Origins of European Civilization

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Introduction: Europe and Civilization

Introduction

The inhabitants of Europe did not identify themselves as Europeans on a wide scale before the Middle Ages. In all likelihood, prior to the modern period, most Europeans identified with their local community and kinship groups much more than they did with Europe. Certainly, ancient Greeks noted a cultural difference between themselves and their rivals, the Persians. Alexander the Great purposefully sought to deemphasize these cultural distinctions between Europeans and Asians; he encouraged his soldiers to intermarry with the local inhabitants of what had once been the Perisan Empire. Later, the pan-Mediterranean culture of the Roman Empire at least tempered this distinction between Europeans, Asians, and Africans. St. Augustine of Hippo, writing from North Africa in the 400s, would likely have found it laughable that he did not belong to the same culture as the bishop of Rome.

The crusades raised Latin Christians' awareness of their collective identity. As the crusaders fought and traded with Greek Orthodox Christians and Muslims, the Latin Christians gradually viewed themselves as belonging to a culture that differed substantially from their rivals to the east and south. From the perspective of the Byzantines and the Muslims at the time of the First Crusade, the Latin Christians appeared to be rude, uncultured, and illiterate barbarians. While the tensions between the Latin Christians on one hand and the Greek Orthodox Christians and Muslims on the other persisted, the relationship between these groups changed as the western Europeans strengthened their collective identity and developed the rudiments of civilization and during the High Middle Ages.

The Character of Civilization

Historically, civilizations began with the advent of cities in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus River Valley, the Yellow River Valley, and in Mesoamerica between 3500 and 1000 BCE. Because these civilizations featured permanent settlements, patriarchy, socioeconomic strata, and the ability to produce agricultural surpluses, they resembled the earlier Neolithic settlements that began in the middle latitudes of the Northern Hemisphere and spread northward and southward, sometime after the end of the last Ice Age, around 12,000 BCE. However, the culture of civilizations differed from the Neolithic predecessors in the size and the complexity of the settlements. In addition, the patriarchal and socioeconomic differentiation that developed in the Neolithic period became more pronounced in

ancient city-states and empires.

Located in the southern half of Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) Çatalhöyük was a neolithic settlement of approximately 6,000 people. This photo includes modern roofing to protect the site, which is continuously under excavation.

As they first emerged around 3,500 BCE cities often had upwards of 10,000 people and featured walls, monumental architecture, such as temples and funerary structures, and a bureaucratic elite who commanded the specialized knowledge of reading and writing. These cities also ruled over neighboring lands. No city was self-sufficient. The compact urban space with a dense population required external resources and agricultural labor to sustain the population. The rulers of these river-valley city-states typically resorted to exploitation and tried to justify their domination of rural workers by elevating themselves into gods or demigods and by convincing their subjects and later citizens that the administrators and their warriors deserved elevated status, rights, and material wealth. Therefore, the rulers often emphasized the distinction between these elites in the civilization on one hand and the slaves, immigrants, and foreigners on the other.

The term "civilization" often implies a qualitative advancement over other peoples, sometimes referred to as "barbarians." The Greeks referred to the Persians this way even though the Persians had a very sophisticated civilization. The Romans wrote similarly about the Germans, whom they feared and employed as soldiers. Consequently, the term "civilization" may be offensive to some because of this bigoted differentiation, which implies the presence of the non-civilized. However, we decided to maintain the term in the title of this work because it reflects the persistent quest by the leaders of complex societies to dominate and conquer other people whom they deemed inferior. Conquest was often integral to civilizations because rulers raised their prestige and rewarded their elite followers by gaining control of more territory.

This propensity for the domination of resources through conquest encouraged leaders of civilizations to

undertake two enduring policies. First, they tended to exploit both resources and people in order to control more of both. And second, civilizations provided luxuries that seduced their inhabitants so that they ignored or overlooked the exploitations that often damaged the environment and caused immense human and animal suffering throughout time. Reliable sources of cheap food, clothing, and entertainment have placated subject populations for millennia.

