Western Civilization: A Concise History
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The Creation of This Book

This textbook was created as part of the Interactive OER for Dual Enrollment project, facilitated by LOUIS: The Louisiana Library Network and funded by a $2 million Open Textbooks Pilot Program grant from the Department of Education.

This project supports the extension of access to high-quality post-secondary opportunities to high school students across Louisiana and beyond by creating materials that can be adopted for dual enrollment environments. Dual enrollment is the opportunity for a student to be enrolled in high school and college at the same time.

The cohort-developed OER course materials are released under a license that permits their free use, reuse, modification and sharing with others. This includes a corresponding course available in MoodleNet and Canvas Commons that can be imported to other Learning Management System platforms. For access/questions, contact Affordable Learning Louisiana.

If you are adopting this textbook, we would be glad to know of your use via this brief survey.

Review Statement

This textbook and its accompanying course materials went through at least two review processes:

• Peer reviewers, coordinated by Jared Eusea, River Parish Community College, used an online course development standard rubric for assessing the quality and content of each course to ensure that the courses developed through Interactive OER for Dual Enrollment support online learners in that environment. The evaluation framework reflects a commitment to accessibility and usability for all learners.
  ◦ Reviewers
    ▪ Pamela Simek
    ▪ Ginny Bradley
    ▪ Tarrah Davis

• The Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education (ISKME) collaborated with LOUIS to review course materials and ensure their appropriateness for dual enrollment audiences. Review criteria were drawn from factors that apply across dual enrollment courses and subject areas, such as determining appropriate reading levels, assessing the fit of topics and examples for high school
DE students; applying high-level principles for quality curriculum design, including designing for accessibility, appropriate student knowledge checks, and effective scaffolding of student tasks and prior knowledge requirements, addressing adaptability and open educational practices, and principles related to inclusion and representational social justice.

- Reviewers
  - Christy Garrison-Harrison
  - Lisa Namikas
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**

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

- **Cities:** Note that in English, the very word “civilization” is closely related to the word “civic,” meaning “having to do with cities” as in “civic government” or “civic duty.” Cities were essential to sophisticated human groups because they allowed specialization: you could have some people concentrate all of their time and energy on tasks like art, building, religious worship, or warfare, not just on farming.

- **Bureaucracy:** While it seems like a prosaic subject, bureaucracy was and remains the most effective way to organize large groups of people. Civilizations that developed large and efficient bureaucracies grew larger and lasted longer than those that neglected bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is, essentially, the substitution of rules in place of individual human decisions. That process, while often frustrating to
individuals caught up in it, does have the effect of creating a more efficient set of processes than can be achieved through arbitrary decision-making. Historically, bureaucracy was one of the most important “technologies” that early civilizations developed.

- **Large-scale warfare**: Even before large cities existed, the first towns were built with fortifications to stave off attackers. It is very likely that the first kings were war leaders allied with priests.

- **Mathematics**: Without math, there cannot be advanced engineering, and without engineering, there cannot be irrigation, walls, or large buildings. The ancient Mesopotamians were the first people in the world to develop advanced mathematics in large part because they were also the most sophisticated engineers of the ancient world.

- **Astronomy**: Just as math is necessary for engineering, astronomy is necessary for a sophisticated calendar. The ancient Mesopotamians began the process of systematically recording the changing positions of the stars and other heavenly bodies because they needed to be able to track when to plant crops, when to harvest, and when religious rituals had to be carried out. Among other things, the Mesopotamians were the first to discover the 365 (and a quarter) days of the year and set those days into a fixed calendar.

- **Empires**: An empire is a political unit comprising many different “peoples,” whether “people” is defined linguistically, religiously, or ethnically. The Mesopotamians were the first to conquer and rule over many different cities and “peoples” at once.

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

**Greece and Rome**

Even if we do not start with the Greeks, we do need to acknowledge their importance. Alexander the Great was one of the most famous and important military leaders in history, a man who started conquering “the world” when he was eighteen years old. When he died, his empire fell apart, in part because he did not say which of his generals was to take over after his death. Nevertheless, the empires he left behind were united in important ways, using Greek as one of their languages, employing Greek architecture in their buildings, putting on plays in the Greek style, and of course, trading with one another. This period in history was called the Hellenistic Age. The people who were part of that age were European, Middle Eastern, and North African, people who worshiped both Greek gods and the gods of their own regions, spoke 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 incredible engineering, the hard work of Roman citizens and Roman subjects, and the massive use of slave labor, they built remarkable buildings and created infrastructure like roads and aqueducts that survive to the present day.

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

The Romans were largely successful at assimilating the people they conquered. They united their provinces with the Latin language, which is the ancestor of all of the major languages spoken in Southern Europe today (French, Italian, Spanish, Romanian, etc.), Roman law, which is the ancestor of most forms of law still in use today in Europe, and the Roman form of government. 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 worshipped the correct God, but in the wrong way, including Jews and Muslims, but also Christians who deviated from official orthodoxy) or pagans (those who worshipped false gods) who should either convert or be exterminated. For instance, despite the fact that Muslims and Jews worshiped the same God and shared much of the same sacred literature, medieval Europeans had absolutely no qualms about invading Muslim lands and committing horrific atrocities in the name of their religion. Likewise, medieval anti-Semitism (prejudice and hatred directed against Jews) eventually drove many Jews from Europe itself to take shelter in the kingdoms and empires of the Middle East and North Africa. Historically it was much safer and more comfortable for Jews to live in places like the predominantly Muslim 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. Perhaps most importantly, Islamic kingdoms and empires were part of the networks of trade, scholarship, and exchange that linked together the entire greater Mediterranean region. Thus, despite the fervor of European crusaders, it would be profoundly misleading to separate Islamic states and cultures from the rest of Western Civilization.

The Renaissance and European Expansion

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

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

In the process of reviving the ideas of the Greeks and Romans, Renaissance thinkers created a new program of education: “humanist” education. Celebrating the inherent goodness and potentialities of humankind, humanistic education saw in the study of classical literature a source of inspiration for not just knowledge but 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 humanists traced back to the Greeks, humanistic education ultimately created a curriculum meant to create well-rounded, virtuous individuals. That program of education remained intact into the twentieth century, with the study of the classics remaining a hallmark of elite education until it began to be displaced by the more specialized disciplinary studies of the modern university system that was born near the end of the nineteenth century.

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

Thanks largely to the European conquest of the Americas and the exploitation of 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 conquests 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 sophisticated 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 descendants 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 South Asia (i.e., 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.

That conceit 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 55 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, 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, made a hard and fast 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 invariably 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
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 Native 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 Approach of This Book (with Caveats)

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

The purpose of this approach is not to disparage the genuine breakthroughs, accomplishments, and forms of “progress” that did originate in “the West.” Technologies as diverse and important as the steam engine and antibiotics originated in the West. Major intellectual and ideological movements calling for religious toleration, equality before the law, and feminism all came into being in the West. For better and for worse, the West was also the point of origin of true globalization (starting with the European contact with the Americas, as noted above). It would be as misleading to dismiss the history of Western Civilization as unimportant as it is to claim that only the history of Western Civilization is important.

Thus, this textbook attempts to present a balanced account of major events that occurred in the West over approximately the last 10,000 years. “Balance” is in the eye of the reader, however, so the account will not be satisfactory to many. The purpose of this introduction is to make explicit the background and the framework that informed the writing of the book, and the author chooses to release it as an Open Education Resource in the knowledge that many others will have the opportunity to modify it as they see fit.

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

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

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

To be clear, not all of what follows has to do with politics in so many words. Considerable attention is also given to intellectual, economic, and to an extent, religious history. Social and cultural history are covered in less detail, both for reasons of space and the simple fact that the author was trained as an intellectual historian interested in political theory. These, hopefully, are areas that will be addressed in future revisions.

Original Version: March 2019

Notes on the Second Edition (“Version 2.5”)

The second edition of this textbook attempts to redress some of the “missing pieces” noted in the conclusion of the introduction above. First, greater emphasis is placed on the history of the Middle East, especially in the period after the collapse of the political authority of the Abbasid Caliphate in the ninth century CE. The textbook now addresses the histories of Persia (Iran) and the Ottoman Empire in considerable detail, emphasizing both their own political, religious, and economic developments and their respective relationships with other cultures. Second, much greater focus is given to the history of gender roles and to women’s history.

From the perspective of the author, the new material on the Middle East integrates naturally with the narrative because it remains focused mostly on political history. The material on gender and women’s history
requires a shift in the overall approach of the textbook in that women were almost entirely excluded from traditional “high-level” political histories precisely because so few women were ever in positions of political authority until the recent past. The shift in focus to include more women’s history necessarily entails greater emphasis not just on gender roles but on the social history of everyday life, stepping away at times from the political history framework of the volumes as a whole. The result is a broader and more robust historical account than that of the earlier edition, although the overarching narrative is still driven by political developments.

As of the autumn of 2021, the first volume of this textbook is now in its “Version 2.5,” preserving the entire second edition with a few key changes. Wendy Fall, at the time of this release a Ph.D. candidate in literature at Marquette University, was kind enough to volunteer to edit the entire first volume. She corrected numerous grammatical issues and streamlined the phrasing considerably. Wendy also provided additional content, especially on literary history, which has enriched the intellectual and cultural histories covered in the volume. My sincere thanks to Wendy for her efforts!

Finally, a note on grammatical conventions: in keeping with most American English approaches, the writing errs on the side of capitalizing proper nouns. For example, terms like “the Church” when referring to the Catholic Church in its institutional presence, specific regions like “Western Europe,” and historical eras like “the Middle Ages” and “the Enlightenment” are all capitalized. Diacritical marks are kept when possible in original spellings, as in the term “Führer” when discussing Adolf Hitler. Herculean efforts have gone into reducing the number of semicolons throughout the text, to little avail.

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STATEMENT OF THANKS AND ATTRIBUTION

This book is an adaptation of the Portland Community College textbook “Western Civilization: A Concise History” (which can be found at https://www.pcc.edu/staff/christopher-brooks3/) and was written by Dr. Christopher Brooks. We have adapted Volume 1 (version 2.5, released in September 2021) and Volume 2, (version 2.0, released in Winter 2020) for this version to better fit a traditional 16-week semester schedule. Western Civilization: A Concise History by Portland Community College is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

We would like to wholeheartedly thank Dr. Brooks, Portland Community College, and Open Oregon for their work in this area of open educational resources.

The following changes were made to this book as a whole:

- Minor errors in grammar, punctuation, and formatting were corrected.
- Minor edits for readability and clarity were made where necessary (e.g., rewording of a sentence or eliminating extraneous biographical details).
- Where archaic or outdated terms were used in the original (e.g., “Barbarians”), they were replaced with more up-to-date or appropriate terms. The original terms are introduced and explained in other ways where appropriate.
- Interactive HP5 elements were added to each chapter to increase student engagement and retention of materials.
- A glossary function was added, which shows definitions when students hover their mouse over a term. Glossary definitions are adapted from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary and from Encyclopedia Britannica.
- People, places, and works of note were linked to their page in Encyclopedia Britannica online.

The following changes were made to specific chapters:

- Volume 1, Chapter 1: A note on the term “barbarians” was included to introduce students to this term
while giving context to how the term has been used historically. This term was replaced with “foreigners” throughout the book.

- Volume 1, Chapter 8: A note on Celtic peoples was adapted from the original text.
- Volume 1, Chapter 10: Several sections, including those on “Early Christianity,” “Christianity’s Relationship with Non-Christian Religions,” and “Orthodoxy and Heresy” were substantially edited for length, simplicity, and readability. A note on the term “barbarians” was adapted and moved to Chapter 1, and a note on Arianism was adapted from the edited text. A note on the term “cult” was added.
- Volume 2, Chapter 2: The map of the Carolingian Empire was replaced with a simpler map for readability.
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.

“Barbarians”

A note on nomenclature: Historically, the term “barbarians” has been used to refer to people groups outside of the Western, dominant political rule, including the groups responsible for the destruction of the Western Empire. Specifically, the term “barbarians” was used when referring to the Greek and Roman perception of Celtic, Germanic, and Central Asian groups. This term and its connotations show the degree to which the Greeks and Romans were contemptuous towards and, it turns out, vulnerable to these peoples.
Because of these connotations, the more neutral term, “foreigners” has been used in this book whenever possible. It is retained primarily when needed to demonstrate the viewpoint of a group who historically used the term.

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 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 “the wisest man” in Greek). Neanderthals enjoyed a long period of existence between about 400,000 and 70,000 years ago, spreading from Africa to the Middle East and Europe. They were physically larger and stronger than *Homo sapiens sapiens* and were able to survive in colder conditions, which was a key asset during the long ice age that began around 100,000 years ago. Neanderthals congregated in small groups, apparently interacting only to exchange breeding partners (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; the Americas were populated about 15,000 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* were 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.
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 Greek word for city, along with words like “civil” and “civic.” The key element of the definition is the idea that many 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, 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 discovered agriculture, that is, the deliberate cultivation of edible plants. People discovered that certain seeds could be planted and crops could be reliably grown. Some time 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 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 had much more leisure time than farmers did (and 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 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.

Agriculture was developed in a few different places completely independently. According to archeological evidence, agriculture did not start in one place and then spread; it started in a few distinct areas and then spread from those areas, sometimes meeting in the middle. For example, agriculture developed independently in China by 5000 BCE, and of course agriculture in the Americas (starting in western South America) had nothing to do with its earlier invention in the Fertile Crescent.

The most important regions for the development of Western Civilization were Mesopotamia and Egypt because it was from those regions that the different technologies, empires, and ideas that came together in Western Civilization were forged. Thus, it is important to emphasize that the original heartland of Western Civilization was not in Greece or anywhere else in Europe; it was in the Middle East and North Africa. Many of the different elements of Western Civilization—things like scientific inquiry, the religions of the book (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), engineering, and mathematics—were originally conceived in Mesopotamia and Egypt.
Early agriculture, the kind of agriculture that made later advances in civilization possible, consisted of people simply planting seeds by hand or with shovels and picks. There were some important technological discoveries that took place over time that allowed much greater crop yields, however. They included

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

3. Irrigation, which appeared in an organized fashion sometime around the same time in Mesopotamia.

The early civilization of Mesopotamia consisted of small farming communities. A common theory is that they may have originally come together to coordinate the need for irrigation systems; 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, 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, 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 must 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 used 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 is 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.

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 understood 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; early agriculture relied on a regular supply of water in a highly fertile region (like nearby Egypt and the Nile River). 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’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 leadership to direct the efforts, leading to systems of governance and administration. Thus, the earliest cities in the world may have been born not just out of agriculture, but out of the need to manage the natural resource of water.

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

One compelling theory about the period between the invention of agriculture and the emergence of large cities (again, between about 8,000 BCE and 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 millennia without
feeling compelled to build larger settlements. Somehow, however, a regime eventually emerged that imposed a new form of social organization and hierarchy, introducing taxation, large-scale building projects, and unfree labor (i.e., both slavery and forms of indentured labor). In turn, this appears to have occurred in the areas that grew cereal grains like wheat and barley extensively, because cereal grains were easy to collect and store, making them easy to tax.

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 linguistic: 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 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 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, crops, and goods of Uruk’s subjects 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 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 3000 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 “real” 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 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 works survive was a Sumerian high priestess, **Enheduanna** (2286–2251 BCE). 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 work of prose, however, whose author or authors remain unknown. Remembered as the **Epic of Gilgamesh**, the earliest surviving work of literature 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 (d. 1750 BCE), dating from about 1780 BCE. Hammurabi’s law code went into 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 combat 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 (d. 2279 BCE), also known as Sargon of Akkad (father of Enheduanna, described above), conquered almost all 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 its cities and farmlands and pump it back to the capital of Akkad, which he built somewhere near present-day Baghdad. While his descendants 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 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 had 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 on Babylon. It lasted until 1595 BCE, when it was defeated by an empire from Anatolia known as the Hittites.

What all 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 afterward were the first early empires that, through a combination of governing techniques, beliefs, and technology, were able to grow much larger and more powerful.

Check Your Understanding:
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 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, 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 as 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 very large overarching story of ancient Egyptian history is that each of the different major kingdoms was quite stable and relatively peaceful, while the intermediary periods were troubled, violent, and chaotic. The remarkable thing about the history overall is the simple fact of its longevity; even compared to other ancient cultures (Mesopotamia, for instance), Egyptian politics were incredibly consistent.

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

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, 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).
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, contains 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, leading to the First Intermediate Period. The reason for the collapse is not clear, but it probably had to do with the very infrequent occurrence of drought. There are written records from this period of instability, 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 would see their heart in balance with 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.

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 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 survives 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 innovations introduced by the Hyksos was the use of bronze, the horse, and chariots. 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,” or “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 is 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 used tax breaks, gifts, and benefits 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.

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 infamously known 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 was 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.

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.
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. 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, Piankh, 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-sliter 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 Egypt itself was often conquered by powerful rivals, beginning with a civilization discussed in the next chapter, the Assyrians. 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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3. THE BRONZE AGE AND THE IRON AGE

The Bronze 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. But some innovative smith did figure it out, and in the process ushered in an array of new possibilities.

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 afterward, was that of the Hittites. 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. 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 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.

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 where it 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.

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. Both the Minoans and Mycenaeans were seafarers.

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 (New Kingdom) 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, which 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.

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.

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 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 and 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 worked in tandem to spell the end of 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.
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. 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.

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, particularly by sea, and merchants. They traveled farther than any other ancient people; sometime around 600 BCE, according to the Greek historian Herodotus, a Phoenician expedition even sailed around Africa over the course of three years (if that actually happened, it was an achievement that would not be accomplished again for almost 2,000 years). The Phoenicians established colonies all over the Mediterranean shores, where they provided anchors in a new international trade network that eventually replaced the one destroyed with the fall of the Bronze Age. 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 a syllabic alphabet that formed the basis of Greek and Roman writing much later. A syllabic 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 a syllabic alphabet much more quickly than using a symbolic one (like Egyptian hieroglyphics or Chinese characters).

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.

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.

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). 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.

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. The Assyrians finally fell in 609 BCE, overthrown by a series of rebellions.

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 “Religions of the Book” in Islam, because they share a set of beliefs first written down in the Hebrew holy texts and they all venerate the same God.

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.

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.

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.

The Kings and Kingdoms

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 – at one point they captured the Ark of the Covenant, containing the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written. Under the leadership of their kings, however, the Hebrews pushed back the Philistines and eventually defeated them completely.

Saul’s successor was David, one of his former lieutenants, and David’s was his son Solomon, 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 as well. Likewise, he taxed both trade passing through the Hebrew kingdom and his own subjects. His demands for free labor from the Hebrew people amounted to one day in every three spent working on palaces and royal building projects – an enormous amount from a contemporary perspective, but one that was at least comparable to the redistributive economies of nearby kingdoms. Thus, while his subjects came to resent aspects of his rule, it was not 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.

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, 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.

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

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

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

The Yahwist Religion and Judaism

The Hebrew Bible claims that the Jews as a people worshipped Yahweh exclusively from the time of the Covenant, albeit with the worship of “false” gods from neighboring lands sometimes undermining their unity. A more likely scenario is that the Hebrews, like every other culture in the ancient world, worshipped a variety of deities, with Yahweh in a place of particular importance and centrality.

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.

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

The Prophetic Movement attacked both *polytheism* and the Yahwist establishment centered on the Temple of Jerusalem. The prophets were hostile to both the political power structure and to deviation from the exclusive worship of Yahweh. This is, so far as historians know, the first instance in world history in which the idea of a single all-powerful deity emerged among any people, anywhere (although some scholars consider Akhenaten’s attempted religious revolution in Egypt a quasi-monotheism). Up to this point, all religions held that there were many gods or spirits and that they had some kind of direct, concrete connections to specific
areas. Likewise, the gods in most religions were largely indifferent to the actions of individuals so long as the proper prayers were recited and rituals performed. Ethical conduct did not have much influence on the gods (“ethical conduct” itself, of course, differing greatly from culture to culture); what mattered was that the gods were adequately appeased.

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

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. 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 it 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.

Check Your Understanding:

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https://louis.pressbooks.pub/westernciv/?p=320#h5p-12
Many Western Civilization textbooks begin with the ancient Greeks. As noted in the introduction of this book, however, there are some problems with taking that approach, most importantly the fact that starting with the Greeks overlooks the fact that the Greeks did not invent the essential elements of civilization itself.

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 Mycenaens 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 Mycenaens, their neighbors to the north.

The Mycenaens developed as a civilization after the Minoans were already established in Crete. The Mycenaens 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 Mycenaens were the protagonists of the famous epic poems written by the (possibly mythical) Homer, the Iliad and the Odyssey.

The Mycenaens 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 Mycenaens 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 them off from important sources of nutrition and materials for daily life, as well as foreign ideas and cultural influences. The Greeks went from being a great traveling and trading culture to one largely isolated from its neighbors. The results were devastating: some 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 800–490 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 that 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 focus of the Greeks was on the two ways that
a man (and it was always a man in Greek philosophy – a theme that will be explored in detail in a subsequent chapter) 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.

What was important to the Greeks was the public performance of excellence, not private virtue or good intentions. What mattered was how a man performed publicly, in battle, in athletic competitions, or in the public forums of debate that emerged in the growing city-states of Archaic Greece. The fear of shame was a built-in part of the pursuit of excellence: Greek competitions (in everything from athletics to poetry) had no second-place winners, and the losers were openly mocked in the aftermath of the contests. This idea of public debate and competition was to have an enormous influence on the development of Greek culture, one that would subsequently spread around the entire Mediterranean region.

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

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

Even in poleis in which citizens did not directly vote on laws, however, there was a strong sense of community, out of which developed the concept of civic virtue: the idea that the highest moral calling was to place the good of the community above one’s own 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 rife with hostility and suspicion of assertive, intelligent women, celebrating instead women who dutifully served their husbands or fathers (Penelope, wife of the Greek hero Odysseus, is described as waiting faithfully for twenty years for Odysseus to return from the invasion of Troy despite a legion of suitors trying to win her and Odysseus’s lands). Women were expected to be sexually monogamous with their husbands, while men’s sexual liaisons with female slaves as well as other men of their own social rank were perfectly acceptable behaviors.

That being noted, it is clear that women in the Archaic Age did enjoy both social influence and some access to economic power, being able to inherit property and receiving social approval for the skillful management of households. Likewise, women were not generally secluded from men in normal social discourse, with various Greek tales including moments of casual interaction between men and women. Practically speaking, women were invaluable to the Greek economy, providing almost all of the domestic labor and contributing to farming and commerce as well. Their status, however, 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 poleis like Athens, culminating in some of the most misogynistic gender standards in the ancient world.

