypt's borders, with particular attention to Nubia and "Asia" (i.e. everything east of the Sinai Peninsula). One king described himself as the "throat-slitter of Asia," and all the way through the New Kingdom, Egyptians tended to regard themselves as being the most important and "central" civilization in the world.

Conclusion

This chapter concludes its detailed consideration of Egypt with the fall of the New Kingdom not because Egyptian civilization vanished, but because it did not enjoy lasting stability under a native Egyptian dynasty again for most of the rest of ancient history. Instead, after the New Kingdom, Egypt was often torn between rival claimants to the title of pharaoh, and beginning with a civilization discussed in the next chapter, the Assyrians, Egypt itself was often conquered by powerful rivals. It is important to bear in mind, however, that Egypt remained the richest place in the ancient world because of the incredible abundance of the Nile, and whether it was the Assyrians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, or the Arabs doing the conquering, Egypt was always one of the greatest prizes that could be won in conquest. Likewise, Egypt contributed not just wealth but its unique culture to the surrounding regions, serving as one of the founding elements of Western Civilization as a whole.

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Chapter 3: The Bronze Age and The Iron Age

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 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.

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 spear and 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 New Kingdom. The New Kingdom of Egypt conquered more territory than any earlier Egyptian empire. It was able to do this in part because of its 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.

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 and war with the other cultures and states of the time.

The Hittite state is depicted in pink and New Kingdom Egyptian territory in green on the map above. The island "Alasiya" is present-day Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean.

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 invaded by the Hittites, who sacked Babylon but did not stay to rule over it. Instead, Babylon was ruled by the Kassites (whose origins are unknown) beginning in 1595 BCE. 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).

Both the Kassites and the Assyrians were proud members of the diplomatic network of rulers that included New Kingdom Egypt and the Hittites (as well as smaller and less significant kingdoms in Canaan and Anatolia). Likewise, both states encouraged trade, and goods were exchanged across the entire region of the Middle East. Compared to some later periods, it was a time of relative stability and, while sometimes interrupted by short-term wars, mostly peaceful relations between the different states.

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.

Both the Minoans and Mycenaeans were 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. The Minoans ruled the island of Crete in the Mediterranean and created a merchant marine (i.e. a fleet whose purpose is primarily trade, not war) to trade with the Egyptians, Hittites, and other peoples of the area. One of the noteworthy archaeological traits of the Minoans is that there is very little evidence of fortifications of their palaces or cities, unlike those of other ancient peoples, indicating that they were much less concerned about foreign invasion than were the neighboring land empires thanks to the Minoans' island setting.

The Minoans built enormous palace complexes that combined government, spiritual, and commercial centers in huge, sprawling buildings that were interconnected and which housed thousands of people. The Greek legend of the labyrinth, the great maze in which a bull-headed monster called the minotaur roamed, was probably based on the size and the confusion of these Minoan complexes. Frescoes painted on the walls of the palaces depicted elaborate athletic events featuring naked men leaping over charging bulls. Minoan frescoes have even been found in the ruins of an Egyptian palace, indicating that Minoan art was valued outside of Crete itself.

The Minoans traded actively with their neighbors and 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. Their 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 Minoans were, according to the surviving archaeological evidence, relatively peaceful. They traded with their neighbors, and while there is evidence of violence (including human sacrifice) within Minoan society, there is no indication of large-scale warfare, just passing references from the Mycenaeans about Minoan mastery of the seas. In contrast, 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, although it is likely "Homer" is a mythical figure himself) *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, describing the exploits of great Mycenaean heroes like Agamemnon, Achilles, and Odysseus. Those exploits almost always revolved around warfare, as 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.

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.

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 so warlike, as they raided each other and their neighbors in search of greater wealth and opportunity.

The "Mask of Agamemnon," a Mycenaean funerary mask discovered by a German archaeologist in the late nineteenth century.

The Mycenaeans were a society that 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. In turn, Mycenaean ruins (and tombs) make it abundantly clear that most Mycenaeans were dirt-poor farmers working with primitive tools, lorded over by bronze-wielding lords who demanded labor and wealth. Foreign trade was in service to providing luxury goods to this elite social class, a class that was never politically united but instead shared a common culture of warrior-kings and their armed retinues. Some beautiful artifacts and amazing myths and poems have survived from this civilization, but it was also one of the most *predatory* civilizations we know about from ancient history.

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.

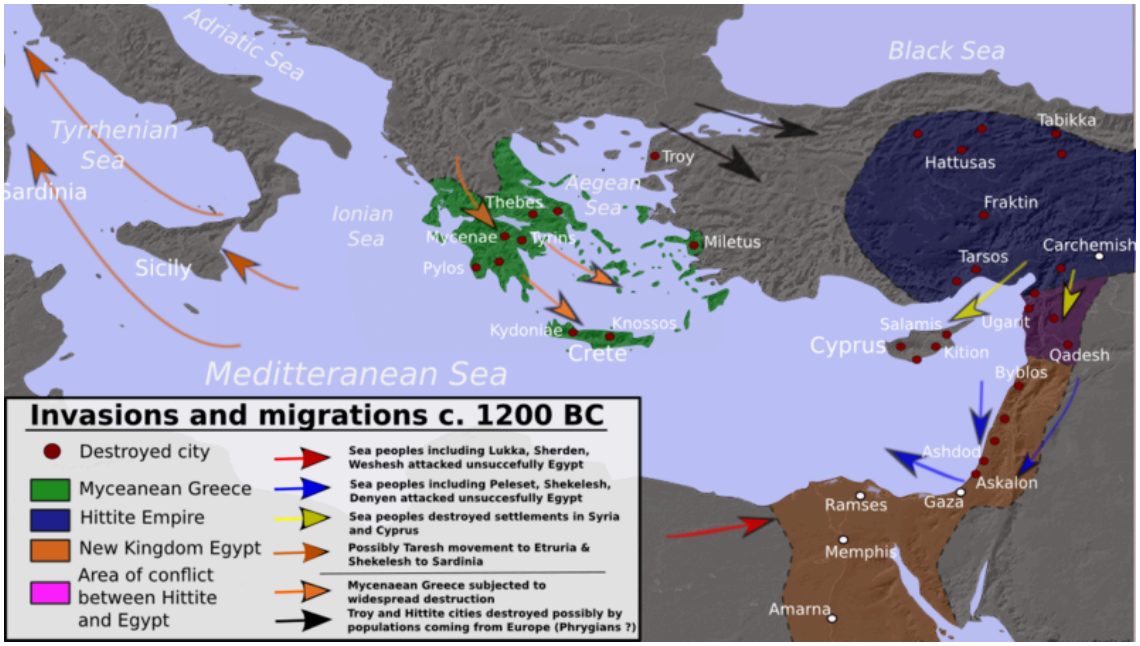
That said, most of the states involved in this network fell into ruin between 1200 - 1100 BCE. The great empires collapsed, followed by a period of about 100 years of recovery, with new empires arising in the aftermath. There is still no definitive explanation for why this collapse occurred, not least 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.



While the precise details are impossible to pin down, the above map depicts likely invasion routes during the Bronze Age Collapse. More important than those details is the result: the fall of almost all of the Bronze Age kingdoms and empires.

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 Iron Age

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 centuries of trial and error to develop. 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.

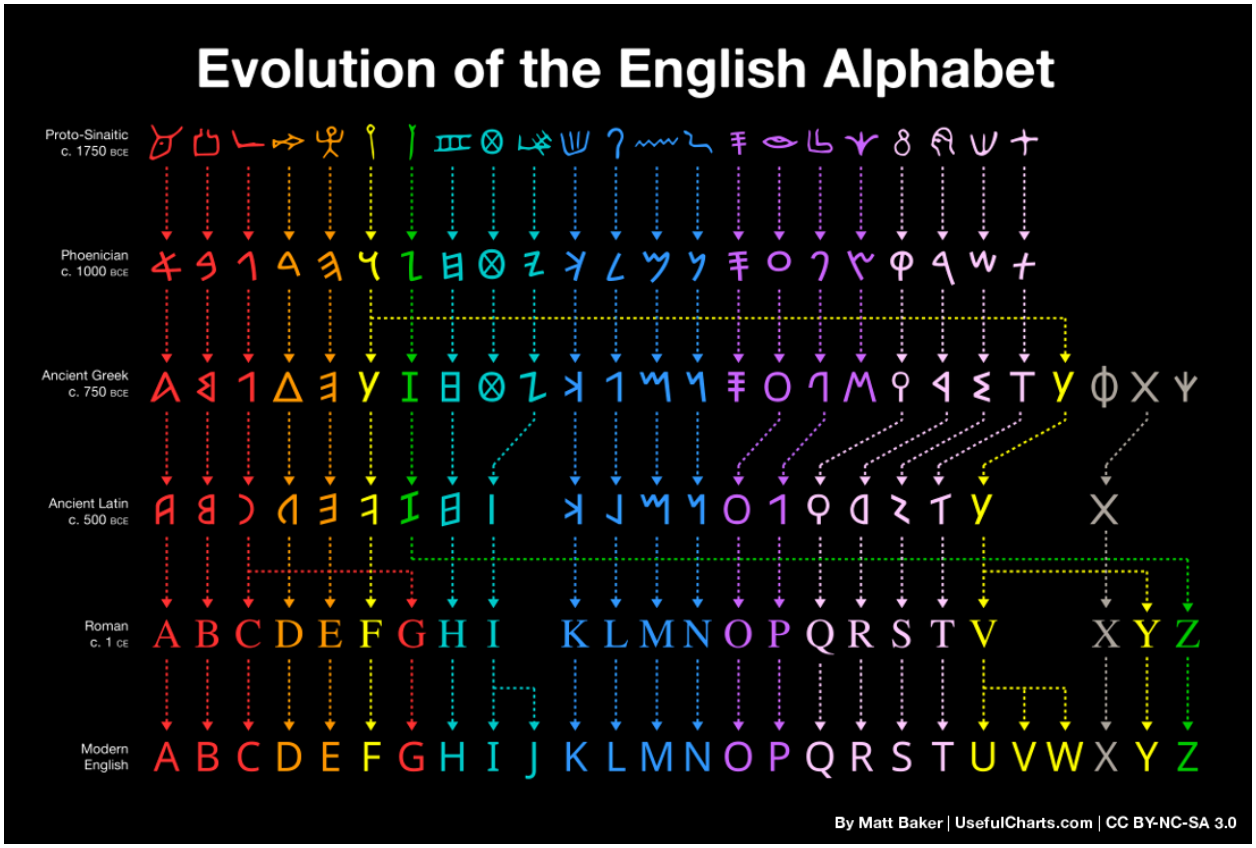
Iron Age Cultures and States

The 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.

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 Mediterranean 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 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 would become the great rival of the Roman Republic.

Phoenician trade was not, however, the most important legacy of their society. Instead, none of their various accomplishments has had 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 an phonemic alphabet that formed the basis of Greek and Roman writing much later. A phonemic alphabet has characters that represent sounds (called phonemes), 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 such an alphabet much more quickly than using a symbolic writing system (like Egyptian hieroglyphics or Chinese characters). Thus, in societies like that of the Phoenicians, there was no need for a scribal class, since even ordinary 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 are direct descendants 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 legacy of the ancient Phoenicians: their 22-character alphabet evolved over time into the Greek, Roman, and modern English alphabets.

The Phoenician mastery of sailing and the use of the 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.

Empires of the Iron Age

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. 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. They represented the pinnacle of military power and bureaucratic organization of all of the civilizations considered thus far. (Note: historians of the ancient world distinguish between the Bronze Age and Iron Age Assyrian kingdoms by referring to the latter as the Neo-Assyrians. The Neo-Assyrians were direct descendants of their Bronze Age predecessors, however, so for the sake of simplicity this chapter will refer to both as the Assyrians.)

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 nomads 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.

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 nomads 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 in the region, those of the Nile and of Mesopotamia, were under the control of a single political entity.

The expansion of the Assyrian Empire, originating from northern Mesopotamia.

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.

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 Asshurbanipal ordered the collection of all of the texts of all 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.

The Neo-Babylonians adopted some of the terror tactics of the Assyrians; they, too, deported conquered enemies as servants and slaves. Where they differed, however, was in their focus on trade. 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. They also created the zodiac used up to the present in astrology, reflecting the age-old practice of both science and "magic" that were united in the minds of Mesopotamians. 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 following chapter.

The Hebrews

Ancient Hebrew History

Of the Bronze and Iron-Age cultures, one played perhaps the most vital role in the history of Western Civilization: the Hebrews. 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. 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 Abrahamic religions, because they all venerate the God that the Hebrew Bible describes as first revealing Himself (the pronouns Himself and Him are normally capitalized when referring to the Abrahamic God) to the prophet Abraham. Also, an important 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 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 (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 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.

Archeological 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 one of the groups of “Sea People” who had 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, even capturing the Ark of the Covenant which contained 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, renowned for his wisdom. 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. 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.

As noted above, the kingdom itself was fairly rich, thanks to its good spot on trade routes and the existence of gold mines, but Solomon's ongoing taxation and labor demands were such that resentment developed among the Hebrews over time. After his death, fully ten out of the twelve tribes broke off to form their own kingdom, retaining the name Israel, while the smaller remnant of the kingdom took on the name Judah.

Israel and Judah in the ninth century BCE, approximately a century before Israel was invaded and destroyed by the Assyrian Empire.

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 worshiped 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 archeological 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, and 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, worshiped 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 faith. 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 response, 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 instead 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 the 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.

Conclusion

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.

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Chapter 4: The Archaic Age of Greece

Traditional 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.

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. It is thus useful and productive to consider the history of ancient Greece even if the conceit that other forms of ancient history are less important is abandoned.

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 network 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. The Mycenaeans were the protagonists of the famous epic poems written by (the possibly mythical) Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

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. One strong possibility is that there was a sustained civil war among the Mycenaean palace-settlements that

resulted in a fatal disruption to the economic setting that was essential to their very existence. A bad enough war in Greece itself could have easily undermined harvests, already near a subsistence level, and when they were destroyed by these conflicts, towns, fortresses and palaces could not be rebuilt. Whatever the cause, 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 hit hardest. 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 the Greeks 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 scholarly estimates are that the population of Greece declined by as much as 90% in the centuries following the Bronze Age collapse.

The Archaic Age and Greek Values

The Greek Dark Age started to 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 on the western coast of Anatolia; this region is called Ionia, with its Greek inhabitants speaking a dialect of Greek called Ionian. 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 Latinate 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 struggle 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 main focus of the Greeks was on the two ways that a man could dominate other men: through strength of arms and through 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. Women did play a significant role in the Homeric tales as well, sometimes as murderous and sinister, like the queen Clytemnestra, but sometimes as exemplars of virtue, like the hero Odysseus's faithful wife Penelope. In almost all cases the characters in Homer's epics embodied the Greek ethical outlook, and they serve as one of the most important sources in understanding Greek culture itself.

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 (note: we will use the more generic term city-state throughout the textbook to

avoid confusion). The English word “political” derives from “polis” – the polis was the center of Greek political life, and Greek innovations in the realm of political theory would have an enormous historical legacy. From the Greek city-states 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 city-state, 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 city-state 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; their importance to the future development of democracy was the precedent of meeting to discuss politics.

Even in city-states 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 selfish 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 in most cases. 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 later chapter on classical Greece). Civic virtue, very closely related to the modern concept of patriotism, was a powerful and influential idea because it would continue through the Greek Classical Age, be transmitted by Alexander the Great's conquests, and eventually become one of, if not the single most important ethical standards 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. A key example was, as noted above, Penelope, the wife of the Greek hero Odysseus, who 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, would grow 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 would increase, especially in key city-states like Athens, culminating in some of the most misogynistic gender standards in the ancient world.

Greek Culture and Trade

The Greek city-states 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*.

Depiction of a symposium dating from c. 475 BCE.

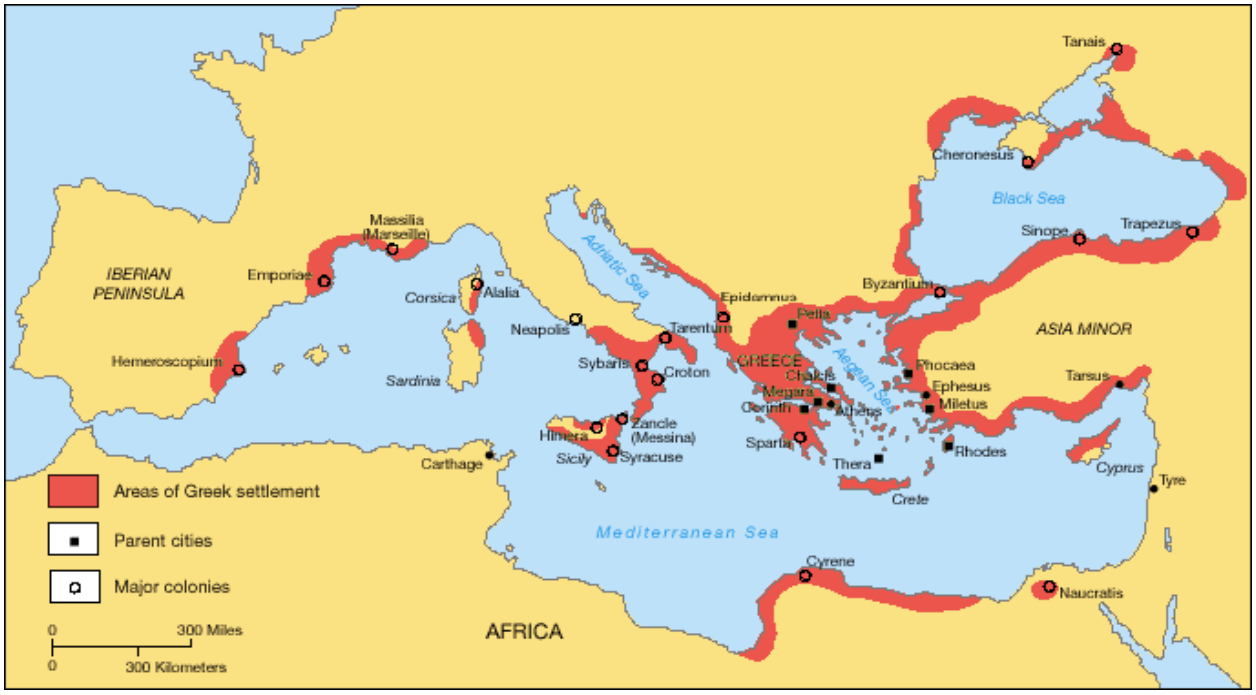
The city-states also invented institutions that united the cities culturally, despite their political independence, the most important of which was the Panhellenic games. “Panhellenic” literally means “all Greece,” and the games were meant to unite all of the Greek city-states, including those founded by colonists and located far from Greece itself. The games were a combination of religious festival and 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. The Olympics were extraordinary not just in their longevity, but because Greeks from the entire world of Greek settlements came to them, traveling from as far away as Sicily and the Black Sea region. Wars were temporarily suspended and all Greek city-states 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. As noted above, there were no second prizes. Greek culture was hugely competitive; the defeated were humiliated and the winners totally triumphant. 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).

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 comprised almost entirely of young men. In other cases, however, colonists found relatively isolated areas appropriate for shipping and set up shop, maintaining close connections with their home city-state 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 seafaring trade routes was so strong that colonists were not generally interested in trying to push inland.



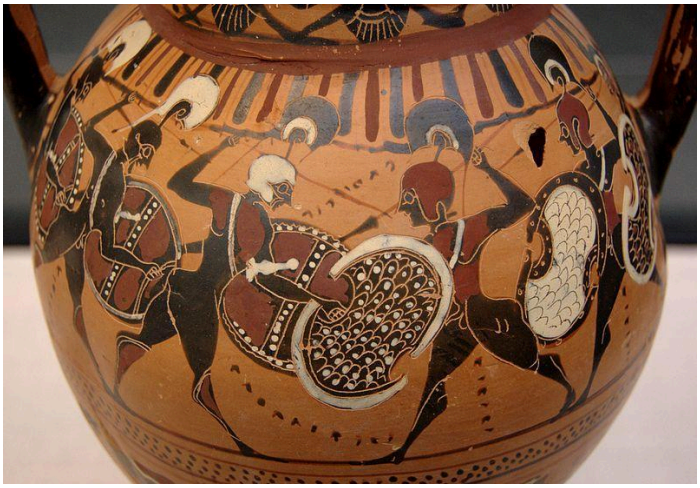
Greek colonization during the Archaic period - note how Greek colonies were always near the sea.

As trade recovered following the end of the Dark Age, the Greeks re-established their commercial shipping network across the Mediterranean, with their colonies soon playing a vital role. Greek merchants eagerly traded with everyone from the Celts of Western Europe to the Egyptians, Lydians, and Babylonians. When Julius Caesar was busy conquering Gaul about 700 years later, he found the Celts there writing in the Greek alphabet, long since learned from the Greek colonies along the coast. Likewise, archaeologists have discovered beautiful examples of Greek metalwork as far from Greece as northern France.

Greek colonies far from Greece were as important as the older city-states 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 would go on to influence all of the cultures to follow in a vast swath of territory throughout the Mediterranean region and the Middle East.

Military Organization and Politics

A key military development unique to Greece was the *phalanx*: a unit of spearmen standing in a dense formation, with each using his shield to protect the man to his left. Each soldier in a phalanx was called a *hoplite*. Each hoplite had to be a free Greek citizen of his city-state 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. The hoplites were significant politically 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 city-states and proved extremely effective on the battlefield, the hoplites would go on to demand better political representation, something that would have a major impact on Greek politics as a whole.