Although the phrase, "bread and circuses" is well known to those familiar with the Roman example, the poet of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* observed this tendency in Sumeria around 2,000 BCE. Writing about the Sumerian city-state of Uruk, the anonymous poet expressed admiration for the walls that offered inhabitants protection. Uruk also offered musical entertainment, street fairs, and resplendent clothing. However, these luxuries came at a price. The ruler, Gilgamesh, was a tyrant who slept with brides-to-be and impressed young men into his army. The people prayed to the gods for a remedy, which came in the form of an uncivilized being, Enkidu, who was seduced by the courtesan, Shamhat. In this very early piece of literature, Shamhat embodied the twin features of exploitation and seduction. Herself a victim of exploitation, she seduced Enkidu into joining civilization. Gilgamesh, the leader of the city who strutted like a bull in public and called on his mother for advice in private, understood how he could conquer his adversary, Enkidu, by recruiting Shamhat to seduce the barbarian.

The prescience of this early poet was not unique in the ancient world. Writing almost 2,000 years later, the Roman senator and historian, Tacitus, reflected on the expansion of the Roman Empire into northern Britain in *Agricola*. He dedicated the work to his father-in-law, Agricola, a celebrated military commander who led the Roman troops to victories. Agricola also understood the power of seduction to win peace. Tacitus described how the conquerors built temples, schools, and Roman baths in order to win over the subjugated Britons. He noted wryly that the Britons "called it 'civilization,' although it was part of their enslavement" (Agricola, 21). The seductive provision of amenities was a strategy used by the elite to gain the cooperation of subject populations.

Another strategy employed by the leaders of civilizations to expand their dominions involved the refinement of storytelling into myths that strengthened the collective identity and encouraged conquest. Students of American history will likely recall "Manifest Destiny" in our own country's history to justify the conquest of the Western U.S. The Romans also developed their own conquest ideology, the *Pax Romana*, which emphasized that the Romans brought peace, law, and order to their subject peoples. Similarly, the Muslim Caliphate's distinction between the abode of war and barbarism (*Dar al-Harb*) and the abode of peace (*Dar al-Islam*), emphasized the divinely-appointed mission of the civilized to conquer. These myths and many others shaped identities and inspired collective action.

In order to preserve and refine such narratives, rulers looked to the literate elites of their societies. Before the introduction of the phonetic alphabet, the skills of reading and writing were confined to the well heeled in ancient societies because literacy and writing were even more time consuming to master than they are today. Originally writing was the very specialized craft that took years to master because of the large number of symbols involved in pictographic communication. By contrast, reading was more accessible, but it required enough prosperity to expend time on studies. Learning to read and to write

were luxuries beyond the reach of most of society, but they provided rulers and the wealthy with solutions to problems related to commerce, taxation, propaganda, and record keeping. Therefore, the rulers of civilizations nurtured not only poets and storytellers, but also bureaucrats, who helped to organize armies, to build temples to deities, and to regulate society. The obstacles in learning to read and write were typically not an accident. Priests and scholars operated at the heart of bureaucratic institutions that organized civilizations, and rulers and their advisors regulated access to these positions of power.

As literacy advanced in civilizations, the oral traditions of a preliterate age developed into more refined and complex mythologies that educated, re-educated, and entertained readers and listeners alike. The wealthy and powerful became patrons of poets who crafted familiar stories into revered myths that facilitated the growth of more uniform collective identities. Most of these narratives had kernels of truth to them, but the poets and scribes revised the stories to render them memorable, instructive, and appealing. The Hebrew Bible and Vergil's *Aeneid* strengthened collective identities, as did Homer's *Iliad* and Muhammed's *suras*, the essence of the *Qu'ran*. Rulers sought to nurture such identities to grow their civilizations and to mollify diverse populations.