**Greek Culture and Trade**

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

The poleis also invented institutions that united the cities culturally, despite their political independence, the most important of which was the Panhellenic games. “Panhellenic” literally means “all Greece,” and the games were meant to unite all of the Greek poleis, including those founded by colonists and located far from Greece itself. The games were a combination of religious festival and 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. Wars were temporarily suspended and all Greek poleis agreed to let athletes travel with safe passage to take part in the games, in part because the Olympics were dedicated to Zeus, the chief Greek god. 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 almost all young men. In other cases, however, colonists found relatively isolated areas appropriate for shipping and set up shop, maintaining close connections with their home polis as an economic outpost. The one factor that was common to all Greek colonies was that they were rarely far from the sea. They were so closely tied to the idea of a shared Greek civilization and the need for the sea for trade routes was so strong that colonists were not generally interested in trying to push inland.
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 poleis in Greece itself, since they created a common Greek civilization across the entire Mediterranean world. Greek civilization was not an empire united by a single ruler or government. Instead, it was united by culture rather than a common leadership structure. That culture 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 polis and had to be able to pay for his own weapons and armor. He also had to be able to train and drill regularly with his fellow hoplites, since maneuvering in
the densely-packed phalanx required a great deal of practice and coordination. 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 poleis 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.

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 poleis 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 poleis 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 polis 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 poleis 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 poleis of the Archaic Age were Sparta and Athens. The two poleis 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 included 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. 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 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 poleis 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 poleis was in gender roles. According to Greeks from outside of Sparta, free Spartan women were much less restricted than women elsewhere in Greece. They were trained in war, 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 polis 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, the Athenians appointed Solon (638–558 BCE), an aristocratic but fair-minded politician, to serve as a tyrant and to reform 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 tyrant named Cleisthenes was appointed by the Athenian assembly who finally took the radical step of allowing 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.

Check Your Understanding:
An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://louis.pressbooks.pub/westernciv/?p=76#h5p-21
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, like the Greeks. 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 Expansion

The Medes were allies of Babylon, and in 612 BCE they took part in the huge rebellion that resulted in the downfall of the Assyrian Empire. For just over fifty years, the Medes continued to dominate the Iranian plateau. Then, in 550 BCE a Persian leader, Cyrus II the Great, led the Persians against the Medes and conquered them (practically speaking, there was little distinction between the two groups since they were so closely related and similar; the Greeks regularly confused the two when writing about them). 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 poleis, but instead of punishing the Greeks for opposing him, he allowed them to keep their language, religion, and culture, simply insisting they give him loyal warriors and offer
tribute. He found Greek leaders willing to work with the Persians, and he appointed them as governors of the colonies. Thus, even though they had been beaten, most of the Greeks in the colonies did not experience Persian rule as particularly oppressive.

Cyrus next turned south and conquered the city-states and kingdoms of Mesopotamia, culminating with his conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE. This conquest was surprisingly peaceful; Babylon was torn between the priests of Marduk (the patron deity of the city) and the king, who was trying to favor the worship of a different goddess. After he defeated the forces of the king in one battle, Cyrus was welcomed as a liberator by the Babylonians and he made a point of venerating Marduk to help ensure their ongoing loyalty.

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.

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

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

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 (mercy and kindness), of linking their power to sympathy for their subjects, rather than trying to terrorize their subjects into submission.

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

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

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. 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
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 I vowed to make an example not just of them, but of the Greek poleis that had aided them, including Athens. This led to the Persian War, one of the most famous conflicts in ancient history. It is remembered in part because it pitted an underdog, Greece, against a massive empire, Persia. It is remembered because the underdog won, at least initially. 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. 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,” a force sent to accomplish a specific goal and 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 I died in
486 BCE, in the middle of the preparations, which disrupted them further while his son Xerxes I 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 poleis were, for the most part, terrified into submission, with only about 6% of the Greek cities joining into the defensive coalition created by Athens and Sparta (that being said, within that 6% were some of the most powerful poleis in Greece). The Spartans took leadership of the land army that would block the Persians in the north while the Athenians attacked the Persian navy in the south.

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’ I army was easily able to march across Greece and ransack various poleis and farmlands; it even sacked Athens itself, which had been evacuated earlier. Xerxes I 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 polis, not just Sparta) was a real, viable soldier. The immense majority of the Persian forces were relatively ineffective peasant conscripts, unwillingly recruited from their homes and forced to fight for a king to 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.

The year 479 BCE marked 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 poleis to victory against the Persians in the Persian War, it was a shock to the entire region of the Mediterranean and Middle East. Persia was the regional “superpower” at the time, while the Greeks were just a group of disunited city-states on a rocky peninsula to the northwest. After their success, the Greeks were filled with confidence about the superiority of their own form of civilization and their taste for inquiry and innovation. Greeks in this period, the Classical Age, produced many of their most memorable cultural and intellectual achievements.

The great contrast in the Classical Age was between the power and splendor of the Greek poleis, especially Athens and Sparta, and the wars and conflicts that broke out as they tried to expand their power and control. After the defeat of the Persians, the Athenians created the Delian League; in theory this was a defensive coalition that existed to defend against Persia and to liberate the Ionian colonies still under Persian control, but in reality it was 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 polis had a navy anywhere near as large or effective, so the other members of the League had to contribute funds and supplies while the Athenians fielded the ships. Thus, it was all too easy for Athens to simply use the League to drain the other poleis of wealth while building up its own power. The last remnants of Persian troops were driven from the Greek islands by 469 BCE, about ten years after the great Greek victories of the Persian War, but Athens refused to allow any of the League members to resign from the League after the victory.
Soon, Athens moved from simply extracting money to actually imposing political control in other poleis. Athens stationed troops in garrisons in other cities and forced the cities to adopt new laws, regulations, and taxes, all designed to keep the flow of money going to Athens. Some of the members of the League rose up in armed revolts, but the Athenians were able to crush the revolts with little difficulty. The final event that eliminated any pretense that the League was anything but an Athenian empire was the failure of a naval expedition sent in 460 BCE by Athens to help an Egyptian revolt against the Persians. The Greek expedition was crushed, and the Athenians responded by moving the treasury of the League, formerly kept on the Greek island of Delos (hence “Delian League”), to Athens itself, arguing that the treasury was too vulnerable if it remained on Delos. At this point, no other member of the League could do anything about it – the League existed as an Athenian-controlled empire, pumping money into Athenian coffers and allowing Athens to build some of its most famous and beautiful buildings. Thus, the great irony is that the most glorious age of Athenian democracy and philosophy was funded by the extraction of wealth from its fellow Greek cities.

In the end, the Persians simply made peace with Athens in 448 BCE, giving up the claim to the Greek colonies entirely and in turn eliminating the very reason the League had come into being.

Meanwhile, Sparta 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 poleis started a conflict and Athens tried to influence the political decisions of Spartan allies. The war lasted from 431 to 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.

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 polis of Thebes defeated the Spartans three times in open battle, symbolically marching to within sight of Sparta itself and destroying the myth of Spartan invincibility.

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

Despite the importance of the Peloponnesian War in transforming ancient Greece, however, it should be emphasized that not all of the poleis were involved in the war, and there were years of truce and skirmishing during which even the major antagonists were not actively campaigning. The reason that this part of Greek history is referred to as the Classical Age is that its lasting achievements had to do with culture and learning, not warfare. The Peloponnesian War ultimately resulted in checking Athens’ imperial ambitions and causing the Greeks to broaden their outlook toward non-Greeks; its effects were as much cultural as political. Those effects are the topic of the next chapter.

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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 (382–336 BCE; the father of Alexander the Great) in 338 BCE. This was the era in which the Greek poleis were at their most powerful economically and militarily and their most innovative and productive artistically and intellectually. While opinions will vary, perhaps the single most memorable achievement of the Classical Age was in philosophy, first and foremost because 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 the Greek poleis during this period, although its power waned once it plunged into the Peloponnesian War against Sparta starting in 431 BCE. The most famous Greek philosophers – Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle – were either native Athenians (Socrates and Plato) or studied and taught in Athens (Aristotle). Likewise, the Athenian democracy that 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 poleis, it was that Athenian democracy itself was at its strongest: even as it was forging an empire on top of the other city-states, Athens was becoming the first great experiment in democratic government in world history. The Athenian leader in charge during the transition to this phase was Pericles (495–429 BCE), an aristocrat who dominated Athenian politics but did not actually seize power as had 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 oversaw both the military and foreign relations.
As the Delian League grew – which is to say, as Athens took over control of its “allied” poleis – it increased the size of its bureaucracy accordingly. Under Pericles, there were about 1,500 officials who managed the taxation of the League’s cities, ran courts and administrative bodies, and managed the League’s activities. Pericles instituted the policy of paying public servants, who had worked for free in the past, a move that dramatically decreased the potential for corruption through bribes and opened the possibility of poorer citizens to serve in public office (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, 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 priesth仿佛s of some of the Greek gods, where women could serve as priestesses. However, these were a very small minority.

Non-elite women had more freedom in the sense that they had to work, so they often sold goods in the marketplace or helped run shops. Since most 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 most cases, Greek women were married off, usually soon after puberty, mostly 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 were for
enjoyment and sexual slavery.

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 most 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.”¹

It is difficult to know the degree to which female seclusion was truly practiced, since all 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 (630–570 BCE), 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 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 present in different regions and
between different poleis; regimented Sparta was far more progressive in its empowerment of women than was
democratic Athens.

One product of the divide between men and women was the prevalence of bisexuality among elite Greek men (and, as suggested by Sappho’s work, also apparently among women). There was no concept of “heterosexual” versus “homosexual” in Greek culture; sexual attraction was assumed to exist, in potential, between men as easily as between men and women, although bisexuality appears to have been most common among men in the upper social ranks. 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 polis of Thebes*, 150 male couples who led the army of Thebes and held the reputation of being completely fearless. Homosexual love in this case was linked directly to the Greek virtues of honor and skill in battle, as the Sacred Band were believed to fight all the harder to uphold 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 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 poleis 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 poleis 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 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 (620–564 BCE), credited with compiling a book of fables that remain 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.

For every Aesop there 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 did not include anything 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 approaches 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 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 them 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 included 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.

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 (446–386 BCE), Lysistrata, is 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 (626/628–548/545 BCE). He and the students of his who went on to be important scientific thinkers were from the polis of Miletus in Ionia. During the Archaic Age, Thales 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 the 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 (610–546 BCE), who posited that the earth was held suspended in space by a perfectly symmetrical balance of forces rather than floating on water as his teacher had suggested.
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 (586–526 BCE), created the theory of the four elements that, he argued, comprise all things – earth, air, fire, and water. Many centuries later, Galen of Pergamon (129–216 CE), a Greek physician living under Roman rule, would explain human health in terms of the balance of those four forces (the four “humors” of the body), ultimately crafting a medical theory that would persist until the modern era.

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 proven correct through empirical research.

**History**

It was the Greeks who 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 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 powerful, as was Greece. Nevertheless, his history of the Persian War continued the age-old Greek practice of referring to the Persians as “barbarians.”

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

**Philosophy**

Perhaps the single greatest achievement of Greek thought 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 in terms of the human mind
and human capacities. As noted above, the word “philosophy” literally means “love of knowledge,” and Greek
philosophers did much more than just contemplate the meaning of life; they were often mathematicians,
physicists, and literary critics as well as “philosophers” in the sense that the word is used in the present.

Among the important questions that most Greek philosophers dealt 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 polis, democracy, tyranny,
Greek standards of behavior, and so on – were somehow dictated by nature or were instead merely social
customs that had arisen over time. The Classical Age saw the full flowering of Greek engagement with those
questions.

Some of the early philosophers of the Greek classical age were the Sophists, traveling teachers who tutored
students on all aspects of thought. While they did not represent a truly unified body of thought, the one
common sophistic doctrine was that all human beliefs and customs were just habits of a society, that there
were no absolute truths, and that it was thus vitally important for an educated man to be able to argue both
sides of an issue with equal skill and rhetorical ability. Their focus was on training elite Greeks to be
successful – the Greek term for “virtue” was synonymous with “success.” Thus, the sophists were in the business 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’ 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.

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, existing in the intellectual realm as something philosophers should contemplate.

In Plato’s work, The Republic, he wrote of an imaginary polis in which political leaders were raised from childhood to become “philosopher-kings,” combining practical knowledge with a deep understanding of intellectual concepts. Plato believed that the education of a future leader was of paramount importance, perhaps even more important than that leader’s skill in leading armies. Of all his ideas, this concept of a philosopher-king was one of the most influential; various kings, emperors, and generals influenced by Greek philosophy would try to model their rule on Plato’s concepts up until 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 the greatest possible detail. One of his major areas of focus was an analysis of the real-life politics of the polis; his conclusion was that humans are “political animals” and that it was possible to improve politics through human understanding and invention, not just contemplation.

Aristotle was the ancient world’s greatest intellectual overachiever. He single-handedly founded the disciplines of biology, literary criticism, political science, and logical philosophy. He wrote about everything from physics to astronomy and from mathematics to drama. His work was so influential that philosophers continued to believe in the essential validity of his findings well into the period of the Renaissance (thousands of years later), even though many of his scientific conclusions turned out to be factually inaccurate. Despite those inaccuracies, he unquestionably deserves to be remembered as one of the greatest thinkers of all time.
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 afterward, believed was inherently pleasing to the eye. The most prominent surviving piece of Greek architecture, the Parthenon of Athens dedicated to the polis’s patron goddess Athena, was built to embody the golden ratio in terms of its height and width. Likewise, in its use of symmetrical columns and beautiful carvings, it is widely believed to strike a perfect balance between elegance and grandeur.

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.

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 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 so, 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 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 Strait 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 (b. 350 BCE). A sailor from the small Greek polis Massalia that was well-known for producing ship captains and navigators, Pytheas undertook one of the most improbable voyages in ancient history, alongside the famous (albeit anonymous) Phoenician voyage around Africa 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 (356–323 BCE) 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 by 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, 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 not yet done, however, was spread that culture and those beliefs to non-Greeks, 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.

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

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

The more immediate problem facing Philip in the aftermath of the Greek conquest was that his men demanded more loot—the only way he could pay them was to find new places to invade and sack. Thus, Philip ruled Greece, but he could not afford to sit idle with troops aching for more victories. Cleverly, having just defeated the Greek poleis, Philip began behaving like a Greek statesman and assuming a kind of symbolic leadership role for Greek culture itself, not just Greek politics. He began agitating for a Greek invasion of Persia under his leadership to “avenge” the Persian invasion of the prior century. 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 the 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. 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 is 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 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 poleis rose up, hoping to end Macedonian control almost as soon as it had begun, but Alexander returned to reconquer the rebellious Greek cities. In the case of the city of Thebes, for instance, Alexander let the Thebans know that, by rebelling, they had signed their own death 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.

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 afterward) 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 Persepolis, the Persian capital city. There, the Greek armies looted the entire palace complex before burning it to the ground; historians have concluded that Alexander ordered the burning to force the remaining Persians who were resistant to his conquest to acknowledge its finality. The wealth of Persepolis and the surrounding Persian cities paid for the entire Greek army for years to come and inspired a renaissance of building back in Greece and Macedon, paid for with Persian gold. Darius III fled to the east but
was murdered by Persian nobles, who hoped to hold on to their own independence, but Alexander 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., near 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 the 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 intermarriage, 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 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 poleis 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.

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 some 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.

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 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 Ptolemy, 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 crisscross their large empire suppressing rebellions, fighting off invasions of Central Asian nomads, and squabbling with their neighbors in Egypt.

Seleucid rule left a lasting mark on the region it was in consolidating long-distance trade. The Silk Road that linked China, India, the Middle East, and Europe truly began during the Hellenistic period, and the Seleucids did everything in their power to support trade in their territories. They supervised the construction of roads and canals useful to merchants and derived much of their revenue from silk textiles. Even though raw silk (from silkworms) was only available from China, subjects of the Seleucids in Mesopotamia did master the production of textiles from the raw material, creating an enormously valuable commodity for markets farther west. Thus, even though Seleucid political control was somewhat haphazard overall, it did at least play a role in encouraging the east/west trade that would only grow in the following centuries.

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 lands written by the natives of those lands. Major histories of Mesopotamia, Persia, and Egypt were written during the Hellenistic period and translated into Greek. Ambassadors from the Hellenistic kingdoms in foreign lands sometimes wrote accounts of the customs of those lands (such as India). In short, it was a period when knowledge of the world greatly expanded.

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 poleis, 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 poverty 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.

Unrelated to the struggle between Greeks and non-Greeks, the Hellenistic period saw a significant shift in gender relations. 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 (for example, Alexander’s mother Olympias and the famous Cleopatra VII).

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

As usual when discussing gender in the pre-modern period, however, it is necessary to provide some caveats about greater periods of freedom and autonomy for women. With very few exceptions (once again, Cleopatra VII is the outstanding example), men continued to control politics. The laws of the Hellenistic kingdoms did protect and recognize women in various ways, but men were always given the greater legal role and identity. Analysis of birth rates suggests that infanticide was common, with girl babies often left to die both out of a general preference for boys and because the dowry the girl would have to be provided 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 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 have 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). The Cynics 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 polis of Corinth, asking him what he, the king, might do for him, the philosopher. The Cynic replied, “Stop standing in my sunbeam.”

Originally an offshoot of the Cynics, the Stoics became philosophers of fate and rationality. Unlike the Epicureans, Stoics believed that humans had an obligation to engage in politics, which formed part of a great divine plan, something linked to both fate and nature. As participants in the natural order, humans ought to learn to accept the trials and tribulations of life rationally, without succumbing to emotion (hence the contemporary meaning of the word “stoic”: someone who is indifferent in the face of pain or discomfort). The Stoics accepted the necessity of being part of a society and of fulfilling social obligations, but they warned against the excesses of pride and greed. Instead, a Stoic was to do his duty in his social roles without the distraction of luxury or indulgence. This was 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 it 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, was 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 era, 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 few 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 astronomer
Aristarchus of Samos posited that the sun was the center of the solar system. Hellenistic astronomers also refined the calculations associated with the size of the Earth; one astronomer named Eratosthenes calculated the circumference of the Earth and 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 of Alexandria 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 and 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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In many ways, Rome defines Western Civilization. Even more so than Greece, the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire that followed created the idea of a single, united civilization, sharing certain attributes and providing a lasting intellectual and political legacy. Its boundaries, from what is today England to Turkey and from Germany to Spain, mark out the heartland of what its inhabitants would later consider 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 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.

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 **poleis** 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 culture – 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.

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 that seemed to have practiced a variation of what would later be known as feudal law, in which every offense demanded retribution in the form of either violence or “man gold”: the payment needed to atone for a crime and thereby prevent the escalation of violence. The Celts were in contact with the peoples 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.

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. 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.

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 allied with other rich and powerful people, owners of large tracts of land, to try 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.

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
debtor. 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.

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.

In the midst of this ongoing struggle, the Romans came up with the basis of Roman law, the system 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.
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).

Roman soldiers were inspired by straightforward greed as well as the tremendous cultural importance placed on 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
The First Punic War lasted from 264 to 241 BCE. (“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.

A Map of Carthaginian and Roman territories c. 237 BCE.

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 (218–202 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 that 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 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.
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 re-created 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.

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 through battle and through 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, and 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 oratory skill.

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

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.

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 describe and, in many cases, celebrate 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 first step toward violent revolution in the Republic was the work of the Gracchi 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 pass a bill through the Centuriate Assembly that would limit the amount of 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 full citizenship to all of Rome’s Italian subjects, which would have effectively transformed the Roman Republic into the Italian Republic. Here, he lost even the support of his former allies in Rome, and he killed himself in 121 BCE rather than be murdered by another gang of 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.

**Julius Caesar**

Thus, there is an unresolved question about the end of the Roman Republic: when a new 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.

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’d 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 enslaveing 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, establishing a Roman territory there that lasted centuries. All of the lands he invaded were so thoroughly conquered that the descendants of the Celts ended up speaking languages based on Latin, like French, rather than their native Celtic dialects.

Caesar’s victories made him famous and immensely powerful, and they ensured the loyalty of his battle-hardened troops. In Rome, senators feared his power and called on Caesar’s former ally Pompey to bring him to heel (Crassus had already died in his ill-considered campaign against the Parthians; his head was 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 both rejecting the renewal of his governorship of Gaul and his military command and refusing to allow 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 seditio 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 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.

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 in exile. Octavian was 33. As his grand-uncle had before him, Octavian began the process of manipulating the institutions of the Republic to transform it into something else entirely: an empire.

**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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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” – meant “Caesar.” In turn, the English word “emperor” derives from *imperator*, the title of a victorious Roman general in the field, which was adopted as yet another honorific by the Roman emperors. The English word “prince” is another Romanism, from *Princeps Civitatus*, “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 façade 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, a position that allowed unlimited power in
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.

making or vetoing legislation. All soldiers swore personal oaths of loyalty to him, and having 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.

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 formal relationship between emperor and law was never explicitly defined. Emperors who respected Roman laws and traditions won prestige and veneration for having done so, but there was never a formal legal challenge to imperial authority. Likewise, as the centuries went on and many emperors came to seize power through force, it was painfully apparent that the letter of the law was less important than the personal power of a given emperor in all too many cases.

This extraordinary power did not prompt resistance in large part because the practical reforms Augustus introduced were effective. He transformed the Senate and equestrian class into a real civil service to manage the enormous empire. He eliminated tax farming and replaced it with taxation through salaried officials. 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 worshipped as a god.

The Imperial Dynasties

The period of the Pax Romana included three distinct dynasties:

1. The Julian dynasty: 14–68 CE – those emperors related (by blood or adoption) to Caesar’s line.
2. The Flavian dynasty: 69–96 CE – a father and his two sons who seized power after a brief civil war.
3. The “Five Good Emperors”: 96–180 CE – a “dynasty” of emperors who chose their successors, rather than power passing to their family members.

The Julian Dynasty

There is a simple and vexing problem with any discussion of the Roman emperors: the sources. While archaeology and the surviving written sources create a reasonably clear basis for understanding the major political events of the Julian dynasty, the biographical details are much more difficult to pin down. All of the surviving written accounts about the lives of the Julian emperors were written many decades, in some cases more than a century, after their reign. In turn, the two most important biographers, Tacitus and Suetonius, detested the actions and the character of the Julians, and thus their accounts are rife with scandalous anecdotes that may or may not have any basis in historical truth. 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. It is likely that only idealistic or embittered senators really dreamed of restoring the Republic; therefore a coup, or overthrow of government rule, 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 500 years 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 (located 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.” Even if some of the stories of his personal sadism are exaggerated, there is no doubt that Caligula was unsuccessful as an 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 Julian line after Augustus. Claudius had survived palace intrigues because he walked with a limp and spoke with a pronounced stutter; he was widely considered to be a simpleton, whereas he was actually highly intelligent. Once in power Claudius proved himself a competent and refreshingly sane emperor, ending the waves of terror Caligula had unleashed. He went on to oversee the conquest of England, first begun by Julius Caesar decades earlier. He was also a scholar, mastering the Etruscan and Punic languages and writing histories of those two civilizations (the histories are now lost, unfortunately). He restored the imperial treasury, depleted by Tiberius and Caligula, and maintained the Roman borders. He also established a true bureaucracy to manage the vast empire and began the process of formally distinguishing between the personal wealth of the emperor and the official budget of the Roman state.