Depiction of a battle between phalanxes of hoplites from rival city-states, dating from c. 560 BCE. The clay vessel is an amphora, a container used for wine or olive oil.

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. When rival city-states fought, the phalanxes of each side would square off and stab away at each other until one side broke, threw down their shields, and ran away (by far the deadliest part of the confrontation). The victors would then

allow the losers time to gather their dead for a proper burial and peace terms would be negotiated.

By the seventh century BCE, the hoplites in many city-states were clamoring for better political representation, since they were excluded by the traditional aristocrats from meaningful political power. In many cases, the result was the rise of tyrannies: a government led by a man, the tyrant, who had no legal right to power, but had been appointed by the citizens of a city-state in order to stave off civil conflict (tyrants were generally aristocrats, but they answered to the needs of the hoplites as well). To the Greeks, the term tyrant did not originally mean an unjust or cruel ruler, since many tyrants succeeded in solving major political crises on behalf of the hoplites while still managing to placate the aristocrats.

The tyrants, lacking official political status, had to play to the interests of the people to stay in power as popular dictators. They sometimes seized lands of aristocrats outright and distributed them to free citizens. Many of them built public works and provided jobs, while others went out of their way to promote trade. The period between 650 – 500 BCE is sometimes called the "Age of Tyrants" in Greek history because many city-states instituted tyrants to stave off civil war between aristocrats and less wealthy citizens during this period. After 500 BCE, a compromise government called oligarchy tended to replace both aristocracies and tyrannies. In an oligarchy, anyone with enough money could hold office, the laws were written down and known to all free citizens, and even poorer citizens could vote (albeit only yes or no) on the laws passed by councils.

Sparta and Athens

Two of the most memorable city-states of the Archaic Age were Sparta and Athens. The two city-states were in many ways a study in contrasts: an obsessively militaristic and inward-looking society of "equals" who controlled the largest slave society in Greece, and a cosmopolitan naval power at the forefront of political innovation.

Sparta

One scholarly work on Greek history, Frank Frost's *Greek Society*, describes the Spartans as "an experiment in elitist communism." 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. Starting in about 700 BCE, the Spartans conquered a large

swath of territory in their home region of Greece, the southern Greek peninsula called the Peloponnesus. Sparta at the time was an aristocratic monarchy, with two kings ruling over councils of citizens. Under the two kings were a smaller council that issued laws and a large council made up of all Spartan males over 30 who approved or rejected the laws proposed by the council. Over time, citizenship was limited to men who had undergone the arduous military training for which the Spartans are best remembered.

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 a 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 all of this militaristic mania was simple: Sparta was a slave society. Approximately 90% of the population of the area under Sparta's control were *helots*, serfs descended from the population conquered by Sparta in the eighth century BCE. Early Spartan conquests of their region of Greece had 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 soldiers, along with another 20,000 or so of free noncitizens (inhabitants of towns near Sparta who were not considered helots, but instead free but 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 city-states before the outbreak of war against Athens in the fourth century BCE.

The only area in which Spartan society was actually *less* repressive than the rest of the Greek city-states 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, they could speak publicly, and they could own land. They scandalized other Greeks by participating in athletics and appear to have benefited from a greater degree of personal freedom than women anywhere else in Greece - 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.

Athens

In many ways, Athens was the opposite of Sparta. Whereas the Spartans were militaristic and austere (the word “spartan” in English today means “severe and unadorned”), the Athenians celebrated art, music, and drama. While it still controlled a large slave population, Athens is also remembered as the birthplace of democracy. In turn, Sparta and Athens were, especially in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, rivals for the position of the most powerful city-state in Greece.

Athens was rich and populous – the population of Attica, its 1,000-square-mile region of Greece, was about 600,000 by 600 BCE, and Athens was a major force in Mediterranean trade. That wealth led to conflicts over its distribution among the citizens, in turn prompting some unprecedented political experiments. 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 but were shut out of political decision-making. This was a classic case of hoplites becoming increasingly angry with the political domination of the aristocracy.

The crisis of representation reached a boiling point in about 600 BCE when there was a real possibility of civil war between the common citizens and the aristocrats. The major problem was that the aristocrats owned most of the land that other farmers worked on, many of those farmers were increasingly indebted to the aristocrats, and by Athenian law anyone who could not pay off his or her debts could be legally enslaved. An increasing number of formerly-free Athenian citizens thus found themselves enslaved to pay off their debts to an aristocrat.

To prevent civil war, a leader named Solon (638 – 558 BCE), an aristocratic but fair-minded politician, led a major effort to reform Athenian institutions. 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 (up to that point, the only people who actually knew the laws were the aristocratic judges, which made it all too easy for them to abuse their power).

Solon was not some kind of rabble-rouser or proto-communist, however. 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). 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.

This pattern continued for about a century. Solon's successors were a collection of new tyrants, some of whom 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.
In 508 BCE, however, a new leader named Cleisthenes led the effort to allow all male citizens to have a vote in public matters and to be eligible to serve in public office. This included free but poor citizens, the ones too poor to afford weapons and serve as hoplites. He had lawmakers chosen by lot (i.e. randomly) and created new “tribes” mixing men of different backgrounds together to force them to start to think of themselves as fellow Athenians, not just jealous protectors of their own families’ interests. 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 is 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.

Conclusion

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 that empire: Persia.

Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):
Symposium - PD-1923
Greek colonies - Regaliorum
Phalanxes - Bibi Saint-Pol

Chapter 5: Persia and the Greek Wars

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 chapters above, 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 would go on to rule territories far beyond the Iranian heartland.

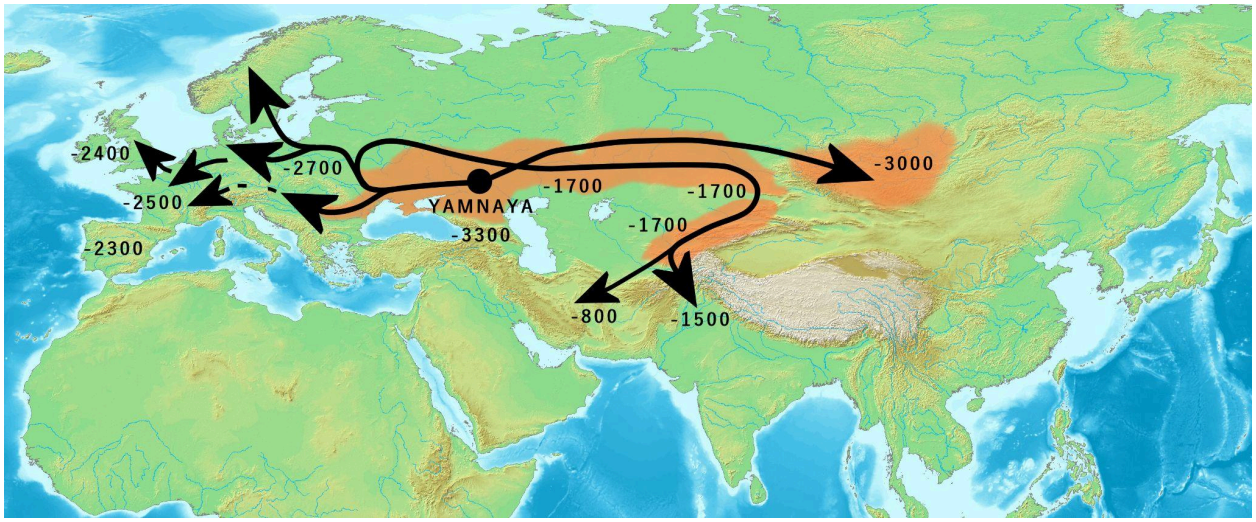
Historians divide Persian history into periods defined by the founding clan of a given royal dynasty. The empire described in this chapter is referred to as the Achaemenid Persian Empire after its first ruling clan. Later periods of ancient Persian history, most importantly the Parthian and Sasanian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

Persian Origins: The Indo-European Migrations

In the late 1700s CE, an English judge and linguist named Sir William Jones made a remarkable discovery: ancient languages whose speakers lived thousands of miles apart shared significant similarities in their words and grammar. Jones himself was fluent in an astonishing twenty-eight languages, including ancient Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit (the ancient Indian language in which the earliest major books of Hinduism were written). Jones surmised that, at some point in the ancient past, there must have been a single language spoken by a group of people whose descendants spread across much of Eurasia, in the process bringing dialects of that shared language with them. Over time, the languages would have branched apart until they were mutually unintelligible, despite sharing a common linguistic root. Jones was the first to determine that languages as seemingly unrelated as English, Spanish, Turkish, Farsi (i.e. modern Persian), and Hindi were in fact all part of one vast linguistic family.

Put simply, Jones was right. Subsequent generations of scholars have established beyond a doubt that there was indeed a group, about whom we know almost nothing, who

spoke dialects of the root language Jones discovered. Because the descendants of that group migrated and settled from India and Iran in the east all the way to western Europe, the term "Indo-European" is used both for the people and the languages they spoke. There is no archeological, let alone historical, evidence that identifies exactly where this group originated, nor can we determine much about their culture. That said, based on linguistic evidence, it is certain that the Indo-Europeans migrated south, east, and west from somewhere in the southern part of Central Asia by the third millennium BCE (i.e. the 2000s BCE). They both conquered and settled among the people who were already present, in some cases coming to completely dominate, and in other cases simply intermixing over time.



Approximate dates of the Indo-European migrations. Note that the ancestors of the Persians were relative latecomers; the migrations had been occurring for thousands of years, but the people who would become the Persians arrived in Iran in about 800 BCE.

Unfortunately, within a century of Jones' discovery, both genuine scholars and racist hacks tried to impose their own worldview - that of Europeans at the height of European global dominance, the late nineteenth century CE - on ancient history. Rather than the Indo-Europeans being a large group of nomadic peoples who spent over a thousand years migrating and settling, in the minds of these pseudo-scholars the Indo-Europeans were instead a dominant ancient "race" of conquerors. Seizing on the fact that the ancient Indo-Europeans of India and Iran called themselves *Arya* (which was simply their name for themselves, a self-designation), racist pseudo-scholars claimed that the "Aryan race" had been a group of pale-skinned geniuses who brought the light of learning and culture to "inferior" racial groups

through force. These “Aryans,” however, foolishly interbred with their inferiors, and when they did, the ancient civilizations they founded, from actual Indo-European empires like Persia to totally unrelated ones like Egypt, collapsed. While some of these European myth-makers claimed, against all evidence, that the Indo-Europeans originated in northern Europe, others grudgingly accepted that they were originally from Central Asia - this has left the strange legacy of using the term “Caucasian” for pale-skinned people of European descent (i.e. the Caucasus Mountains are in the southern part of Russia, near where the Indo-Europeans may have originated).

This racist myth has overshadowed the real history of a tremendously important fact: the Indo-Europeans were real, they truly did migrate and settle across a vast swath of Eurasia, and they left an enormous linguistic and, arguably, cultural legacy to world history. They were not, however, a “race,” let alone a pale-skinned one, nor were most ancient civilizations founded by them. Needless to say, all of East Asia, Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific developed major civilizations that had nothing to do with the Indo-Europeans, and both the pre-Indo European Indian cultures like the Harappans of northern India and the various ancient cultures of the Middle East (including the Sumerians, the Assyrians, the Hebrews, and the Arabs) were well established before the arrival of the Indo-Europeans.

Persian Expansion

In the case of the Persians, the Indo-European migration to the Iranian plateau was complete by the eighth century BCE. Over time, the two distinct but closely related groups noted above, the Medes and the Persians themselves, were established as the dominant powers in the region, with the Medes holding the lion’s share of power. 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). He 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. His principal targets further west were the Greek colonies of Ionia, along the coast of the Aegean Sea. Cyrus swiftly defeated the Greek city-states, 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.

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.”

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.

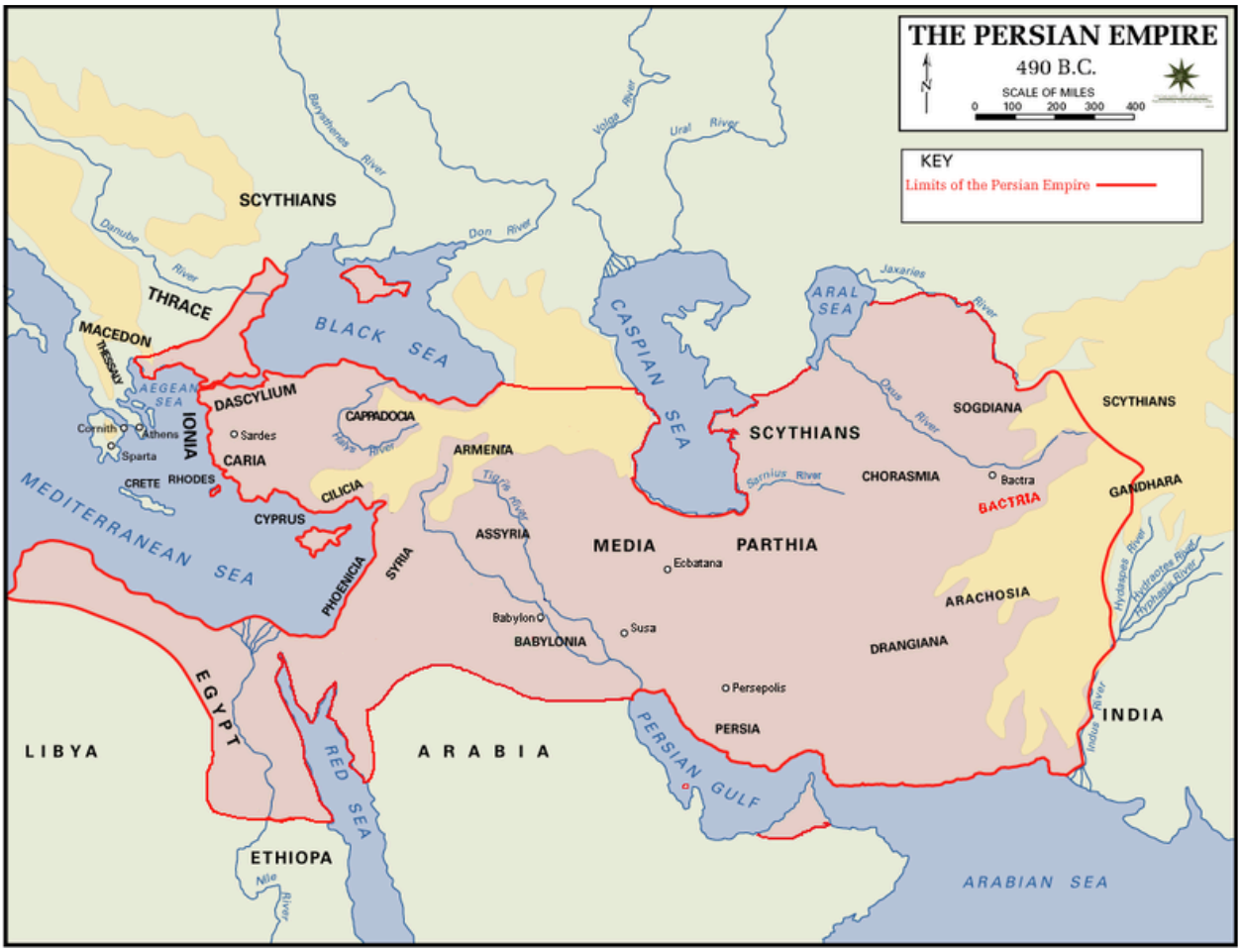
Cyrus continued the practice of finding loyal leaders and treating his conquered enemies fairly, which kept uprisings against him to a minimum. He then pushed into Central Asia, in present-day Afghanistan, conquering all of what constituted the "known world" in that region. To the northeast were the 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 at its territorial height 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 city-states 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 angered the Persians, however, and Darius began to plan a full-fledged invasion of Greece (considered below).

The Persian Government

An empire this big posed some 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 up the empire all the way 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. For example, it was Cyrus who allowed the exiled Jews to return to Judah from Babylon in the name of a kind of royal generosity. 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 Parsa

(both cities served as royal capitals). 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 Parsa 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.

One final component of the Persian system was relatively modest taxation. In order to keep taxes moderate, 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 that the Greeks called 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.

The Achaemenid dynasty of Persia would rule 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.

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.

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 during 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.

One noteworthy aspect of Zoroastrianism is that, in contrast to other ancient religions (including Judaism, and later, Christianity), Zoroastrianism appears to have banned slavery on spiritual grounds. This is important to bear in mind in the context of discussing the Persian War, described below. The Greeks thought of the war as the defense of their glorious traditions,

including the political participation of citizens in the state, but it was the Greeks who controlled a society that was heavily dependent on slavery, whereas slavery was at least less prevalent in Persia than in Greece (despite the religious ban, slavery was clearly still present in the Persian Empire to some degree).

Almost all of the theological details about Zoroastrianism are known from much later periods of Persian history, although historians have established that the Persian rulers themselves were almost certainly Zoroastrians by the rule of Darius I. The importance of Zoroastrianism is in part the fact that it reveals much about what the Persians *valued*, not just what they believed about the universe. Truth was the cardinal virtue of Zoroastrianism, with lying being synonymous with evil. Each person had a certain social role to play in the Zoroastrian worldview, with the kings presiding over an ordered, loyal, prosperous society. In theory, war was fought to extend righteousness, not just seize territory and loot. Clearly, there was a sophisticated ethical code and set of social expectations present even in early Zoroastrianism, reflected in a comment made by the Greek historian Herodotus. According to him, the Persians taught their children three things: to ride a horse, to shoot a bow, and to tell the truth.

The Persian War

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 city-states 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. It is also remembered, unfortunately, for how the conflict was appropriated by proto-racist beliefs in the superiority of "The West." Because the Greeks saw the conflict in terms of the triumph of true, Greek, civilization over barbaric tyranny, and the surviving historical sources are told exclusively from the Greek perspective, this bias has managed to last down until the present – consider the movie adaptations of the most famous battles of the Persian War, *300* and *300: Rise of an Empire*, in which the Persians are depicted as being literally monstrous, ruled over by a comically evil, eight-foot-tall king. The fact that both Sparta and Athens were slave-based societies is *not* part of those movies' narratives.

The war began in 490 BCE, when the Persians, with about 25,000 men, landed at Marathon, a town 26 miles from Athens. 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 (almost certainly 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 a 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. 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.

The Persians had finally regrouped by 480 BCE, ten years after their first attempt to invade. Xerxes I, the new king, 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 city-states 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 city-states 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.

Route of the Persian invasion under Xerxes.

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.

Despite the Persian naval loss, Xerxes' army was easily able to march across Greece and ransack various city-states 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, and the Persians finally decided 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 city-state, 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. During this period, the Greeks exhibited the most remarkable flowering of their ideas and accomplishments, as well as perhaps their most selfish and misguided political blundering in the form of a costly and ultimately pointless war between Sparta and Athens: the Peloponnesian War.

The Peloponnesian War

When the Spartans and Athenians led the Greek city-states 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 city-states, 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.

Each year, the 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 city-state 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 city-states 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 city-states. 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 was the head of a different association, the Peloponnesian League, which was 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. Sparta was resentful and, in

a way, fearful of Athenian power. Open war finally broke out between the two cities in 431 BCE after two of their respective allied city-states started a conflict and Athens tried to influence the political decisions of Spartan allies. The war lasted from 431 – 404 BCE.

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.

Athens and its allies, including the city-states it dominated in the Delian League, are depicted in orange, Sparta and its allies in green.

Truces came and went, but the war continued 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, and within a year the Athenians had created a new government.

The Aftermath

Greece itself 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 transformed by the war, out of necessity becoming both a naval power and a diplomatic “player” and losing much of its former 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 city-state 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 city-states adopted the practice of enlisting state-financed standing armies for the first time, rather than relying on volunteer citizen-soldiers. Likewise, the city-states 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 city-states 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 city-states 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. Those effects are the topic of the next chapter.

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Chapter 6: The Classical Age of Greece

Introduction

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 city-states 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 the era generated 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.

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 city-states 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 had 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 city-states, 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 the earlier tyrants.

When Pericles rose to be a dominant voice in Athenian politics, the system remained in place that had been set up by Cleisthenes. 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 argumentation. 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" city-states, 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 (i.e. before, a citizen had to be wealthy enough to volunteer in the city government - this meant that almost all farmers and small merchants were cut off from direct political power). 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, 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 (like children are in American society today) 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 from families 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 when 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 off 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 should 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, and it was a rare occurrence either way: 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 and sexual slavery.

Depiction of a symposium from c. 420 BCE, featuring a female entertainer - most likely a slave and obliged to provide sex as well as musical entertainment to the male guests.

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 and 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 confined 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 suggest 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 city-states; 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. One common practice was for an adult man of the elite classes to "adopt" a male adolescent of his social class and both mentor him in politics, social conduct, and war, and carry on what we would now regard as a statutory sexual relationship with him - this practice was especially common 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 city-state 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. This certainly seemed to be true at times, as when the Theban army, led by the Sacred Band, was the first to defeat Sparta in open battle (this occurred after the Peloponnesian War, when Sparta found itself warring with its former allies like Thebes).