A uniform collective identity held the promise of widespread obedience and acceptance of social inequalities. Often religions promoted the existing social order and thereby promoted obedience; early Christianity as it emerged in the first and second centuries CE with its emphasis on the divinely favored poor was a notable exception. It was initially somewhat contemptuous of traditional authorities. Christians refused to recognize the divinity of the emperor. They rejected the materialism that was intrinsically attached to so many civilizations' glorification of seductive comforts. When it became the religion of the emperors and later kings, Christianity's emphasis on the divine favor cast upon the poor receded into the background. It became like other myths that glorified the rulers and their warriors. It gradually to conformed to the patterns of myths that strengthened loyalties, encouraged obedience, forged collective identities that resembled an early form of patriotism.

The Concept Of Europe

Europe is the westernmost part of the Eurasian landmass, the largest continent on planet Earth. Although many people refer to Europe as a continent, it is sort of like India, an appendage to the largest continent. Sometimes those who refer to Europe as a continent cite the Ural mountains in western Russia as the boundary between Europe and Asia. Although the Urals extend for quite a distance and are rich in mineral deposits, their maximum elevation is unremarkable, and there is little justification for viewing them as a physical boundary separating two continents. No other mountain range divides two continents; bodies of water typically fulfill that function.

The willingness to assign continental status to Europe underscores Europeans' tendency to view

themselves as distinct from Asians, and perhaps vice-versa. Europeans have expressed their differences from Asians in racial terms even though the genetic composition of all humans on the planet is virtually identical. In short, Europeans have developed a strong tradition of viewing themselves as distinct from Asians and have gone so far as to claim that they inhabit a different continent and belong to a separate race. Both assertions are debatable or even false.

Similar to the ancient Greeks, Europeans have established a collective identity without forming a unified political state. The formation of the EU is an attempt to transform that collective identity into a political and economic system. Viewed from the longer term historical perspective, this push toward the EU is part of a broader attempt by humanity to expand the scope of political organizations from kinship groups and clans to nation-states, federations, alliances, and empires. Still, the definition of what constitutes as "Europe" remains somewhat ambiguous and EU membership problematic. Turkey, for instance, has sought admission, while Britain and other states have vacillated, despite the widespread recognition that Britain is part of what we traditionally refer to as "Europe."

The evolution of Europeans' tendency to view themselves with a separate collective identity has a long past that traces back at least to the ancient Greeks. They had their own language, shared stories or myths, and maintained many common customs and beliefs. Their willingness to lay aside their arms and engage in the Olympics exemplified their desire to nurture a collective identity that was in frequent tension with their loyalty to their city-states. However, the political unification of the Greeks only happened after conquest from the Macedonians in the fourth century BCE and again much later in the wake of the nineteenth-century nation-state movement when their perceived need to unite strengthened. Similarly, despite the European propensity to develop a collective identity, Europe's transition from a conglomeration of nation-states to a federal Europe has faced many obstacles, such as strong attachments to a rich diversity of customs and traditions.

Another such obstacle is the lack of coherence about the essence of Europe. In other words, what is at the heart of European cultural identity? Since the 1700s when aspirations for democratic and representative governments gained many vocal supporters, such as Jacques Louis David, the histories of radical democracy in ancient Greece and especially the stability of government in the early Roman republic contributed to Europeans' pride in their path-breaking efforts toward more representative governance. In other words, Europeans recognize a common past that emphasizes the struggle toward representative governance.

Jacques-Louis David, Brutus and the Lictors (1789) reminded viewers that loyalty to a republic could sometimes divide families. David produced the work as fascination with republics was sweeping across Europe after the formation of the United States.

Similar to Rome between 500 and 100 BCE, Iceland between 950 and 1250 CE was a republic; Italian city-states featured republics in the centuries leading up to the Renaissance. However, representative governments were the exception rather than the rule in Europe's more distant past, and even when they arose, they initially limited political rights to white, male property holders. Monarchies, constrained by powerful elites, have dominated European societies for most of the past 3000 years. To find the origins of European culture and the roots of its collective identity, one must look beyond the modern propensity toward representative and democratic governance.