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. This would influence how the earliest histories of his reign were written. In addition, Nero took great pride in being an actor and musician, two professions that were considered by Roman elites to be akin to prostitution. His artistic indulgences were thus scandalous violations of elite sensibilities. After completely losing the support of both the army and the Senate, Nero committed suicide in 68 CE.

Another note on the sources: what the “bad” emperors of the Julian line (Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero) had in common is that they violated the old traditions of *Romanitas*, squandering wealth and glorifying themselves in various ways, thus inspiring hostility from many elite Romans. Since it was other elite Romans (albeit many years later) who became their biographers, we in the present cannot help but have a skewed view of their conduct. Historians have rehabilitated much of the rule of Tiberius and (to a lesser extent) Nero in particular, arguing that even if they were at loggerheads with the Senate at various times and probably did unfairly prosecute at least some senators, they did a decent job of running the empire as well.

**The Flavian Dynasty**

In the aftermath of Nero’s death, a brief civil war broke out. Four generals competed for the emperorship, supported by their armies. In the end, a general named **Vespasian** (r. 69–79 CE) seized power and founded a fairly short-lived dynasty consisting of himself and his two sons, known to history as the Flavians. The importance of Vespasian’s takeover was that it reinforced the idea that real power in Rome was no longer that of the old power-broking families, but instead the armies; Vespasian had no legal claim to the throne, but his emperorship was ratified by the Senate nevertheless. The emperor’s major concern had to be maintaining the
loyalty of the armies, 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. Reputably, he did not keep a guard and let people speak to him directly in public audiences. In an act of classic Romanitas, he started work on the famous Colosseum (known at the time as the Flavian Amphitheater) in Rome in order to provide a grand setting for public games and performances. All of this happened in just a decade; he died of natural causes in 79 CE.

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, a volcano in southern Italy, Mt. Vesuvius, erupted, followed shortly by another huge fire as well as an epidemic in Rome. Titus struggled to aid victims of all three disasters and 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 the 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 Roman 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 192–235 CE. They faced growing threats on the Roman borders, as Germanic tribes staged repeated (and often at least temporarily successful) incursions to the north and a new Persian dynasty known as the Sasanians.
pressed against Roman territory to the east. The last Severan emperor, Severus Alexander, died in 235 CE, ushering in a terrible period of military defeat and instability considered in the next chapter.

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 various other peoples, regarded as “barbarians” by the Romans who believed 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 foreign 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.

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 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). 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

Far beyond Persia was the Chinese Empire, already thousands of years old. China and Rome never established formal diplomatic ties, although the leaders of both empires knew of one another. During the entire period of Roman Imperial power, only China could produce silk, which was highly coveted in Rome. Shipments of silk moved along the aptly-named Silk Road across Central Asia, directly linking the two most powerful empires in the world at the time (via, as mentioned above, Persia, which derived huge profits in the process).

In addition, a major navigational breakthrough occurred during the time of Augustus, when the Romans learned to navigate the Indian Ocean using the monsoon winds to reach western India. There, they could trade for Chinese silk at much better prices. This journey was hugely risky, but if a Roman merchant could pull it off and return to Rome with a cargo hold full of silk, he would earn fully 100 times his investment as profit. Along with spices (especially pepper), the trade for silk eventually drained enormous amounts of gold from Rome, something that added up to a serious economic liability over the hundreds of years of exchange.

The most important, and threatening, border for Rome was to its north, on the eastern and northern banks of the Rhine and Danube rivers. The region the Romans called Germania was an enormous stretch of heavily forested land that was cold, wet, and uninviting from the Roman perspective. The “Germans” were a hugely diverse group of tribes practicing feudal law, the system of law in which offenses were met with clan-based violent retribution or blood payments. For hundreds of years, there were complex relationships between various tribes and the Roman empire in which the Romans both fought with and, increasingly, hired German tribes to serve as mercenaries. Eventually, some of the Germanic tribes were allowed to settle along the Roman borders in return for payments of tribute to Rome.

The two major rivers, the Rhine and the Danube, were the key dividing lines to the north of Rome, with Roman legions manning permanent fortifications there. As far as the Romans were concerned, even if they were able to militarily, they did not want to conquer German territory. The Romans tended to regard the Germans as being semi-human at best, incapable of understanding true civilization. Some Romans did admire their bravery and codes of honor – the same Tacitus who provides much of the information on the early emperors contrasted the supposed weakness and dissolution of his contemporary Romans with the rough virtue of the Germans. That being noted, most Romans believed that the Celts, conquered by Caesar centuries earlier, were able to learn and assimilate to Roman culture, but the Germans, supposedly, were not. Likewise, Germania was assumed to be too cold, too wet, and too infertile to support organized farming and settlement. Thus, the role of the 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 on a standard day carrying a heavy pack. They were subject to brutal discipline, up to and including summary execution if they were judged to have been derelict in their duties — one of the worst violations of conduct was falling asleep on guard duty, punishable by being beaten to death by one’s fellow soldiers. Roman soldiers were held to the highest standards of unit cohesion, and their combat drills meant they were constantly ready for battle.

Starting in the Augustan period, the essential division in the Roman military was the legion, a self-sufficient army unto itself that could be combined with other legions to form a full-scale invasion force but could also operate on its own. During the Augustan period, each legion consisted of 5,400 infantry and 120 cavalry, along with hundreds of specialists such as engineers, arrow-makers, and blacksmiths who allowed the legion to operate independently while traveling. The legions were subdivided into cohorts of 480 men, each of which was led by a centurion, veterans who had risen through the ranks to lead. The legions were designed to be flexible, adaptable, and “standardized”: each legion was comparable in its organization, down to the placement of the tents in the camps built at the end of every day while the legion was on the march.

In turn, each legion was led by a legionary legate, usually a powerful noble appointed by the imperial government or the emperor himself. These legates were often politicians rather than soldiers, meaning that the key figures in actual battle were the centurions, each of whom had earned his position through exemplary service. Perhaps most important of all was the lead centurion, the First Spear, who dictated tactics on the field.
The legions were made up of Roman citizens, but not all members of the Roman military were citizens. Instead, as numerous as the legions were auxiliaries: Roman subjects (e.g., Celts, North Africans, Syrians, etc.) who nevertheless served the empire. The auxiliaries were divided into cohorts of infantry and alae (“wings”) of cavalry. In comparison to the infantry-focused Roman legions, the auxiliaries tended to vary their arms – auxiliaries could be slingers and archers as well as foot soldiers and cavalry. They tended to serve as scouts and support for the legions as well as engaging in combat in their own right. As of 23 CE, they numbered about 150,000 men, which was the same as the legions at the time. The emperor Claudius rewarded 25 years of service with citizenship; by the early second century, all auxiliaries gained citizenship on discharge.

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.

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.
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 tolerance 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 enormous libraries and temples, along with numerous public sites for recreation, including public baths, race tracks, and the famous Colosseum, used primarily for displays of lethal gladiatorial combat.

The empire as a whole enjoyed levels of commercial and agricultural productivity not seen again until the seventeenth century CE. Specialized craftsmen made high-quality goods to be sold on an empire-wide market, with better-off citizens enjoying access to quality tools, dishware, linens, and so on, much of which had been manufactured hundreds of miles away. While the long-term economic pattern was that the wealthier parts of society tended to become even richer at the expense of the common people, there was still a substantial “middle class” that enjoyed a relatively high standard of living.

We should note that, while the Romans are not famous as scientists, they are famous as architects and engineers. The Romans used concrete extensively in building projects. They mastered the art of building arches and domes to hold up ceilings without interior supports. Using only gravity, they could transport water dozens of miles, not just in Rome but in other major cities across the empire. Roman roads were so well built that some survive to the present, now used by cars rather than the horse-drawn carts they were originally built for.

Each city built by the Romans in their conquered territory was laid out according to careful plans, with streets built in grids and centered on a public forum with public buildings. One of the reasons that the Romans were so effective in assimilating conquered peoples into Roman society was that they built a great deal of infrastructure; being conquered by Rome seemed less like a burden when an aqueduct, public baths, and street system appeared within a generation of the Roman conquest (the relative cultural and religious tolerance of Roman culture was also key). All of these cities were linked by the 40,000 miles of roads that stretched across the empire. The primary purpose of these administrative capitals was extracting taxes and other wealth from the local areas and funneling them back to Rome, but they also served as genuine cultural centers. Likewise, even though the roads were often built with troop movement in mind, people everywhere could take advantage of them for trade.
That all being said, there were vast social distances that separated elites and commoners. Even in the city of Rome, most of the citizens lived in squalor, packed into apartment buildings many stories high, made out of flammable wood, and 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 supply started drying up and prices rose; without the constant expansion of the empire, there were far fewer slaves available. By that time, however, the legal and social conditions of farmers had degenerated to the point that they were essentially serfs (known as coloni): unfree rural laborers, barely better than slaves themselves.

**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 above 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 foreign 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.

Check Your Understanding:
THE ROMAN EMPIRE
Hellenistic Rome underwent half a century of crisis in the middle of the third century CE. Threatened 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 stay 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 (religious sect) 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.

**“Cult”**

A note on nomenclature: The word *cult* is used formally by historians to refer to formal systems of religious beliefs and practices. While it often has a pejorative or derogatory connotation in popular use, when used by historians in formal writing about history, the technical definition is neutral and simply means a formalized system of religious beliefs and practices. In other words, it simply means “a religion”; therefore its use has been retained in this and other chapters.

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. And of the 26 emperors to follow for the next fifty years, all were murdered or died in battle as well, except one – only one emperor from 235 to 284 CE 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 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 centralization and their empire’s stability 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 greed (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 Persian 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.
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 Church. That practice persists all the way to the present in the administration of the Catholic Church (and other Christian churches).

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 religion 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 more cynical explanations 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 324 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 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.

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 difficult for Rome to manage 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 acknowledge, even insincerely, 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. For three years, he traveled and delivered his teachings in the Roman province of Palestine and the nearby puppet kingdoms dominated by the Romans 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?
- Was Jesus the messiah?
- Was Jesus human, or was he instead somehow God Himself?
- Could everyone be a Christian, or instead, was membership limited to the Jews?

Ultimately, the early Church came to the following conclusions about these questions: that the God of Christ was the Jewish God, and in fact, Jesus was himself God. This belief ultimately led to the articulation of the Christian doctrine of the trinity, that there is one God who exists in three equal, eternal persons who have the same substance or essence. To the early Church, this divinity made him also the messiah, who could and would give spiritual liberation to all of humanity, regardless of ethnic origin.

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 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 archbishops. 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, adapting their meanings to communicate and celebrate Christian ideals and events. One commonly used example is Christmas. 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 saints’ 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.

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, Christians sometimes led 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 in 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 have survived 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 formal authority within the Church (very much including the popes) who could enforce a certain set of beliefs over rival interpretations.
The beginning of orthodoxy, as a set of recorded and enforced beliefs, 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 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 address a challenge to the trinitarian view of God’s nature and therefore to the divinity of Jesus. One of the results of this council was the Nicene Creed (now usually referred to as the Apostles’ Creed), to this day one of the central elements of many Christian services and statements of belief. 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.

This controversy addressed by the council of Nicaea is known as Arianism. This name comes from the name of the Egyptian priest named Arius who first proposed the understanding that Jesus was created by the Father and was not coeternal nor consubstantial with him. This belief effectively denies the divinity of Jesus. Arius’s belief quickly took hold among many people, most importantly among the Germanic tribes of the north.

While united in belief, Christians were divided by language, since the western empire still spoke Latin and the eastern empire Greek. In 410 CE the monk Jerome produced a translation 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 CE (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 what they came to call 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 also guaranteed that there would always be those who rejected that orthodoxy in the name of a different theological interpretation. Likewise, the practical issues of cultural and language 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 CE, 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, The Life of Antony, written about him by the bishop Athanasius. This book 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 the holiest life was thus one that rejected it completely in favor of prayer and meditation away from human company. Thousands of people followed this 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.

Ultimately, 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 contribution to the development of monasticism was the work of Benedict, an Italian bishop, who wrote a book in about 529 CE known as the Rule 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) 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, and so on, 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 CE. 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, and 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: the Roman Empire 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 CE. 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. Ultimately, Rome’s fall seems to have been due to routine defeats and growing threats.

Roman Relations with Foreigners

Romans had always held foreigners in contempt, and they believed that the lands held by these people (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 peoples like the Celts, who were their subjects and could at least be made useful to (and, later, citizens of) the empire. For the entire history of the empire, the Romans never seemed to figure 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 returned 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 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., 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, everything 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 that successfully defended Roman sovereignty, Roman armies in the west were under-funded, under-manned, and vulnerable. There was thus a vicious cycle of lost land, lost revenue, and poor military performance that saw Roman power simply disintegrate over the course of less than a century. Even the handful of effective emperors and generals in the west during that period could not staunch the tide of defeat.

Invasions

The beginning of the end for the western empire was the Huns. The Huns were warriors of the Central Asian steppes: expert horsemen, skillful warriors, unattached to any particular land. They had much in common with other groups of steppe peoples like the Scythians who had raided civilized lands going back to the very emergence of civilization in Mesopotamia. They were believed to be so cruel and so unstoppable that the Germanic groups farther west claimed that they were the product of unions between demons and witches rather than normal humans.

In 376 CE the Huns drove a large group of Goths out of 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 unconquerable nature 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 this domino effect in which various groups were pushed into Roman territory, with the sack of Rome as merely one disaster of many for the empire.

![Map of Invasions of the Roman Empire](image)

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 descendants 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 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 CE, 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 CE, pushing as far as the gates of Rome in 451 CE. There, the pope (Leo I) personally appealed to Attila not to sack the city and paid them a hefty bribe. Attila died in 453 CE 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 CE 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 CE, 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 CE, 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 CE). 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).

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 CE), 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 Germanic 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 I of the Franks made a point of having the Frankish laws recorded in Latin, and over time the Frankish language vanished, replaced by an 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

While interpretations of the collapse of the empire will continue to differ as long as there are people interested in Roman history, there is no question about the basic facts: half of what had once been an enormous, coherent, and amazingly stable state was splintered into political fragments by the end of the fifth century.

Check Your Understanding:
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 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 more familiar economic and diplomatic relationships 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. 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 Silk 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 the frequent disputes between clans and families. Muhammad’s trek to Medina is called the hejira (also spelled hijra in English) and is the starting date of the Islamic calendar.

In Medina, Muhammad met with much more success in winning converts. He quickly established a religious community with himself as the leader, one that made no distinction between religious and political authority. His followers 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 CE, 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 CE, 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 the true language of God – according to traditional Islamic belief, the angels speak Arabic in paradise.

According to Islam, Muhammad was the last in the line of prophets stretching back to Abraham and Moses and including Jesus, whom Muslims consider a major prophet and a religious leader, but not actually divine. Muhammad delivered the “definitive version” of God’s will as it was told to him by Gabriel on the mountainside. The core tenets of Islamic belief are referred to as the “Five Pillars”:

1. There is only one God and Muhammad is his prophet.
2. Each Muslim must pray five times a day, facing toward the holy city of Mecca.
3. During the holy month of Ramadan, each Muslim must fast from dawn to sundown.
4. Charity should be given to the needy.
5. If possible, at least once in his or her life, each Muslim should undertake the hajj: 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.

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 20 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. 63–34), 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 Bakr and Umar were forced to suppress revolts of the clans, and Umar hit upon the idea of raiding Persia and Byzantium to keep 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 also 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 siege craft, 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.

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. Afterward, 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 Spanish (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 garrisons (meaning towns that have troops permanently stationed in them) 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 the forcible conversion of Jews and Christians. It does allow that non-Muslim monotheists pay a special tax, however. For the century of Umayyad rule, only about 10% of the population was Muslim. Non-Muslims, called *dhimmis* (followers of religions tolerated by law), had to pay a head tax and were not allowed to share in governmental decision-making or in the spoils of war. Many Jews and Christians found Arab rule preferable to Byzantine rule, however, because the Byzantine government had actively persecuted religious dissenters and the Arabs did not. Likewise, taxes were lower under the Arabs as compared to Byzantium. These traditions of relative tolerance would continue all the way up to the modern era in places like the Ottoman Empire. However, even without forcible pressure, many people did convert to Islam either out of a heartfelt attraction to Islam or because of simple pragmatism; in some cases, Muslim generals rejected the attempted conversions of local people because it threatened their tax base so much.

There was also the case of the nomadic peoples of North Africa, collectively referred to as “Berbers” by the
Arabs. The Berbers were hardy, warlike tribesmen living in rugged mountainous regions across North Africa. They had already seen the Romans and the Vandals come and go and simply kept up their traditions with the arrival of the Arabs. They were, however, polytheists, which the Muslims were unwilling to tolerate. Thus, faced with the choice of forcible conversion or death, the Berbers converted and then promptly joined the Arab armies as auxiliaries. This lent tremendous strength to the Arab forces and helps explain the relative ease of their conquests, especially in Spain.

The members of other monotheistic faiths who chose not to convert were often left much more free to practice their religions than they would have been in Christian lands, because the Umayyads simply did not care about theological disagreements among their Jewish and Christian subjects so long as the taxes were paid. Over time, various sects of Christianity survived in Muslim lands that vanished in kingdoms that were officially, and rigidly, Christian. Likewise, Jews found that they were generally better off in Muslim lands than in Christian kingdoms because of their safety from official persecution. Jews became vitally important merchants, scholars, bankers, and traders all across the caliphate.

Zoroastrianism, however, declined in the long run. The first generations of Muslim rulers accepted Zoroastrians as People of the Book like Jews and Christians, but that acceptance atrophied over time. Muslims were less tolerant of Zoroastrianism because it did not venerate the God of Abraham and its traditions were markedly different from those of Judaism and Christianity. Likewise, as Muslim rule over Persia was consolidated over time, the practical necessity of respecting Zoroastrianism as the majority religion of the Persian people weakened. By the tenth century, most Zoroastrians who had not converted to Islam migrated to India, where they remain today in communities known as the Parsees.

The Abbasids

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, allowing any Muslim the possibility of achieving the highest state offices and political and social importance.

Perhaps the most important phenomenon within the Abbasid Caliphate was the great emphasis and respect the caliphs placed on learning. New discoveries were made in astronomy, metallurgy, and medicine, and learned works from a variety of languages were translated and preserved in Arabic. The most significant tradition of scholarship surrounding Aristotle’s works, in particular, took place in the Abbasid Caliphate.

The major library in Baghdad was called the House of Wisdom; it was one of the great libraries of the world at the time. The various advances that took place in the Abbasid Caliphate included

- Medicine: far more accurate diagnoses and treatments than existed anywhere else (outside of China).
- Optics: early telescopes, along with the definitive refutation of the idea that the eye sends out beams to detect things and instead receives information reflected off of objects.
- Chemistry: various methods including evaporation, filtration, sublimation, and even distillation. Despite the specific ban on intoxicants in the Koran, it was Abbasid chemists who invented distilled spirits: al-kuhl, meaning “the essence,” from which the English word alcohol derives.
- Mathematics: the creation of Arabic numerals, based on Hindu characters, which were far easier to work with than the clunky Roman equivalents. In turn, the Abbasids invented algebra and trigonometry.
- Geography and exploration: accurate maps of Asia and East Africa, thanks to the presence of Muslim merchant colonies as far as China, along with new navigational technologies like the astrolabe (a device that is used to determine latitude while at sea).
- Banking: the invention of checks and forms of commercial insurance for merchants.
- Massive irrigation systems: these made Mesopotamia nearly on par with Egypt as the richest farmland in the world.
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 (and the Andalus to come) stand out from their contemporary peers by firmly establishing their poetry as a distinct form.

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 then 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 metropolis, 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 sharia 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.

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As noted previously, 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,” 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 CE 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 foreign 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.

**Justinian**

The most important early emperor of Byzantium was Justinian, who ruled from 527 to 565 CE. Justinian was the last Roman emperor to speak Latin as his native tongue; afterward, all emperors spoke Greek. He is remembered for being 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.
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 CE, 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 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.

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 CE 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 CE, 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 CE, 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 CE). He was originally a governor who returned from his post in Africa to seize the throne from a rival named Phocas in the midst of a Persian invasion. The empire was in such disarray at the time that the Persians seized Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, cutting off a huge part of the food supply to Constantinople. In the process, the Persians even seized the “True Cross,” the cross on which (so Christians at the time believed) Christ Himself had been crucified, from its resting place in Jerusalem. Simultaneously, the Avars and Bulgars, steppe peoples related to the Huns, were pressing Byzantine territory from the north, and piracy was rife in the Mediterranean.

Heraclius managed to save the core of the empire, Anatolia and the Balkans, by recruiting free peasants to fight instead of relying on mercenaries. 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 the Persians: the Arab caliphates.

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.

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.

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.

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.
In the Balkans, Slavic tribes proved a major ongoing problem for the Byzantines.

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.

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.

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 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, Vladimir the Great, who conquered all of the rival cities and imposed control from his capital in Kiev. 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, Vladimir 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 CE, at which point Constantinople became the heart of a European silk industry, an imperial monopoly that generated tremendous wealth. The entire economy was regulated by the imperial government through a system of guilds, which helped ensure steady tax revenues.

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

Byzantines believed that God oversaw Constantinople and that the Virgin Mary interceded before God on behalf of the city. Many priests taught that Constantinople was the New Jerusalem that would be at the center of events during the second coming of Christ, rather than the actual Jerusalem.

The piety of the empire sometimes undermined secular learning, however. Over time, the Church grew increasingly suspicious of learning that did not either center on the Bible and religious instruction or have direct practical applications in crafts or engineering. Thus, there was a marked decline in scholarship throughout the empire.

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 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.

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 CE, 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 to 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 power unto themselves, like relics.

In 726 CE, 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 CE, 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 CE, 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 CE. A murderous leader named Basil I, originating from Macedonia, seized the throne in 867 CE 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.

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.

These happy times for Byzantium ended when the emperor Basil II died in 1025 CE 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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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.

“Roman Church”

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 could preserve 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 across Europe. An educated person (almost always a member of the clergy in this period) from England could still correspond with 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 that drove a permanent wedge between the western and eastern churches, since the Byzantine emperors claimed authority over both church and state. The popes were not just at the apex of the western church; they often ruled as kings unto themselves, and they always had complex relationships with other rulers. For the entire period of the early Middle Ages (from the end of the western Roman Empire until the eleventh century), the popes were rarely acknowledged as the sovereigns of the Church outside of Italy. Instead, this period was important in the longer history of institutional Christianity because many popes at least claimed authority over doctrine and organization – centuries later, popes would look back on the claims of their predecessors as “proof” that the papacy had always been in charge.