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 city-states 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 was outlawed in Athens by Solon, most city-states still allowed the enslavement of their own people who 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 very lucky 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. Rarest of all were slaves who were remembered by later Greeks for their accomplishments. Easily the most important and well known example was Aesop, credited with compiling a book of fables that are still in print to this day, and some of which (e.g. *The Tortoise and the Hare*) have become common tropes in Western thought. The stories about Aesop's life which have survived propose an ideal of an elite slave who achieves freedom and a measure of fame through the pursuit of the elevated cultural endeavors valued by the Greeks.

Needless to say, for every Aesop were countless slaves about whom we know almost nothing. Most 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 worst positions for slaves were the jobs involving manual labor, especially in mines. As noted in the last chapter, one of the events that lost the Peloponnesian War for Athens was the fact that 20,000 of its publicly-owned slaves were liberated by the Spartans from the horrendous conditions in the Athenian silver mines. Likewise, 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 die horribly over time. The historical

evidence suggests that slaves in mines were routinely worked to death, not unlike the plantation slaves of Brazil and the Caribbean thousands of years later.

Culture

If Greek society was thus nothing like 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.

That being noted, one of the major cultural innovations of the Greeks, the creation of drama, emerged from the 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 was choruses of singing and chanting. Greek writers started scripting these performances, eventually creating what we now recognize as plays. A prominent feature of Greek drama left over from the Dionysian rituals remained the *chorus*, a group of performers who chanted or sang together and served as the narrator to the stories depicted by the main characters.

Contemporary view of the remnants of the Greek theater of Lychnidos in present-day Macedonia. The upper tiers are still marked with the names of the wealthy individuals who purchased their own reserved seats.

Greek drama depicted life in human terms, even when using mythological or ancient settings. Playwrights would 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.

In addition to tragedy, the Greeks invented *comedy*. The essential difference is that tragedy revolves around *pathos,* or suffering, from which the English word “pathetic” derives. Pathos is meant to inspire sympathy and understanding in the viewer. Watching a Greek tragedy should, the playwrights hoped, lead the audience to relate to and sympathize with the tragic hero. Comedy, however, is meant to inspire mockery and gleeful contempt of the failings of others, rather than sympathy. The most prominent comic playwright (whose works survive) was Aristophanes, a brilliant writer whose plays are full of lying, hypocritical Athenian politicians and merchants who reveal themselves as the frauds they are to the delight of audiences.

One famous play by Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, was set in the Peloponnesian War. The women of Athens are fed up with the pointless conflict and use the one thing they have some power over, their bodies, to force the men to stop the fighting by withholding sex. A Spartan contingent appears begging to open peace negotiations because, it turns out, the Spartan women have done the same thing. Here, Aristophanes not only indulged in the ribald humor that was popular with the Greeks (even by present-day standards, *Lysistrata* is full of “dirty” jokes) but showed a remarkable awareness of, and sympathy for, the social position of Greek women. In fact, in plays like *Lysistrata* we see evidence that Greek women were *not* in fact always secluded and rendered mute by male-dominated society, even though (male) Greek commentators generally argued that they should be.

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. Greek drama was the first time human beings acted out stories that were meant to entertain, and sometimes to inform, their audiences.

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 (i.e. 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 spirits or gods (or at least tools of spirits and gods), but might just be natural forces that did not have personalities of their own.

The first known Greek scientist was Thales of Miletus (i.e. Thales, and the students of his who went on to be important scientific thinkers as well, were from the city-state of Miletus in Ionia), 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.

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 reasoning, of starting with observation and moving toward explanation. Even though it was (as 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. The practice of inductive reasoning led to many subsequent advancements; most importantly when two Greek scholars (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.

Meanwhile, the concept of the four elements was closely related to one of the most influential developments in Greek thought, namely the medical theories of Hippocrates (c. 460 - 377 BCE). Whereas earlier concepts of medicine had revolved around the combination of physical and magical or spiritual influences, such as demons invading the body and causing illness, Hippocrates argued that illness was caused by imbalances in the four "humors," bodily fluids (blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile) that corresponded to the four elements and which, he claimed, caused disease when they were not in balance inside the body. Treatments often revolved alterations to diet, which he claimed would change the humoral balance, as well as more direct interventions such as bleeding to remove "excess" blood. While Hippocrates' theories were eventually proved to be scientifically inaccurate, it took until the nineteenth century CE for that to happen. For about 2,000 years, the humoral concept remained central to medical theory and practice across the Middle East and Europe.

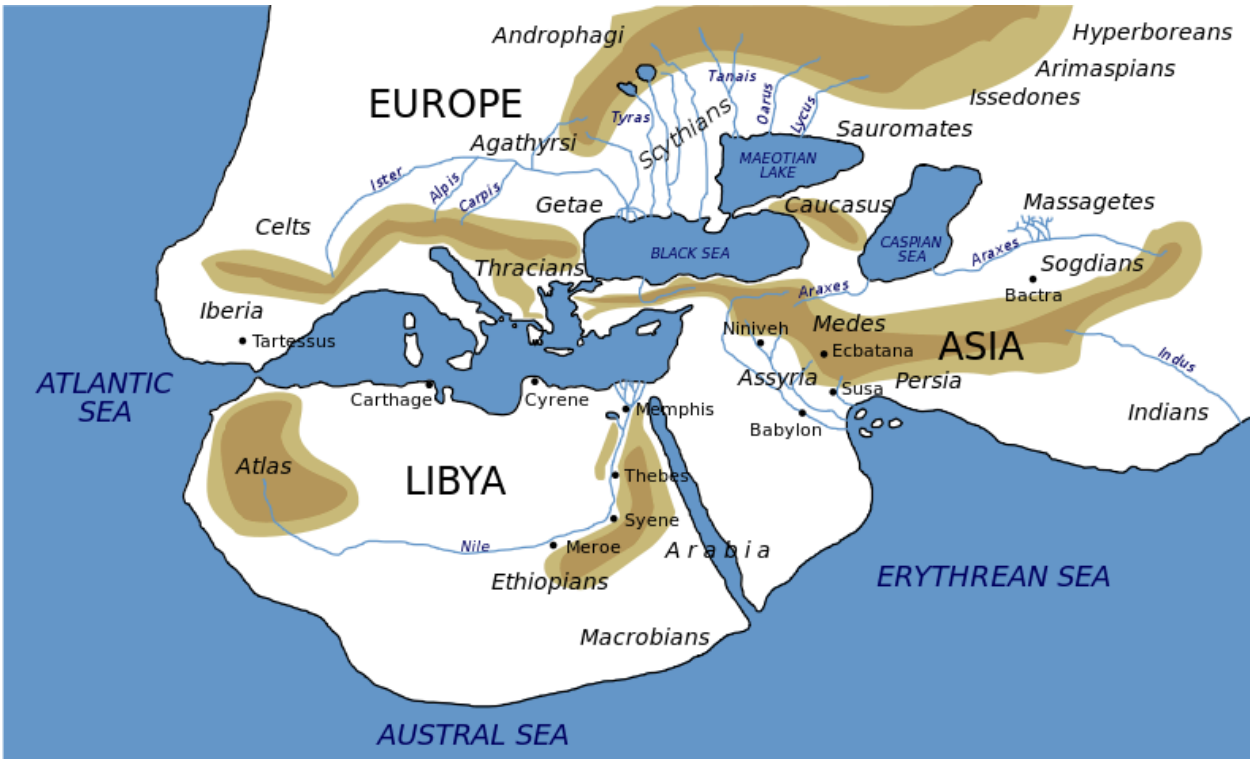
History

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 founding figure of Greek history-writing was Herodotus (484 – 420 BCE), who wrote a history of the Persian War that was 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 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. 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."



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."

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. 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, the sources of inspiration for thought and artistic creation, was the patron of history specifically.

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 that the word is used in the present.

Among the important questions that most Greek philosophers dealt with 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 city-state, 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.

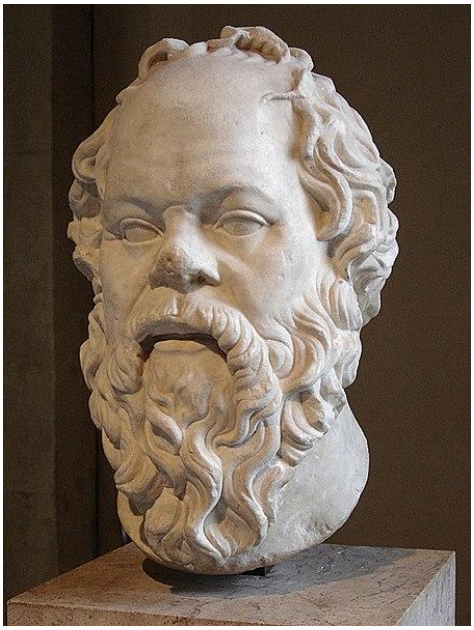
Some of the early philosophers of the Greek classical age were the Sophists: traveling teachers who tutored students on all aspects of thought. While they did not represented a truly unified body of thought, the one common sophistic doctrine was that all human beliefs and customs were just habits of 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 of educating Greeks to be more successful, especially in the law courts and the public assemblies. They did not have a shared philosophical doctrine besides this idea that truth was relative and that the focus in life ought to be on individual achievement.

The men who became the most famous Greek philosophers of all time strongly disagreed with this view. 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. 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 her own biases and gaps in logic, until finally arriving at a more satisfying and reasonable belief than 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.



A Roman copy of an original Greek bust of Socrates - as with many Greek sculptures, only the Roman copy survives. Most Greek statues were made of bronze, and over the centuries almost all were melted down for the metal.

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 city-state 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.

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 city-state; 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.

Art

The 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 was inherently pleasing to the eye. The most prominent surviving piece of Greek architecture, the Parthenon of Athens dedicated to the city-state’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.

Contemporary view of the Parthenon.

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. In turn, 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.

One of the few original Greek bronze statues to survive, depicting either Zeus or Poseidon (Zeus would have held a lightning bolt, Poseidon a trident).

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 the 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 city-state 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 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 north as he said, because north of Greece it was quite cold enough and there was no way humans could live any farther north than that. Practically speaking, despite Pytheas's voyage, the Greek world would remain defined by the shores of the Mediterranean.

Conclusion

"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, their adherence to occupying areas close to the sea, 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.

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Quote:

Demosthenes: Victor Bers, *Demosthenes, Speeches 50–59*, University of Texas Press (2003)

Chapter 7: The Hellenistic Age

Introduction

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.

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 city-states and, while they were recognized as Greeks because of their language and culture, they were also thought of as being a bit like country bumpkins 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 his 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), whose repeated invasions the Macedonians 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 sliding into anarchy. The war lasted for forty years.

In 359 BCE, the Macedonian king, Philip II, re-unified the country. Philip was the classic Macedonian leader: shrewd, clever, skilled in battle, and quick to reward loyalty or punish sedition. He led military campaigns 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 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 funded his soldiers’ pay and equipment. He hired mercenaries to supplement his Macedonian troops, ending up with the largest army Macedon had ever seen.

The expansion of Macedon under Philip II, from the small region marked in the red border to the larger blue region, along with the dependent regions surrounding it.

The Greek city-states 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 city-states 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 city-states 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 city-states, 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.

Unfortunately for Philip, he was murdered by one of his 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 was once accepted as fact but has faced sustained criticism for many years. 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.

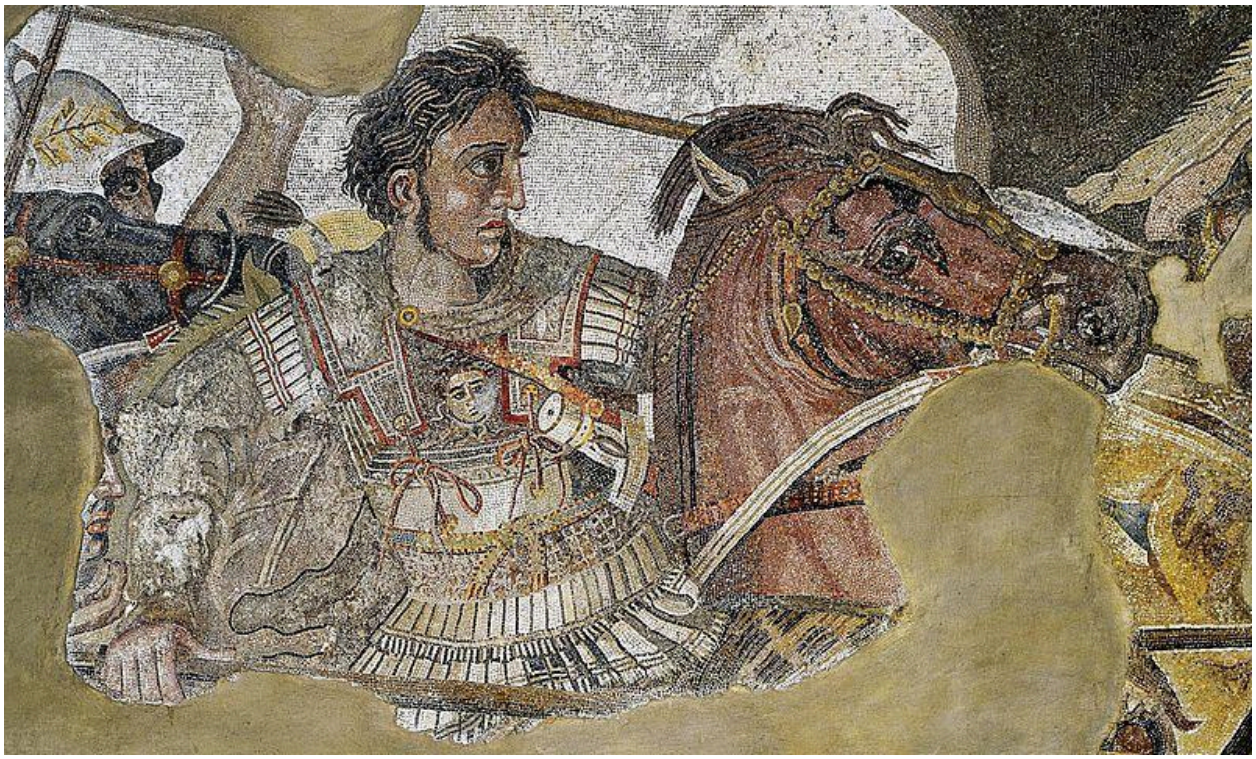
Alexander the Great

Alexander was one of the 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 continuing to fight 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

subjects, and even his Greek subjects came to venerate him as one of the greatest leaders of all time.

Alexander's conquests began almost immediately after seizing the throne. He first ruthlessly killed off his rivals 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 city-states 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 warrants 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.



A Roman mosaic depicting Alexander the Great in battle, possibly based on a Greek original.

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 Macedonian and Greek forces 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 counterattacks. 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 honoring with lands and positions 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. 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.

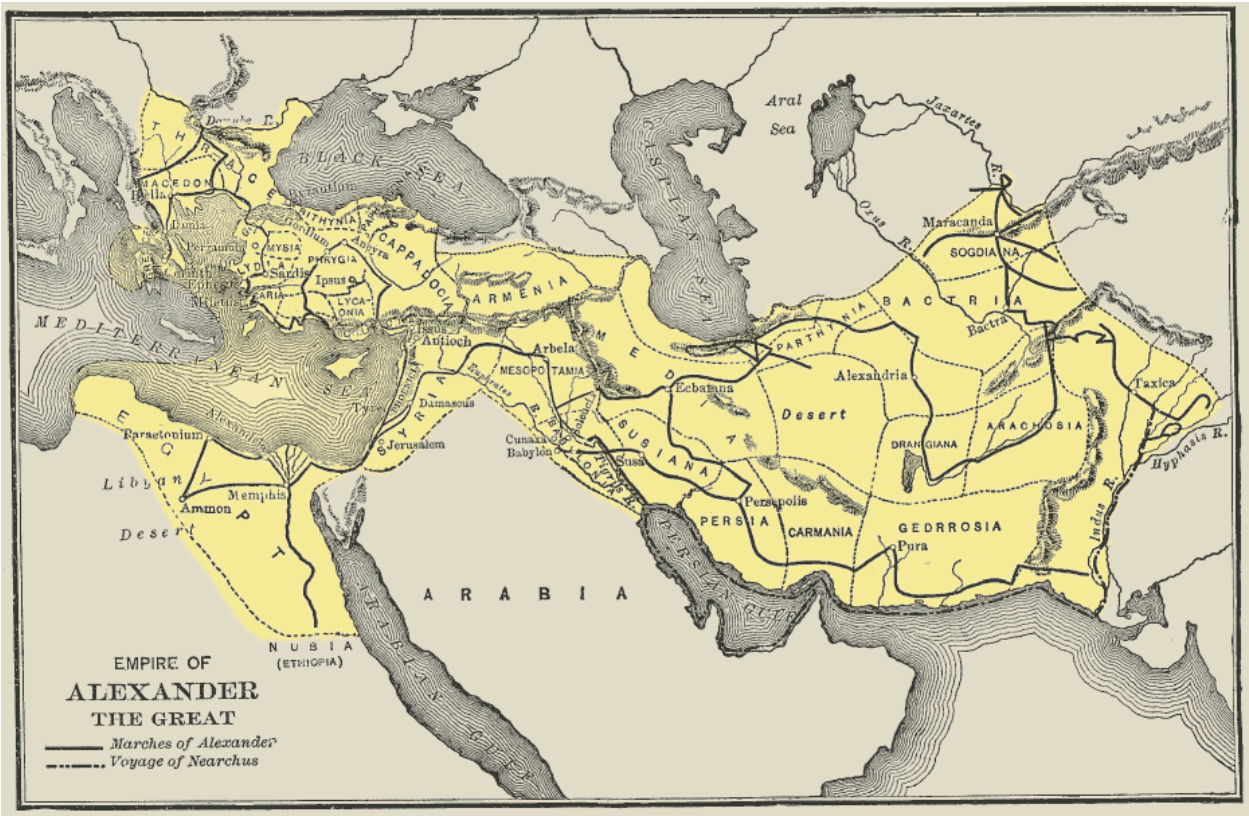
From Egypt, the Greek armies headed east, defeating the Persians at two more major battles, culminating in 330 BCE when they seized Parsa (called Persepolis by the Greeks, simply meaning "city of the Persians"), the Persian capital city. There, the Greek armies looted the entire palace complex before 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. 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 off 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 (such as the organization of the Satrapies) 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, however, he was unsatisfied, and he set off to conquer lands his new Persian subjects told him about beyond the borders of the empire.

Alexander headed east again 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 (Alexander was so impressed by Porus that after the battle he appointed him satrap of what had been Porus’s kingdom). 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.

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.



Alexander's conquests - the dark black lines trace his route from Macedon in the far northwest through Egypt, across the Persian heartland, then to Afghanistan and India, and finally along the shores of the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf back to Babylon.

The return journey was arduous, and it took years to get back to the heartland of Persia. 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. 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.

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

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 had 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 Hellenistic Monarchies

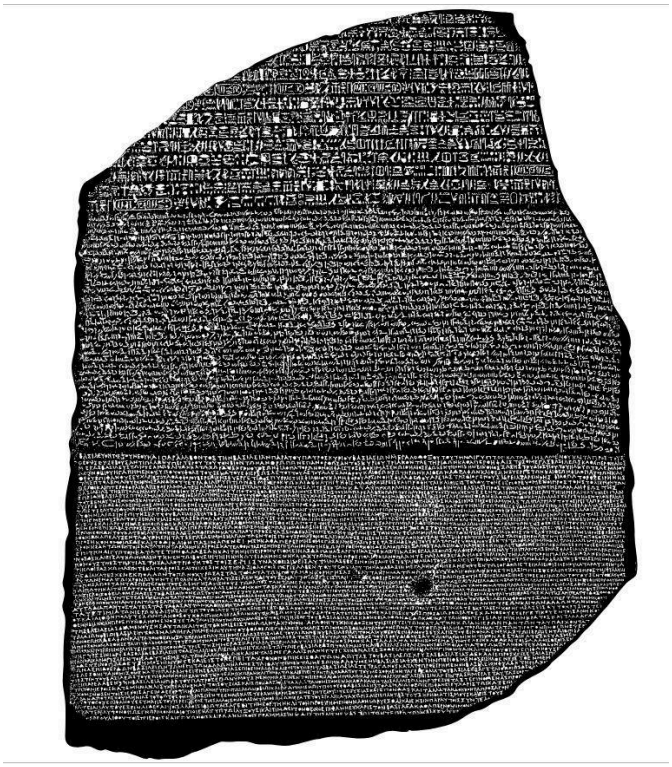
The Macedonians could be united by powerful leaders, but their nobility tended to be selfish and jealous of power. Since he named no heir, Alexander almost guaranteed that his empire would collapse as his generals turned on each other. Indeed, within a year of his death the empire plunged into civil war, and it took until 280 BCE for the fighting to cease and three major kingdoms to be established, founded by the generals Antigonus, Ptolemy, and Seleucus.

The major Hellenistic kingdoms (here Anglicized as "Seleukos" rather than "Seleucid" and "Ptolemaios" instead of "Ptolemaic.") The Mauryan Empire was a new Indian state that swiftly achieved independence from Greek influence following Alexander's death.

The Antigonids ruled over Macedon and Greece. Despite controlling the Macedonian heartland and Greece itself, the Antigonids possessed the least territory among the Hellenistic monarchies. Macedon and Greece were depopulated by the wars as many thousands of soldiers and their families emigrated to the new military colonies established by Alexander. Over time, the Antigonids had to fight to hold on to power in Greece and they ultimately saw many of

the Greek city-states achieve independence from their rule. That noted, their hold over Macedon remained strong until its conquest by Rome in 148 BCE.