The formative period for European civilization occurred between 1000 and 1300 CE, the High Middle Ages, when Europeans built cities, constructed monumental architecture, and organized universities that expanded literacy. During this period the population and wealth of Europe increased significantly, and political structures became more bureaucratic. Wars became more organized, and the ideology of conquest became more compelling with the crusades, which increased western European Christians' awareness of their differences with Byzantines, with Muslims, and even with the Jews who often lived in Europe.

Although some conservative scholars have identified Christianity as the essential element of the

European or "Western" collective identity, to do so would be overly simplistic. Certainly, since the Middle Ages, Christianity has provided Europeans with a common cultural framework, including values, beliefs, institutions, rituals, myths, and historical paradigms. Building upon the power of the Hebrew Bible to forge a strong collective identity, the Christian parables, along with stories of saints, heretics, and warriors, reinforced these values and beliefs. Prior to the advent of secular nation-states in the nineteenth century, Europe's most influential leaders typically recognized Christianity as the state religion. However, Christianity fails to account for influential elements of European cultuire as it emerged as a civilization during the High Middle Ages, 1000-1300 CE.

During this period Europe's warrior aristocracy embraced chivalry, often at odds with Christianity in its celebration of sexual intimacy and in its exploration of gender relations. Unlike the warriors of an earlier age, such as Beowulf or Byrhtnoth, these knights sought the love of a lady, read books, and practiced mercy. The romances of Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes in the 1170s and 1180s stand in stark contrast to the attempt by St. Bernard to celebrate the celibate Templar as the ultimate form of knighthood in the first half of the 1100s. After the crusades brought Europeans into close contact with the more sophisticated civilization of the Islamic caliphate in the southern Mediterranean, European authors increasingly recognized the importance of a broader spectrum of emotions and more complex gender relations in their accounts of the human experience. Although the direct influence of Arabic literature, such as One Thousand and One Nights, on chivalry may be somewhat debatable, other Arabic and Muslim influences had clearer lines of influence in the High (1000-1300 CE) and in the Late Middle Ages (1300-1500 CE).

The crusader states and the Muslim scholars of the Iberian peninsula became vectors for the transmission of Arabic and Muslim ideas to Europe. Knowledge of algebra, the pointed fifth arches, the three-field system, double-entry bookkeeping, and even the ancient Greek literature seeped into Western Europe from these Muslim vectors between 1100 and 1400. In other words, medieval Europeans often learned math, engineering, agricultural techniques, accounting, and Aristotle's logic from their Muslim neighbors. Europe's debt to Islamic civilization was substantial. But these two religions did not fully shape the essential elements of Europe's civilization during the High Middle Ages. For more primordial and intrinsic features of Europe's civilization, one must look to the pre-civilized cultures of Europeans during the Early Middle Ages (500-1000 CE).

During this period the Slavic, Germanic, and Celtic cultures that had existed in Europe north of the Alps for centuries increasingly came into contact with the Judaeo-Christian and Greco-Roman influences of the Mediterranean basin. The result produced a fascinating fusion. Christian scribes wrote stories of saintly heroes and warrior priests oftentimes in Latin but sometimes in the vernacular. Leaders of the Church officiated over rituals which had distinctly pagan origins, such as the ordeal. In Germanic Europe, Christian holidays assimilated pagan names, such as Easter, and activities, such as looking for eggs, a symbol of fertility. And in both Celtic and Germanic parts of Europe, the love of storytelling, ancestors, and heroic deeds received a preservative: the Judaeo-Christian attachment to writing.

In the early phases of this process of fusion, much of the pagan Greco-Roman tradition remained

relatively unknown, partly because the Church exercised enormous control over the preservation of manuscripts and access to ancient knowledge. The writings of Greco-Roman playwrights, philosophers, and other scholars would have to wait until humanists uncovered manuscripts during the Renaissance before many of these Greco-Roman masterpieces became part of the intellectual canon of European civilization. Between 500 and 1000 CE the cultures north of the Alps remained fairly provincial and mostly illiterate. However, those cultures provided some of the seeds of the civilization that blossomed after 1000 CE.