An important example of an early pope who created such a precedent is Gregory the Great, who was pope at the turn of the seventh century. Gregory still considered Rome part of the Byzantine Empire, but by that time Byzantium could not afford troops to help defend the city of Rome, and he was keenly interested in developing papal independence. As a result, Gregory shrewdly played different Germanic kings against each other and used his spiritual authority to gain their trust and support. He sent missionaries into the lands outside of the kingdoms to spread Christianity, both out of a genuine desire to save souls and a pragmatic desire to see wider influence for the Church.

Gregory’s authority was not based on military power, nor did most Christians at the time assume that the pope of Rome (all bishops were then called “pope,” meaning simply “father”) was the spiritual head of the entire Church. Instead, popes like Gregory slowly but surely asserted their authority by creating mutually beneficial relationships with kings and by overseeing the expansion of Christian missionary work. In the eighth century, the papacy produced a (forged, as it turned out) document known as the Donation of Constantine
in which the Roman emperor Constantine supposedly granted authority over the western Roman Empire to the pope of Rome; that document was often cited by popes over the next several centuries as “proof” of their authority. Nevertheless, even powerful and assertive popes had to be realistic about the limits of their power, with many popes being deposed or even murdered in the midst of political turmoil.

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). 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 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 most of the population was completely illiterate, it was impossible for most Christians to have access to anything but the rudiments of Christian belief. The path to salvation was thus not knowing anything about the life of Christ, the characteristics of God, or the names of the apostles, but of two things above all else: the sacraments and the relevant saints to pray to.

The sacraments were, and remain in contemporary Catholicism, the essential spiritual rituals conducted by ordained priests. Much of the practical day-to-day power and influence exercised by the Church was because
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

- **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.
- **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.
- **Confession** – necessary to receive forgiveness for sins, which every human constantly committed.
- **Confirmation** – the pledge to be a faithful member of the Church taken in young adulthood.
- **Marriage** – believed to be sanctified by God.
- **Holy orders** – the vows taken by new members of the clergy.
- **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 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 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 most of the population: peasants.

Eventually, the relationship between lords and kings was formalized in a system of mutual protection (or even protection rackets). 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.
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.

**England and France**

**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, fleeing either 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 that 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 (c. 1028–9 September 1087), 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 Christians, 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 (c. 688–22 October 741), who defeated the invading Arab armies at the Battle of Tours (also referred to as the Battle of Poitiers) in 732. Soon afterward, 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 many 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 the 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 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 was a poor reflection of ancient Rome. He had almost no bureaucracy, no standing army, not even an official currency. He spent almost all 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 his efforts, rebellions against his rule were frequent and Charlemagne was forced to war against former subjects to re-establish control on several occasions.

Charlemagne also reorganized the Church by insisting on a strict hierarchy of archbishops to supervise bishops who, in turn, supervised priests. Likewise, under Charlemagne there was a revival of interest in ancient writings and in proper Latin. He gathered scholars from all of Europe, including areas like England beyond his political control, and sponsored the education of priests and the creation of libraries. He had flawed versions of the Vulgate (the Latin Bible) corrected and he revived disciplines of classical learning that had fallen into disuse (including rhetoric, logic, and astronomy). His efforts to reform Church training and education are referred to by historians as the Carolingian Renaissance.

One innovation of note that arose during the Carolingian Renaissance 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 scrip torium, 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 that 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
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 sailing up rivers to raid inland communities.

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 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. 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, 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 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 to defend against other Vikings. Likewise, the Vikings settled areas in England that would help shape the English language and literary traditions (for example, though written in the language of the Anglo-Saxons, the famous epic poem Beowulf is about Viking settlers who had recently converted to Christianity). Ultimately, the Vikings became so rich from raiding that they became important figures in medieval trade and commerce, trading goods as far from Scandinavia as Baghdad in the Abbasid Caliphate.

The Vikings were not just raiders, however. They sought to explore and settle in lands that were in some cases completely uninhabited when they arrived, like Iceland. They appear to have been fearless in quite literally going where no one had gone before. Much of their exploration required audacity as well as planning – they were the best navigators of their age, but at times their travels led them to forge into areas completely unknown to Europeans. Vikings were the first Europeans to arrive in North America, with a group of Icelandic Vikings arriving in Newfoundland, in present-day Canada, around the start of the eleventh century.
An attempt at colonization failed, however, quite possibly because of a conflict between the Vikings and the Indigenous people they encountered, and the people of the Americas were thus spared the presence of further European colonists for almost five centuries.

In what eventually became Russia, meanwhile, Viking exploration, conquest, and colonization had begun even earlier. The Vikings started traveling down Russian rivers from the Baltic in the mid-eighth century, even before the raiding period began farther west. Their initial motive was trade, not conquest, trading and collecting goods like furs, amber, and honey and transporting them south to both Byzantium and the Abbasid Caliphate. The Vikings were slavers as well, capturing Slavic peoples and selling them in the south. In turn, the Vikings brought a great deal of Byzantine and Abbasid currency to the north, introducing hard cash into the mostly barter-based economies of Northern and Western Europe. Eventually, they settled along their trade routes, often invited to establish order by the native Slavs in cities like Kiev, with the Vikings ultimately forming the earliest nucleus of Russia as a political entity. The very name “Russia” derives from “Rus,” the name of the specific Viking people (originally from Sweden) who settled in the Slavic lands bordering Byzantium.

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 (911–986 CE), in 958, Norway in 995 under Olaf Tryggvason, and Sweden in 995 as well under Olof Skötkonung (c. 980–1022). 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 Latin 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 several languages. Despite having lost the opulence and much of the learning of Rome, medieval Europe was not a static, completely backward place. Instead, it slowly but surely constructed an entirely new form of society in place of what had been.

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Historians sometimes refer to the period between approximately 1000 and 1300 CE as the “high” Middle Ages to emphasize its dynamism, creativity, and importance in setting the stage for subsequent historical developments. During the high Middle Ages, the European economy greatly expanded, leading to a revived cash economy and widespread trade and commerce. Towns and cities grew, and with them new centers of learning emerged. While still highly decentralized by the standards of later periods, kingdoms did start the gradual process of transforming into more highly organized states. Europe also re-engaged in significant ways with its neighboring regions, leading to both an influx of foreign trade goods and, unfortunately, tremendous bloodshed in the form of the crusades.

The Crusades

The Crusades were a series of invasions of the Middle East by Europeans in the name of Christianity. They went on, periodically, for centuries. They resulted in a shift in the identity of Latin Christianity, great financial benefits to certain parts of Europe, and many instances of horrific carnage. The Crusades serve as one of the iconic points of transition from the early Middle Ages to the high Middle Ages, in which the localized, barter-based economy of Europe transitioned toward a more dynamic commercial economic system.

The background to the Crusades was the power of a specific group of nomadic warriors in the Middle East, that of the Seljuk Turks. The Seljuks were fierce fighters, trained by their background as steppe nomads and raiders, who had converted to Islam prior to the eleventh century. The Seljuks were a tribal confederation, not a united kingdom or empire, and they invaded Muslim kingdoms as often as Christian ones. Despite their lack of political unity, they proved even more deadly foes to the Byzantine Empire than had the Arab caliphates, and by late in the eleventh century the Byzantine emperor Alexius called for aid from the Christians of western Europe, despite the ongoing divide between the Latin and Orthodox churches.

In 1095, Pope Urban II responded by giving a sermon in France summoning the knights of Europe to holy war to protect Christians in and near the Holy Land. Urban spoke of the supposed atrocities committed by the Turks, the richness of the lands that European knights might expect to seize, and the righteousness of the cause of aiding fellow Christians. The idea caught on much faster and much more thoroughly than Urban could have possibly expected; knights from all over Europe responded when the news reached them. The idea was so appealing that not only knights but thousands of commoners responded, forming a “people’s crusade” that marched off for Jerusalem, for the most part without weapons, armor, or adequate supplies.
Much of the impulse of the Crusades came from the fact that Urban II offered unlimited penance to the crusaders, meaning that anyone who took part in the crusade would have all of their sins absolved; furthermore, pilgrims were now allowed to be armed. Thus, the Crusades were the first armed Christian pilgrimage, and in fact, the first “official” Christian holy war in the history of the religion. In addition to the promise of salvation, and equally important to many of the knights who flocked to the crusading banner, was the promise of loot (and, again, Urban’s speech explicitly promised the crusaders wealth and land). Many of the crusaders were minor lords or landless knights, men who had few prospects back home but now had the chance to make something of themselves in the name of liberating the Holy Land. Thus, most crusaders combined ambition and greed with genuine Christian piety.

The backbone of the Crusades were the knightly orders: organizations of knights authorized by the Church to carry out wars in the name of Christianity. These orders came into being after the First Crusade, originally organized to provide protection to Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land. They were made up of “monk-knights” who took monastic vows (i.e., of obedience, poverty, and chastity) but spent their time fighting as well as praying. The concept already existed at the start of the crusading period, but the orders grew quickly thanks to their involvement in the invasions. Two orders in particular, the Hospitallers and the Templars, would go on to achieve great wealth and power despite their professed vows of poverty.

The First Four Crusades

The First Crusade (1095–1099), which lasted only four years following the initial declaration by Pope Urban, was amazingly successful. What had once been the great power of the Middle East, the Abbasid Caliphate, had long since splintered apart, with rival kingdoms holding power in North Africa and the Middle East. The doctrinal differences between Sunni and Shia Muslims further divided the Muslim ummah (community of believers). In addition, the Arab kingdoms battled the Seljuk Turks, who were intent on conquering everything, not just Christian lands. Thus, the crusaders arrived precisely when the Muslim forces were profoundly divided. By 1099, the crusaders had captured Jerusalem and much of the Levant, forming a series of Christian territories in the heart of the Holy Land. These were called the Latin Principalities, kingdoms ruled by European knights.
The Latin Principalities at their height. Note how the Seljuk (here spelled “Seljuq”) territories almost completely surrounded the principalities.

After their success in taking Jerusalem, the knightly orders became very powerful and very rich. They not only seized loot, but became caravan guards and, ultimately, money-lenders (the Templars became bankers after abandoning the Holy Land when Jerusalem was lost in 1187). Essentially, the major orders came to resemble armed merchant houses as much as monasteries, and there is no question that many of their members did a very poor job of living up to their vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity. Likewise, the rulers of the Latin Principalities made little effort to win over their Muslim and Jewish subjects.

Subsequent crusades were much less successful. The problem was that, once they had formed their territories, the Westerners had to hold on to them with little but a series of strong forts up and down the
coast. The European population centers were obviously hundreds or thousands of miles away and the local people were mostly Jews and Muslims who detested the invaders. While generations of Europeans continued to regard crusading as a worthwhile endeavor, that enthusiasm did ebb over time as the crusades came to resemble conventional invasions more so than genuine holy wars.

Attacks on the Latin Principalities resulted in the Second Crusade, which lasted from 1147 to 1149. The Second Crusade consisted of two crusades that happened simultaneously: some European knights sailed off to the Holy Land, while others fought against the Cordoban Caliphate in the Iberian Peninsula. The Europeans ultimately lost ground in the Middle East but managed to retake Lisbon in Portugal from the Muslim Caliphate there. In fact, the Second Crusade’s significance is that crusaders began to wage an almost ceaseless war against the Cordoban Caliphate in Spain – in a sense, Christian Europeans, particularly the inhabitants of the Christian kingdoms of northern Spain, concluded that there were plenty of infidels much closer to home than Jerusalem and its environs. These wars of Christians against Spanish Muslims were called the Spanish “Reconquest” (Reconquista), and they lasted until the last Muslim kingdom fell in 1492 CE.

In 1187 an Egyptian Muslim general named Salah-ad-Din (his name is normally anglicized as Saladin) retook Jerusalem after crushing the crusaders at the Battle of Hattin. This prompted the Third Crusade (1189–1192), a massive invasion led by the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (Frederick Barbarossa), the king of France (Philip II), and the king of England (Richard I – known as “the Lion-Hearted”). It completely failed, with the English king negotiating a peace deal with Saladin after Frederick died (he drowned trying to cross a river) and Philip returned to France. After this, only a few small territories remained in Christian hands.

Arguably the most disastrous (in terms of failing to achieve its stated goal of controlling the Holy Land) crusade was the Fourth Crusade, lasting from 1199–1204. This latest attempt to seize Jerusalem began with a large group of crusaders chartering passage with Venetian sailors, long since accustomed to profiting from crusader traffic. En route, the crusaders and sailors learned of a succession dispute in Constantinople and decided to intervene. The intervention turned into an outright invasion, with the crusaders carrying out a horrendously bloody sack of the ancient city. In the end, the crusaders set up a Latin Christian government that lasted for about fifty years while completely ignoring their original goal of sailing to the Holy Land. The only lasting effect of the Fourth Crusade was the further weakening of Byzantium in the face of Turkish invaders in the future. To emphasize the point: Christian knights from Western Europe set out to attack the Muslim kingdoms of the Middle East but ended up conquering a Christian kingdom, and the last political remnant of the Roman Empire at that, instead.

Many further crusades followed; popes would continue to authorize official large-scale invasions of the Middle East until the end of the thirteenth century, and the efforts of Christian knights in Spain during the Reconquest very much carried on the crusading tradition for centuries. Later crusades were often nothing more than politically-motivated power grabs on the part of popes, launched against a given pope’s political opponents (i.e., fellow European Christians who happened to be at odds with a pope). Technically, the last crusade was the Holy League, an army drawn from various kingdoms in Central and Eastern Europe dispatched to fight the Ottoman Empire in 1684. None of the latter crusades succeeded in seizing land in the
Middle East, but they did inspire a relentless drive to overthrow and destroy the now centuries-old Muslim kingdom of Spain, as noted above, and they also inspired the idea of the potential “holiness” of warfare itself among Christians.

Consequences of the Crusades

The Crusades had numerous consequences and effects. Three were particularly important. First, the city-states of northern Italy, especially Venice, Genoa, and Pisa, grew rich transporting goods and crusaders back and forth between Europe and the Middle East. As the transporters, merchants, and bankers of crusading expeditions, it was northern Italians that derived the greatest financial benefit from the invasions. The Crusades provided so much capital that the northern Italian cities evolved to become the banking center of Europe and the site of the Renaissance starting in the fifteenth century.

Second, the ideology surrounding the Crusades was to inspire European explorers and conquerors for centuries. The most obvious instance of this phenomenon was the Reconquest of Spain, which was explicitly seen through the lens of the crusading ideology at the time. In turn, the Reconquest was completed in 1492, precisely the same year that Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas. With the subsequent invasions of South and Central America by the Spanish, the crusading spirit, of spreading Catholicism and seizing territory at the point of a sword, lived on.

Third, there was a new concern with a particularly intolerant form of religious purity among many Christian Europeans during and after the Crusades. One effect of this new focus was numerous outbreaks of anti-Semitic violence in Europe; many crusaders attacked Jewish communities in Europe while the crusaders were on their way to the Holy Land, and anti-Jewish laws were enacted by many kings and lords inspired by the fervent, intolerant new brand of Christian identity arising from the Crusades. Thus, going forward, European Christianity itself became harsher, more intolerant, and more warlike because of the Crusades.

The Northern Crusades and the Teutonic Knights

Often overlooked in considerations of the Crusades were the “Northern Crusades” – invasions of the various Baltic regions of northeastern Europe (i.e., parts of Denmark, northern Germany, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Finland) between 1171, when Pope Alexander III authorized a crusade against the heathens of the east Baltic region, and the early fifteenth century, when the converted kingdoms and territories of the Baltic began to seize independence from their crusading overlords: the Teutonic Knights.

The Teutonic Knights were a knightly order founded during the Third Crusade at a hospital in the Latin city of Acre. They were closely modeled after the Templars, adopting their “rule” (their code of conduct) and spending most of the twelfth century crusading in the Holy Land. Their focus shifted, however, in the middle of the century when they began leading crusades against the pagan peoples of the eastern Baltic, including the Lithuanians, Estonians, Finns, and other groups.
The Baltic lands were the last major region of Europe to remain pagan. Neither Latin nor Orthodox missionaries had made significant headway in converting the people of the region, outside of the border region between the lands of the Rus and the Baltic Sea. Thus, the Teutonic Knights could make a very plausible case for their Crusades as analogous to the Spanish Reconquest, and the Teutonic Knights proved very savvy at placing agents in the papal court that worked to maintain papal support for their efforts.

The Teutonic Order ultimately outlasted the other crusading orders by centuries. The order was very successful at drumming up support from European princes and knights, relying on annual expeditions of visiting warriors to do most of the fighting while the Teutonic Knights themselves literally held down the fort in newly-built castles. They were authorized by various popes not only to conquer and convert, but to rule over the peoples of the east Baltic, and thus by the thirteenth century the Teutonic Knights were in the process of conquering and ruling Prussia, parts of Estonia, and a region of southeastern Finland and present-day Lithuania called Livonia. These kingdoms lasted a remarkably long time; the Teutonic Order ruled Livonia until 1561, when it was finally ousted. Thus, for several centuries, the map of Europe included the strange spectacle of a theocratic state: one ruled directly by monk-knights, with no king, prince, or lord above them.
The theocracy of the Teutonic Knights as of 1466 (marked in orange and purple along the shores of the Baltic). Note that 1466 falls squarely into the Renaissance period – the Northern Crusades began during the Middle Ages but their influence lasted far longer.

The Northern Crusades were, in some ways, as important as the crusades to the Holy Land in that they were responsible for extinguishing the last remnants of paganism in Europe – it was truly gone by the late fourteenth century in Lithuania, Estonia, and Livonia – and in conquering a large territory that would one day be a core part of Germany itself: Prussia.

The Middle East after the Caliphates

The irony of the crusades to the Holy Land is that the vast majority of people who lived in the Middle East did
not think of politics in terms of Muslim versus Christian (or Jewish) identity. The fairly brief and ephemeral period of political unity under the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates that saw most of the Middle East and North Africa united under the rule of “caliphs” was gone by the time the first European crusaders arrived. In turn, despite disrupting and transforming the Holy Land itself for a time, the crusades had little overall impact on the societies of the Middle East themselves. Those societies represented a cross-section of ethnic, religious, and regional identities that underwent major transformations in the period of the High Middle Ages.

By the time the last Abbasid caliph was murdered by the Mongols in 1258, the caliphate itself had long degenerated into a legal fiction. The caliphs themselves had become honored prisoners of more powerful invading forces starting in 945, and the territories of the former caliphate were divided between numerous sultans, an Arabic word that simply means “ruler.” Many of those sultans petitioned for recognition from the captive caliphs as a form of spiritual and political currency, but the bottom line is that the caliphs themselves exercised no political authority of their own.

This was not, however, a period of stagnation in the Middle East and North Africa. First and foremost, the culture of learning that had blossomed during the Abbasid period continued to prosper. Scholarship in fields as diverse as theology and astronomy was supported by numerous sultans. Persian became the international language of both scholarship and poetry during this period, with major works being written in Persian from northern India to Anatolia by writers of a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds. In fact, it was not until the nineteenth century that writers drifted away from Persian as the “default” language of learning. In that way, Persian was something of a parallel to Latin in Europe, with the major difference being that (unlike Latin) Persian remained a living language spoken by millions of people.

In addition to scholarship and literature, commerce thrived in the post-caliphate Middle East. Almost without exception, elites went out of their way to actively encourage trade by building and policing trade routes and founding caravanserais, fortified waystations for mercantile travelers. In contrast to the contempt for merchants felt by most elite Europeans at the time, merchants were an honored part of Persian, Turkic, and Arabic societies. The result was a thriving commercial economy across most of the region, although it is important to bear in mind that most people were still farmers in the Middle East just as they were everywhere else in the pre-modern world.

The Turkic Migrations and Ottoman Origins

By far the most important and far-reaching event in the Middle East during the post-caliphate period was the arrival of the Turks. As noted above, the group known as the Seljuks migrated from Central Asia starting in earnest in the tenth century CE, settling from Afghanistan to Anatolia over the course of the following centuries. The Turks were nomadic warriors organized into tribal confederations (the Seljuks were simply the leading tribe rather than the actual rulers during the first wave of migration), effective in warfare but generally poor at establishing stable governments. A series of Turkic dynasties across the region began in 998 under
the Ghaznavids in Persia, but the history of those dynasties is a litany of invasion, assassination, and collapse, typically after a few generations of shaky rule.

Where Turkic dynasties were able to establish a stable rule for at least a century, it was usually thanks to the infusion of Persian traditions of statecraft. The Seljuk dynasty that overthrew the Ghaznavids in 1040 drew on the long history of effective Persian administration to build up an actual government (rather than just meetings of tribal leaders) and to financially support the building projects associated with Islamic civilization like madrasas (schools for instruction in the Koran and Islamic law) and public baths. Likewise, as the Seljuks encroached on Byzantine territory to the west, the first stable Turkic state there – the Sultanate of Rum (Rome) – relied heavily on Persian administrators and Persian political traditions.

The greatest literary work of medieval Islam was in Persian, the poet Firdausi’s (d. 1020) Shahnamah, a mythologized account of Persian rulers reaching back to the ancient past that suggested a single cultural and political tradition. Even though they were not ethnically Persian, Turkic rulers embraced this idea of historical sovereignty, seeing themselves as the inheritors of over a thousand years of Persian rule. Simply put, Persian political culture was crucial in creating actual states out of tribal confederations, although it is important to acknowledge that many of those states were not especially long-lived during the medieval period.

Unfortunately for the Turkic dynasties at the time and for millions of ordinary people across the Middle East, the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century devastated much of the region. By 1256 the Seljuk territories had been crushed by the Mongols and a decades-long period of brutal exploitation and pillaging ensued. The Mongols established a kingdom known as the Il-Khanate in Persia in 1256, but it took until 1295 for the Mongol ruler Ghazan, the first to convert to Islam, to shift Mongol priorities away from plundering expeditions to more conventional rulership and taxation. While Egypt fought off the Mongols, most of the rest of the Middle East either experienced harsh Mongol rule itself or political fragmentation as a side effect of the invasions.

It was in the aftermath of the Mongol invasions that the Ottoman Turks began their ascent to power. Starting as nothing more than a small Turkic beglik (sultanate), the Turks defeated a Byzantine army in 1302 and seized part of Anatolia. Over the next few decades, they built up a formidable reputation as ghazis, holy warriors, but they also made a point of taking over the lands of former Byzantine subjects without inflicting excessive destruction or cruelty (to Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike). In 1352 they took control of a key fortress near Constantinople, and from there they launched a stunning series of invasions in Greece and the Balkans. In the process, Byzantium was reduced to a pitiful fragment of its former glory, holding on to the city of Constantinople and its hinterlands but otherwise surrounded by Ottoman territories.