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 itself was 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. Under Ptolemaic rule, Alexandria also became a gathering place for scholars and intellectuals of all kinds. In the end, the Ptolemies were the longest-lasting of the Hellenistic dynasties.



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

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. After a military defeat, Seleucus himself gave his Indian territory back to an Indian king, Chandragupta, in 301 BCE in return for 500 war elephants; Chandragupta would go on to found one of India's most impressive ancient states, the Mauryan Empire. Back in Persia, in 247 BCE a former Seleucid general based in the region of Parthia destroyed Seleucid control in the Iranian Plateau, 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, and 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.

All of the Hellenistic monarchs tried to rule in the style of Alexander, rewarding their inner circles with riches, founding new cities, and expanding trade routes to foreign lands. They also warred with one another, however, with the Ptolemies and the Seleucids emerging as particularly bitter rivals, frequently fighting over the territories that divided their empires (e.g. they fought eight full-scale wars over Canaan in total). The kingdoms fielded large armies, many of which consisted of the descendants of Greek settlers who agreed to serve in the armies in return for permanent land-holdings in special military towns.

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.

The political legacy of the Seleucid kingdom was of nearly constant rebellion and infighting. While the dynasty tried to model itself both on Greek traditions of rule and on the earlier Persian dynasty of the Achaemenids (Darius III was the last of that dynasty to rule), it never established legitimacy in the eyes of many of its subjects. Instead, the Seleucid rulers were military leaders first and foremost, often obliged to criss-cross their large empire suppressing rebellions, fighting off invasions of Central Asian nomads, and squabbling with their neighbors in Egypt.

That noted, where Seleucid rule left a lasting mark on the region it was in consolidating long-distance trade, especially in relation to the famous Silk Road that began during the Hellenistic period. As noted above, Alexander left behind garrisons and colonies as his armies moved east, and a group of Greek and Macedonian soldiers intermarried with the local people of what is today Tajikistan in Central Asia in the process. By 200 BCE, the descendents of this Greek-Bactrian people, the Yuehzi, were trading for Chinese silks in small quantities. Agents of the new Han Dynasty of China (founded in 206 BCE) learned of this trade and were eventually successful in securing warhorses from the Yuehzi, in the process laying the groundwork for an official, Chinese-sponsored trade route across Central Asia to the Middle East that vastly expanded the volume of trade goods traveling between China and, eventually, Europe.

The Seleucids, meanwhile, ruled over the Persian territories that lay directly in the main trade routes of the Silk Road, and they did everything in their power to support it. The dynasty 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 - Persian silk weavings were of such high quality that they were actually traded back to China for profit. 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.

Culture and Gender

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 to circumnavigate Africa itself, but did not quite succeed. In addition to accounts by explorers, the Greeks of the Hellenistic lands enjoyed histories and accounts of foreign kingdoms 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 places as far afield as India sometimes wrote accounts of the customs they encountered. In short, it was a period when knowledge of the world greatly expanded.

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. Both the new cities founded by Alexander and his successors and the old Greek settlements along the eastern coasts of the Mediterranean grew and prospered. 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 city-states, became instead a mark of elite membership that could be won in multiple cities at the same time.

Of note is the fact that the Seleucid cities represented the first major experiment in what we now call the welfare state. Because of the obligations the first monarchs felt toward their specifically Greek subjects, things like education and garbage collection were funded by the state. Eventually, public services extended to include poor relief, which consisted of free food distributed within the cities to the poorest classes of permanent residents. This practice had nothing to do with charity; it was simply a means for keeping the peace in the growing cities.

There were major ongoing problems for the Hellenistic ruling class, however, 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, ultimately ruling over a fraction of their former territories by the time the Romans began encroaching in the second century BCE.

Gender

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, and even for their political savvy in the case of noteworthy queens (like Alexander's mother Olympias or, much later, the famous Cleopatra VII).

Strikingly, Hellenistic women exercised considerable economic power and enjoyed much greater legal recognition than had women in earlier periods of Greek history. While they were sometimes obliged to do so with the backing of a male guardian, women controlled property, could borrow and lend money, and could manage the inheritances of their children. Some few women even served in political office - for example, a woman served as a magistrate in the city-state of Histria, on the shores of the Black Sea, in the first century BCE.

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 city-states 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 city-states to the south, and that cultural value was clearly imprinted along with Macedonian rule itself across the Hellenistic world. Back in Greece, meanwhile, Sparta stood apart as the one city-state 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 for 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.

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 cooking.

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 most 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 city-state 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 theory did not enjoy a period of growth during the 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 is one of those relatively few ancient thinkers who really "got it right" in the sense that none of his major claims were later proved to be inaccurate. His 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).

Hellenistic thinkers also made important discoveries in astronomy, most notably the fact that the astronomer Aristarchus of Samos posited that the sun was the center of the known universe, not the earth. 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.

Perhaps the most memorable achievement in scholarship during the period was the institutional form it took at the Library of Alexandria and its associated Museon, 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. In fact, the Museon functioned similarly to a modern university: scholars resided there, conducted research in a variety of specialized subjects, and presented their findings via lecture and publication. Unfortunately, the Museon 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 fanatics centuries later).

Thus, there were certainly important intellectual breakthroughs that occurred during the Hellenistic period. There were not, however, corresponding achievements in technology or engineering. That is not surprising; the pace of technological change in the ancient world was *always* glacially slow by modern standards. Instead, what mattered at the time was the spread of ideas and knowledge, much of which had no immediate and practical consequences in the form of applied technology - this was as true of ancient Rome as it was of the Hellenistic kingdoms.

Conclusion

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.

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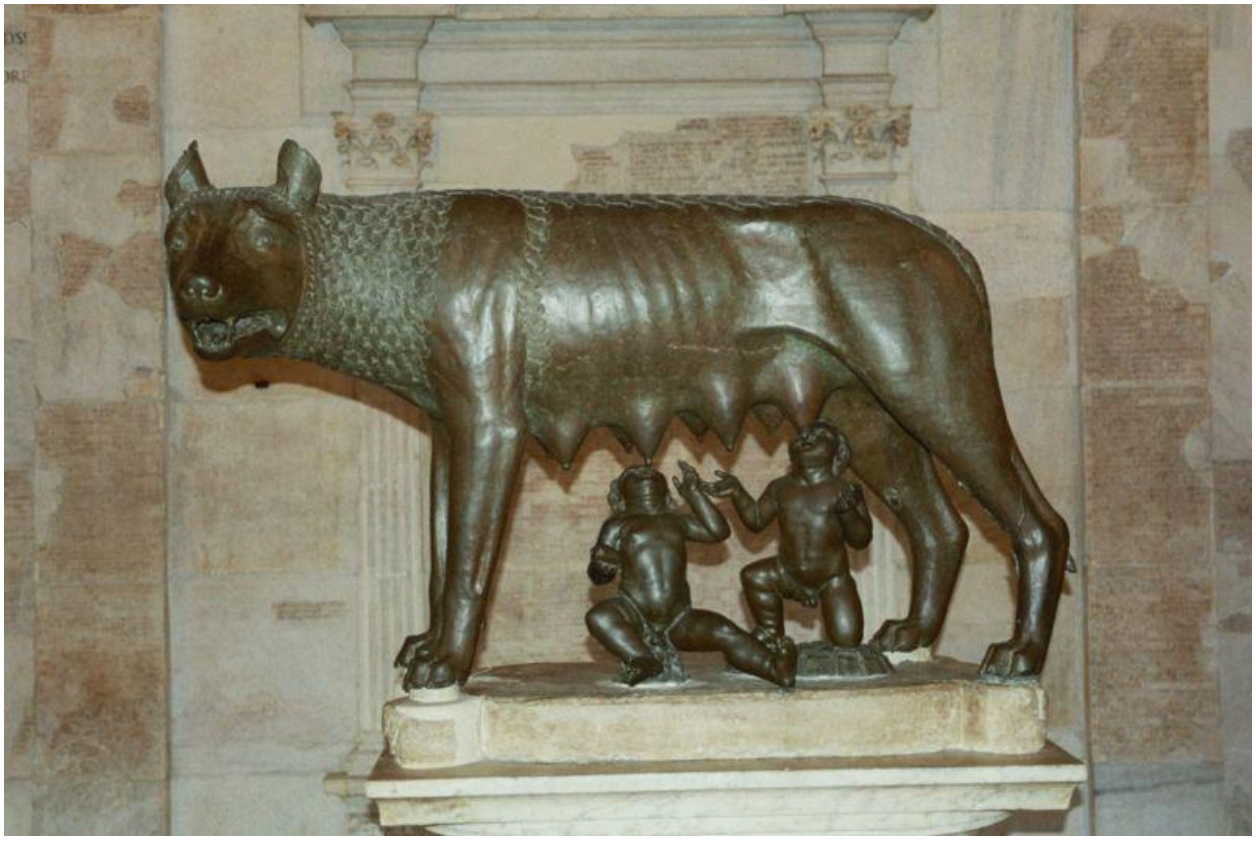
Chapter 8: The Roman Republic

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 Algeria, mark out the heartland of what its inhabitants would later consider itself 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.

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 own origins had to do with two brothers: Romulus and Remus. In the legend of Romulus and Remus, two boys were 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, eventually growing up and exacting their revenge on their treacherous uncle. They then fought each other, with Romulus killing Remus and founding the city of Rome. 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.



Replica of an Etruscan-era statue of Romulus and Remus suckling from the wolf.

The Romans were a warrior people from very early on, feuding and fighting with their neighbors and with raiders from the north. They were allied with and, for a time, ruled by a neighboring people called the Etruscans who lived to the northwest of Rome. The Etruscans were active trading partners with the Greek city-states of the south, and Rome became a key link along the Etruscan - Greek trade route. The Etruscans ruled a loose empire of allied city-states that carried on a brisk trade with the Greeks, trading Italian iron for various luxury goods. This mixing of cultures, Etruscan, Greek, and Latin, included shared 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.

According to Roman legends, the Etruscans ruled the Romans 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 would eventually create new forms of military organization and tactics that would overwhelm 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 as rejecting foreign rule of any kind, or 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 men who were poor were considered full Romans but had no vote. In 509 BCE (according to their own legends), the Romans overthrew the last Etruscan king and established a full 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.

Note: 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 would eventually spell the end of Celtic independence in most of Europe.
Much less is known about the Celts than about the 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 former 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.

We know relatively little about Celtic culture because they left no first-hand written accounts. Celtic legends survive, but they were recorded centuries after the Roman period had ended, so their relationship to earlier periods of Celtic history is unclear. Some of the accounts

of the Celts written by Roman authors (including Plutarch, Julius Caesar, and Tacitus) suggest that women may have enjoyed more freedom and political power in Celtic society than in many other ancient cultures, with Plutarch describing a panel of Celtic women negotiating with the Carthaginian general Hannibal and Tacitus recounting the British Celtic queen Boudicca and her daughters riding to battle against the Romans. In the end, the details of Celtic politics and beliefs remain obscure, however.

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. In the long run, Celtic culture and languages survived in areas the Romans either never conquered or did not completely assimilate, most obviously in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland.

The Republic

The Roman Republic had a fairly complex system of government and representation, but it was one that would last about 500 years and preside over the vast expansion of Roman power. An assembly, called the Centuriate Assembly, was elected by the citizens and created laws. Each year, the 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 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.

The rich were referred to as *patricians*, families with ancient roots in Rome who occupied most of the positions of the senate and the judiciary in the city. There were about one hundred patrician families, descending from the men 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*, Roman citizens not from patrician backgrounds.

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.

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 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.

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, would become 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 had been 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, 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.

Roman Expansion

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. Rome did not punish the cities after it defeated them, however. Instead, it offered them citizenship in its republic (albeit without voting rights) in return for pledges of loyalty and troops during wartime, a very important precedent because it meant that with every victory, Rome could potentially expand its military might. Soon, the elites of the Latin cities realized the benefits of playing along with the Romans. They were dealt into the wealth distributed after military victories and could play an active role in politics so long as they remained loyal, whereas resisters were eventually ground down and defeated with only their pride to show for it. While Rome would rarely extend actual citizenship to whole

communities in the future, the assimilation of the Latins into the Roman state did set an important precedent: conquered peoples could be won over to Roman rule and contribute to Roman power, a key factor in Rome's ongoing expansion from that point forward.

Expansion of the Republic, from the region marked in dark red around Rome itself in Central Italy north and south along the Italian Peninsula, culminating in the conquests of Northern Italy, Sicily, and Sardinia (whose conquests are described in the section below).

Rome rapidly expanded to encompass all of Italy except the southernmost regions. Those regions, populated largely by Greeks who had founded colonies there centuries before, invited a Greek warrior-king named Pyrrhus to aid them against the Romans around 280 BCE (Pyrrhus was a Hellenistic king who had already wrested control of a good-sized swath of Greece from the Antigonid dynasty back in Greece). Pyrrhus won two major battles against the Romans, but in the process he lost two-thirds of his troops. After his victories, he made a comment that "one more such victory will undo me" - this led to the phrase "pyrrhic victory," which means a temporary victory that ultimately spells defeat, or winning the battle but losing

the war. He took his remaining troops and returned to Greece. After he fled, the south was unable to mount much of a resistance, and all of Italy was under Roman control by 263 BCE.

Roman Militarism

It is important to emphasize the extreme militarism and terrible brutality of Rome during the republican period, very much including this early phase in which it began to acquire its empire. 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.

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 as 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.

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.

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 with them and occasionally skirmishing with the Ptolemaic armies of Egypt and with 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.

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 city-states, Syracuse and Messina. The Carthaginians sent a fleet to intervene on behalf of Messinans, but the Messinans 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 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.)

The Romans suffered several defeats, but they were rich and powerful enough at this point to persist in the war effort. 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.

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 the governors wielding enormous power and influence in their respective provinces.

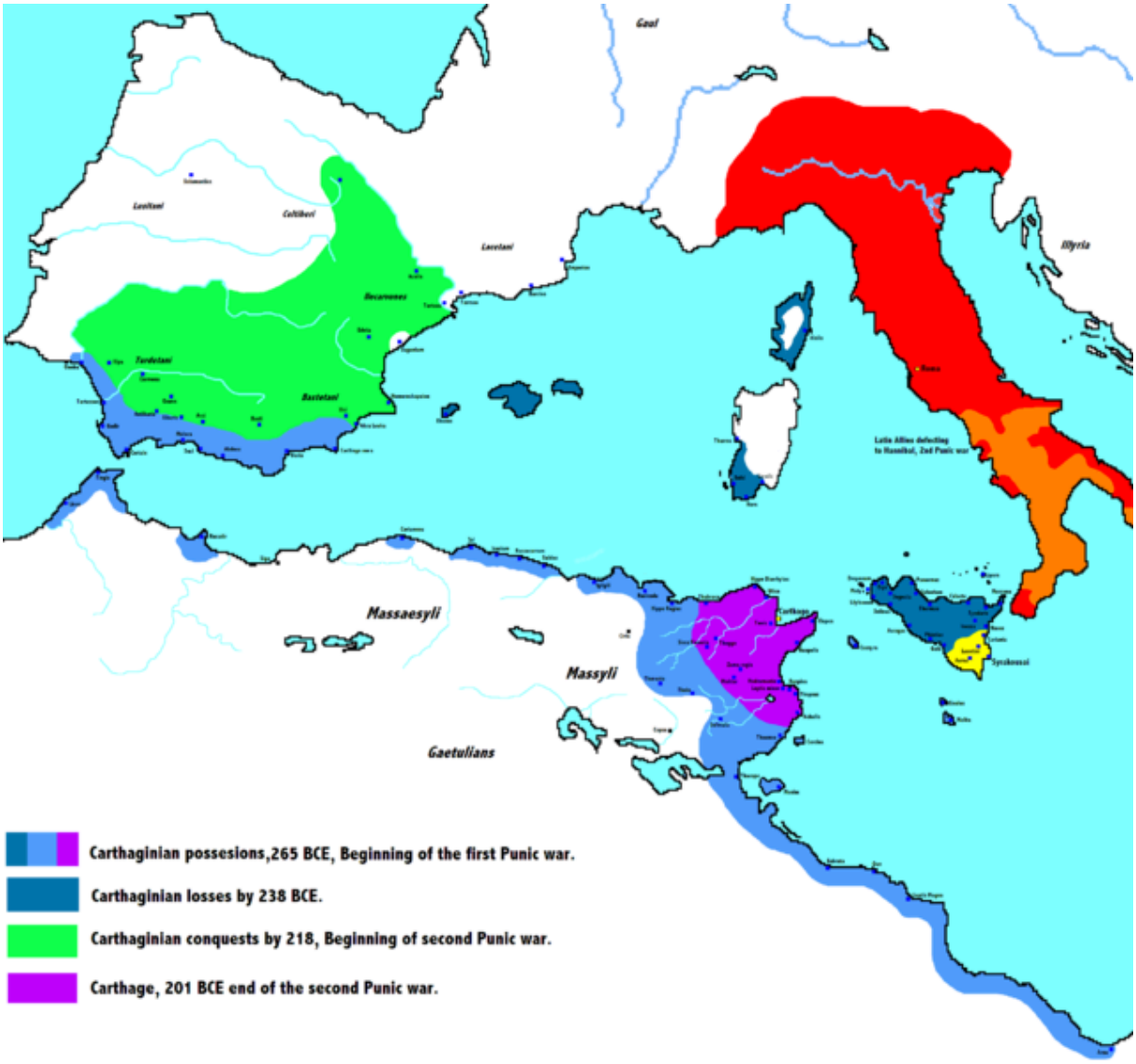
Unsurprisingly, the Carthaginians wanted revenge, not just for their loss in the war but for Rome's seizure of Corsica and Sardinia. For twenty years, the Carthaginians built up their forces and their resources, most notably by invading and conquering a large section of Spain, containing rich mines of gold and copper and thousands of Spanish Celts who came 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) 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).

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 never lost a single battle in Italy, yet neither did he force the Romans to sue for peace.

Hannibal defeated the Romans repeatedly with 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 one battle in 216 BCE, Hannibal's smaller army defeated a larger Roman force by letting it push into the Carthaginian center, then surrounding it with cavalry. He was hampered, though, by the fact that he did not have a siege train to attack Rome itself (which was heavily fortified), and he failed to win over the southern Italian cities which had been conquered by the Romans a century earlier. The Romans kept losing to Hannibal, but they were largely successful in keeping Hannibal from receiving reinforcements from Spain and Africa, slowly but steadily weakening his forces.

Eventually, the Romans altered their tactics and launched a guerrilla war against Hannibal within Italy, harrying his forces. This was totally contrary to their usual tactics, and the dictator Fabius Maximus who insisted on it in 217 BCE was mockingly nicknamed "the Delayer" by his detractors in the Roman government despite his evident success. The Romans vacillated on this strategy, suffering the terrible defeat mentioned above in 216 BCE, but as Hannibal's victories grew and some cities in Italy and Sicily started defecting to the Carthaginian side, they returned to it.

A brilliant Roman general named Scipio defeated the Carthaginian forces back in Spain in 207 BCE, cutting Hannibal off from both reinforcements and supplies, which weakened his army significantly. Scipio then attacked Africa itself, forcing Carthage to recall Hannibal to protect the city. Hannibal finally lost in 202 BCE after coming as close as anyone had to defeating the Romans. 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.



The Punic Wars over time - note how much Carthage’s empire was reduced by the end of the Second Punic War, encompassing only the region marked in purple around Carthage itself.

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 the 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.

Greece

Rome expanded eastward during the same period, eventually conquering 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) had agreed to divide up the eastern Mediterranean, assuming they could defeat and control all of the Greek city-states. 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 city-states 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 lousy at political organization. There

was also a growing conservative faction in Rome led by Cato the Elder that 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 city-states. 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.

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 (one Roman governor had 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 pitiful vestiges of the Seleucid kingdom.

A Roman bust of Mithridates VI sculpted in the first century CE (i.e. over a century after Mithridates was defeated) by a Roman sculptor. Here, he is depicted in the lion headdress of Hercules - the implication is that the Romans respected his ferocity in historical hindsight, even though he had been a staunch enemy of Rome.

Under the leadership of a general and politician, Pompey (“the Great”), both Mithridates and the remaining independent formerly Seleucid territories were defeated and incorporated either as provinces or puppet states under the control of the Republic. With that, almost the entire Mediterranean region was under Rome’s sway - Egypt alone remained independent.

The Republic as of 40 BCE. The Republic itself is marked in dark green, with the other colors consisting of other independent states. Many of those would subsequently fall under the sway of Rome or be conquered outright (such as Egypt).

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 city-states 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 convinced 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 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.

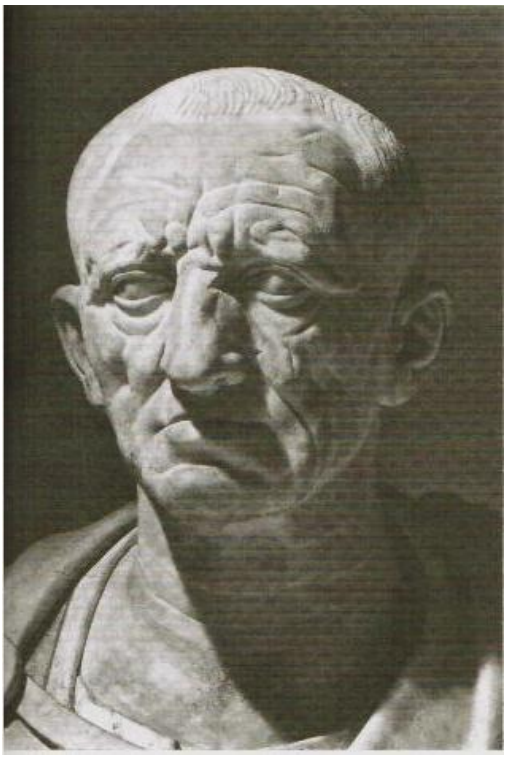
Romanitas was profoundly compatible with Greek Stoicism (which came of age in the Hellenistic monarchies just as Rome itself was expanding). Stoicism celebrated self-sacrifice, strength, political service, and the rejection of frivolous luxuries; these were all ideas that seemed laudable to Romans. By 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) 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. One status symbol in Rome was to have a Greek slave who could tutor one's children in the Greek language and Greek learning. 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.