By the High Middle Ages (1000-1300 CE) commercial activity increased significantly, and consequently, so did literacy. Commerce had fostered literacy since the development of cuneiform in ancient Sumeria in the fourth millennium BCE. As Europeans traveled both for warfare during the crusades and for commerce across the Mediterranean Sea, they increasingly absorbed features of the Greco-Roman civilizations of the past and the Muslim civilization of their present. The Muslims also acted as intermediaries for the transmission of ancient Chinese discoveries including paper making, gunpowder production, and possibly moveable type. By the 1300s, Europe had all the makings of a complex and sophisticated civilization.

The demographic collapse during the 1300s, mostly caused by the *Yersinia pestis* bacterium, altered the fundamental structure of European society when the relative size of Europe's middle class expanded. The plague also undermined respect for the hierarchy and customs that had evolved during the High Middle Ages. This contempt for Church officials, oligarchs, and even patriarchs became more vocal right around the time that Giovanni Boccaccio wrote his somewhat fictionalized account of the Black Death in Florence in his *Decameron* (c. 1350 CE). The growth of the middle class and the rising willingness to challenge obedience to corrupt authorities persisted. By the modern period, Europeans had developed a cultural propensity for challenging monarchs, popes, and other tyrants. This trend eventually inspired not only calls for republican governments, but also the Jacques Louis David painting above. Completed in the months leading up to the French Revolution (1789 CE), it emphasized the importance of loyalty to a republic; the common good, the *res publica*, trumped loyalty even to family.

David himself was the beneficiary of another big trend of the Late Middle Ages (1300-1500 CE): increased innovation. For centuries Europeans had been so attached to traditions that, compared to the Chinese and the Muslims, they were very slow to adopt innovations, often thought to be the work of the Devil. In the 1300s most elites still eschewed both paper for documents and Arabic numerals for math even though they had known about these innovations for centuries. Although the first official indices of prohibited books did not appear until the 1500s, the Church had tacitly and covertly suppressed pagan Greek and Roman authors for centuries. One of the first steps of this increased tendency toward innovation involved the recovery of lost ancient knowledge. Often inspired by the belief that knowledge was in decline, humanist scholars first in Italy in the 1300s and then later across much of Europe undertook the recovery of that knowledge by foraging in monastic archives and by journeying to the more cosmopolitan milieu of Islamic scholarship.

This quest for wisdom coincided with the growth of the middle class and the contempt for authority in

the wake of the plague. Transformative technical innovations coincided with literary and artistic achievements, sometimes referred to as "a renaissance," a rebirth of knowledge that harked back to the great achievements of the Greeks and Romans. The printing press, the adaptations to gunpowder, and the proliferation of navigation technology, including maps, ship design, and compasses, transformed Europe's relationship to the rest of the world. No longer a cultural backwater, Europe became the cradle of great art, literature, architecture, and many other accoutrements of a sophisticated civilization. That is where this volume ends.

Abandoning "Western Civilization"

Only a deeply racist civilization could put a man in a zoo as an exhibit.
Ota Benga on exhibit at the Bronx Zoo, 1906.

For over a century, historians have often addressed the history of Europe under the heading of "Western Civilization," which also included the history of the Americas, especially North America.

However, the concept of "Western Civilization" is problematic for a number of reasons. Europeans had employed it with the hope of drawing Americans into conflicts that European imperialism had created. In addition, the concept of "Western Civilization" was racially charged. It implied an advanced civilization, which then justified exploitation, conquest, and conversion. By the late 1800s Europeans had conquered and colonized most of the world as they spread their religions. Perhaps no event captures European civilization's hegemony and the accompanying tendency to exploit people and resources than did the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference, where Europeans partitioned Africa into colonies. And perhaps no photo reflects this sense of racial superiority more than the picture of Ota Benga (left), a 23-year-old Congolese man, whom Americans placed in the Bronx Zoo in the early 1900s.