The Emergence of the High Middle Ages in Europe

Thus, the Middle East during the period of the crusades was already a prosperous and sophisticated, albeit politically splintered, region. Europe at the time was also politically disunited, and it had much further to climb in terms of wealth, scholarship, and commerce. Europe began a long period of transformation and growth
starting in about 1000 CE that resulted in significant economic expansion, demographic growth, and cultural achievement.

The early Middle Ages, from about 500 CE to 800 CE, operated largely on the basis of subsistence agriculture and a barter economy. Economies were almost entirely local; local lords and kings extracted wealth from peasants, but because there was nowhere to sell a surplus of food, peasants tended to grow only as much as they needed to survive, using methods that went unchanged for centuries. There was a limited market for luxury goods even among those wealthy enough to afford them, and the only sources of reliable minted coins were over a thousand miles away, in Byzantium, Persia, and the Arab kingdoms.

This descent into subsistence had happened for various reasons over the course of the earlier centuries. The fall of the western empire of Rome had strangled the manufacture and trade in high-quality consumer goods (a trade that had been very extensive in Rome). Centuries of banditry, raids, and wars made long-distance travel perilous. In turn, the simple lack of markets meant that there was no incentive to grow more than was needed, and the nobility sought to become more wealthy and powerful not by concerning themselves with agricultural productivity (let alone commerce) but by raiding one another’s lands.

Europe had enjoyed brief periods of relative stability earlier, culminating around 800 CE during Charlemagne’s rise to power. During the rest of the ninth and tenth centuries, however, the invasions of the Magyars, Saracens, and Vikings had undermined the stability of the fragile political order created by the Carolingians. Many accounts written at the time, almost exclusively by priests and monks, decried the constant warfare of the period, including the wars caused by invaders from beyond the European heartland and those between European rulers themselves. Historians now believe that market exchange was growing as a component of the European economy by about 800 CE, but the period between 800–1000 was still one of political instability and widespread violence.

Things started to change around the year 1000 CE. The major causes for these changes were twofold: the end of full-scale invasions from outside of the core lands of Europe, and changes in agriculture that seem very simple from a contemporary perspective but were revolutionary at the time.

The Medieval Agricultural Revolution

In 600 CE, Europe had a population of approximately 14 million. By 1300 it was 74 million. That 500% increase was due to two simple changes: the methods by which agriculture operated and the ebb in large-scale violence brought about by the end of foreign invasions. The first factor in the dramatic increase in population was the simple cessation of major invasions. With relative social stability, peasants were able to consistently plant and harvest crops and not see them devoured by hungry troops or see their fields trampled. Those invasions stopped because the Vikings went from being raiders to becoming members of settled European kingdoms, the Magyars likewise took over and settled in present-day Hungary, and the Saracens were beaten back by increasingly savvy southern-European kingdoms. Warfare between states in Europe remained nearly
constant, and banditry was still commonplace in the countryside, but it appears that the overall levels of violence did drop off over the course of the eleventh century.

Simultaneously, important changes were underway in agricultural technology. Early medieval farmers had literally scratched away at the soil with light plows, usually drawn by oxen or donkeys. Plows were like those used in ancient Rome: the weight of the plow was carried in a pole that went across the animal’s neck. Thus, if the load was too heavy the animal would simply suffocate. In turn, that meant that only relatively soft soils could be farmed, limiting the amount of land that could be made arable.

A series of inventions led to dramatic changes. Someone (we have no way of knowing who) developed a new kind of collar for horses and oxen that rested on the shoulders of the animal and thus allowed it to draw much heavier loads, enabling the use of heavier plows. Those plows were called *carruca*: a plow capable of digging deeply into the soil and turning it over, bringing air into the topsoil and refreshing its mineral and nutrient content. Simultaneously, iron horseshoes became increasingly common, which dramatically increased the ability of horses to produce usable muscle power, and iron plowshares proved capable of digging through the soil with greater efficiency.

In addition to the increase in available animal power thanks to those innovations, farmers started to take advantage of new techniques that greatly increased the output of the fields themselves. Up to that point, European farmers tended to employ two-field crop rotation, planting a field while leaving another “fallow” to recover its fertility for the next year. This system was sustainable but limited the amount of crops that could be grown. Starting around 1000 CE, farmers became more systematic about employing three-field crop rotation: working with three linked fields, they would plant one with wheat, one either with legumes (peas, beans, lentils) or barley, and leave one fallow, allowing animals to graze on its weeds and leftover stalks from the last season, with their manure helping to fertilize the soil. After harvest, farmers would rotate: the fallow field would be planted with grain, the grain with legumes, and the legume field left fallow. This process dramatically enriched the soil by returning nutrients to it directly with legumes or at least allowing it to naturally recover while it lay fallow. Thus, the overall yields of edible crops dramatically increased. Likewise, with the greater variety, the actual nutritional content of food became better.

Finally, starting in earnest in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, windmills and watermills became increasingly common for grinding grain into usable flour. The difference in speed between hand-grinding grain and using a mill was dramatic – it could take most of a day to grind enough flour to bake bread for a family, but a mill could grind fifty pounds of grain in less than a half hour. While peasants resented having to pay for access to mills (which were generally controlled by landowners, often nobles or the Church), the enormous increase in productivity meant that much more food was available overall. Thus, mills were still cost effective for peasants, and milled flour became the norm across most of Europe by the end of the twelfth century.

The medieval agricultural revolution had tremendous long-term consequences for peasants and, ultimately, for all of European society. Thanks to the increase in animal power and the effects of crop rotation, existing fields became far more productive. Whole new areas were opened to cultivation, thanks to the ability of the *carruca* to cut through rocky soil. As a result, there was a major expansion between 1000 and 1300 from...
the middle latitudes of Europe farther north and east, as the farming population took advantage of the new technology (and growing population) to clear and cultivate what had been forest, scrub, or swamp. In turn, the existence of a surplus encouraged lords to convert payment in kind (i.e., taxes and rents paid in actual foodstuffs and livestock) to cash rent. Likewise, the relative stability allowed smaller kingdoms to mint their own coins, and over the course of a century or so (c. 1000–1100), much of Europe became a cash economy rather than a barter economy. This gave peasants an added incentive to cultivate as much as possible.

Peasants did very well for themselves in these centuries; they were often able to bargain with their lords for stabilized rents, and a fairly prosperous class of landowning peasants emerged that enjoyed traditional rights vis-à-vis the nobility. Thus, the centuries between 1000 CE and 1300 CE were relatively good for many European peasants. Later centuries would be much harder for them. As an aside, it is important to bear in mind that the progressive view of history, namely the idea that “things always get better over time,” is factually wrong for much of history, as reflected in the lives of peasants in the Middle Ages and early modern period.

Cities and Economic Change

The increase in population tied to the agricultural revolution had another consequence: beyond simply improving life for peasants and increasing family size: it led to the growth of towns and cities. Even though most peasants never left the area they were born in, many did migrate to the nearest towns and cities and try to make a life there; serfs (unfree peasants) who made it to a town and stayed a year and day were even legally liberated from having to return to the farm. Likewise, whole families and even villages migrated in search of new lands to farm, usually to the east and north, as noted above.

This period saw the rebirth of urban life. Not since the fall of Rome had most towns and cities consisted of more than just central hubs of local trade with a few thousand inhabitants. By the twelfth century, however, many cities were expanding rapidly. The leaders of these cities were often merchants who grew rich on trade, rather than traditional landowning lords.

Even as the agricultural revolution laid the foundation for growth and the cities took advantage of it, other factors led to the economic boom of this period. Lords created new roads and repaired Roman ones from 1,000 years earlier, which allowed bulk trade to travel more cheaply and effectively. More important than bulk goods, however, were luxury goods, a trade almost entirely controlled by the Italian cities during this period. Caravans arrived in the Middle East from China and Central Asia and sold goods to Italian merchants waiting for them. From the Black Sea Region and what was left of Byzantium, the Italians then transported these goods back west. Silk and spices were worth far more than their weight in gold, and their trade created the foundation for early financial markets and banks.

Trade networks emerged not only linking Italy to the Middle East but southern to northern Europe. In the Champagne region of France, annual fairs brought merchants together to trade their goods. German rivers saw the growth of towns and cities on their banks where goods were exchanged. Starting in the twelfth century,
the German city of Lubeck became the capital of the Hanseatic League, a group of cities engaged in trade that came together to regulate exchange and maintain monopolies on goods.

The social consequences were dramatic and widespread, yet the status of merchants in European society was troubled. They were resented by the poor (still the vast majority of the population), often held in contempt by traditional landowning nobles, and frequently condemned by the Church. Usury, the practice of lending money and charging interest, was classified as a sin by the Church even though the Church itself had to borrow money and pay interest constantly. Likewise, anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jews as greedy and ruthless arose from the simple fact that dealing in money and money-lending was one of the only professions Jews were allowed to pursue in most medieval kingdoms and cities. Christian Europeans needed loans (as it happens, loans and banking are essential to a functioning cash economy) but despised the Jews they got those loans from – hence the origins of some of the longest-lasting anti-Semitic stereotypes.

Even though cities did not “fit” in the medieval worldview very well, even the most conservative kings had to recognize the economic strength of the new cities. Just as peasants had been able to negotiate for better treatment, large towns and cities received official town charters from kings in return for stable taxation. In many cases, cities were practically politically independent, although they generally had to acknowledge the overall authority of the king or local lord.

The growth in trade did not, however, create a real “market economy” in the modern sense. For one thing, skilled trades were closely regulated by craft guilds, which maintained legal monopolies. Monopolies were granted to guilds by kings, lords, or city governments, and anyone practicing a given trade who was not a member of the corresponding guild could be fined, imprisoned, or expelled. Guilds jealously guarded the skills and tools of their trades – everything from goldsmithing to barrel making was controlled by guilds. Guilds existed to ensure that their members produced quality goods, but they also existed to keep out outsiders and to make the “masters” who controlled the guilds wealthy.

**Medieval Politics**

The feudal system flourished in the High Middle Ages. While it had its origins in the centuries after the collapse of the western Roman Empire, the formal system of vassals receiving land grants by pledging military service to kings (or, increasingly, in return for cash payments in lieu of military service) really came of age in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The lords themselves presided over a rigidly hierarchical social and political system in which one’s vocation was largely determined by birth, and the vocation of the nobility was clearly defined by landowning and making war.

Lords – meaning landowning nobles – lived in “manors,” a term that denoted not only their actual houses but the lands they owned. All of the peasants on their lands owed them rent, originally in the form of crops but eventually in cash, as well as a certain amount of labor each year. Peasants were subdivided into different categories, from the relatively-well off independent yeomen and freeholders, who owned their own plots of land, down to the serfs, semi-free peasants tied to the land, and then the cottagers, who were the landless
peasants worse-off even than serfs. The system of landownership and the traditional rights enjoyed by not just lords, but serfs and freeholders who lived under the lords, is referred to as “manorialism,” the rural political and economic system of the High Middle Ages as a whole.

One of the traditional rights, and a vital factor in the lives of peasants, were the commons: lands not officially controlled by anyone that all people had a right to use. The commons provided firewood, grazing land, and some limited trapping of small animals, collectively serving as a vital “safety net” for peasants living on the edge of subsistence. Access to the commons was not about written laws but instead the traditional, centuries-old agreements that governed the interactions between different social classes. Eventually, peasants would find their access to the commons curtailed by landowning nobles intent on converting them to cash-producing farms, but for the medieval period itself, the peasants continued to enjoy the right to their use.

The kingdoms of Europe up to this point were barely unified. In many cases, kings were simply the most powerful nobles, men who extracted pledges of loyalty from their subjects but whose actual authority was limited to their personal lands. Likewise, kings in the early Middle Ages were largely itinerant, moving from place to place all year long. They had to make an annual circuit of their kingdoms to ensure that their powerful vassals would stay loyal to them; a vassal ignored for too long could, and generally did, simply stop acknowledging the lordship of his king. Those patterns started to change during the High Middle Ages, and the first two kingdoms to show real signs of centralization were France and England.

In France, a series of kings named Philip (I through IV) ruled from 1060 to 1314, building a strong administrative apparatus complete with royal judges who were directly beholden to the crown. The kings ruled the region around Paris (called the Île-de-France, meaning the “island of France”), but their influence went well beyond it as they extended their holdings. Philip IV even managed to seize almost complete control of the French Church, defying papal authority. He also proved incredibly shrewd at creating new taxes and in attacking and seizing the lands and holdings of groups like the French Jewish community and the Knights Templar, both of whom he ransacked (the assault on the Knights Templar started in 1307).

In England, the line descending from William the Conqueror (following his invasion in 1066) was also effective in creating a relatively stable political system. All land was legally the king’s, and his nobles received their lands as “fiefs,” essentially loans from the crown that had to be renewed for payments on the death of a landholder before they could be inherited. Henry II (r. 1154–1189) created a system of royal sheriffs to enforce his will, created circuit courts that traveled around the land hearing cases, and created a grand jury system that allowed people to be tried by their peers.

In 1215, Henry II’s son, a much less competent king named John, signed the Magna Carta (“great charter”) with the English nobility that formally acknowledged the feudal privileges of the nobility, towns, and clergy. The important effect of the Magna Carta was its principle: even the king had to respect the law. Thereafter English kings began to call the Parliament, a meeting of the Church, nobles, and well-off commoners, in order to get authorization and money for their wars.
Women and Gender

Gender standards in medieval Europe were based on a combination of centuries-old social traditions, ancient medical theories, and biblical standards. Greek and Roman medical ideas, very much the basis of the medieval understanding of human biology, held that women were essentially inferior versions of men: weaker, less intelligent, and suffering from an excess of moist “humors” (the bodily fluids that supposedly formed the foundation of health). Biblical stories taught that women were inherently more credulous and sinful, with Eve’s temptation in the Garden of Eden both the origin and the model of female wickedness. When male writers bothered to write about women, they generally did so with predictable misogyny. A handful of women writers emerged over the course of the Middle Ages, but since there were almost no opportunities for women to learn Latin (the great exception being the education afforded to some nuns), they were cut off from the world of medieval scholarship.

That being noted, on a practical level, medieval women exercised at least some forms of genuine agency (meaning the ability to make meaningful choices about their own lives). Legally, women could inherit and own property independently, and in most cases they retained control of the dowry brought to marriage. Women almost always married younger than men did, meaning there were large numbers of widows in medieval society who generally retained control of their property. Marriage itself was regarded as a sacred duty: it was one of the seven sacraments that the Church held were essential to spiritual salvation. Marriages were only valid if both parties entered into the marriage willingly.

In daily life women performed a host of crucial economic and social functions. Medieval society was, after all, completely dependent on agriculture and the vast majority of the population were peasants, with men and women both obliged to work from childhood to old age (which for most people was their late 30s – life expectancy was the early 40s for both men and women). Farm work was divided between men’s and women’s labor. Men plowed fields, tended the large farm animals, and performed maintenance and construction. Women gardened, tended the small animals (e.g., poultry), made cheese and ale, and were almost completely responsible for cooking, cleaning, and childcare. This gendered division of labor was never absolute, of course, especially since women did “men’s work” out of necessity whenever men were away in war, were injured or sick, or were otherwise unavailable. One area that had an obvious negative impact on medieval women was that their work was never done – a man’s workday ended when he returned from the fields, but a woman always had work that needed to be done around the house.

Women in more elite social categories also performed important economic tasks, but they were increasingly excluded from the formal institutions of organization and power like craft guilds (more women worked as skilled artisans before craft guilds cemented their control of production). The wives of artisans were often artisans themselves, but their work was simply regarded as part of their husbands’ output. Married noblewomen managed their estates, a necessity considering how closely noblemen’s social identity revolved around warfare, while noble widows sometimes served as formal feudal vassals to more powerful lords, even occasionally leading troops when called into service. Still, the expectation was that women in general were
to defer to men in almost every case, and even widows often found themselves pressured to remarry (and in the process hand over much of their former independence). Even queens were usually limited in their access to genuine political power, serving as “queens consort,” wives of kings, with the latter possessing complete political control, far more often than “queens regnant,” rulers in their own right who were able to share power with their royal spouse.

Monasticism

One special social category within medieval society deserves added attention: the monks and nuns. Monks and nuns took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience when they left their normal lives and joined (respectively) monasteries and convents. They did not, however, have to spend their time attending to the spiritual needs of laypeople (i.e., people outside of the Church), which was the primary function of priests. Instead, they were to devote themselves to prayer and to useful works, activities that were thought to encourage piety and devotion among the monks and nuns, and which often proved to be extremely profitable to the monasteries and convents themselves.

Monasteries and convents grew to become some of the most important economic institutions in medieval Europe, despite their stated intention of housing people whose full-time job was to pray for the souls of Christians everywhere. Monasteries and convents had to be economically self-sustaining, overseeing both agriculture and crafts on their lands. Over time, activities like overseeing agriculture on monastery lands, brewing beer or making wine, or painstakingly copying the manuscripts of books often became a major focus of life in monasteries and convents. In essence, many monasteries and convents became the most dynamic and commercially successful institutions in their home regions. Monks and nuns encouraged innovative new forms of agriculture on their lands, sold products (including textiles and the above-mentioned beer and wine) at a healthy profit, and despite their vows of poverty, successful monasteries and convents became lavishly decorated and luxurious for their inhabitants.

Simultaneously, one way that medieval elites tried to shore up their chances of avoiding eternal damnation was leaving land and wealth in their wills to monasteries and convents. Generations of European elites granted land to monasteries and convents during life or as part of their posthumous legacy. The result was the astonishing statistic that monasteries owned a full 20% of the arable land of Western Europe by the late Middle Ages.

Corruption

Monasteries and convents were not alone in their wealth. The upper ranks of the Church – bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and the popes themselves – were almost exclusively drawn from the European nobility. Lower-ranking churchmen were, in turn, commoners, often drawn from the ranks of the same peasants that they ministered to from one of the small parish churches that dotted the landscape. All of the wealth that
went into the Church, from an obligatory tax called the tithe, was siphoned up to the upper reaches of the institutional Church, and many of the high-level priests lived like princes as a result.

Morality in this setting was, predictably, lax. Despite the nominal requirement not to marry, many high-level priests lived openly with concubines and equally openly supported their children, seeing their sons set up as landowners or members of the Church and marrying off daughters to noble families. Despite the injunction to live simply and avoid luxury, many priests (and monks, and nuns) were greedy and ostentatious; one notorious practice was of bishops or archbishops who controlled and received incomes from many different territories (called “bishoprics”) at once but never actually visited them. Another practice was of noblemen literally buying positions in the Church for their sons – teenage boys might find themselves appointed bishops thanks to the financial intervention of their fathers, with Church officials pocketing the bribe. Medieval depictions of hell were full of the image of priests, monks, and nuns all plummeting into the fire to face eternal torment for what a profoundly poor job they had done while alive in living up to the moral demands of their respective vocations. In other words, medieval laypeople were well aware of how corrupt many in the Church actually were.

In addition, while medieval education and literacy were almost entirely confined to the Church as an institution, many rural priests were at best semi-literate. All Church services were conducted in Latin, and yet some priests understood Latin only poorly, if at all (it had long since vanished as a vernacular language in Europe). Thus, some of the very caretakers of Christian belief in medieval society often had a very shallow understanding of what that belief was supposed to consist of theologically.

For all of the Middle Ages, however, the fact that the lay public knew that the Church was corrupt and that many of its members were incompetent was of limited practical importance. There was no alternative. Without the Church, without the sacraments only it could offer, without the prayers issued by monks and nuns for the souls of believers, and without its reassurance of a life to come after death, medieval Christians were certain that their eternal souls were damned to hell.

**Medieval Learning**

Despite the biases of later Renaissance thinkers that the medieval period was nothing but the “Dark Ages,” bereft of learning and culture, there were very important intellectual achievements in the period of 1000–1400 CE. Most of these had to do with foreign influences that were taken and reshaped by European thinkers, from the ancient Greeks and Romans to innovations originating in the Islamic empires to the south and east of Europe.

Likewise, despite the problems of corruption and ignorance among members of the clergy, scholarship did continue and even prosper within the Church during the late Middle Ages. Numerous priests not only were literate in Latin and deeply knowledgeable about Christian theology but made major strides in considering, debating, and explaining the nuances of Christian thought. Thus, it is a mistake to consider the medieval
Church as nothing more than a kind of “scam” – it did provide meaningful guidance and comfort to medieval Christians, and some of its members were exemplary thinkers and major intellectuals.

**Intellectual Life in the Middle Ages**

A symptom of the growth of intellectual life in the High Middle Ages was the fact that literacy (which, at the time, meant the ability to read, not necessarily to write) finally revived, at least a bit, following the real nadir of literacy that had lasted from the collapse of the western Roman Empire until about 1050. As of 1050, perhaps 1% of the population could read, most of whom were priests, some of the latter only being able to stumble through the Latin liturgy without fully comprehending it. While it is impossible to calculate anything close to the exact literacy rates at any point before the modern era, it is still clear that literacy started to climb following that eleventh-century low point, with many regular merchants and even a few peasants acquiring at least basic reading knowledge by the fourteenth century. The explanation for this growth in literacy is an expansion of educational institutions that had only existed in a few pockets earlier in the Middle Ages.

The two forms of educational institutions available were tutoring offered within monasteries and schools associated with cathedrals. Both were, obviously, part of the Church, and cathedral schools typically focused on training future priests. Monasteries offered basic education in literacy (in Latin) to laypeople as well as the monks themselves, and even some prosperous farmers achieved a basic degree of literacy as a result. Cathedral schools in cities offered the same, and they increasingly trained not only local elites but even the children of artisans and merchants.

They began to expand after 1000 CE, offering a more focused and rigorous grounding in sacred texts and, to an extent, ancient texts from Rome, to help educate Church leaders and laypeople. The cathedral schools were supposed to be turning out not just spiritual leaders but skilled bureaucrats, and that required a rigorous form of education that encouraged the study not just of the Bible but of classics of Latin literature like the speeches of the great Roman politician Cicero and ancient Rome’s great epic poem, Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Thus, those priests-in-training who were lucky enough to attend one of the better cathedral schools acquired a strong command of classical Latin and were made aware of the high intellectual standards that had prospered in the glory days of Rome.

**Scholasticism**

If there was a single event that changed education and scholarship in the late Middle Ages, it was the arrival of the lost works of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle was one of the greatest geniuses of the ancient world, producing learned works on philosophy, astronomy, physics, biology, literary criticism, and, most importantly for medieval Europe, logic. Some of Aristotle’s works had survived in Europe after the fall of Rome, but most of it had vanished. Over the course of the eleventh century, translations of Aristotle’s work on formal philosophical logic re-emerged in Europe. Most had been preserved in the Arab world, where Aristotle
was considered the single most important pre-Islamic philosopher and was studied with great rigor by Arab scholars. Enterprising scholars – many of them Jewish philosophers who lived in North Africa and Spain – translated Aristotle’s work on logic from Arabic into Latin. Later, Greeks from Byzantium came to Europe with the originals in Greek, and they, too, translated it into Latin.