The "Patrician Torlonia," a bust of an unknown Roman politician from sometime in the first century BCE.

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.

Roman Society

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 votes, 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 was still in 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.

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 dependent on the goodwill of the Roman governor, who might well look for opportunities to extract provincial wealth for his own benefit.

At the bottom of the Roman social system were the slaves. Slaves were one of the most lucrative forms of loot available to Roman soldiers, and so many lands had been conquered by Rome that the population of the Republic was swollen with slaves. Fully one-third of the population of Italy were slaves by the first century CE. 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.

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.

There were many slave uprisings, the most significant of which was led by Spartacus, a gladiator (warrior who fought for public amusement) originally from Thrace. Spartacus led the revolt of his gladiatorial school in the Italian city of Capua in 73 BCE. He set up a war camp on the slopes of the volcano Mt. Vesuvius, to which thousands of slaves fled, culminating in an "army" of about 70,000. He tried to convince them to flee over the Alps to seek refuge in their (mostly Celtic) homelands, but was eventually convinced to turn around to plunder Italy. The richest man in Italy, the senator Crassus, took command of the Roman army assembled to defeat Spartacus, crushing the slave army and killing Spartacus in 71 BCE (and lining the road to Rome with 6,000 crucified slaves).

In one area, however, Rome represented greater freedom and autonomy than did some of its neighboring societies (like Greece): gender roles. While Roman culture was explicitly patriarchal, with families organized under the authority of the eldest male of the household (the *pater familias*), there is a great deal of textual evidence that suggests that women enjoyed considerable independence nevertheless. Women retained the ownership of their dowries at marriage, could initiate divorce, and controlled their own inheritances. Widows, who were common thanks to the young marriage age of women and the death of soldier husbands, were legally autonomous and continued to run households after the death of the husband. Within families, women's voices carried considerable weight, and in the realm of politics, while men held all official positions, women exercised considerable influence from behind the scenes.

It is easy to overstate women's empowerment in Roman society; Roman culture celebrated the devoted mother and wife as the female ideal, and Roman traditionalists decried the loosening of strict gender roles that seems to have taken place over time during the republic. Women were expected to be frugal managers of households and, in theory, they were to avoid ostentatious displays. Likewise, Roman law explicitly designated men as the official decision-makers within the family unit. That being noted, however, one of the reasons that we know that women did enjoy a higher degree of autonomy than in many other societies is the number of surviving texts that both described and, in many cases, celebrated the role of women. Those texts were written by both men and women, and most Romans (men very much included) felt that it was both appropriate and desirable for both boys and girls to be properly educated.

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 up until the aftermath of the Punic Wars 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 *Romanitas* 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.

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. Gracchus, 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 push through a law that would limit the amount of public land a single man could own, distributing the excess to the poor. The Senate was horrified and fought bitterly to reverse the bill. Tiberius ran for a second term as tribune, something no one had ever done up to that point, and a group of senators clubbed him to death in 133 BCE.

Tiberius's brother Gaius Gracchus took up the cause, also becoming tribune. He attacked corruption in the provinces, allying himself with the equestrian class and 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 citizenship to 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 killers sent by senators.

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. A 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 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.

A contemporary of the Gracchi, a general named Gaius Marius, took further steps that eroded the traditional Republican system. Marius combined political savvy with effective military leadership. Marius was both a consul (elected an unprecedented seven times) and a general, and he used his power to eliminate the property requirement 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. Marius was popular with Roman commoners because he won consistent victories against enemies in both Africa and Germany, and because he distributed land and farms to his poor soldiers. This made him a people's hero, and it terrified the nobility in Rome because he was able to bypass the usual Roman political machine and simply pay for his wars himself. 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.

A general named Sulla followed in Marius's footsteps by recruiting soldiers directly and using his military power to bypass the government. In the aftermath of the Italian revolt of 88 - 84 BCE, the Assembly took Sulla's command of Roman legions fighting the forces of the anti-Roman eastern king Mithridates away and gave it to Marius in return for Marius's support in

enfranchising the people of the Italian cities. Sulla promptly marched on Rome with his army, forcing Marius to flee. Soon, however, Sulla left to resume his campaign against Mithridates. Marius promptly attacked with an army of his own, seizing Rome and murdering various supporters of Sulla. Marius himself soon died (of old age), but his followers remained united in an anti-Sulla coalition under a friend of Marius, 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 executed. In 81 BCE, Sulla was named dictator; he greatly strengthened the power of the Senate at the expense of the Plebeian Assembly, had his enemies in Rome murdered and their property seized, then retired to a life of debauchery in his private estate (and soon died from a disease he contracted). The problem for the Republic was that even though Sulla ultimately proved loyal to republican institutions, other generals might not be in the future. Sulla could have simply held onto power indefinitely thanks to the personal loyalty of his troops.

Julius Caesar

Thus, there is an unresolved question about the end of the Roman Republic: when a politician and general named Julius Caesar became increasingly powerful and ultimately began to replace the Republic with an empire, was he merely making good on the threat posed by Marius and Sulla, or was there truly something unprecedented about his actions? 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), 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 it feared his power and influence with so many soldiers who were loyal to him instead of the Republic. Pompey reacted by forming an alliance with Crassus and with

Julius Caesar, who was a member of an ancient patrician family. This group of three is known in history as the First Triumvirate.

Busts of the members of the First Triumvirate: Caesar, Crassus, and Pompey.

Each member of the Triumvirate wanted something specific: Caesar 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 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 wrote his own accounts of his wars in excellent Latin prose. His forces even invaded England, beginning a long-lasting Roman presence there. 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 used as a prop in a Greek play staged by the Parthian king). Pompey, fearing his former ally's power, 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 off 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.

Caesar returned to Rome two years later after hunting down Pompey's remaining loyalists. There, he had himself declared dictator for life 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 him, and he regularized Roman currency. Then he promptly set about making plans to launch a massive invasion of Persia.

Instead of leading another glorious military campaign, however, in March of 44 BCE Caesar was assassinated by a group of senators who resented his power and genuinely desired to save the Republic. The result was not the restoration of the Republic, however, just a new chapter in the Caesarian dictatorship. Its architect was Caesar's heir, his grand-nephew Octavian, to whom Caesar left (much to almost everyone's shock) almost all of his vast wealth.

Mark Antony and 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. In 34 BCE, Mark Antony and Cleopatra declared that Cleopatra's son by Julius Caesar, Caesarion, was the heir to Caesar (not Octavian), and that their own twins were to be rulers of Roman provinces. Rumors in the west 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, and Octavian seized on this behavior to claim that he was the true protector of Roman

morality. Soon, Octavian 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 support against his former ally in Rome.

A dedication featuring Cleopatra VII making an offering to the Egyptian goddess Isis. Note the remarkable mix of Egyptian and Greek styles: the image is in keeping with traditional Egyptian carvings, and Isis is an ancient Egyptian goddess, but the dedication itself is written in Greek.

When he finally declared war in 32 BCE, Octavian claimed he was only interested in defeating Cleopatra, which led to broader Roman support by avoiding the premise of 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, Octavian defeated Mark Antony's forces, which were poorly equipped, sick, and hungry. 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. 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.

Conclusion

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, Octavian had permanently dismantled the Republic and replaced it with the Roman Empire.

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Chapter 9: The Roman Empire

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 would survive 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." 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 would last into the twentieth century CE: the imperial titles of the rulers of both Russia and Germany - "Tsar" and "Kaiser" - mean "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.

Augustus

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. Unlike his great-uncle, Julius Caesar, Octavian eliminated all political rivals and set up a permanent hereditary emperorship. All the while, he claimed to be restoring not just peace and prosperity, but the Republic itself. Since the term *Rex* (king) would have been odious to his fellow Romans,

Augustus 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. By 23 BCE, he assumed the position of tribune for life, the position that allowed unlimited power in making or vetoing legislation. All soldiers swore personal oaths of loyalty to him, and since he conquered Egypt from his former ally Mark Antony, Augustus was worshiped there as the latest pharaoh. The Senate awarded Octavian the honorific *Augustus*: "illustrious" or "semi-divine." It is by that name, Augustus Caesar, that he is best remembered.

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.

Augustan propaganda was not just a projection of his personal authority, however. Instead, works that celebrated Roman cultural values such as those by the poets Virgil and Ovid were translated into many languages and distributed across the empire. In turn, these works played a major role in the creation of the very idea of Western Civilization. The writings of Horace, Ovid, and Virgil were used in Renaissance-era schools more than a thousand years later, and they continued to appear in the poems, essays, and plays of writers from Shakespeare to Cervantes well into the modern period. This literary tradition served the immediate need for the early Roman Empire to influence the cultures of the numerous societies it had conquered, but its long-term consequences were even more profound in that it created the myth of a refined, elitist hierarchy presiding over a unified, obedient empire.

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 at the time, 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 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.

One of the more spectacular surviving statues of Augustus. Augustus was, among other things, a master of propaganda, commissioning numerous statues and busts of himself to be installed across the empire.

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. He instituted a regular messenger service. His forces even 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 his 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 worshiped as a god.

The Imperial Dynasties

The period of the *Pax Romana* included three distinct dynasties:

1. The Julio-Claudian 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 Julio-Claudian 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 Julio-Claudian dynasty, the biographical details are much more difficult. All of the surviving written accounts about the lives of these first 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 emperors, 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.

When Augustus died in 14 CE, his stepson Tiberius (r. 14 – 37 CE) became emperor. While it was possible that the Senate might have tried to reassert its power, 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. 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 might threaten his power, at one point ordering one to call off a war in Germany). The Roman Empire would continue 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.

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 (one notable translation of the work of Suetonius by Robert Graves translates Caligula as "Bootikins" instead).

Even if some of the stories of his personal sadism are exaggerated, there is no doubt that Caligula was a disastrous emperor. According to the biographers, Caligula quickly earned a reputation for cruelty and megalomania, enjoying executions (or simple murders) as forms of entertainment 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 appointed as a Roman consul. 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.

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.

The next emperor was Claudius (r. 41 – 54 CE), the one truly competent emperor of the dynasty 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.

According to Roman historians, 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 the city, 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 dynasty (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 state 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. Reputedly, 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.

The outside of the Colosseum in present-day Rome.

Vespasian's older son Titus (r. 79 – 81 CE) had been groomed to follow his father and began as a promising and competent emperor. Unfortunately, almost as soon as he took the throne Mt. Vesuvius, a volcano in southern Italy, erupted followed shortly by another huge fire as well as an epidemic in Rome. Titus struggled to aid victims of all three disasters, but was then struck by fever and died in 81 CE.

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 liked to appear before the senate in the armor of a Roman commander returning from victory. He was moralistic about both sex and the divinity of the emperors, instituting a policy that all oaths had to be sworn to the godhood of the emperor. About the only positive undertaking in his rule was major building projects, both for palaces for himself and public works (including roads and fortifications), and it is also worth noting that the

empire remained under a stable administration during his reign. That noted, Domitian became increasingly paranoid and violent between 89 and 96 CE, until he was finally killed by assassins in the palace.

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. 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 *Romanitas*, undertaking actions not only for their own glorification but for the good of the Roman state. The 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 and used the interest to pay for food for poor children, and he worked closely and successfully 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.

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.

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 193 - 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.

Beyond The Empire

As noted above, by the year 117 CE under Trajan the 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.

The Empire at the height of its territorial expanse under Trajan in 117 CE, including the Latin names of its provinces.

As far as the Romans were concerned, there were only two things beyond those 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.

Persia Under the Parthians

Parthian history is difficult to establish because almost no sources survive besides Roman and Greek accounts of battle *against* the Parthians. What is clear is that the Parthians deliberately built on the achievements of the earlier Achaemenid and Seleucid periods, adopting the title of king of kings, basing their empire (as of the 120s BCE) out of Ctesiphon, a city near Babylon in Mesopotamia, and ruling over a shifting confederation of both the settled peoples of Mesopotamia and Persia itself and of nomadic tribal confederations. Importantly, the Parthians were able to clinch control of major Silk Road trade routes, even receiving the first ever formal diplomatic contact with China in the West in the process, and thus had a solid economic foundation for their military and political control of the region.

Persia had long stood as the only adversary Rome was unable to defeat. In a stark contrast to Roman tactics, Persia relied on cavalry instead of infantry, including both heavy, armored lancers and highly mobile mounted bowmen. Persian forces refused to engage in hand combat with Roman soldiers whenever possible and simply rained arrows on them from horseback instead (using compound bows capable of penetrating Roman armor). Probably the most notorious Roman defeat to the Persians was that of the forces led by Crassus, Julius Caesar's ally in the First Triumvirate. In 53 BCE at a site known as Carrhae, the Persians slew 20,000 Roman troops, took 10,000 prisoners, and killed Crassus to boot. That battle led to a grudging admiration on the part of the Romans, who were forced to acknowledge that they had finally met their match.

The closest Rome came to defeating the Persians was under Trajan when he managed to conquer Armenia and parts of Mesopotamia, but after his death Rome swiftly abandoned those territories. Even as they fought, however, Persia and Rome still traded, and Rome also adopted various Persian technologies and military tactics (for example, Rome adopted irrigation techniques from Persia, and Persia adopted engineering techniques from Rome). Out of necessity, Rome learned to add heavy cavalry units to its legions by the fourth century CE.

Little else is known about Persia during the Parthian period. The Roman sources would have it that the power of the ruling dynasty was limited by both court intrigue and the frequency of invasions from the steppes (the usual problem for the settled dynasties of Mesopotamia and Persia going back to the very origins of civilization). Parthian storytelling was a rich oral tradition, but only fragments and mentions of their epic tales have survived, along with a number of inscribed epitaphs and memorials. Both war and trade came and went between Rome and Persia, with the Euphrates River existing as the usual boundary between the two empires and

the nearby kingdom of Armenia as a buffer state dominated by one power and then the other over time. In 224 CE the last Parthian ruler was overthrown by Ardashir I, the leader of the Sasanian clan, and Persian history moved into a new phase under Sasanian rule (described in the next chapter).

Farther East and North: China and Germania

During the height of the Roman imperial period, China was flourishing under the Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE), the first long-lasting Chinese imperial dynasty that would create the precedent for all of the dynasties to follow. 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 pull it off and return to Rome with a cargo hold full of silk, he would earn 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 created a serious economic liability over the hundreds of years of exchange.

China under the Han and Rome during the height of imperial power lend themselves to comparison. Around a quarter of the world's population lived in the Roman Empire at its height, and about 20% of the global population was in China at the time of the Han; thus, at the time nearly half of the entire population of the human species was part of one or the other of the greatest empires of the era. The Han Dynasty established powerful and extremely long-lasting political precedents, most importantly an official focus on the ideas of the great philosopher Confucius (551 - 479 BCE; he had lived centuries before the Han Dynasty itself) as guiding principles for good governance. Although there are many differences, some Confucian ideas have parallels with the Roman concept of *Romanitas*, particularly in terms of the importance of selfless duty to the country and a celebration of social hierarchy.

Both Chinese and Roman elites saw their respective cultures as being supreme over other, lesser peoples. Foreign cultures were judged by Romans in terms of how closely they resembled, or differed from, the Roman model, and all non-Romans were lumped together as

"barbarians." Chinese political theory held that China was the "middle kingdom" between heaven and earth, with all other states and peoples owing the Chinese emperor (the "son of heaven") fealty. Likewise, foreign peoples were all "barbarians" from the Chinese perspective. By the reign of Tacitus, neither empire was actively expansionist, but that can be explained at least in part by the fact that the Romans and the Chinese felt secure in their supremacy, surrounded as they were by undesirable lands, subservient tributary or puppet kingdoms, or nomadic groups who were (from the Roman and Chinese perspective) little better than bandits.

Naturally, there were numerous major differences between Roman and Chinese politics, beliefs, cultural practices, and social organization. With the benefit of historical hindsight, however, it is striking to reflect on the fact that both empires were genuinely preeminent in their respective world regions and both exercised supreme self confidence. Only the vast distances that separated them prevented Rome and China from entering into what would probably have become a contentious but fascinating relationship.

Germania

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, a 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 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 provided 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 *limes* 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 by the third century CE.

The Army and Assimilation

Rome had established control over its vast territory thanks to the strength of the citizen-soldiers of the Republic. As described in the last chapter, however, the republican military system declined after the Punic Wars as the number of free, economically independent Roman citizens capable of serving in the army diminished. By the first century, most Roman soldiers became career soldiers loyal to a specific general who promised tangible rewards rather than volunteers who served only in a given campaign and then returned home to their farms.

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 in a standard day's march 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.

Wall carvings of a Roman legion in battle, with the characteristic large rectangular shields. A regular legionnaire would typically fight in formation using a short sword after throwing javelins while closing with the enemy.

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.

A key legion that stood apart from the rest of the military was the *Praetorian Guard*, whose major job was defending the emperor himself, followed in priority by the defense of Italy and the city of Rome. The Praetorian Guard started as nine cohorts of 480 men, but later each cohort was grown to 1,000 men. The terms of service in the Praetorian Guard were very attractive: 16 years instead of 25 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.

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 and 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 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 Society

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 numerous libraries and temples, along with 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; 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.

Social Classes

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 poor folk 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 property 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, 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: unfree rural laborers, barely better than slaves themselves.

Law

For the republican period and the first few hundred years of the Empire, Roman jurisprudence was split in the provinces. 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.

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.

Some of the concepts and practices of Roman law were to outlive 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.

Much of Roman law still seems grossly unfair from a contemporary perspective. In particular, laws came to establish a formal divide between the rich and the poor, even in the case of citizens. The rich were protected from torture and painful execution, while the poor were subject to both. Slaves were held in such a subservient position by the law that the testimony of a slave was only allowed in court cases if it *had* been obtained through torture. And, over everything else, the decrees of the emperor were the fundamental basis of law itself; they could not be appealed or contested in the name of some kind of imagined higher authority or written constitution. The emperor was not just about the law, he *was* the law.

Conclusion

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. Trouble was afoot on Rome's borders, however, as Germanic 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. At the same time, what began as a cult born in the Roman territory of Palestine was making significant inroads, especially in the eastern half of the Empire: Christianity.

Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):
Augustus Caesar - Till Niermann
Colosseum - Andreas Ribbefjord
Empire 117 CE - Aregakn
Roman Legion - Ursus

Chapter 10: The Late Empire and Christianity

Rome underwent half a century of crisis in the middle of the third century CE. Beset along its borders and hobbled by constant infighting, the empire was at real risk of collapse for decades. It did not collapse, however, and in fact enjoyed a resurgence of a sort that held the Roman state together until the end of the fifth century (the western half of the Empire “fell” in 476 CE).

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.

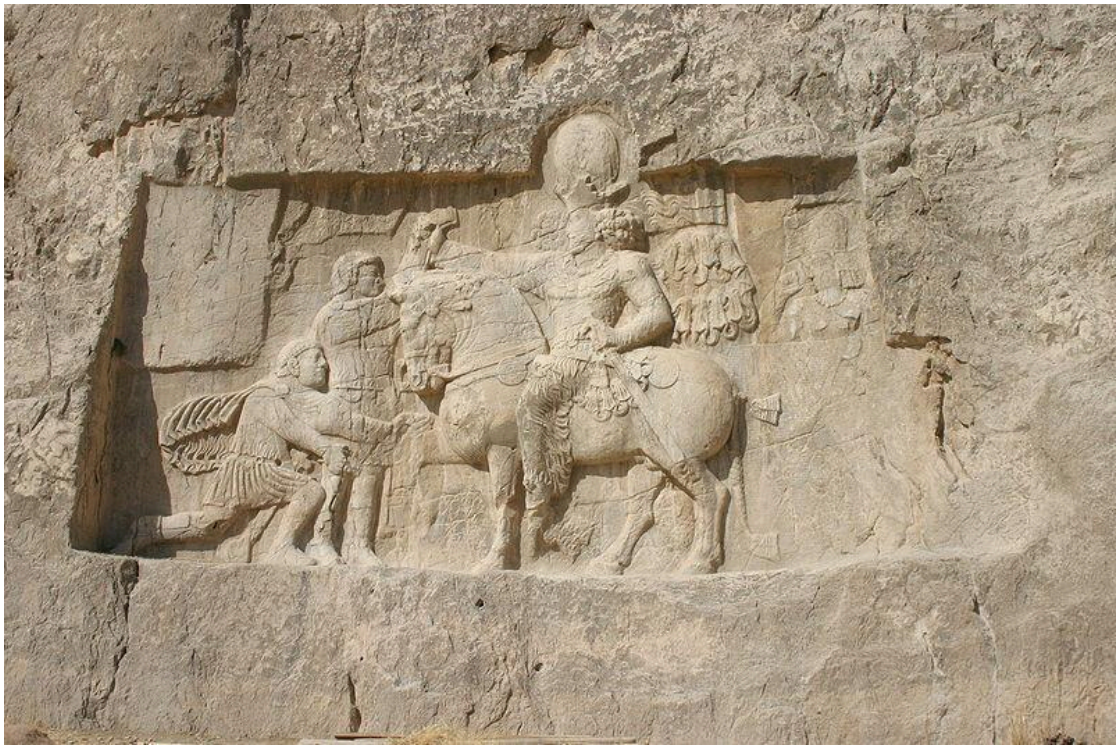
Crisis and Recovery

Major crises affected the Empire from 235 to 284 CE. The basis of these 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 tasks important to the stability of the Empire.