Following the lack of U.S. popular interest in engaging in World War I, Europeans, and the British in particular, increasingly developed curricula in European history courses that tied U.S. and especially western European histories together under the rubric of "Western Civilization." Since that time, the term has increasingly become polarizing, used both by Osama bin Laden and by white nationalists in the U.S. and elsewhere. Defenders and critics of this concept often point to some combination of Christianity, democracy, capitalism as defining characteristics of civilizations that emerged in the west, much as we have done with the origins of European civilization; however, they often skip over the cultural debt that Europeans incurred as they imported knowledge and technology from Middle Eastern and Islamic civilizations. They also minimize the exploitation that happened in the name of Western religions. These oversights tend to aggravate the racist and imperialist implications of "Western Civilization" as a lens for understanding the past.

The defenders of this terminology often emphasize the seductive elements of civilization: freedom, material possessions, cultural achievements, claims to moral superiority, and so on. The critics of "Western Civilization" point to its exploitative elements: environmental destruction, shallow materialism, and human exploitation, including racism, classism,and patriarchy. Although many who continue to employ the terminology of "Western Civilization" are not racist, imperialist, or sexist, we find that the term unnecessarily clouds our understanding of Europe's past and have chosen to jettison it.

The authors of this edition commend the prospect of removing borders between humans so that we can start to think more about the problems facing all of humanity and less about the problems faced by a particular nation or people. We also sense that framing our understanding of the past in terms of "Western Civilization" is actually counterproductive to solving the global problems that have become more pronounced in the twenty-first century: pandemics, extreme wealth disparities, authoritarianism, mass extinction, and human suffering. To perpetuate the history of a "Western Civilization" only exacerbates these problems. Meanwhile, an evaluation of the defining features of European civilization as they developed over several centuries has more potential to promote the unified and cooperative initiatives that are likely to help humanity address the crises of the twenty-first century. Consequently, this volume focuses on the origins of European civilization and encourages Europeans and others to recognize that Europe's meteoric success in the modern period owed a great debt to its Asian and

African neighbors in the pre-modern and modern periods.

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BODY

Chapter 1:The Origins of Civilization

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Prior to the advent of civilization in the fourth and third millennia BCE, humans had lived first as hunter gatherers during the Paleolithic period and then in permanent settlements beginning around 10,000 BCE with the advent of the Neolithic period. These transitions from Paleolithic to Neolithic culture and then from Neolithic settlements to civilization fundamentally altered human relationships with one another and with the environment. More specifically, the pace of human cultural change accelerated with both of these changes. Humans learned to communicate more effectively, and the scope of collective action broadened. These factors hastened the introduction and adoption of early technologies such as livestock rearing, planting crops, forging metals, and drawing images. By the dawn of civilization around 3,500 BCE, societies around the Mediterranean basin were becoming much more hierarchical, patriarchal, and organized.

Hominids

Human beings are members of a species of hominid, which is the same biological classification that includes the advanced apes like chimpanzees. The earliest hominid ancestor of humankind was called *Australopithecus*: a biological species of African hominid (note: hominid is the biological "family" that encompasses great apes – *Australopithecus*, as well as *Homo Sapiens*, are examples of biological "species" within that family) that evolved about 3.9 million years ago. 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 descendant of Australopithecus was *Homo Erectus*, which gets its name from the fact that it was the first hominid to walk upright. It also benefited from a brain three-fourths the size of the modern human equivalent. *Homo Erectus* developed more advanced stone tool-making than had Australopithecus, and survived until about 200,000 years ago, by which time the earliest, *Homo sapiens* (humans), had long since evolved alongside them.