The importance of this rediscovery of Aristotle is that his work on logic offered a formal system for evaluating complicated bodies of work like the Christian Bible itself. The inherent problem facing believers of any religion based on a single major text is figuring out what that text fundamentally means.

Thus, Aristotle’s formal approach to logic proved invaluable to the interpreters of the Bible. Armed with his newly-rediscovered system of logical interpretation, key figures within the Church began to analyze the Bible and the works of early Christian thinkers with new energy and focus. The result was scholasticism, which was the major intellectual movement of the High Middle Ages. Scholasticism was the rigorous application of methods of logic, originally developed by Aristotle, to Christian scriptures. And, because the cathedral schools of the late Middle Ages increasingly relied on scholasticism to train and teach new priests, it spread rapidly across all of Europe.

By roughly 1100 CE, a new form of formal education based on scholasticism was the method of instruction in cathedral schools. The instructor would read a short passage from the Bible or an early Christian intellectual leader, then cite various authorities on the meaning of the passage. This was called the lecture, which simply means the “reading.” Students would then consider the possible meanings of the passage in a period of meditation. Finally, and most importantly, students would be called on to debate their respective interpretations. In debates, students were expected to cite not only the passage itself but any supporting evidence they could come up with from the vast body of sacred and ancient writings. The result was that, at least at the better cathedral schools, large numbers of newly-minted priests emerged with a strong understanding of Christian thought and an equally strong grasp of rhetoric, debate, and logic.

The importance to scholasticism of what was called at the time “disputation” – the debating technique described above – cannot be overstated. Rather than merely presenting an interpretation of Christian thought and expecting students to absorb it verbatim, scholastic teachers used disputation with students to hone their students’ argumentative skills, insight, and logical analysis. One obvious example of a field that benefited from formal disputation was law: disputation as a technique easily transitioned from biblical questions to legal ones, and by the twelfth century new generations of lawyers (starting in Italy) used scholastic techniques both to revive aspects of Roman law and to hone their own skills as lawyers.

Some teachers in the scholastic tradition became minor intellectual celebrities, the most celebrated being Peter Abelard (1079–1142), a brilliant teacher and debater in Paris who gave extensive lectures exploring both the pros and cons of various important questions that had been considered by the Church fathers. Abelard’s major focus was the use and application of reason to faith – he was of the belief that ultimate truth could and should sustain reasoned investigation of its precepts, a stance that got him into considerable trouble with some Church leaders. Abelard’s point was that educated Christians should challenge their own beliefs and try to understand them; to him, since Christians were safe in the assumption that the Bible would always be the...
ultimate source of truth, their own attempts to understand its apparent contradictions and ambiguities only strengthened the Christian religion as a whole.

The new rigor of education and the expansion of cathedral schools, helped in part by the popularity of figures like Abelard, led in turn to the emergence of the first true universities. Initially, they were comparable to craft guilds, with organizations of students and teachers negotiating over the cost of classes and preventing unauthorized lecturers from stealing students. A princely charter was granted to the law students of Bologna in northern Italy in 1158, which marks it as the first recognized university. The most significant medieval university was, however, the Sorbonne of Paris in 1257. It grew out of the cathedral school of Notre Dame, at which Abelard had taught, and it is usually considered the oldest large university in the Western world (it is still very much in operation today).

Medieval universities created a number of practices that live on to the present in higher education. They drew up a curriculum, established graduation requirements and exams, and conferred degrees. The robes and distinctive hats of graduation ceremonies are directly descended from the medieval models. Teachers were all members of the clergy, “professing” religion, hence the term “professor.” The core disciplines, which date back to Roman times, were divided between the liberal arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic (called the trivium) and what might now be described as a more “technical” set of disciplines: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (the quadrivium) – this division was the earliest version of a curriculum of “arts and sciences.” Finally, the four kinds of doctorates, the PhD (doctor of philosophy), the JD (doctor of jurisprudence, that is to say of law), the ThD (doctor of theology, a priest), and the MD (doctor of medicine), are all derived from medieval degrees.

All students and professors were male, since the assumption was that the whole purpose of studies was to create better Church officials; while some women did become important medieval thinkers, they were either exceptional individuals who had been tutored by men or were nuns who had access to the (often excellent) education of the convents. One outstanding example of a medieval woman who was known in her own lifetime as a major intellectual figure was Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), abbess of a German convent. While not formally educated in the scholastic tradition, Hildegard was nevertheless the author of several works of theological interpretation and of medicine. She was a musician and composer as well, writing music and musical plays performed by both nuns and laypeople. She carried on a voluminous correspondence with other learned people during her lifetime and was eventually sainted by the Church. While Hildegard was exceptional in her range of intellectual production, many other women within the Church also contributed to medieval learning and scholarship as a whole.

Conclusion

While it is tempting to characterize European intellectual life before about 1000 CE as part of a “dark age,” that was obviously no longer the case by the eleventh century. Educational institutions multiplied, diversified, and expanded, and the quality of education and scholarship increased along with that expansion. While most
people – by definition, peasants – remained illiterate and largely ignorant of the world beyond their own villages, there was at least a current of real intellectual curiosity and rigorous scholarship expanding in the cities, monasteries, and convents of the High Middle Ages.

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15.

THE CRISES OF THE MIDDLE AGES

From a very “zoomed-out” perspective, the years between about 1000 CE and 1300 CE were relatively good ones for Europe. The medieval agricultural revolution sparked an expansion of population, urbanization, and economics; advances in education and scholarship paid off in higher literacy rates and a more sophisticated intellectual life; and Europe was free of large-scale invasions. Starting in the mid-thirteenth century in Eastern Europe, and spreading to Western Europe in the fourteenth century, however, a series of crises undermined European prosperity, security, and population levels. Historians refer to these events as the “crises of the Middle Ages.”

The Mongols

The Mongols are not always incorporated into the narrative of Western Civilization, because despite the enormous breadth of their empire under Genghis (the Anglicized form of his name; the actual pronunciation in Mongolian is Chinggis) Khan and his descendants, most of the territories held by the Mongols were in Asia. The Mongols, however, are entirely relevant to the history of Western Civilization, both because they destabilized the kingdoms of the Middle East at the time and because they ultimately set the stage for the history of early-modern Russia.

The Mongols and the Turks are related peoples from Central Asia going back to prehistory. They were nomads and herders with very strong traditions of horse riding, archery, and warfare. In general, the Turks lived in the western steppes and the Mongols in the eastern steppes, with the Turks threatening the civilizations of the Middle East and Eastern Europe, and the Mongols threatening China. A specific group of Turks, the Seljuks, had already taken over much of the Middle East by the eleventh century, and over the next two hundred years they deprived the Byzantine Empire of its remaining holdings outside of Constantinople and its immediate surroundings.

Meanwhile, in 1206 the Mongols elected a leader named Temujin (b. 1167) as khan, which simply means “lord” or “warlord.” The election was the culmination of years of battles and struggles between Temujin and various rival clan leaders. By the time he united the Mongols under his rule, he had already overcome numerous setbacks and betrayals, described years later in a major history commissioned by the Mongol rulers, the Secret History of the Mongols. After his election as khan, he set his sights on the lands beyond Mongolia and eventually became known as Genghis Khan, meaning “universal lord.” He united both the Mongols and various Turkic clans, then launched the single most successful campaign of empire-building in world history.
Genghis personally oversaw the beginning of the expansion of the “Mongol Horde” across all of Central Asia as far as the borders of Russia and China. Over the following decades, Mongol armies conquered all of Central Asia itself, Persia (in 1221), northern China (in 1234), Russia (in 1241), the Abbasid Caliphate (in 1258), and southern China (in 1279). Importantly, most of these conquests occurred under Genghis’s sons and grandsons (he died in 1227), demonstrating that Mongol military prowess was not dependent on his personal genius. Ultimately, the Mongol empires (a series of “khanates” divided between the sons and grandsons of Genghis) stretched from Hungary to Anatolia and from Siberia to the South China Sea.

Mongol military discipline was extraordinary by pre-modern standards. Starting with Genghis himself, all Mongols were beholden to a code of conduct and laws called the *Yasa* (historians debate whether or not the Yasa was a codified set of laws or just a set of traditions). They were divided into units divisible by ten, from hundred-man companies to ten-thousand-man armies called tumen. Since clan divisions had always undermined Mongol unity in the past, Genghis deliberately placed members of a given clan in different tumen to water-down clan loyalty and encourage his warriors to think of themselves as part of something greater than their clans.

Mongols had strict regulations for order of march, guard duty, and maintenance of equipment. All men were expected to serve in the armies, and the Mongols quickly and efficiently plundered the areas they conquered to supply their troops. Mongols trained relentlessly; during the brief periods of peace, they took part in great hunts of animals which were then critiqued by their commanders. Each warrior had several horses, all trained to respond to voice commands, and in battle Mongol armies were coordinated by signal flags.

The Mongols also made extensive use of spies and intelligence to gather information about areas they
planned to attack, interviewing merchants and travelers before they arrived. They were noteworthy for being willing to change their tactics to suit the needs of a campaign, using siege warfare, terror tactics, and even biological warfare (flinging plague-ridden corpses over city walls) as necessary. Once the Mongols had conquered a given territory, they would deport and use soldiers and engineers from the conquered peoples against new targets: Persian siege engineers were used to help the conquest of China, and later, Chinese officials were used to help extract taxes from what was left of Persia.

The Mongol horde often devastated the lands it conquered. Some, like the Central Asian kingdom of Khwarizm, were so devastated that the areas it encompassed never fully recovered. Genghis himself believed that civilization was a threat that might soften his men, so he had whole cities systematically exterminated; in some of their invasions, the Mongols practiced a medieval form of what we might justifiably call genocide. Fortunately for the areas conquered by the Mongols, however, under Genghis’s sons and grandsons, this policy of destruction gave way to one of (often still vicious) economic exploitation and political dominance.

The Mongols in Eastern Europe

In 1236, after years of careful planning, the Mongols attacked Russia. Russia was not a united kingdom – instead, each major city was ruled by a prince, and the princes often fought one another. When the Mongols arrived, the Russian principalities were divided and refused to fight together, making them easy prey for the unified and highly-organized Mongol army. By 1240, all of the major Russian cities had been either destroyed or captured – the city of Vladimir was burned with its population still inside.

In 1241 the Mongols invaded Poland and Hungary simultaneously. Here, too, they triumphed over tens of thousands of European knights and peasant foot-soldiers. Both kingdoms would have been incorporated into the Mongol Empire if not for the simple fact that the Great Khan Ogodei (Genghis’s third son, who had become Great Khan following Genghis) died, and the European tumen were recalled to the Mongol capital of Karakorum. This event spared what very well could have been a Mongol push into Central Europe itself; the pope at the time called an anti-Mongol crusade, and those Europeans who understood the scope of the threat were terrified of the prospect of the Mongols marching further west. As it happens, the Mongols never came back.

The Mongols were finally stopped militarily by the Mamluk Turks, the rulers of Egypt as of the thirteenth century, who held back a Mongol invasion in 1260. By then, the inertia of the Mongol conquests was already slowing down as the great empire was divided between different grandsons of Temujin; the Mamluk victory did not represent the definitive defeat of the Mongol horde as a whole, just a check on Mongol expansion in one corner of the vast Mongol Empire. By then, the Mongol khanates had become truly independent from one another, with Mongol rule eventually collapsing over time (a process that happened in just a few decades in some places, but took centuries in others – Russia was not free of Mongol rule until the second half of the fifteenth century).

Mongol rule had mixed consequences for both Asian and European history. There was a beneficial
stabilization in the trade that crossed the West–East axis in Eurasia as a continent, as Silk Road traders enjoyed a relatively peaceful and stable route. It also terrified Europeans, who heard travelers’ tales of the non-Christian “Tatars” in the East who had crushed all opposition, and in Russia it created a complex political situation in which the native Slavic peoples were forced to pay tribute to Mongol lords. To this day, the period of Mongol rule is often taught in Russia as the period of the “Tatar Yoke,” when any hope of progress for Russia was suspended for centuries while the rest of Europe advanced; while that may be a bit of an exaggeration, it still has a kernel of truth.

The Black Death

Historians have now arrived at a consensus that the deadliest epidemic in medieval and early-modern history began in the Mongol khanates and spread west: the Black Death, or simply “the plague,” of the fourteenth century. The plague devastated the areas it affected, none more so than Europe. That devastation was in large part due to the vulnerability of the European population to disease thanks both to poor harvests and the lack of practical medical knowledge.

A series of bad harvests led to periods of famine in Europe starting in the early fourteenth century. Conditions in some regions were so desperate that peasants reportedly resorted to cannibalism on occasion. When harvests were poor, Europeans not only died outright from famine, but those who survived were left even more vulnerable to epidemics because of weakened immune systems. By the time the plague arrived in 1348, generations of people were malnourished and more susceptible to infection as a result.

Medicine was completely ineffective in holding the plague in check. Europeans did not understand contagion – they knew that disease spread, but they had absolutely no idea how to prevent that spread. The prevailing medical theory was that disease was spread by clouds of foul-smelling gases called miasmas, like those produced by stagnant water and decay. Thus, people sincerely believed that if one could avoid the miasmas (which of course never actually existed), they could avoid sickness. Over the centuries, doctors advocated various techniques that were meant to dispel the miasmas by introducing other odors, including leaving piles of onions on the streets of plague-stricken neighborhoods and, starting in the seventeenth century, wearing masks that resembled the heads of birds, with the “beaks” stuffed with flower petals.

Not surprisingly, given the dearth of medical knowledge, epidemics of all kinds regularly swept across Europe. When harvests failed, the poor often went to the cities in search of some kind of respite, either work or Church-based charity. In 1330, for instance, the official population of the northern Italian city of
Florence was 100,000, but a full 20,000 were paupers, most of whom had come from the countryside seeking relief. The cities became incubators for epidemics that were even more intense than those that affected the countryside.

Thus, a vulnerable and, in terms of medicine, ignorant population fell victim to the virulence of the Black Death from 1348 to 1351. Historians still debate as to exactly which (identifiable with contemporary medical knowledge) disease or diseases the Black Death consisted of, but the prevailing theory is that it was **bubonic plague**. Bubonic plague is transmitted by fleas, both those carried by rats and transmitted to humans, and on fleas exclusive to humans. In the unsanitary conditions of medieval Europe, there were both rats and fleas everywhere. In turn, many victims of bubonic plague developed the “pneumonic” form of the disease, spread by coughing, which made it both incredibly virulent and lethal (about 90% of those who developed pneumonic plague died).

The theory that the Black Death was the bubonic plague runs into one problem: modern outbreaks of bubonic plague do not seem to travel as quickly as did the Black Death, although that almost certainly has much to do with the vastly more effective sanitation and treatment available in the modern era as compared to the medieval setting of the Black Death. One hypothesis is that those with bubonic plague may have caught pneumonia as a secondary infection, and that pneumonia was thus another lethal component of the Black Death. Regardless of whatever disease or combination of diseases the Black Death really was, the effects were devastating.

The plague exploded across Europe starting at the end of the 1340s. All of Southern Europe was affected in 1348; it spread to Central Europe and England by 1349 and Eastern Europe and Scandinavia by 1350. It went on to spread even further and continued to fester until 1351, when it had killed so many people that the survivors had developed a resistance to it. The death toll was astonishing: in the end, the Black Death killed between one-third and one-half of the population of Europe in just three years. Some cities lost over half of their population; there are even cases of villages where there was only a single survivor. This was an enormous demographic shift in a very short amount of time that had lasting consequences for European society, thanks mostly to the labor shortage that it introduced.
The plague’s spread, from south to north, over the course of just a few years. The section marked in grey is incorrectly labeled “minor outbreak”: in fact, while data is difficult to come by for that region, it seems clear that the plague hit just as hard there as elsewhere in Europe.

The only somewhat effective response to the Black Death was the implementation of quarantines. The more fast-acting city governments of Europe locked those who had plague symptoms in their homes, often for more than a month, and sometimes whole neighborhoods or districts were placed under quarantine. In the countryside, people refused to travel to larger cities and towns out of fear of infection. Even though quarantines slowed the spread of the plague in some cases, overall they did little but delay it.

More common than practical measures like quarantines, however, were prayer and the search for scapegoats to blame for the devastation. The spiritual reaction to the plague was, among Christian Europeans, to implore
God for relief, beg for forgiveness, and look to outsiders to blame. Building on the murderous anti-Semitism that had begun in earnest during the period of the crusades, Jews were often the victims of this phenomenon. There was a huge spike in anti-Semitic riots during plague outbreaks, as Jews were blamed for somehow bringing the plague (a frequent accusation was that Jews had poisoned wells), and thousands of Jews were massacred as a result.

Religious movements emerged in response to the plague as well, like the Flagellants: groups of penitents who roamed the countryside, villages, and towns whipping themselves and begging God for forgiveness. Many people sincerely believed that the Black Death was the beginning of the end times, since the history of Europe in the fourteenth century so clearly involved both famine and pestilence – two of the four “horsemen” that were to accompany the end times according to the Bible (the others, war and death, were ever-present as well).

The Black Death ended in 1351, but the plague returned roughly every twenty years in some form. Some cases were as devastating, at least in limited areas, as the Black Death had been. The plague did not disappear entirely until the early eighteenth century – to this day it is not clear what brought an end to large-scale plague outbreaks, although one theory is that a species of brown rat that was not as vulnerable to the plague overwhelmed the older black rats that had infested Europe.

Effects of the Plague’s Aftermath

Ironically, the immediate economic effects of the plague after it ended were largely positive for many people. The demographic consequences of the Black Death, namely its enormous death toll, resulted in a labor shortage across all of Europe. The immediate effect was that lords tried to keep their peasants from fleeing the land and to keep wages at the low levels they had been at before the plague hit, sparking various peasant uprisings. Even though those uprisings were generally bloodily put down in the end, the overall trend was that laborers had to be paid more; their labor was simply more valuable. In the decades that followed, then, many peasants benefited from higher prices for their labor and their crops.
Another group that benefited was women. For roughly a century after the plague, women had more legal rights in terms of property ownership, the right to participate in commerce, and land ownership than they had enjoyed before the plague’s outbreak. Women were even able to join certain craft guilds for a time, something that was almost unheard of earlier. The reason for this temporary improvement in the legal and economic status of women was precisely the same as that of peasants: the labor shortage.

The plague also ushered in a cultural change that came about because of the prevalence of death in the fourteenth century. Europeans became so used to death that they often depicted it graphically and quite terribly in art. Paintings, stories, and theatrical performances emerged having to do with the “dance of death,” a depiction of the futility of worldly possessions and status vis-à-vis the inevitability of death. Likewise, graves and mausoleums came to be decorated with statues of grotesque skeletons and writhing bodies. When people were dying, their families and friends were supposed to come and view them, inoculating everyone present against the temptation to enjoy life too much and encouraging them to greater focus on preparing their souls for the afterlife.

The Hundred Years’ War

The plague happened near the beginning of the conflict between England and France remembered as the Hundred Years’ War, which lasted from 1337 CE – 1453 CE. That conflict was not really one war but instead consisted of a series of battles and shorter wars between the crowns of England and France interrupted by (sometimes fairly long) periods of peace.

The war began because of simmering resentments and dynastic politics. The root of the problem was that the English kings were descendants of William the Conqueror, the Norman king who had sailed across the English Channel in 1066 CE and defeated the Anglo-Saxon king who then ruled England. From that point on, the royal and noble lines of England and France were intertwined, and as marriage between both nobles and royalty often took place across French–English lines, the inheritance of lands and titles in both countries was often a point of contention. The culture of nobility in both countries was so similar that the “English” nobles generally spoke French instead of English in day-to-day life.

This confusion very much extended to the kings themselves. The English royal line (the Plantagenets) often enjoyed pledges of fealty from numerous “French” nobles, and “English” kings often thought of themselves as being as much French as English – the English King Richard the Lion-Hearted, for instance, spent most
of his career in France battling for control of more French territory. Likewise, a large region in southwestern France, Aquitaine, was formally the property of the English royal line, with the awkward caveat that, while a given English king might be sovereign in England, his lordship of Aquitaine technically made him the vassal of whoever the French king happened to be. Thus, hundreds of years after William’s conquest, the royal and noble lines of England and France were often hard to distinguish from one another.

The war began in the aftermath of the death of the French King Charles IV in 1328 CE. The king of England, Edward III, was next in line for succession, but powerful members of the French nobility rejected his claim and instead pledged to give the crown to a French noble of the royal line named Philip VI. When Philip began passing judgments to do with the English-controlled territory of Aquitaine, Edward went to war, sparking the Hundred Years’ War itself.

The war itself consisted of a series of raids and invasions by English forces, punctuated by the occasional large battle. English kings and knights kept the war going because it was a way to enrich themselves – they would arrive in France with a moderately-sized force of armed men to loot and pillage. English forces tended to be better organized than were their French counterparts, so even France’s much greater wealth and size did not prevent major English victories. The most famous of those victories was the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 CE, in which a smaller English force decimated the elite French cavalry through effective use of longbows, a weapon that could transform an English peasant into more than the equal of a mounted French knight. The aftermath of Agincourt saw most of the French nobility accept the English king, Henry V, as the king of France. Henry V promptly died, however, and the conflict exploded into a series of alliances and counter-alliances between rival factions of English and French nobles (one French territory, Burgundy, even declared its independence from France and became a staunch English ally for a time).

Decades into the war, the French received an unexpected boost in their fortunes thanks to the intervention of one of the future patron saints of France itself: Joan of Arc. Joan was a peasant girl who walked into the middle of the conflict in 1429 CE, supporting the French Dauphin (heir) Charles VII. Joan reported that she had received a vision from God commanding her to help the French achieve victory against the invading English. French forces rallied around Joan, with Joan herself leading the French forces in several battles. Remarkably, despite being a teenage peasant with no military background, she proved capable at aiming catapults, making tactical decisions, and rallying the French troops to victory. Buoyed by the sense that God was on their side, French forces prevailed. Even though she was soon captured and handed over to the English for trial and execution as a witch by the Burgundians, Joan became a
martyr to the French cause and, eventually, one of the most significant French nationalist symbols. By 1453 CE, the French forces finally ended the English threat.

The war had a devastating effect on France. Between the fighting and the plague, its population declined by half. Many French regions suffered economically as luxury trades shut down and whole regions were devastated by the fighting. The French crown introduced new taxes, such as the *gabelle* (a tax on salt) and the *taille* (a household tax) that further burdened commoners. On the cultural front, the English monarchy and nobility severed their ties with France and high English culture began to self-consciously reshape itself as distinctly *English* rather than French, leading among other things to the use of the English language as the language of state and the law for the first time.