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 BCE, 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, who were all generals, traveled constantly with their armies and made their courts wherever they had to while waging campaigns.



The defeat of the emperor Valerian, kneeling on the left, before the Persian king Shapur I, on horseback.

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. His reach, however, was limited by the speed a messenger could travel on horseback. As a result, 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 three rival “Roman Empires” as of 271 CE.

Sasanian Persia

Persia was not, of course, simply the most powerful and well organized threat to the Roman Empire. It was an ancient and sophisticated civilization of its own, by the Sasanian period already nearly eight centuries old under the Achaemenids, Seleucids, and Parthians in turn. Drawing on an ancient term for the Persian people, the Sasanians identified their empire as *Iranshahr*, land of the Iranians, and from this point on it is appropriate to refer to Persia as Iran (this textbook will continue to use the term “Persia” for clarity’s sake, however). Under Sasanian rule, Persia reached the height of its organization, power, and sophistication during the ancient period.

While the Sasanian kings were obliged to govern both settled peoples and nomads, as had all earlier Persian dynasties, they were more successful in creating a stable *system* of rule, not just relying on their own charismatic authority. For the first time in its history, Zoroastrianism became the official state religion and its holy books were codified, in contrast to the earlier oral traditions of the religion. The state made major efforts to increase both agricultural productivity

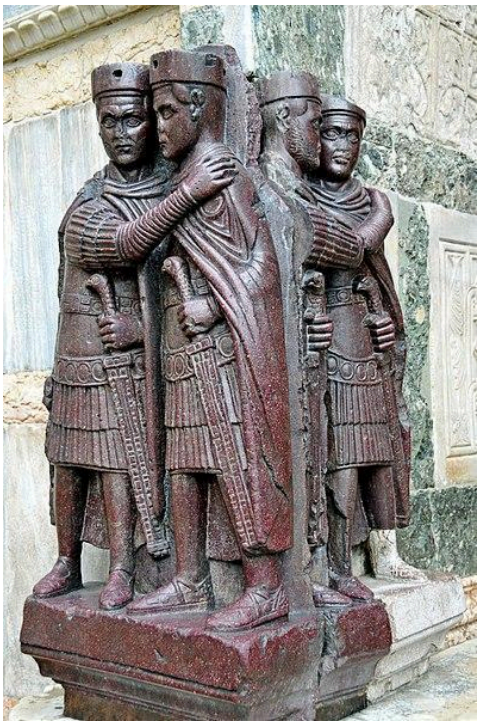
and the amount of land under cultivation, especially in Mesopotamia. The long-distance trade routes that had grown to such importance under Parthian rule continued to expand in scope and volume of trade, as did crafts and manufacturing in Sasanian territory (Sasanian silk textiles were of such high quality that they were even exported to China itself). The Sasanian rulers drew a direct connection between stability, centralization, and prosperity at precisely the same time that the chaos in Rome undermined the Roman commercial economy.

Sasanian centralization built on the (much earlier) Achaemenid tradition. All rulers were members of the Sasanian family line, and governors of the important provinces were also related to the extended family. Authority was understood to emanate from the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda himself, and while a degree of regional autonomy was necessitated by the sheer size and diversity of the empire, regional rulers knew themselves to be inferior to the Sasanian Great King. A powerful institutional relationship between the rulers and the *magi* (Zoroastrian priesthood) emerged in which Sasanian rule was justified by the direct, unequivocal support of the religious power structure. And, of course, the religious power structure received the approval and support of the royal state in the process, up to and including the only campaigns of religious persecution against non-Zoroastrians in Persian history.

One symptom of the success of the Sasanian state is its longevity in the face of nearly constant challenges: it lasted from the Sasanian seizure of power in 220 CE until it was conquered during the Arab invasions in 651 CE. Rome and Persia did not war constantly, but when they did Persia was obligated to devote enormous resources to containing Roman rapacity (the buffer state of Armenia changed hands a bewildering number of times in the process). Invaders from the Central Asian steppes and the mountains of Afghanistan proved an ongoing security threat to the empire as well, as did the Arab clans to the southwest well before they unified under the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Nevertheless, and in spite of some significant Roman victories, the Sasanian state remained stable and the economy prosperous for centuries. Likewise, the Sasanian identification of themselves, Iran, and the legacy of previous Persian dynasties fused together the essential ingredients of Persian historical identity. Subsequent dynasties would look back to the Sasanians as the model to emulate, just as the Sasanians had emulated the Achaemenids.

Diocletian

Turning back to Rome, the period of crisis that had made the eastern empire so vulnerable to Persian invasion ended with the ascension of the emperor Diocletian in 284 CE. 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. 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.



A Roman depiction of the tetrarchy dating from the period of Diocletian’s reign.

Diocletian’s hope was that the tetrarchy would end the cycle of assassinations. The junior emperors were the senior emperors’ respective heirs, destined to assume full power when their seniors stepped down. When that happened, each new senior emperor would then select new juniors. The overall effect was, if it worked, a neat succession of power instead of the constant bloodshed and uncertainty that had haunted Roman politics for half a century; this

system was quite similar to the merit-based selection process used during the rule of the Five Good Emperors.

Diocletian also divided the Empire into smaller provinces so that governors had an easier time with administration. These provinces were grouped into larger units called *dioceses* overseen by an official called a "vicar." When Christianity moved from being an illegal cult to the official religion of the empire (see below), the division of imperial territory into dioceses, overseen by vicars, would be adopted by the Catholic Church. That practice persists all the way to the present in the administration of the Church.

To deal with the threat of both Persia and the Germanic tribes, Diocletian reorganized the Roman army and recruited more soldiers, making it larger than it ever had been. He built new roads for military use to be able to move armies along the borders more efficiently. Borrowing from the Persian practice, he emphasized the use of heavy cavalry to respond quickly to threats. Finally, even though the army itself was now larger, he made individual legions smaller, so that each legion's commander no longer had enough power to take over with a single attack on the current emperor (that worked well enough for Diocletian himself, but it made little difference in the long run).

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, 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.

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. By 312 CE he had succeeded, claiming total control and appointing no co-emperor.

Constantine

Constantine did away with the system of co-emperors (although it would re-emerge after his death), but otherwise he left things as they had been under Diocletian's reforms. The eastern and western halves of the Empire still had separate administrations and he kept up the size and organization of the army. He also took a decisive step toward stabilizing the economy by issuing new currency based on a fixed gold standard. The new coin, the *solidus*, was to be the standard international currency of the western world for 800 years.

Constantine's greatest historical impact, however, was in the realm of religion. He was the first Christian emperor, something that had an enormous effect on the history of Europe and, ultimately, the world. Before his climactic battle in 312 CE to defeat his last rival to the imperial throne, Constantine had a vision that he claimed was sent by the Christian God, promising him victory if he converted to Christianity. There are plenty of theories about a more cynical explanation for his conversion (most revolving around the fact that Constantine went on to plunder the temples of the old Roman gods), but regardless of the fact that he used his conversion to help himself to the wealth of "pagan" temples, he actively supported Christian institutions and empowered Christian officials. Ultimately, his sponsorship of Christianity saw it expand dramatically in his lifetime.

In 330 CE, Constantine founded a new capital city for the entire empire at the site of the ancient Greek town of Byzantium, at the intersection of Europe and Anatolia (he renamed it "Constantine's City," Constantinople, which is today Istanbul). It was at the juncture of the eastern and western halves of the Empire, with all trade routes between Asia and Europe passing through its area of influence. It became the heart of wealth and power in the Empire and a Christian "new beginning" for Roman civilization itself. The city grew to become one of the great cities of late antiquity and the Middle Ages, fed by grain from Egypt and bringing in enormous wealth through trade. Subsequent emperors also built up massive fortifications, walls so strong that it took 1,000 years for an enemy to be able to breach them (namely the Ottoman Turks, who finally conquered the city in 1453 CE).

Religion: Roman Faiths and the birth of Christianity

Rome had always been a hotbed 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. Mithrans believed that Mithras had been a soldier, slain by his enemies, who then rose to enjoy eternal life. 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.

A relief from an altar of Mithras dating from the second or third century CE. In all of the discovered Mithran temples, Mithras is depicted slaying a bull, which somehow (the details of the myth are long lost) helped to create the world.

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 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 bring about 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. The major source of information 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.

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 its 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.

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.

Under the influence of the mystery religions noted above, many early Christians were *Gnostics*, meaning "those who know" in Greek. The Gnostics believed that Jesus had been a secret-teller, almost a magician, who provided clues in his life and teachings about how to achieve union with God. This had more to do with magic than with a recognizable set of religious rituals or customs - for example, many Gnostics believed that it was possible to deduce

a series of incantations from Christ's teachings that included hundreds of secret "names of God." If a Gnostic was to properly chant all of the names of God, he would not only achieve salvation but might enjoy power on earth, as well. The Gnostics had no interest in converting people to their version of Christianity; it was a secret they wanted to keep for themselves.

Still, despite the bewildering diversity of beliefs among early Christians, there were common themes, most importantly the emphasis Jesus Himself had placed on the spiritual needs of the common people, even social outcasts. The most radical aspect of Christianity was its universalism. From Judaism, it inherited the idea that all human beings are spiritually equal. Once the debate about whether non-Jews could become Christians was resolved, it was also potentially open to anyone who heard Christianity's teachings and doctrine. 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.

Early Christian Organization

Before Constantine's conversion, Christianity expanded through missionary work, which succeeded in founding congregations across the Empire but did not seriously disrupt polytheism or the Empire’s religious diversity. Imperial sponsorship changed that because it linked secular power to Christian identity. Following Constantine's conversion, being a Christian became a way to get ahead in the Roman power structure, and over time it became a liability to remain a

polytheist. Thus, whereas early Christianity had been a religion of the common people, Roman elites flocked to convert after Constantine did so in order to stay in the emperor's good graces.

Early Christians had already developed a distinct hierarchy dividing priests from 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 church's organization, especially before "official" Christianity came into being under Constantine.

Almost immediately after Constantine became a Christian, bishops saw their secular power increase dramatically. He allowed bishops to serve as official judges, giving Christians the ability to request a bishop instead of a non-Christian judge in trial. Bishops also moved in administrative circles, representing not just the church but their cities in actions and requests before governors and assemblies. In short, bishops suddenly assumed power on par with that of the traditional Roman nobility, directly linking power within the Christian church hierarchy to power within the Roman political system.

The most important bishop was the archbishop of Rome, who for the first few centuries of Christianity was just one among several major church leaders. Originally, the archbishops of cities like Alexandria and Damascus were of comparable importance to the Roman archbishop, but over time Roman archbishops tried to assert authority over the entire church hierarchy in the west. Their authority, however, was not recognized in much of the eastern part of the Empire, and it should be emphasized that it took more than six *centuries* after Constantine for the Roman archbishop's authority to receive acceptance even in the west. Eventually, however, that authority was at least nominally in place, and the Roman archbishop came to be known as the "pope," meaning simply "father," of the church.

The pope's role as leader of the church emerged for a few reasons. First and foremost, the symbolic power of the city of Rome itself gave added weight to the Roman archbishop's authority. Second, there was a doctrinal tie to the Apostle Peter, who was supposed to have been given the symbolic keys to heaven directly from Christ, which were in turn passed on to his

successor in Rome (the archbishop of Rome) before being crucified. Roman archbishops could thus argue that the Christian church itself was centered in Rome, and that they inherited the spiritual keys to heaven upon taking office - this concept was known as the “Petrine Succession.” By the mid-fifth century CE, the popes were claiming to have total authority over all other bishops, and at least some of those bishops (in Western Europe, at any rate) did look to Rome for guidance. In later centuries, the mere fact that the early popes had claimed that authority, and certain bishops had acknowledged it, was cited as “proof” that the Roman papacy had always been the supreme doctrinal power in the Church as a whole.

Christianity's Relationship with Non-Christian Religions

All across the Empire, massive church buildings were erected by emperors. Right from the beginning of “official” Christianity, Constantine financed construction of huge churches, including the Basilica of St. Peter in what is today the Vatican (at the time it was an obscure graveyard in Rome). The traditional Roman public buildings, including forums, theaters, bathhouses and so on, were often neglected in favor of churches, and many temples to Roman gods and other public buildings were repurposed as churches.

Once it enjoyed the support of the Roman elite, the Christian church began incorporating non-Christian holidays into its own liturgical calendar. December 25 had been the major festival of the sun god Sol Invictus, and early Christians embraced the overlap between that celebration and Christmas, noting that Christ was like the sun as a source of spiritual life. Other Christian holidays like Easter coincided with various fertility festivals that took place in early spring, around the time of the spring equinox. The tradition of saint's days, holidays celebrated in veneration of specific saints, often overlapped with various non-Christian celebrations. Most church leaders saw no theological problem with this practice, arguing that the ultimate goal was the salvation of souls through conversion, so it made perfect sense to use existing holy days and rituals in order to ease the transition for new converts.

That being noted, the incorporation of non-Christian celebrations into the liturgical calendar did not imply that Christians were willing to accept polytheism. Unlike most ancient faiths, Christians could not tolerate the worship of other gods, which they regarded as nothing more than nonexistent delusions that endangered souls. They used the term “pagan,” coming from the Latin *paganus*, which means "country bumpkin" or "redneck," to describe all worshipers of all other gods, even gods that had been worshiped for thousands of years at that point. Christians thus used scorn and contempt to vilify worshipers of other gods - "pagan" indicated

that the non-Christian was both ignorant and foolish, even if he or she was a member of the Roman elite.

It took about a century for the believers in the old Roman gods, especially the conservative aristocracy of Rome, to give up the fight. As money shifted toward building Christian churches and away from temples, so did Christians sometimes lead attacks to desecrate the sites of pagan worship. Riots occasionally broke out as Christian mobs attacked worshipers of other gods, all with the tacit support of the emperors. In 380 CE the Empire was officially declared to be Christian by the emperor Theodosius I and all people of importance had to be, at least nominally, Christians. There was no sustained resistance to Christianity simply because “polytheism” or “paganism” was never a unified system, and it was impossible for people who worshiped a whole range of gods to come together “against” Christianity, especially when it was the official religion of the Empire itself.

A much more difficult battle, one that it some ways was never really won, had to do with “pagan” practices. Everyone in the ancient world, Christians among them, believed in the existence of what is now thought of as “magic” and “spirits.” Christian leaders came to believe that, in general, magic was dangerous, generated by the meddling of the devil, and that the spirits found in nature were almost certainly demons in disguise. There was very little they could do, however, to overturn the entire worldview of their followers, considering that even Christian leaders themselves very much believed that spirits and magic were present in the world, demonic or not. Thus, pagan practices like blessing someone after they sneezed (to keep out an invading spirit or demon), throwing salt over one's shoulder to ward off the devil, and employing all manner of charms to increase luck were to survive to the present.

Orthodoxy and Heresy

Christianity united self-understood "Western Civilization" just as Roman culture had a few centuries earlier. 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 above, 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.

The beginning of orthodoxy was in the second and third centuries, when a group of theologians argued that there were three personas or states of the divine being, referred to as the Holy Trinity. In this view, God could exist simultaneously as three beings: God the Father,

the being that spoke in the Old Testament, God the Son, Jesus himself, and God the Holy Spirit, the presence of God throughout the universe. This concept did not quell controversy at all, though, because it created a distinct stance that people could disagree with - rival groups of Christians came to refer to their enemies as "heretics," from the word "heresy," meaning simply "choice."

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" (note that the word has nothing whatsoever to do with the misguided belief in some kind of ancient Germanic race - the "Aryans" - so important to Nazi ideology almost two thousand years later). 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, 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), 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. There was now the first "party line" in the early history of Christianity: a specific set of beliefs backed by institutional authority.

While 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 to be 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 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.

A depiction of St. Simeon from the sixth century CE. The snake symbolizes the temptation to abandon his holy life, presumably by getting down off of the pillar.

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 development 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. The monks' and nuns' constant scribing also advanced the art of writing; the earliest literatures of many vernacular European languages were products of this manuscript culture.

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 had originally arisen in the Roman context - it lived on *ideologically* and *spiritually.*

The Fall of Rome

The 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 so mighty and, at one time, stable a civilization could so utterly disintegrate. The answers 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 invaders. 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 seems to have less to do with divine intervention than routine defeats and growing threats.

A note on nomenclature: this section will refer to the groups responsible for the destruction of the western empire as "barbarians" when referring to the Roman perception of Germanic and Central Asian groups. The point is not to vilify those groups, but to emphasize the degree to which Romans were both contemptuous towards and, it turns out, vulnerable to them. When possible, it will refer to specific groups by name such as the Goths and the Huns. In addition, it will refer to "Germans" when discussing the specific groups native to Central Europe that played such a key role in the fall of Rome. That is something of a misnomer, however, since there was no kingdom or empire called "Germany" until 1871 CE (i.e. about 1,400 years later). Thus, when using the term "Germans," this section is referring to any of the Germanic cultural groups of the era rather than the citizens or subjects of a unified country.

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 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 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. Occasionally, hundreds of years after they “should have known better,” Roman writers would actually refer to Germans as Celts.

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 Germanic 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 off 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.

The only place worthy of Roman recognition as another "true" civilization was Persia. When Rome was forced to cede territory to Persia in 363 CE after a series of military defeats, Roman writers were aghast because the loss of territory represented “abandoning” it to the other civilization and state. When “barbarians” seized territory, however, it rarely warranted any mention among Roman writers, since it was assumed that the territory could and would be reclaimed whenever it was convenient for Rome.

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 the system of *limes* 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.

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 "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

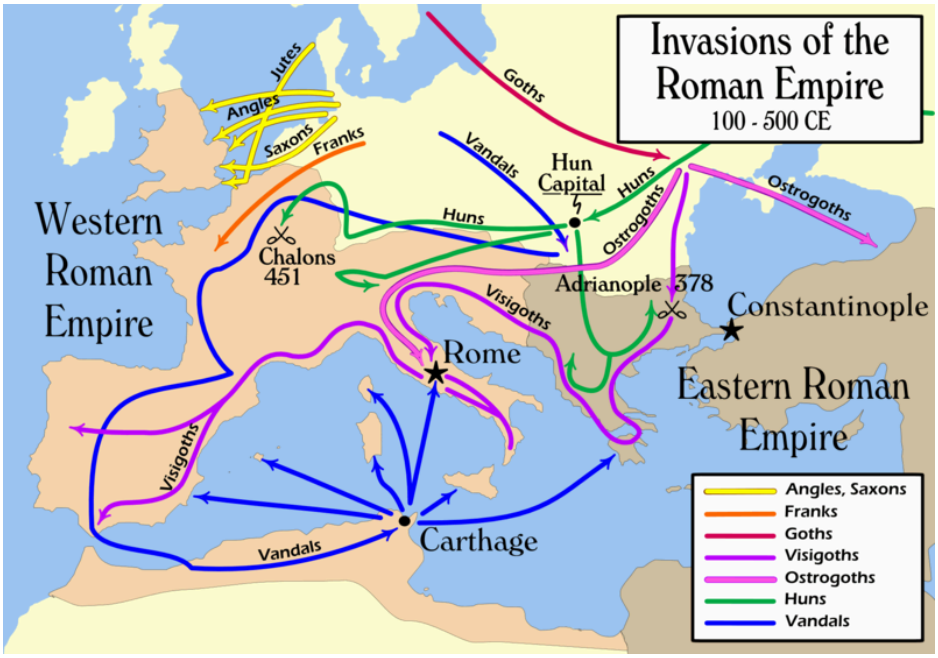
poor military performance that saw Roman power simply disintegrate over the course of less than a century. Even the handful of effective emperors and generals in the west during that period could not staunch the tide of defeat.

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 the Huns drove a large group of Goths from their lands in southern Russia. Those Goths were allowed to settle in the Balkans by the Romans, but were soon extorted by Roman officials, causing the Goths to rise up against Rome in retribution. In 378 the Goths killed the emperor, Valens, and destroyed a Roman army in an open battle. The new emperor made a deal with the Goths, allowing them to serve in the Roman army under their own commanders in return for payment. This proved disastrous for Rome in the long run as the Goths, under their king Alaric, started looting Roman territory in the Balkans, finally marching into Italy itself and sacking Rome in 410 CE. The western Roman government officially moved to the city of Ravenna in the north (which was more defensible) following this sack.

The Gothic attack on Rome was the first time in roughly seven hundred years that the walls of Rome had been breached by non-Romans. The entire Roman world was shocked and horrified that mere barbarians could have overwhelmed Roman armies and struck at the heart of the ancient Empire itself. Rome's impregnability was itself one of the founding stories Romans told themselves; Romans had long vowed that the Celtic sack of 387 BCE would be the last, and yet the Goths had shattered that myth. With the benefit of historical hindsight, we can see the arrival of the Huns as the beginning of a "domino effect" in which various groups were pushed into Roman territory, with the sack of Rome merely one disaster of many for the Empire.



The major invasions of the Roman Empire leading up to its fall. Note, among other things, their astonishing scope: the Goths may have originated in Scandinavia but some of their descendents ended up ruling over Spain, while the Vandals came from somewhere in present-day Germany and conquered Roman North Africa.

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 Germans 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.

Roman armies from the western empire hastily marched back to Italy to fight the Goths, abandoning their traditional defensive posts. 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 the 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 Goths 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. At that point, the Romans came to label this group the *Visigoths* - "western Goths" - to distinguish them from other Gothic tribes still at large in the Empire.

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 it to the legal state in which it already technically existed.

Conclusion: World-Historical Comparisons

It is useful to step back from the exclusive focus on Rome to consider one of the peculiar aspects of its "fall": the fact that the Roman legacy lived on in Byzantium but was very nearly extinguished in the west. The contrast with other major world-historical civilizations is striking. As noted in the discussions of Persia, dynasties came and went over time but Persian culture remained intact. As we will soon see with the discussion of Islam in a following chapter, Persia retained its own distinctive culture despite being conquered during the Arab conquests of the seventh century CE as well. On the other side of Eurasia, the Han Dynasty of China's reign (206 BCE - 220 CE) coincided almost exactly with the greatest period of Roman power. The Han Dynasty eventually fell, but unlike the western empire of Rome, the Han political and cultural legacy was so powerful that every subsequent imperial dynasty of China (until the collapse of the imperial system in the early twentieth century CE) followed its precedent in political culture and practices. In other words, regimes might fall in places like Persia and China, but political legacies lived on.

The Roman political legacy in the west was much weaker. The Roman Church would retain some of Rome's learning and scholarship, Christianity itself thrived in Europe thanks in large part to its establishment in Rome before the "fall," and the cultural memory of Rome's greatness would serve as an inspiration to political leaders up to the present, but no new

kingdom or empire would ever emerge in Europe that would truly follow in Rome's footsteps (despite the pretentions of the "Holy Roman Empire" centered in Germany that began in 800 CE).

Instead, in contrast to the more direct inheritance of political regimes in places like Persia and China, the Roman inheritance in world history is primarily cultural, linguistic, and legal in nature. The Latinate languages of Europe, spoken by over a billion people today, are a Roman legacy, as are the influences of Roman law in many legal systems. In the modern period, the very idea of "checks and balances" in democratic governance was drawn directly from the organization of the Roman Republic. And, as noted in the introduction to this textbook, by building on Greek cultural achievements, Rome played a key role in establishing the very idea of "western civilization," even if that concept should be subject to scrutiny in its contemporary uses.

By 500 CE In Europe west of Greece and the Balkans, the question of Rome's legacy was largely irrelevant to people who were now part of newly-emerging kingdoms ruled by Germanic warlords. Likewise, while interpretations of the collapse of the Roman Empire will continue to differ as long as there are people interested in Roman history, there is no question about the basic fact: 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.

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Chapter 11: Byzantium

As noted in the last chapter, the eastern half of the Roman Empire survived for 1,000 years after the fall of the western one. It carried on most of the traditions of Rome and added many new innovations in architecture, science, religion, and learning. 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," by historians, 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.

Byzantine civilization's origins are to be 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.

East versus West

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 (which was 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."

The Roman Empire after its political division between east and west under Diocletian. From the third through fifth centuries CE, the eastern part of the empire became the true locus of power and wealth, and as of the late fifth century, the entire western half "fell" to barbarian invasions.

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.

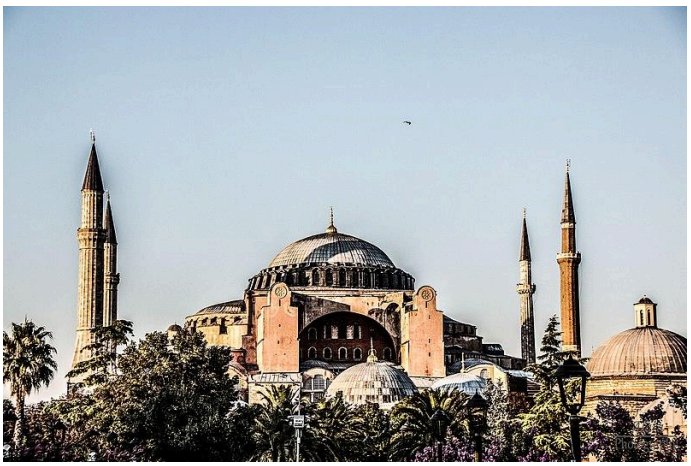
There is another factor to consider, one that is more difficult to pin down than the amount of tax revenue or the existence of Constantinople's walls. Simply put, Roman identity - the degree to which social elites, soldiers, and possibly regular citizens considered themselves "Roman" and remained loyal to the Empire - seems to have been stronger in the east than the west. This might be explained by the reverse of the "vicious cycle" of defeat and vulnerability described in the last chapter regarding the west. In the east, the strength of the capital, the success of the armies, and the allegiance of elites to Rome as an idea encouraged the continued strength of Roman identity. Even if poor farmers still had little to thank the Roman state for in their daily lives, their farms were intact and local leaders were still Roman, not Gothic or Frankish or Vandal.

Lastly, the east enjoyed a simple stroke of good luck in the threats it faced from outside of the borders: the Goths 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 toward Italy. 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 odds 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.

Justinian

The most important early emperor of Byzantium was Justinian, who ruled from 527 to 565. 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.



Modern photograph of the Hagia Sophia, the cathedral built during Justinian's reign in Constantinople. It was converted into a mosque after the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks in 1453 and remains intact to this day.

One aspect of Justinian's focus on Christian purification was the 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 back 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 identify 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.

Theodora, who had come from decidedly humble origins as an entertainer, worked diligently both to free prostitutes from sexual slavery, expand the legal rights and protections of women, and protect children from infanticide. 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. In a famous episode from early in Justinian's reign, Theodora prevented Justinian and his advisors from fleeing from a massive riot against his rule, instead inspiring Justinian to order a counter-attack that may well have saved his reign. While most political marriages in Byzantium, as in practically every pre-modern society, had nothing whatsoever to do with love or even attraction, Theodora and Justinian clearly shared both genuine affection for one another and intellectual kinship.

The best-known surviving depiction of Justinian from a mosaic in Ravenna, Italy. In the mosaic, Justinian is dressed in the "royal purple," a color reserved for the imperial family.

Justinian was 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.

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 itself 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, namely 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 (considered in the following chapter). 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).

Themes and Organization

Heraclius created a new administrative system to try to defend the remaining Byzantine territory: *themes*. He began by seizing lands from wealthy landowners and monasteries in Anatolia, then using the seized land as the basis for new territories from which to recruit soldiers. A theme was a territory, originally about a quarter of the empire in size, organized around military recruitment. A single general appointed directly by the emperor controlled each theme. In turn, only soldiers from that theme would serve in it; this led to local pride in the military prowess of the theme, which helped morale. It was only because of the success of the themes that Byzantine losses were not much worse, considering the strength of their foreign enemies. Eventually, the themes changed further into self-sustaining military systems. Soldiers were granted land to become farmers. From there, they were to fund the purchase of weapons for themselves and their sons. Young men still joined the army, but the system could operate without significant cash-flow from the imperial treasury back in Constantinople.

In essence, the theme system was a return to the ancient manner of military recruitment that had been so successful during the days of the Roman Republic: free citizens who provided their own arms, thereby relieving some of the financial burden on the state. At their height, the themes supported an army of 300,000 men (comparable to the Roman army under Augustus), with the financial burden evenly distributed across the empire. The four themes were divided over the centuries, with villages being watched by a commander and people fighting directly alongside their neighbors and families. Ultimately, it was this system, one that encouraged morale and loyalty, that preserved the empire for many centuries. One straightforward demonstration of the strength of the system was that the perennial enemy of Rome, the Persians, fell against the Arab invasion of the seventh century while the Byzantines did not.

There is an important caveat regarding the consideration of the themes, however. While Byzantium did indeed survive as a state for many centuries while neighboring empires like Persia fell, Byzantium itself arguably ceased to be an “empire” by the middle of the seventh century CE. The 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 those Romans as well as its former Syrian, Jewish, African, Italian, and Spanish subjects.

Imperial Control and Foreign Threats

Justinian's successors tried to hold on to North Africa, Italy, and Spain by establishing territories called exarchates ruled by governors known as exarchs; exarchates were military provinces in which civilian and military control were united. They held out in Spain until the 630s, Africa until the end of the seventh century, and Italy until 751, when a Germanic tribe called the Lombards captured it.

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) used themes-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 addition to the themes system, the empire added heavy cavalry to its roster and, famously, used a substance called Greek Fire in naval warfare; there are very few details, but it appears to have been an oil-based incendiary substance used to attack enemy ships. Finally, the empire made liberal use of spies and agents who infiltrated enemy governments and bribed or assassinated their targets to disrupt, or to start, wars.

A medieval illustration of Greek fire.

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 do 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.

The origins of distinct cultures in what would eventually become Ukraine and Russia emerged out of this interaction, and out of the relationship between Byzantium and the Viking kings of the Slavs in Russia. Originally, the “Rus” were Vikings who ruled small cities in the vast steppes and forests of western Russia and the Ukraine. They were united in about 980 CE by a king, Volodymyr the Great, who conquered all of the rival cities and imposed control from his capital in Kyiv. He converted to Orthodox Christianity and forbade his subjects to continue worshiping Odin, Thor, and the other Norse gods. Just as Boris of Bulgaria had a century earlier, Volodymyr used conversion to legitimize his own rule, by connecting his nascent kingdom to the prestige, power, and glory of ancient Rome embodied in the Byzantine Empire.

The City 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.

Constantinople was impregnable for centuries. Strong walls protected it in the west, and it was surrounded by cliffs leading down to the sea (and its ports) on all of the other sides.

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, or 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 even when individual emperors were incompetent or palace intrigue rendered an emperor unable to focus on governance.

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 had 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 have 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 she be welcomed in Constantinople since she was probably a Monophysite Christian (one of the many Christian heresies, at least from

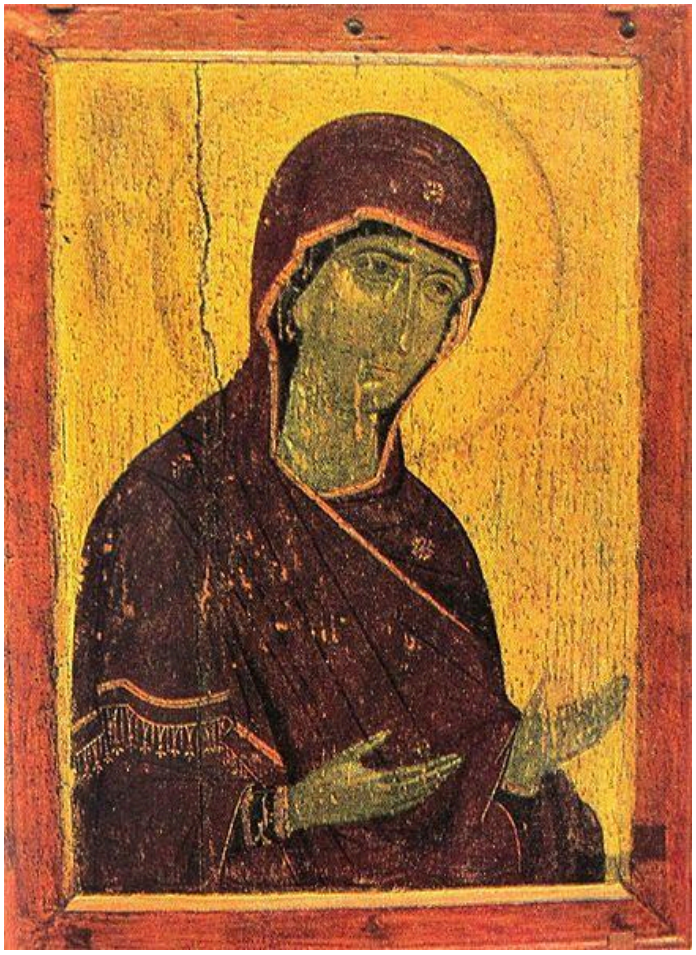
the Orthodox perspective) instead of an Orthodox one. Likewise, men in her family might find themselves enlisted to fight against Byzantium despite their Christian faith, with political allegiances outweighing religious ones.

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.



A fourteenth-century icon of the Virgin Mary.

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 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.

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 were regarded as dangerous. The long-term pattern was thus that, while it preserved ancient learning, Byzantine intellectual culture did not lend itself to progress.

The Late Golden Age and the Final Decline

Byzantium's last period of strength was under a Macedonian dynasty, lasting from 867 – 1056. A murderous leader named Basil I, originating from Macedonia, seized the throne in 867 and initiated a line of ruthless but competent leaders who governed for about two hundred years. Under the Macedonians, Byzantine territorial lines were pushed back to part of Mesopotamia and Armenia in the east and Crete and Cyprus in the Mediterranean. The important effect of these reconquests was trade; once again, Byzantium was at the center of an international trade network stretching across Europe and the Middle East. This vastly enriched Constantinople and its region, leading to a renaissance in building and art. Under the patronage of the Macedonian dynasty, some ancient learning was revived, as scholars tried to find ways to make the work of the ancient Greek masters compatible with Orthodox Christian teachings.

During this late golden age, Constantinople's population rebounded, with food supplies guaranteed by the imperial government. Even the poor lived better lives in Constantinople than did the relatively well-off in Western Europe, much of which was barbaric by comparison. An elite class of administrators occupied a social position somewhat like the ancient Egyptian scribes and were educated in Christianized versions of Greek learning and classics; one scholar named Photius produced an encyclopedia of ancient Greek writings that is the only record of many texts that would have been otherwise permanently lost.

Byzantium in its late golden age - note that Constantinople remained both geographically and politically central.

These happy times for Byzantium ended when the emperor Basil II died in 1025 with no male heir. Simultaneously, a series of bad harvests hit the empire. Byzantium's military success was based on the themes, which were in turn based on the existence of reasonably prosperous independent farmers. Bad harvests saw those farmers vanish, their lands swallowed up by the holdings of wealthy aristocrats. As had happened in the Roman Republic so long ago, the problem was that there were thus no soldiers to recruit, and the armies shrank.

Likewise, the relative calm of the Macedonian period ended with the rise of a new group of invaders from the east: the Seljuk Turks. A powerful group of nomadic raiders from the western part of Central Asia, the Turks had converted to Islam centuries earlier. Despite having no centralized leadership (the Seljuks themselves were just one of the dominant clans with no real authority over most of their fellow raiders), by about the year 1000 CE they began invading both Byzantine territories and those of their fellow Muslims, the Arabs. Over the next few centuries, the Turks grew in power, steadily encroaching on Byzantium's territories in Anatolia.

Fewer independent citizens meant fewer good soldiers, and the armies of Byzantium thus became dominated by foreign mercenaries paid out of the imperial treasury, representing an enormous financial burden for the empire. Another disaster occurred in 1199 when Constantinople itself was invaded and sacked by crusaders (during the Fourth Crusade) from

Western Europe who were supposed to be sailing to fight in the Holy Land. For about fifty years, Byzantium (already reduced to a fraction of its former size) was ruled by a Catholic king. Even when the king was deposed and a Greek dynasty restored, nothing could be done to recapture lost territory. The Muslim empires that surrounded Byzantium occupied its territory until Constantinople finally fell in 1453 to the Ottoman Turks. With it, the last vestige of Roman civilization, founded over two thousand years earlier on the banks of the Tiber River in Italy, ceased to exist as a political reality.

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Chapter 12: Islam and The Caliphates

The history of Islam is an integral part of the history of Western Civilization. Consider the following:

1. Islam was born in the heartland of Western Civilization: the Middle East.
2. Islam is a religion of precisely the same religious tradition as Judaism and Christianity. In Islam, the prophets that came before Muhammad, from Abraham and Moses to Jesus, are venerated as genuine messengers of God. The distinction is that, for Muslims, Muhammad was the *last* prophet, bringing the "definitive version" of God's message to humanity. The word *Allah* simply means “God” in Arabic - He is the same God worshiped by Jews and Christians.
3. The Islamic empires were the most advanced in the world, alongside China, during the European Middle Ages. During that period, they created and preserved all important scholarship worthy of the name. As noted in the previous chapter, it was Arab scholarship that preserved ancient Greek learning, and Arab scholars were responsible for numerous technological and scientific discoveries as well.
4. The Islamic empires were often the enemies of various Christian ones. They were certainly the target of the European crusades. But, at the same time, the Christian kingdoms were often the enemies of one another as well. Likewise, different Islamic states were often in conflict. The political, and military, history of medieval Europe and the Middle East is one of different political entities both warring and trading; religion was certainly a major factor, but there are many cases where it was secondary to more prosaic economic or political concerns.
5. The Islamic states were the active trading partners and sometimes allies of their neighbors from India and Central Asia to Africa and Europe. Islam's initial spread was due to an enormous, unprecedented military campaign, but after that campaign ended the resulting empires and kingdoms entered into a more familiar economic and diplomatic relationship with their respective neighbors.

Thus, 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 conceit 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 the 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.

Origins of Islam

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 in clans, with each clan claiming descent from common ancestors and governing through meetings of the patriarchs of the leading families. 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.

Arabia in 600 CE. The names in black on the map are the clan groups at the time. Mecca is spelled "Makkah," with Yathrib to its north.

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.

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, marrying a wealthy and intelligent widow named Khadija (who was originally his employer) and traveling with caravans. He was particularly well known as a fair and perceptive arbitrator of disputes among other Arab clans 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 the 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 worshipers.

Muhammad did not meet with much success in Mecca in 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 real 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 an ongoing dispute 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 would regularly gather 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. 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 clans under his leadership and most willingly converted to Islam.

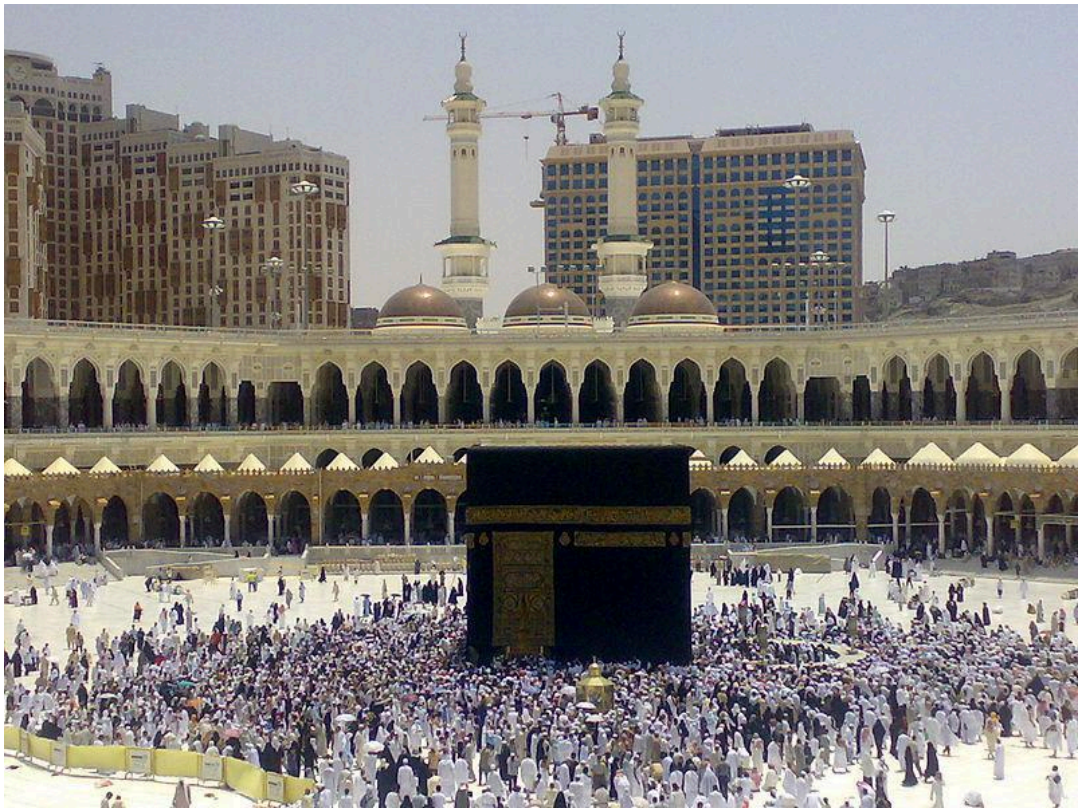
Islam

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 that 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 turn, a 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.



The Ka'aba (contemporary photograph).

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 Political History of the Arabs After Muhammad

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.

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 clans as much as to expand the faith; both Abu Bakur and Umar were forced to suppress revolts of the clans, and Umar hit upon the idea of raiding Persia and Byzantium to keep the them loyal. For the first time in history, the Arabs embarked on a sustained campaign of conquest rather than serving others as mercenaries.

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.

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 Christianity their new subjects happened to subscribe to. 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.