**The Babylonian Captivity and the Great Western Schism**

Even as the French and English were at each other’s throats, the Catholic Church fell into a state of disunity, sometimes even chaos. The cause was one of the most peculiar episodes in late medieval European history: the “**Babylonian Captivity**” of the popes in the fourteenth century. The term originally referred to the Biblical story of the Jews’ enslavement by the Babylonian Empire in the sixth century BCE, but the late-medieval Babylonian Captivity refers instead to the period during which the popes no longer lived in their traditional residence in Rome.

The context for this strange event was the state of the Catholic Church as of the early fourteenth century. The Church was a very diverse, and somewhat diffuse, institution. Due to the simple geographical distance between Rome and the kingdoms of Europe, the popes did not exercise much practical authority over the various national churches, and high-level churchmen in European kingdoms were often more closely associated with their respective kings than with Rome. Likewise, there were many times during the Middle Ages when individual popes were weak and ineffectual and could not even command obedience within the Church hierarchy itself.

Over the centuries the papacy struggled, and often failed, to assert its control over the Church as an institution and to hold the pretensions of kings in check. Those weaknesses were reflected in a simple fact: there had been a number of times over the centuries in which there were rival popes, generally appointed by compliant Church officials who answered to kings. Obviously, having rival popes undermined the central claim of the papacy to complete authority over the Church itself and over Christian doctrine in the process (let alone the occasional insistence by popes that their authority superseded that of kings – see below).

The Babylonian Captivity began when Pope **Boniface VIII** issued a papal bull (formal commandment) in 1303 CE to the effect that all kings had to acknowledge his authority over even their own kingdoms, a challenge he issued in response to the taxes kings levied on Church property. Unfortunately for Boniface, he lacked both influence with the monarchs of Europe and the ability to defend himself. Infuriated, the French king, **Philip IV**, promptly had the pope arrested and thrown in prison; he was released months later but promptly died.

Philip supported the election of a new pope, **Clement V**, in 1305 CE. Clement was a Frenchman with strong
ties to the French nobility. At the time, Rome was a very dangerous city, with rival noble families literally fighting in the streets in various feuds, so Clement moved himself and the papal office to the French city of Avignon, which was much more peaceful. This created enormous concern among non-French Church officials (most of them Italian), who feared that the French king, then the most powerful ruler in Europe, would have undue influence over the papacy. Their fears seemed confirmed when a pattern developed as Clement started appointing new cardinals: 113 French cardinals were appointed in the following decades, out of the 134 total.

From 1305 to 1378 CE, the popes continued to live and work in Avignon (despite the English invasions of the Hundred Years’ War). They were not directly controlled by the French king, as their opponents had feared, but they were influenced by French politics. They also came to accept bribes and kickbacks for the appointment of priests and bishops, alongside their involvement with shady schemes with Church lands. This situation was soon described as a new Babylonian Captivity by clerics and laypeople alike (especially in Italy), comparing the presence of the papacy in France to the enslavement of the ancient Jews in Babylon.

In 1378 CE, the new pope, Urban VI, announced his intention to move the papacy back to Rome. As rival factions developed within the upper levels of the Church hierarchy, a group of French cardinals elected another, French, pope (Clement VII), and Europe thus was split between two rival popes, both of whom excommunicated each other as heretics and impostors (the term used at the time was “antipope.”) This led to the Great Western Schism, a period from 1378 to 1417 CE during which there were as many as three rival popes vying for power. For almost forty years, the Church was a battlefield between both rival popes and their respective followers, and laypeople and monarchs alike were generally able to go about their business with little fear of papal intervention.

The Great Western Schism finally ended after a series of Church councils, the Conciliar Movement, succeeded in establishing the authority of a single pope in 1417 CE. The movement elected a new pope, Martin V, and made the claim that Church councils could and should hold the ultimate authority over papal appointments – this concept was known as the via consilii, the existence of a great council with binding powers over the Church’s leadership. This, however, undermined the very concept of what the papacy was: the “Doctrine of the Keys” held that the pope’s authority was passed down directly from Christ and that even if councils could play a role in the practical maintenance of the Church, the pope’s authority was not based on their approval. Ultimately, a powerful pope, Eugene IV, reconfirmed the absolute power of the papacy in 1431 CE. Thus, this attempt at reform failed in the end, inadvertently setting the stage for more radical criticisms of papal power in the future.

The most important consequence of the Babylonian Captivity and the Great Western Schism was simple: the moral and spiritual authority of the Church hierarchy was seriously undermined. While no one (yet) envisioned rejecting the authority of the Church altogether, many people regarded the Church’s leadership as just another political institution.
Conclusion

Some of the trends, patterns, and phenomena that were to take shape during the Renaissance era which began around 1300 began in the midst of the crises of the Middle Ages. France and England emerged from the Hundred Years’ War to become stronger, more centralized states (although it took a civil war in England to get there, described in a subsequent chapter). The labor shortage in the aftermath of the Black Death spurred a period of modest economic growth. And, while European culture may have become more pessimistic and xenophobic, one region was rising to wealth and prominence precisely because of its long-distance trade and cultural connections: northern Italy. It was there that the Renaissance began.

Check Your Understanding:
The Renaissance, meaning “rebirth,” was a period of innovation in culture, art, and learning that took place between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, starting in Italy and then spreading to various other parts of Europe. It produced several artists, scientists, and thinkers who are still household names today: Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Donatello, Botticelli, and others. The Renaissance is justly famous for its achievements in art and learning, and even though some of its thinkers were somewhat conceited and off-base in dismissing the prior thousand years or so as being nothing but the “Dark Ages,” it is still the case that the Renaissance was enormously fruitful in terms of intellectual production and creation.

“The” Renaissance lasted from about 1300 to 1500 CE. It ended in the early sixteenth century in that its northern Italian heartland declined in economic importance and the pace of change and progress in the arts and learning slowed, but in a very real sense the Renaissance never truly ended – its innovations and advances had already spread across much of Europe, and even though Italy itself lost its prominence, the patterns that began in Italy continued elsewhere. That was true not only of art but of education, architecture, scholarship, and commercial practices.

The timing of the Renaissance coincided with some of the crises of the Middle Ages described in the last chapter. The overlap in dates is explained by the fact that most of Europe remained resolutely “medieval” during the Renaissance’s heyday in Italy: the ways of life, forms of technology, and political structure of the Middle Ages did not suddenly change with the flowering of the Renaissance, not least because it took so long for the innovations of the Renaissance to spread beyond Italy. Likewise, in Italy itself, the lives of most people (especially outside of the major cities) were all but identical in 1500 to what they would have been centuries earlier.

Background

Simply put, the background of the Renaissance was the prosperity of northern Italy. Italy did not face a major ongoing series of wars like the Hundred Years’ War in France. It was hit hard by the plague, but no more so than most of the other regions of Europe. One unexpected “benefit” to Italy was the Babylonian Captivity and Great Western Schism: because the popes’ authority was so limited, the Italian cities found it easy to operate with little papal interference, and powerful Italian families often intervened directly in the election of popes when it suited their interests. Likewise, the other powers of Europe either could not or had no interest in troubling Italy: England and France were at war, the Holy Roman Empire was weak and fragmented, and
Spain was not united until the late Renaissance period. In short, the crises of the Middle Ages benefited Italy because they were centered elsewhere.

In this relatively stable social and political environment, Italy also enjoyed an advantage over much of the rest of Europe: it was far more urbanized. Because of its location as a crossroads between East and West, Italian cities were larger and there were simply more of them as compared to other kingdoms and regions of Europe, with the concomitant economic prosperity and sophistication associated with urban life. By 1300, northern Italy boasted twenty-three city-states with populations of 20,000 or more, each of which would have constituted an enormous metropolis by medieval standards.

Italian cities, clustered in the north, represented about 10% of Italy’s overall population. While that means that 90% of the population was either rural or lived in small towns, there was still a far greater concentration of urban dwellers in Italy than anywhere else in Europe. Among those cities were also several that boasted populations of over 100,000 by the fifteenth century, including Florence and Milan, which served as centers of banking, trade, and craftsmanship. Italian cities had large numbers of very productive craft guilds and workshops producing luxury goods that were highly desirable all over Europe.

**Economics**

Italy lay at the center of the lucrative trade between Europe and the Middle East, a status determined both by its geography and the role Italians had played in transporting goods and people during the crusading period. Along with the trade itself, it was in Italy that key mercantile practices emerged for the first time in Europe. From the Arab world, Italian merchants learned about and ultimately adopted several commercial practices and techniques that helped Italians stay at the forefront of the European economy as a whole. For example, Italian accountants adopted double-entry bookkeeping (accounts payable and accounts receivable) and Italian merchants invented the *commenda*, a way of spreading out the risk associated with business ventures among several partners – an early form of insurance for expensive and risky commercial projects. Italian banks had agents all over Europe and provided reliable credit and bills of exchange, allowing merchants to travel around the entire Mediterranean region to trade without having to literally cart chests full of coins to pay for new wares.

One other noteworthy innovation first employed in Europe by Italians was the use of Arabic numerals instead of Roman numerals, since the former are so much easier to work with (e.g., imagine trying to do complicated multiplication or division using Roman numerals like “CLXVIII multiplied by XXXVIII,” meaning “168 multiplied by 38” in Arabic numerals…it was simply far easier to introduce errors in calculation using the former). Overall, Italian merchants, borrowing from their Arab and Turkic trading partners, pioneered efforts to rationalize and systematize business itself in order to make it more predictable and reliable.

Benefiting from the fragmentation of the Church during the era of the Babylonian Captivity and the Great Western Schism, Italian bankers also came to charge interest on loans, becoming the first Christians to defy the Church’s ban on “usury” in an ongoing, regular fashion. The stigma associated with usury remained, but
bankers (including the Medici family, which came to completely dominate Florentine politics in the fifteenth century) became so wealthy that social and religious stigma alone was not enough to prevent the spread of the practice. This actually led to more anti-Semitism in Europe, since the one social role played by Jews that Christians had grudgingly tolerated – money-lending – was increasingly usurped by Christians.

Much of the prosperity of northern Italy was based on the trade ties (not just mercantile practices) Italy maintained with the Middle East, which by the fourteenth century meant both the remains of the Byzantine Empire in Constantinople as well as the Ottoman Turkish empire, the rising power in the East. From the Turks, Italians (especially the great mercantile empire controlled by Venice) bought precious cargo like spices, silks, porcelain, and coffee, in return for European woolens, crafts, and bullion. The Italians were also the go-betweens linking Asia and Europe by way of the Middle East: Italy was the European terminus of the Silk Road.

The Italian city-states were sites of manufacturing as well. Raw wool from England and Spain made its way to Italy to be processed into cloth, and Italian workshops produced luxury goods sought after everywhere else in Europe. Italian luxury goods were superior to those produced in the rest of Europe, and soon even Italian weapons were better made. Italian farms were prosperous and, by the Renaissance period, produced a significant and ongoing surplus, feeding the growing cities.

One result of the prosperity generated by Italian mercantile success was the rise of a culture of conspicuous consumption. Both members of the nobility and rich non-nobles spent lavishly to display their wealth as well as their culture and learning. All the famous Renaissance thinkers and artists were patronized by the rich, which was how the artists and scholars were able to concentrate on their work. In turn, patrons expected “their” artists to serve as symbols of cultural achievement that reflected well on the patron. The fluorescence of Renaissance art and learning was a consequence of that very specific use of wealth: mercantile and banking riches translated into social and political status through art, architecture, and scholarship.

**Political Setting**

Even though the western Roman Empire had fallen apart by 476 CE, the great cities of Italy survived in better shape than Roman cities elsewhere in the empire. Likewise, the feudal system had never taken hold as strongly in Italy – there were lords and vassals, but especially in the cities there was a large and strong independent class of artisans and merchants who balked at subservience before lords, especially lords who did not live in the cities. Thus, by 1200, most Italian cities were politically independent of lords and came to dominate their respective hinterlands, serving as lords to “vassal” towns and villages for miles around.

Instead of kings and vassals, power was in the hands of the popoli grossi, literally meaning the “fat people,” but here meaning simply the rich. About 5% of the population in the richest cities was among them. The culture of the popoli grossi was rife with flattery, backstabbing, and politicking, since so much depended on personal connections. Since noble titles meant less, more depended on one’s family reputation, and the most important thing to the social elite was honor. Any perceived insult had to be met with retaliation, meaning
there was a great deal of bloodshed between powerful families. There was no such thing as a police force, after all, just the guards of the rich and powerful and, usually, a city guard that answered to the city council. The latter was often controlled by powerful families on those councils, however, so both law enforcement and personal vendettas were generally carried out by private mercenaries.

Another aspect of the identity of the popoli grossi was that, despite their penchant for feuds, they required a peaceful political setting on a large scale in order for their commercial interests to prosper. Thus, they were often hesitant to embark in large-scale warfare in Italy itself. Likewise, the focus on education and culture that translated directly into the creation of Renaissance art and scholarship was tied to the identity of the popoli grossi as people of peace: elsewhere in Europe noble identity was still very much associated with war, whereas the popoli grossi of Italy wanted to show off both their mastery of arms and their mastery of thought (along with their good taste).

The central irony of the prosperity of the Renaissance was that even in northern Italy, most of the population benefited only indirectly or not at all. While the lot of Italian peasants was not significantly worse than that of peasants elsewhere, poor townsfolk had to endure heavy taxes on basic foodstuffs that made it especially miserable to be poor in one of the richest places in Europe at the time. A significant percentage of the population of cities were “paupers,” the indigent and homeless who tried to scrape by as laborers or sought charity from the Church. Cities were especially vulnerable to epidemics as well, adding to the misery of urban life for the poor.

The Great City-States of the Renaissance

In the fourteenth and the first half of the fifteenth centuries, the city-states of northern Italy were aggressive rivals; most of the formerly independent cities were swallowed up by the most powerful among them. However, as the power of the French monarchy grew in the west and the Ottoman Turks became an active threat in the east, the most powerful cities signed a treaty, the Peace of Lodi, in 1454, which committed each city to the defense of the existing political order. For the next forty years, Italy avoided major conflicts, a period that coincided with the height of the Renaissance.

The great city-states of this period were Milan, Venice, and Florence. Milan was the archetypal despot-controlled city-state, reaching its height under the Visconti family from 1277 to 1447. Milan controlled considerable trade from Italy to the north. Its wealth was dwarfed, however, by that of Venice.

Venice

Venice was ruled by a merchant council headed by an elected official, the Doge. Its Mediterranean empire generated so much wealth that Venice minted more gold currency than did England and France combined, and its gold coins (ducats) were always the same weight and purity and were accepted across the Mediterranean as
a result. Its government had representation for all of the moneyed classes, but no one represented the majority of the city’s population that consisted of the urban poor.

The main source of Venice’s prosperity was its control of the spice trade. It is difficult to overstate the value of spices during the Middle Ages and Renaissance – Europeans had a limitless hunger for spices (as an aside, note that the theory that spices were desirable because they masked the taste of rotten meat is patently false; medieval and Renaissance-era Europeans did not eat spoiled food). Unlike other luxury goods that could be produced in Europe itself, spices could only be grown in the tropical and subtropical regions of Asia, meaning their transportation to European markets required voyages of many thousands of miles, vastly driving up costs.

The European terminus of much of that trade was Venice. In about 1300, 40% of all ships bearing spices offloaded in Venice, and by 1500 it was up to 60%. The prices commanded by spices ensured that Venetian merchants could achieve incredible wealth. For example, nutmeg (grown in Indonesia, halfway around the world from Italy) was worth a full 60,000% of its original price once it reached Europe. Likewise, spices like pepper, cloves, and cinnamon could only be imported rather than grown in Europe, and Venice controlled most of that hugely lucrative trade. Spices were, in so many words, worth far more than their weight in gold.

Based on that wealth, Venice was the first place to create true banks (named after the desks, banchi, where people met to exchange or borrow money in Venice). Furthermore, innovations like the letter of credit were necessitated by Venice’s remoteness from many of its trade partners; it was too risky to travel with chests full of gold, so Venetian banks were the first to work with letters of credit between branches. A letter of credit could be issued from one bank branch at a certain amount, redeemable only by the account owner. That individual could then travel to any city with a Venetian bank branch and redeem the letter of credit, which could then be spent on trade goods.

In addition, because Venice needed a peaceful trade network for its continuing prosperity, it was the first power in Europe to rely heavily on formal diplomacy in its relations with neighboring states. By the late 1400s practically every royal court in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa had a Venetian ambassador in residence. The overall result was that Venice spearheaded many of the practices and patterns that later spread across northern Italy and, ultimately, to the rest of Europe: the political power of merchants, advanced banking and mercantile practices, and a sophisticated international diplomatic network.

**Florence and Rome**

Florence was a republic with longstanding traditions of civic governance. Citizens voted on laws and served in official posts for set terms, with powerful families dominating the system. By 1434 the real power was in the hands of the Medici family, who controlled the city government (the Signoria) and patronized the arts. Rising from obscurity from a resolutely non-noble background, the Medici eventually became the official bankers to the papacy, acquiring vast wealth as a result. The Medici spent huge sums on the city itself, funding the creation of churches, orphanages, and municipal buildings, and the completion of the great dome of the city’s cathedral, at the time the largest freestanding dome in Europe. They also patronized most of the most
famous Renaissance artists (at the time as well as in the present), including Donatello, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo.

Florence benefited from a strong culture of education, with Florentines priding themselves on not just wealth but knowledge and refinement. By the fifteenth century, there were 8,000 children in both religious and civic schools out of a population of 100,000. Florentines boasted that even their laborers could quote the great poet, and native of Florence, Dante Alighieri (author of *The Divine Comedy*). At the height of Medici, and Florentine, power in the second half of the fifteenth century, Florence was unquestionably the leading city in all of Italy in terms of art and scholarship. That central position diminished by about 1500 as foreign invasions undermined Florentine independence.

The city of Rome, however, remained firmly in papal control despite the decline in independence of the other major Italian cities, having become a major Renaissance city after the end of the Great Western Schism. The popes re-asserted their control of the Papal States in central Italy, in some cases (like those of Julius II, r. 1503–1513) personally taking to the battlefield to lead troops against the armies of both foreign invaders and rival Italians. The popes usually proved effective at secular rule, but their spiritual leadership was undermined by their tendency to live like kings rather than priests; the most notorious, Alexander VI (r. 1492–1503), sponsored his children (the infamous Borgia family) in their attempts to seize territory all across northern Italy. Thus, even when “good popes” came along occasionally, the overall pattern was that the popes did little to reinforce the spiritual authority they had already lost because of the Great Western Schism.

Regardless of their moral failings, the popes restored Rome to importance as a city after it had fallen to a population of fewer than 25,000 during the Babylonian Captivity. Under the so-called “Renaissance popes,” the Vatican itself became the gloriously decorated spectacle that it is today. Julius II paid Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, and many of the other famous works of Renaissance artists stud the walls and facades of Vatican buildings. In short, popes after the end of the Great Western Schism were often much more focused on behaving like members of the popoli grossi, fighting for power and honor and patronizing great works of art and architecture, rather than worrying about the spiritual authority of the Church for laypeople.
In general, the Renaissance did not coincide with a great period of technological advances. As with all of pre-modern history, the pace of technological change during the Renaissance period was glacially slow by contemporary standards. There was one momentous exception, however: the proliferation of the movable-type printing press. Not until the invention of the typewriter in the late nineteenth century and the internet in the late twentieth century would comparable changes to the diffusion of information come about. Print vastly increased the rate at which information could be shared, and in turn, it underwrote the rise in literacy of the early modern period. It moved the production of text in Europe away from a “scribal” tradition in which educated people hand-copied important texts toward a system of mass-production.

In the centuries leading up to the Renaissance, of course, there had been some major technological advances. Print, however, introduced a revolution in ideas. By making the distribution of information fast and comparatively cheap, more people had access to that information than ever before. Print was also an enormous leap forward in the long-term view of human technology, since the scribal tradition had been in place since the creation of writing itself.

The printing press works by coating a three-dimensional impression of an image or text with ink, then pressing that ink onto paper. The concept had existed for centuries, first invented in China, and used also in Korea and parts of Central Asia, but there is no evidence that the concept was transmitted from Asia to Europe (it might have, but there is simply no proof either way). In the late 1440s, a German goldsmith named Johannes Gutenberg from the city of Meinz struck on the idea of carving individual letters into small, movable blocks of wood (or casting them in metal) that could be rearranged as necessary to create words. That innovation, known as movable type, made it viable not just to print a single page of text but to simply rearrange the letters to print subsequent pages. With movable type, an entire book could be printed with clear, readable letters, and at a fraction of the cost of hand-copying.

Print spread quickly. Within about twenty years there were printing presses in all of the major cities in Western and Southern Europe. Gutenberg personally trained apprentice printers, who became highly sought-after in cities everywhere once the benefits of print became apparent. By 1500, about fifty years after its invention, the printing press had already largely replaced the scribal tradition in book production. Presses tended to operate in large cities and smaller independent cities, especially in the Holy Roman Empire. The free cities of the German lands and Italy were thus as likely to host a press as were larger capital cities like Paris and Rome.

Gutenberg would go on to invent printed illustration in 1461, using carved blocks that were sized to fit alongside movable type. Printed illustration became crucial to the diffusion of information because literacy rates remained low overall; even when people could not read, however, they could look at pamphlets and posters (called “broadside”) with illustrations. Mere decades after the invention of the press, cheap printed posters and pamphlets were commonplace in the major cities and towns, often shared and read aloud in public gatherings and taverns. Thus, even the illiterate enjoyed increased access to information with print.
Printing had various, and enormous, consequences. Information could be disseminated far more quickly than ever before. Whereas with the scribal tradition, readers tended to hold books in reverence, with the reader having to seek out the book, now books could go to readers. In turn, there was a real incentive for all reasonably prosperous people to learn to read because they now had access to meaningful texts at a relatively affordable price. While religious texts dominated early print, both literary works and political commentaries followed. Overall, print led to a revolutionary increase in the sheer volume of all kinds of written material: in the first fifty years after the invention of the press, more books were printed than had been copied in Europe by hand since the fall of Rome.

There were other, unanticipated issues that arose because of print. In the past, while the Church did its best to crack down on heresies, it was not necessary to impose any kind of formal censorship. No written material could be mass-produced, so the only ideas that spread quickly did so through word of mouth. Print made censorship both much more difficult and much more important, since now anyone could print just about anything. As early as the 1460s, print introduced disruptive ideas in the form of the next best-seller to follow the Bible itself, a work that advocated the pursuit of salvation without reference to the Church entitled *The Imitation of Christ*. The Church would eventually (in 1571) introduce an official Index of Prohibited Books, but several works were already banned by the time the Index was created.

While there were other effects of print, one bears note: it began the process of standardizing language itself. The long, slow shift from a vast number of vernacular dialects across Europe to a set of accepted and official languages was impossible without print. Print necessitated that standardization so that people in different parts of “France” or “England” were able to read the same works and understand their grammar and their meaning. For the first time, the very concept of proper spelling emerged, and existing ideas about grammar began the process of standardization as well.