The Umayyad Caliphate and the Shia

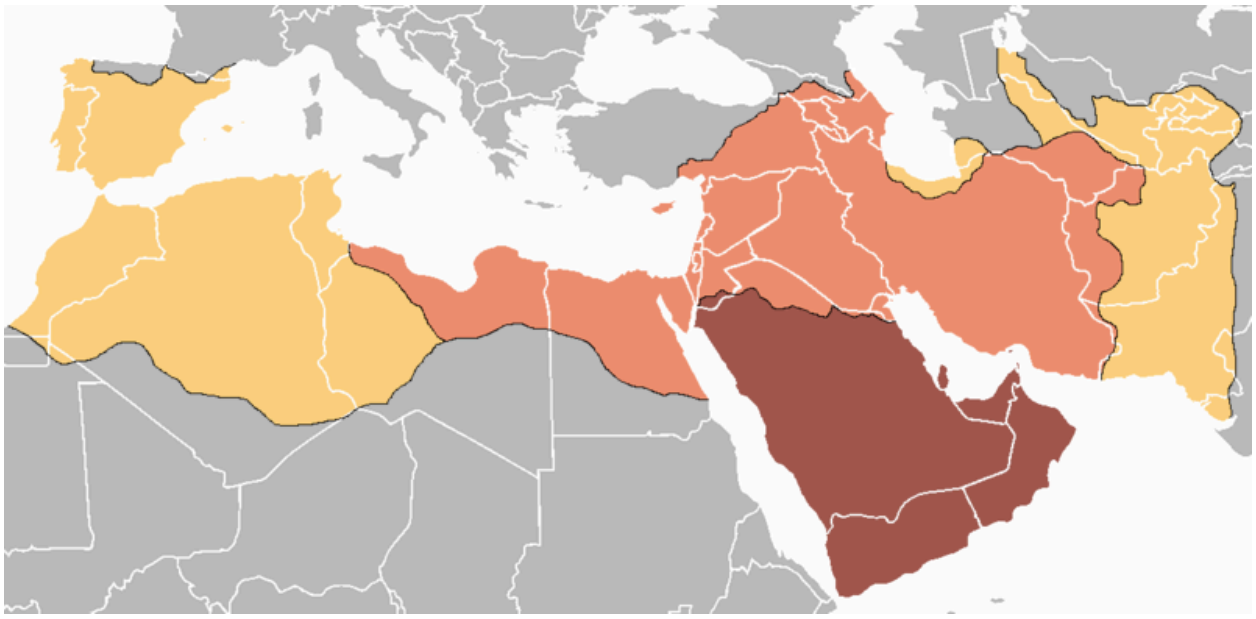
The second caliph, Umar, was murdered by a slave in 644 and the Muslim leaders had to pick the next caliph. They chose an early convert and companion of Muhammad, Uthman. Many members of the Muslim community, however, supported Muhammad's cousin and son in-law Ali, claiming he should be the head of the 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. 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 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 resolving 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 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 732 by a Frankish army led by the Frankish lord Charles Martel at the Battle of Poitiers, which 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.



The Arab Conquests, stretching from Persia in the east to Morocco and Spain in the west. The colors correspond to chronology: Arabia itself was united under Muhammad and his immediate successors, the regions in orange under the first four caliphs, and the regions in yellow under the Umayyads.

In Africa, Umayyad armies also attacked Nubia, still one of the richest kingdoms in the region, but were unable to defeat it. For the first time, the caliphate signed a peace treaty with a non-Muslim state. This was an important precedent because it established the idea that a Muslim state could acknowledge the political legitimacy of a non-Muslim one. Afterwards, the Umayyad Caliphate came to deal with non-Muslim powers primarily in terms of normal diplomacy rather than through the lens of holy war.

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, such as 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 linguistic 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 linguistic. Unlike the Greek case during the Hellenistic period, Arabic was to replace the vernacular of the lands 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 linguistic uniformity was a huge benefit to trade, and to cultural and intellectual exchange, because one could travel from Spain to India and speak a single language.

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 may have disrupted the traditional oral transmission of literatures by the peoples of their empire, but the mosques fostered a blossoming manuscript culture that would overlap with the oral one, laying the groundwork for what would become a remarkably literate society

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

One of the noteworthy aspects of the Arab conquests is the complex role of conversion. The Koran specifically forbids forcible conversion, although it bans the worship of idols - Muslim religious leaders concluded that monotheists (most obviously Jews and Christians) were to be tolerated as a result. The Koran 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 and the Golden Age of Islamic Thought

The Umayyads fell from power in 750 because of a revolutionary uprising against their rule led by the Abbasids, a clan descended from Muhammad's uncle. 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, 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.

The Golden Age of Islamic Thought and the Role of Central Asia

The Abbasid period represents the one of the greatest periods of intellectual productivity in the medieval period, often described as a golden age of Islamic scholarship. To be clear, this "Islamic" golden age of scholarship was not based on Islam itself in so many words, although it was stimulated by the diversity of the encounter between the Arabic, Mesopotamian, Persian, and Turkic cultures. Instead, it arose from the pre-existing intellectual culture of Persia and Central Asia. The latter region is probably the most surprising to modern students of history, because Central Asia (most of which is made up of the "-stans" in the contemporary world: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, etc.) faded from its position of intellectual and economic prominence following the impact of the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century and never recovered. Nevertheless, from the ancient period through the early medieval, approximately 1500 BCE - 1200 CE, Central Asia was one of the most intellectually, technically, and economically significant regions on the planet.

Pre-Islamic Central Asia already boasted numerous large cities (many of which were well over 50,000 people), a thriving culture of literacy and bookmaking, and a history of important inventions, including both the most sophisticated irrigation systems in the world and, among other things, the best-quality paper, invented in c. 200 CE out of cotton fibers and proving far more durable than both its Chinese equivalent as well as western papyrus and parchment. The Arab Conquests dealt significant damage, including the destruction of irreplaceable libraries and other cultural treasures, but in their aftermath the region quickly recovered. In fact, Central Asia already had such an established history of self-rule (not to mention military power) that the Umayyad Caliphate never succeeded in truly controlling it, and the Abbasid Caliphate was as much Central Asian as Arab: centered in the new city of Baghdad in Mesopotamia, dependent on Persian officials and Turkic soldiers, and boasting a truly cosmopolitan culture that welcomed not just different ethnicities, but a wide range of cultures and religions (Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, and Buddhists were all established members of Abbasid society).

More to the point, it was during the period after the Arab Conquests that Central Asia's true intellectual golden age took place, from c. 700 - 1100 CE. To cite just a few of the most noteworthy individuals and achievements, the scholar Khwarizmi (c. 780 - 850) used astronomy and mathematics to establish the lengths of degrees of latitude, determined that planets circle the sun in elliptical orbits, was the first to use radicals in equations and, subsequently, to invent algebra. The very word "algorithm" is a corrupted form of his name, and the word "algebra" is

based on the title of his treatise on the subject: al-jabr, meaning “joining.” Khwarizmi was the head of the Abbasid Caliphate’s official library and circle of elite scholars, the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, and his works were distributed and translated across not just the Islamic world, but throughout Europe.

Scholars gathered in the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, the official “think tank” of the Abbasid Caliphate in its glory days in the eighth and ninth centuries CE

Two other polymaths of Khwarizmi’s stature lived over a century later: Ibn Sina (980 - 1037), known as “Avicenna” in European languages, and Al-Biruni (c. 973 - 1040). Like Khwarizmi, both were Persians, and like him, both enjoyed the patronage of rulers and other political elites. Ibn-Sina wrote over 400 books on subjects as varied as medicine, philosophy, geography, and physics Among other accomplishments, Ibn Sina was perhaps the first person to formally analyze the links between mental and physical health. Al-Biruni, who wrote over 180 books, was also astonishingly diverse in his areas of expertise, writing on physics, astronomy, history, and most importantly, linguistics and anthropology. Fluent in at least seven languages, he was one of the earliest practitioners of comparative linguistics as a discipline, and he also

wrote works on comparative anthropology (based on his own deep knowledge of various Indian, Turkic, Persian, and Arabic cultures). While he was at it, he used astronomy to posit that a large landmass almost certainly existed between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

At the heart of much of the intellectual productivity of the Central Asian intellectual golden age was a combination of the study of ancient philosophy with new ideas. Almost all of the major thinkers of the era were deeply knowledgeable about ancient Greek philosophy, especially the work of Aristotle, who was treated with tremendous respect and reverence for the range and depth of his accomplishments. At the same time, most of the major thinkers of the time were willing to break from Aristotle's ideas when the evidence seemed to contradict them. Ibn Sina and al-Biruni carried out a famous exchange of letters around 1000 CE in which they vehemently disagreed about Aristotle's views of the heavens and physics - Ibn Sina defended Aristotle's ideas, while al-Biruni undermined them. Likewise, while Ibn Sina believed in ideas that originated with ancient Greek medicine, he went well beyond them in his own medical theories and techniques.

To mention Khwarizmi, Ibn Sina, and Al-Biruni is to just scratch the surface of the incredible diversity and intellectual productivity of Central Asia's intellectual golden age. Its accomplishments were not just theoretical, but practical: the science of optics was invented during the golden age, leading eventually to telescopes and microscopes. Chemistry made major advances as well, including the most significant improvements to distillation between the ancient and modern periods. Navigational knowledge and technology, most notably the astrolabe (a device for measuring latitude), were increased and improved. One prominent scholar on the subject, the historian Kenneth Star, notes that the Central Asian golden age represented the greatest scientific and scholarly "moment" in history, at least west of China, between ancient Greece and the European Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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 at the time, with the concomitant advantages in technological progress and commercial prosperity.

Building on their longstanding tradition of manuscript culture, this literate populace became voracious readers who demanded a prolific literary marketplace. In response, writers

adapted traditional oral stories into great epics, invented the philosophical novel, and created a remarkable literary tradition that eventually produced world-famous and influential works such as the poetry of Rumi and the fantastical *Book of One Thousand and One Nights*. The long-standing tradition of women's poetry in the region also flourished during this golden age of Islamic literature. These women came to poetry from vastly different perspectives; some were taught to write in order to serve as enslaved courtesans, while others wrote in pursuit of greater spirituality. Both groups of women, however, created astonishingly expressive and popular poetry. Arabic-speaking women's poetry from this period ranged from love poems to satirical mocking of their husbands to Sufi mysticism to court songs. In this regard, the women of the Abbasid period stand out from their contemporary peers by firmly establishing their poetry as a distinct form.

The Decline of the Abbasids

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 Turkic nomads, who took control of secular power while keeping the Caliph alive as a figurehead. In 1055, a different Turkic 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.

Europe

Two parts of Europe came under Arab rule: Spain and Sicily. Spain was the last of the large territories to be conquered during the initial Arab conquests, and Sicily was eventually conquered during the Abbasid period. In both areas, the rulers, Arab and North African immigrants, and new converts to Islam lived alongside those who remained Christian or Jewish. During the Abbasid period in particular, Spain and Sicily were important as bridges between the Islamic and Christian worlds, where all faiths and peoples were tolerated. The city of Cordoba in Spain was a glorious metrocity-state, larger and more prosperous than any in Europe and any but Baghdad in the Arab world itself - it had a population of 100,000, paved streets, street lamps, and even indoor plumbing in the houses of the wealthy. All of the Arabic learning noted above made its way to Europe primarily through contact between people in Spain and Sicily.

The greatest period of contrast between the eastern lands of Byzantium and the caliphates, on the one hand, and most of Europe, on the other, was between the eighth and eleventh centuries. During that period, there were no cities in Europe with populations of over 15,000. The goods produced there, not to mention the quality of scholarship, were of abysmal quality compared to their Arab (or Byzantine) equivalents, and Christian Europe thus imported numerous goods from the Arab world, often through Spain and Sicily. Europe was largely a barter economy while the Muslim world was a currency-based market economy, with Shariah law providing a sophisticated legal framework for business transactions. Especially as Byzantium declined, the Muslim kingdoms stood at the forefront of scholarship, commerce, and military power.

Conclusion

As should be clear, the civilizations of the Middle East and North Africa were transformed by Islam, and the changes that Islam's spread brought with it were as permanent as were the results of the Christianization of the Roman Empire earlier. The geographical contours of these two faiths would remain largely in place up to the present, while the shared civilization that brought them into being continued to change.

Image Citations (Creative Commons):

Map of Arabia - Murraytheb

The Kaaba - المصري الأصيل

The Arab Conquests - Brian Szymanski

House of Wisdom - Zereshk

Chapter 13: Early 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 Roman 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 would persist 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 Roman Church. In turn, a note on nomenclature: for the sake of clarity, this chapter will use the term “Roman” instead of “Catholic” to describe the western Church based in Rome during this period, because both the western Roman and Eastern Orthodox Churches claimed to be equally “catholic”: universal. Another appropriate term is “Latin Church,” since the official language of the liturgy was Latin. Whatever term is used, as an institution, the church 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 clergy 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 Roman Christian in the west and an Orthodox Christian in the east.

The Papacy

The Roman 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 off 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.

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. Although the liturgy of the church continued to be transmitted in Latin, Bede and his followers gained a reputation for respecting the vernacular tongue. The oldest extant work of English poetry, 'Caedmon's Hymn', was in fact recorded and preserved by Bede himself in his book, *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. This hymn, like many other examples of medieval period English literature, combines the basic precepts of Christianity with the traditional poetic forms and themes beloved in local Anglo-Saxon warrior culture, demonstrating one way the blending of Christianity with pagan tradition incorporated local aesthetic and aspirational ideals. 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 Roman 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 much 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, 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 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.

Medieval Politics

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 (or even protection racket). 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.

Depiction of a feudal pledge of fealty from Harold Godwinson, at the time a powerful Anglo-Saxon noble and later the king of England, to William of Normandy, who would go on to defeat Harold and replace him as king of England. William claimed that Harold had pledged fealty to him, which justified his invasion (while Harold denied ever having done so).

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.

Anglo-Saxon England

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” it outside of southern England. For the next three hundred years, Germanic invaders called the Anglo-Saxons (from whom we get the name “England” itself - it means “land of the Angles”) from the areas around present-day northern Germany and Denmark invaded, raided, and settled in 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.

Starting in the late eighth century, the Anglo-Saxons suffered waves of Viking raids 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 the Anglo-Saxon language (which is commonly called Old English). The best-preserved example of this literature is the epic poem *Beowulf*, which melds traditional Anglo-Saxon warrior virtues with Christian philosophy, providing further evidence of the type of cultural blend which continued after the time of Bede (c. 672-735 CE). The relative peace of Anglo-Saxon England proved vulnerable to invasion, however, and in 1066 William the Conqueror, a Viking-descended king from Normandy in northern France, invaded, defeated the Anglo-Saxon king, and instituted Norman rule.

France

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.

In 500 CE Clovis and a few thousand of his most elite warriors converted to Roman Christianity, less out of a heartfelt sense of piety than for practical reasons: he planned to attack the Visigoths of Spain, Arian Christians who ruled over Latin Christian former Romans. By converting to Roman 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 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. 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 Pepin 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.

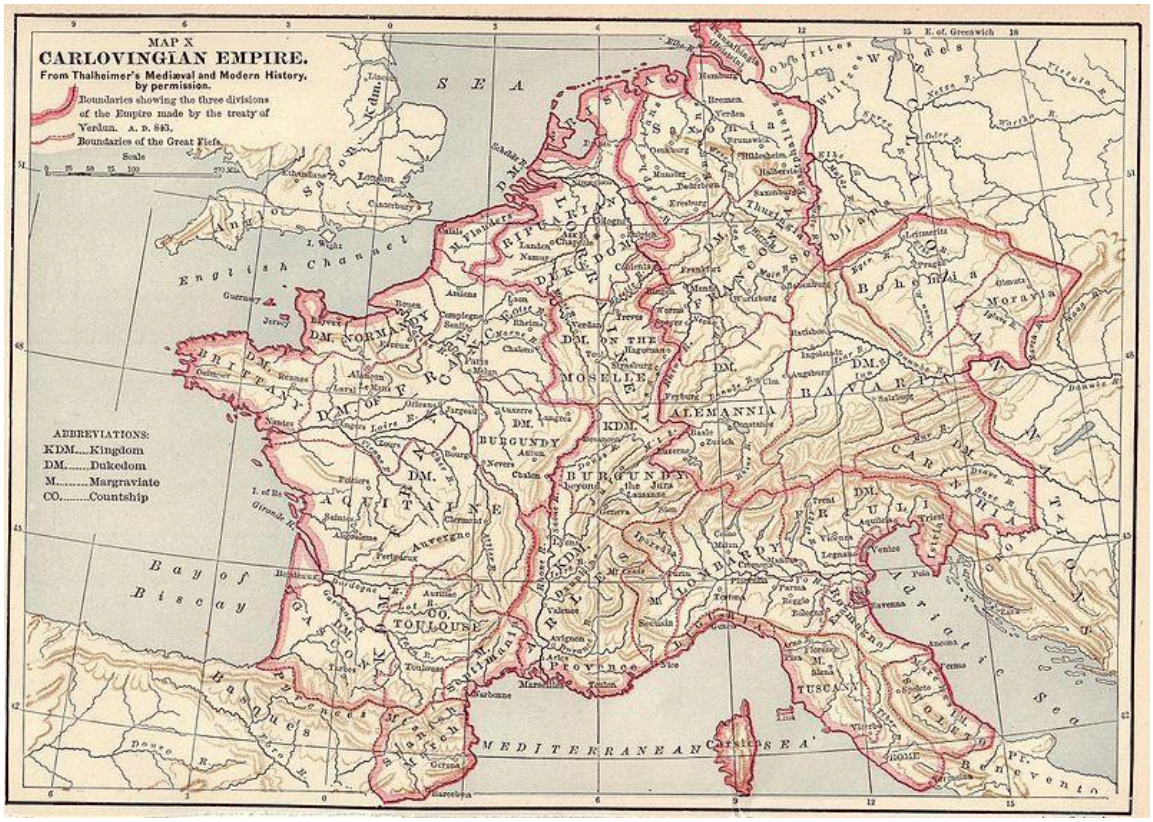
Only the first few kings in the Merovingian dynasty of the Franks were particularly smart or capable. When Pepin seized control in 750 CE, he was merely assuming the legal status that his clan had already controlled behind the scenes for years. The problem facing the Franks was that Frankish tradition 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 Pepin 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).

Charlemagne (r. 768 – 814) was one of the most important kings in medieval European history. Charlemagne waged constant wars during his long reign (lasting over 40 years) 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 Pepin's takeover): a kingship could pass to a different clan or

even kingdom itself depending on the political circumstances. Charlemagne was up to something entirely new, intending to create an empire of various different Germanic groups, with himself (and by extension, the Franks) ruling over all of them.

In 800, Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by the pope, Leo III. 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.



Charlemagne's empire at its height stretched from northern Spain to Bohemia (the present-day Czech Republic). His major areas of conquest were in Central Europe, forming the earliest iteration of "Germany" as a state.

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, and the form of "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 clergy 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 Roman 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 is that Charlemagne instituted 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.

Charlemagne's funding of the *scriptorium*, which was devoted to the reproduction of manuscript books in this new style of manuscript, is responsible for the preservation of many classical and Christian works which would otherwise have been lost. The Carolingians' ability to rapidly reproduce manuscripts was also useful as an early type of propaganda. Court historians

recorded the king's achievements in their annals, in particular highlighting his military victories. These annals created a vision of what the kingdom represented, focusing on the most valued aspects of royalty, and making Charlemagne a legendary figure in his own lifetime.

Ultimately, the Carolingian dynasty lasted for an even shorter period than had the Merovingian. 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. The origin of "Germany" (not politically united until 1871, over a thousand years after Charlemagne's lifetime) was East Francia, the kingdom that Charlemagne's son Louis the Pious left to one of his sons. A different line, not directly descended from the Carolingians, eventually ended up in power in East Francia. Its king, Otto I, was crowned emperor in 962 by the Pope, thereby cementing the idea of the Holy Roman Empire even after Charlemagne's bloodline no longer ruled it.

Invaders

Post-Carolingian Europe was plunged into a period of disorder and violence that lasted until at least 1100 CE. Even though the specific invaders mentioned below had settled down by about 1000 CE, the overall state of lawlessness and violence lasted for centuries. In addition to attacks by groups like the Vikings, the major political problem of the Middle Ages was that the whole feudal system was one based on violence: lesser lords often had no livelihood outside of war, and they pressured their own lords to initiate raids on nearby lands. "Knights" were often little better than thugs who had the distinction of a minor noble title and the ability to afford weapons and armor. Likewise, one of the legacies of feudal law was the importance placed on honor and retribution; any insult or slight could initiate reprisals or even plunge a whole kingdom into civil war.

Meanwhile, a series of invasions began in the post-Carolingian era. Arab invaders called Saracens attacked southern European lands, even conquering Sicily in the ninth century, while a new group of steppe raiders, the Magyars, swept across Europe in the tenth century, eventually seizing land and settling in present-day Hungary. In Northern Europe, the most significant invaders of the period, however, were the Vikings.

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. Scandinavians 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.

The Oseberg ship, a surviving Viking longship discovered in a Viking burial mound in Norway and preserved in a dedicated museum in Oslo. Longships allowed the Vikings unprecedented mobility, being capable of both oceanic voyages and of sailing up rivers to raid inland communities.

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 Kyiv,

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.

Eleventh-century illustration of the Varangian Guard, the personal bodyguards of the Byzantine emperors starting in the tenth century. The guard was composed of warriors from the Rus, the Vikings who conquered and then settled in present-day Russia and Ukraine.

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 Tryggvason, 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.

Conclusion

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 would have a long legacy in forming the basis of later political structures, and the Roman Church would be the essential European intellectual and spiritual institution for centuries to come. Early medieval Europe was defined by shared cultural traits in both oral and manuscript transmission; above all having to do with religion, but also preserving the earliest epic stories and poems in a number of languages. 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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