**Patronage**

The most memorable, or at least iconic, effects of the Renaissance were artistic. To understand why the Renaissance brought about such a remarkable explosion of art, it is crucial to grasp the nature of *patronage*. In patronage, a member of the *popoli grossi* would pay an artist in advance for a work of art. That work of art would be displayed publicly – most obviously in the case of architecture with the beautiful churches, orphanages, and municipal buildings that spread across Italy during the Renaissance. In turn, that art would attract political power and influence on the person or family who had paid for it because of the honor associated with funding the best artists and being associated with their work. While there was plenty of bloodshed between powerful Renaissance families, their political competition as often took the form of an ongoing battle over who could commission the best art and then “give” that art to their home city, rather than actual fighting in the streets.

Perhaps the most spectacular example of patronage in action was when **Cosimo de Medici**, then the leader of the Medici family and its vast banking empire, threw a city-wide party called the Council of Florence in 1439.
The Council featured public lectures on Greek philosophy, displays of art, and a huge Church council that brought together representatives of both the Latin Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church in a (doomed) attempt to heal the schism that divided Christianity. The Catholic hierarchy also used the occasion to establish the canonical and, in a sense, “final” version of the Christian Bible itself (in question were which books ought to be included in the Old Testament). The entire affair was paid for by Cosimo out of his personal fortune – he even paid for the travel expenses of visiting dignitaries from places as far away as India and Ethiopia. The Council clinched the Medici as the family of Florence for the next generation, with Cosimo being described by a contemporary as a “king in all but name.”

Art and learning benefited enormously from the wealth of northern Italy precisely because the wealthy and powerful of northern Italy competed to pay for the best art and the most innovative scholarship – without that form of cultural and political competition, it is doubtful that many of the masterpieces of Renaissance art would have ever been created.

Humanism

The starting point with studying the intellectual and artistic achievements of the Renaissance is recognizing what the word means: rebirth. But what was being reborn? The answer is the culture and ideas of classical Europe, namely ancient Greece and Rome. Renaissance thinkers and artists very consciously made the claim that they were reviving long-lost traditions from the classical world in areas as diverse as scholarship, poetry, architecture, and sculpture. The feeling among most Renaissance thinkers and artists was that the ancient Greeks and Romans had achieved truly incredible things, things that had not been, and possibly could never be, surpassed. Much of the Renaissance began as an attempt to mimic or copy Greek and Roman art and scholarship (correspondence in classical Latin, for example), but over the decades the more outstanding Renaissance thinkers struck out on new paths of their own – still inspired by the classics but seeking to be creators in their own right as well.

Of the various themes of Renaissance thought, perhaps the most important was humanism, an ancient intellectual paradigm that emphasized both the beauty and the centrality of humankind in the universe. Humanists held that humankind was inherently rational, beautiful, and noble, rather than debased, wicked, or weak. They sought to celebrate the beauty of the human body in their art, of the human mind and human achievements in their scholarship, and of human society in the elegance of their architectural design. Humanism was, among other things, an optimistic attitude toward artistic and intellectual possibility that cited the achievements of the ancient world as proof that humankind was the crowning achievement of God’s creation.

Renaissance humanism was the root of some very modern notions of individuality, along with the idea that education ought to arrive at a well-rounded individual. The goal of education in the Renaissance was to realize as much of the human potential as possible with a robust education in diverse disciplines. This was a true, meaningful change over medieval forms of learning in that education’s major purpose was no longer believed
to be the clarification of religious questions or better intellectual support for religious orthodoxy; the point of education was to create a more competent and well-rounded person instead.

Along with the idea of a well-rounded individual, Renaissance thinkers championed the idea of civic humanism: one’s moral and ethical standing was tied to devotion to one’s city. This was a Greek and Roman concept that the great Renaissance thinker Petrarch championed. Here, the Medici of Florence are the ultimate example: there was a tremendous effort on the part of the rich and powerful to invest in the city in the form of building projects and art. This was tied to the prestige of the family, of course, but it was also a heartfelt dedication to one’s home, analogous to the present-day concept of patriotism.

Practically speaking, there was a shift in the practical business of education from medieval scholasticism, which focused on law, medicine, and theology, to disciplines related to business and politics. Princes and other elites wanted skilled bureaucrats to staff their merchant empires; they needed literate men with a knowledge of law and mathematics, even if they themselves were not merchants. City governments began educating children (girls and boys alike, at least in certain cities like Florence) directly, along with the role played by private tutors. These schools and tutors emphasized practical education: rhetoric, math, and history. Thus, one of the major effects of the Italian Renaissance was that this new form of education, usually referred to as “humanistic education” spread from Italy to the rest of Europe by the late fifteenth century. By the sixteenth century, a broad cross-section of European elites, including nobles, merchants, and priests, were educated in the humanistic tradition.

A “Renaissance man” (note that there were important women thinkers as well, but the term “Renaissance man” was used exclusively for men) was a man who cultivated classical virtues, which were not quite the same as Christian ones: understanding, benevolence, compassion, fortitude, judgment, eloquence, and honor, among others. Drawing from the work of thinkers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Virgil, Renaissance thinkers came to support the idea of a virtuous life that was not the same thing as a specifically Christian virtuous life. And, importantly, it was possible to become a good person simply through studying the classics – all of the major figures of the Renaissance were Christians, but they insisted that one’s moral status could and should be shaped by emulation of the ancient virtues, combined with Christian piety.

While the Renaissance case for the debasement of medieval culture was overstated (medieval intellectual life prospered during the late Middle Ages) there was a distinct kind of intellectual courage and optimism that came out of the return to classical models over medieval ones during the Renaissance.

One important caveat must be included in discussing humanistic education, however. While most male humanists supported education for girls, they insisted that it was to be very different than that offered to boys. Girls were to read specific texts drawn from the Bible, the “Church Fathers” (important theologians in the early history of the Church), and classical Greek and Roman writers that emphasized morality, modesty, and obedience. An educated girl was trained to be an obedient, companionable wife, not an independent thinker in her own right. That theme would remain in place in the male-dominated realm of education in Europe for centuries to come, although it is clear from the number of independent, intellectually courageous women
writers throughout the early modern period that girls’ education did not always succeed in creating compliant, deferential women in the end.

Likewise, humanism contributed to an important, ongoing public debate that lasted for centuries: the *querelles des femmes* (“debates about women”). Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, various intellectuals in universities, churches, and aristocratic courts and salons wrote numerous essays and books contesting whether women were naturally immoral, weak, and foolish, or if instead education and environment could lead to intelligence and morality comparable with those of men. While men had dominated these debates early on, women educated in the humanist tradition joined in the *querelles* in earnest during the Renaissance, arguing both that education was key to elevating women’s competence and that women shared precisely the same spiritual and moral nature as did men. Unfortunately, while a significant minority of male thinkers came to agree, most remained adamant that women were biologically and spiritually inferior, destined for their traditional roles and ill-served by advanced education.

**Important Thinkers**

The Renaissance is remembered primarily for its great thinkers and artists, with some exceptional individuals (like Leonardo da Vinci) being renowned as both. What Renaissance thinkers had in common was that they embraced the ideals of humanism and used humanism as their inspiration for creating innovative new approaches to philosophy, philology (the study of language), theology, history, and political theory. In other words, reading the classics inspired Renaissance thinkers to emulate the great writers and philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome, creating poetry, philosophy, and theory on par with that of an Aristotle or a Cicero. Some of the most noteworthy included the following.

**Dante (1265–1321)**

*Durante degli Alighieri*, better remembered simply as Dante, was a major figure who anticipated the Renaissance rather than being alive during most of it (while there is no “official” start to the Renaissance, the life of Petrarch, described below, lends itself to using 1300 as a convenient date). Experiencing what would later be called a mid-life crisis, Dante turned to poetry to console himself, ultimately producing the greatest written work of the late Middle Ages: *The Divine Comedy*. Written in his own native dialect, the Tuscan of the city of Florence, *The Divine Comedy* describes Dante’s descent into hell, guided by the spirit of the classical Roman poet Virgil. Dante and Virgil emerge on the other side of the earth, with Dante ascending the mountain of purgatory and ultimately entering heaven, where he enters into the divine presence.

Dante’s work, which soon became justly famous in Italy and then elsewhere in Europe, presaged some of the essential themes of Renaissance thought. Dante’s travels through hell, purgatory, and heaven in the poem are replete with encounters with two categories of people: Italians of Dante’s lifetime or the recent past, and both real and mythical figures from ancient Greece and Rome. In other words, Dante was indifferent to the entire
period of the Middle Ages, concentrating instead on what he imagined the spiritual fate of the great thinkers and heroes of the classical age would have been (and gleefully relegating Italians he hated to infernal torments). Ultimately, his work became so famous that it established Tuscan as the basis of what would eventually become the language of “Italian” – all educated people in Italy would eventually come to read the Comedy as a matter of course, and it came to serve as the founding document of the modern Italian language in the process.

**Petrarch (1304–1374)**

Francesco Petrarca, known as Petrarch in English, was in many ways the founding father of the Renaissance. Like Dante, he was a Florentine (native of the city of Florence) and single-handedly spearheaded the practice of studying and imitating the great writers and thinkers of the past. Petrarch personally rediscovered long-lost works by Cicero, widely considered the greatest writer of ancient Rome during the republican period and set about training himself to emulate Cicero’s rhetorical style. Petrarch wrote to friends and associates in a classical, grammatically spotless Latin (as opposed to the often sloppy and error-ridden Latin of the Middle Ages) and encouraged them to learn to emulate the classics in their writing, thought, and values. He went on to write many works of poetry and prose that were based on the model provided by Cicero and other ancient writers.

Petrarch was responsible for coming up with the very idea of the “Dark Ages” that had separated his own era from the greatness of the classical past. His own poetry and writings became so popular among other educated people that he deserves a great deal of personal credit for sparking the Renaissance itself; following Petrarch, the idea that the classical world might be “reborn” in northern Italy acquired a great deal of popularity and cultural force.
Christine de Pizan (1364–1430)

Christine de Pizan was the most famous and important woman thinker and writer of the Renaissance era. Her father, the court astrologer of the French king Charles V, was exceptional in that he felt it important that his daughter receive the same quality of education afforded to elite men at the time. She went on to become a famous poet and writer in her own right, being patronized (i.e., receiving commissions for her writing) by a wide variety of French and Italian nobles. Her best-known work was *The Book of the City of Ladies*, in which she attacked the then-universal idea that women were naturally unintelligent, sinful, and irrational; it was a key text in the *querelles des femmes* noted above. Instead, she argued, history provided a vast catalog of women who had been moral, pious, intelligent, and competent, and that it was men’s pride and the refusal of men to allow women to be properly educated that held women back. In many ways, the *City of Ladies* was the first truly feminist work in European history, and it is striking that she was supported by, and listened to by, elite men due to her obvious intellectual gifts despite their own deep-seated sexism.

Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536)

Erasmus was an astonishingly erudite priest who benefited from both the traditional scholastic education of the late medieval Church and the new humanistic style that emerged from the Renaissance. Of his various talents, one of the most important was his mastery of philology: the history of languages. Erasmus became completely fluent not just in classical and medieval Latin, but in the Greek of the New Testament (i.e., most of the earliest versions of the New Testament of the Bible are written in the vernacular Greek of the first century CE). He also became conversant in Hebrew, which was very uncommon among Christians at the time.
In the above well-known portrait of Erasmus, he is depicted in heavy, fur-lined robes and hat, a necessity even when indoors in Northern Europe for much of the year. Realistic portraiture was another major innovation of the Renaissance period.

Armed with his lingual virtuosity, Erasmus undertook a vast study and re-translation of the New Testament, working from various versions of the Greek originals and correcting the Latin Vulgate that was the most widely used version at the time. In the process, Erasmus corrected the New Testament itself, catching and fixing numerous translation errors (while he did not re-translate the Old Testament from the Hebrew, he did point out errors in it as well).

Erasmus was criticized by some of his superiors within the Church because he was not officially authorized to carry out his studies and translations; nevertheless, he ended up producing an extensively notated re-translation of the New Testament with numerous corrections. Importantly, these corrections were not just a question of grammatical issues, but of meaning. The Christian message that emerged from the “correct” version of the New Testament was a deeply personal philosophy of prayer, devotion, and morality that did not correspond to many of the structures and practices of the Latin Church. He was also an advocate of translations of the Bible into vernacular languages, although he did not produce such a translation himself.

Some of his other works included In Praise of Folly, a satirical attack on corruption within the Church, and Handbook of the Christian Soldier, which de-emphasized the importance of the sacraments. Erasmus used his abundant wit to ridicule sterile medieval-style scholastic scholars, the corruption of “Christian” rulers who were essentially glorified warlords, and even the very idea of witches, which he demonstrated relied on a faulty translation from the Hebrew of the Old Testament.

Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527)

Machiavelli was a courtier, professional politician, ambassador, and official who spent his life in the court of a ruler – in his case, as part of the city government of his native Florence. While in Florence, Machiavelli wrote various works on politics, most notably a consideration of the proper functioning of a republic like Florence itself. Unfortunately for him, Machiavelli was caught up in the whirlwind of power politics at court and ended up being exiled by the Medici.

While in exile, Machiavelli undertook a new work of political theory which he titled The Prince. Here, Machiavelli detailed how an effective ruler should behave: training constantly in war, forcing his subjects to fear (but not hate) him, studying the ancient past for role models like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, and never wasting a moment worrying about morality when power was on the line. In the process, Machiavelli created what was arguably the first work of “political science” that abandoned the moralistic approach of how a
ruler should behave as a good Christian and instead embraced a practical guide to holding power. He dedicated the work to the Medici in hopes that he would be allowed to return from exile. Instead, The Prince caused a scandal when it came out for completely ignoring the role of God and Christian morality in politics, and Machiavelli died not long after. That being noted, Machiavelli is now remembered as a pioneering political thinker. It is safe to assume that far more rulers have consulted The Prince for ideas of how to maintain their power over the years than one of the moralistic tracts that was preferred during Machiavelli’s lifetime.

Baldassarre Castiglione (1478–1529)

Castiglione was the author of The Courtier, published at the end of his life in 1528. Whereas Machiavelli’s The Prince was a practical guide for rulers, The Courtier was a guide to the nobles, wealthy merchants, high-ranking members of the Church, and other social elites who served and schemed in the courts of princes: courtiers. The work centered on what was needed to win the prince’s favor and to influence him, not just avoiding embarrassment at court. This was tied to the growing sense of what it was to be “civilized” – Italians at the time were renowned across Europe for their refinement, the quality of their dress and jewelry, their wit in conversation, and their good taste. The relatively crude tastes of the nobility of the Middle Ages were “revised” starting in Italy, with Castiglione serving as both a symptom and cause of this shift.

The effective courtier, according to Castiglione, was tasteful, educated, clever, and subtle in his actions and words, a true politician rather than merely a warrior who happened to have inherited some land. Going forward, growing numbers of political elites came to resemble a Castiglione-style courtier instead of a thuggish medieval knight or “man-at-arms.” When he died, no less a personage than the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V lamented his loss and paid tribute to his memory.

Art and Artists

Perhaps the most iconic aspect of the Renaissance is its tremendous artistic achievements – figures like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti are household names in a way that Petrarch is not, even though Petrarch should be credited for creating the very concept of the Renaissance. The fame of Renaissance art is thanks to the incredible creativity of the great Renaissance artists themselves, who both imitated classical models of art and ultimately forged entirely new artistic paths of their own.
Medieval art (called “Gothic” after one of the Germanic tribes that had conquered the Roman Empire) had been unconcerned with realistic depictions of objects or people. Medieval paintings often presented things from several angles at once to the viewer and had no sense of three-dimensional perspective. Likewise, Gothic architecture tended to be bulky and overwhelming rather than refined and delicate; the great examples of Gothic architecture are undoubtedly the cathedrals built during the Middle Ages, often beautiful and inspiring but a far cry from the symmetrical, airy structures of ancient Greece and Rome.

In contrast, Renaissance artists studied and copied ancient frescoes and statues to learn how to realistically depict people and objects. And, just as Petrarch “invented” the major themes of Renaissance thought by imitating and championing classical humanist thought, a Florentine artist, architect, and engineer named Filippo Brunelleschi “invented” Renaissance art through the imitation of the classical world.

Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446)

Brunelleschi was an astonishing artistic and engineering genius. He became a prominent client of the Medici, and with their political and financial support, he undertook the construction of what would be the largest free-standing domed structure in all of Europe: the dome of the cathedral of Florence. For generations, the cathedral of Florence had stood unfinished; its main tower having been built too large and too tall for any architect to complete. Literally no one knew how to build a freestanding stone dome on top of a tower over 350 feet high. By studying ancient Roman structures and employing his own incredible intellect, Brunelleschi built the dome in such a way that it held its internal structure together during the construction process. He invented a giant, geared winch to raise huge blocks of sandstone hundreds of feet in the air and was even known to personally ascend the construction to place bricks. The dome was completed in 1413, crowning both his fame as an architect and the Medici’s role as the greatest patrons of Renaissance art and architecture at the time.
While the dome is usually considered Brunelleschi’s greatest achievement, he was also the (re-)inventor of one of the most important artistic concepts in history: linear perspective. He was the first person in the Western world to determine how to draw objects in two dimensions, on a piece of paper or the equivalent, in such a way that they looked realistically three-dimensional (i.e., having depth, as in looking off into the distance and seeing objects that are farther away “look smaller” than those nearby). Here, Brunelleschi was unquestionably influenced by a medieval Arab thinker, Ibn Al-Haytham, whose *Book of Optics* laid out theories of light and sight perception that described linear perspective. The *Book of Optics* was available to Brunelleschi in Latin translation, and, crucially, Brunelleschi applied the concept of perspective to actual art (which al-Haytham had not, focusing instead on the scientific basis of optics). In doing so, Brunelleschi introduced the ability for artists to create realistic depictions of their subjects. This innovation spread rapidly and completely revolutionized the visual arts, resulting in far more lifelike drawings and paintings.

**Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510)**

*Botticelli* exemplified the life of a successful Renaissance painter during the height of the most productive artistic period in Florence and Rome. Likewise, his works focused on themes central to the Renaissance as a whole: the importance of patronage, the celebration of classical figures and ideas, the beauty of the human body and mind, and Christian piety. Botticelli was patronized by various members of the Florentine popolo grossi, by the Medici, and by popes, producing numerous frescos (wall paintings done on plaster), portraits, and both biblical and classical scenes. Two of his most famous works capture different aspects of Renaissance art:
The Adoration of the Magi (1475), above, depicts members of the Medici family, Botticelli’s patrons, as taking part in one of the key scenes from the birth of Christ. Botticelli even included himself in the painting; his self-portrait is the figure on the far right. Note how all of the figures are dressed as wealthy Italians of the fifteenth century, not Jews, Romans, and Persians of the first century. Despite the abundance of biblical scenes in Renaissance painting, no attempt was made to depict people as they might have appeared at the time. Instead, the paintings projected the world of the popoli grossi back in time, sometimes (as with this example) even including portraits of actual important Italians.
The Birth of Venus (1485) celebrates a key moment in Greek mythology when the goddess of love, sexuality, and beauty is born from the sea. Here Botticelli pushed the boundaries of Renaissance art (and what was culturally acceptable to his contemporaries) by glorifying not just the beauty of the human body, but by openly celebrating Venus’s sexuality. The painting thus completely rejected the asceticism associated with Christian piety during the Middle Ages, suggesting instead a kind of joyful sensuality.

Despite paintings like The Birth of Venus, however, Botticelli remained a pious Christian throughout his life. In 1490 Botticelli fell under the influence of Girolamo Savonarola, a fiery preacher who came to Florence to denounce its “vanities” (art, rich dress, and general worldliness) and call for a strict, even fanatical form of Christian behavior. While Savonarola was executed in 1493, Botticelli did not go on to produce art at the same pace he had before the 1490s. By then, of course, he had already clinched his place in art history as one of the major figures of Renaissance painting.

Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519)

Da Vinci was famous in his own time as both one of the greatest painters of his age and as what we would now call a scientist – at the time, he was sought after for his skill at engineering, overseeing the construction of the naval defenses of Venice and swamp drainage projects in Rome at different points. He was hired by a whole swath of the rich and powerful in Italy and France; in his old age he was the official chief painter and engineer of the French king, living in a private chateau provided for him and receiving admiring visits from the king.
Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*: Note how the walls and ceiling tiles appear to slant downwards toward a point at the horizon behind Jesus (in the center). That imaginary point – the “vanishing point” – was one of the major artistic breakthroughs associated with linear perspective pioneered by Brunelleschi.

Leonardo’s scientific work was often closely related to his artistic skills. While the practice of autopsy for medical knowledge was nothing new – doctors in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe alike had used autopsies to further medical knowledge for centuries – Leonardo was able to document his findings in meticulous detail thanks to his artistic virtuosity. He undertook dozens of dissections of bodies (most of them executed criminals) and drew precise diagrams of the parts of the body. He also created speculative diagrams of various machines, from practical designs like hydraulic engines and weapons to fantastical ones like flying machines based on the anatomy of birds.

Da Vinci is remembered today thanks as much to his diagrams of things like flying machines as to his art. Ironically, while he was well known as a practical engineer at the time, no one had a clue that he was an inventor in the technological sense: he never built physical models of his ideas, and he never published his concepts, so they remained unknown until well after his death. Likewise, while his anatomical work anticipated important developments in medicine, they were unknown during his own lifetime.
Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564)

Michelangelo was the most celebrated artist of the Renaissance during his own lifetime, patronized by the city council of Florence (run by the Medici) and the pope alike. He created numerous works, most famously the statue of David and the paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The latter work took him four years to complete, during which he argued constantly with the pope, Julius II, who treated him like an artisan servant rather than the true artistic genius Michelangelo knew himself to be. Michelangelo was already the most famous artist in Europe thanks to his sculptures. By the time he completed the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he had to be accepted as one of the greatest painters of his age as well, not just the single most famous sculptor of the time.

In the end, a biography of Michelangelo written by a friend helped cement the idea that there was an important distinction between mere artisans and true artists, the latter of whom were temperamental and mercurial but possessed of genius. Thus, the whole idea of the artist as an ingenious social outsider derives in part from Michelangelo’s life.

Conclusion

Renaissance art and scholarship were enormously influential. While the process took many decades, both humanist scholarship and education on the one hand and classically inspired art and architecture on the other spread beyond Italy over the course of the fifteenth century. By the sixteenth century, the study of the classics became entrenched as an essential part of elite education itself, joining with (or rendering obsolete) medieval scholastic traditions in schools and universities. The beautiful and realistic styles of sculpture and painting spread as well, completely surpassing Gothic artistic forms, just as Renaissance architecture replaced the Gothic style of building. Along with the political and technological innovations that were to come, Renaissance learning and art helped bring about the definitive end of the Middle Ages.

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