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

Homo sapiens was split between two distinct types, physically different but able to interbreed, Neanderthals and Homo sapiens sapiens (the latter term means "the wisest man" in Greek). Neanderthals enjoyed a long period of existence between about 400,000 and 70,000 years ago, spreading from Africa to the Middle East and Europe. They were physically larger and stronger than Homo sapiens sapiens and were able to survive in colder conditions, which was a key asset during the long ice age that began around 100,000 years ago. Neanderthals congregated in small groups, apparently interacting only to exchange breeding partners (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.
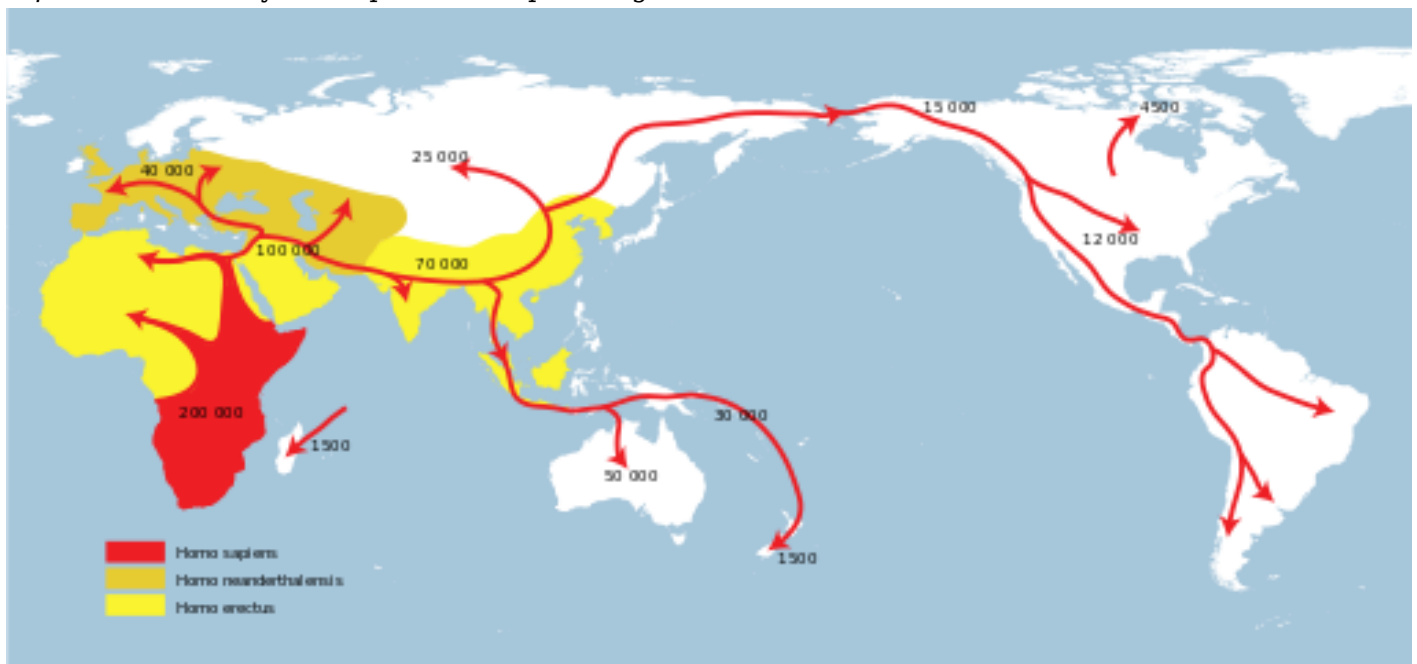
Of the advanced hominids, only homo sapiens spread around the entire globe. That massive global emigration was complete by about 40,000 years ago (with the exception of the Americas, which took until about 15,000 years ago). During an ice age, humans traveled overland on the Bering Land Bridge, a chunk of land that used to connect eastern Russia to Alaska, and arrived in the Americas. Later, very enterprising ancient humans built seagoing canoes and settled in many of the Pacific Islands. Thus, well before ancient humans had developed the essential technologies that are normally associated with civilization, they had already accomplished transcontinental and transoceanic voyages and adapted to almost every climate on the planet.

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

Civilization and the Development of Agriculture

Thus, human beings have existed all over the world for many thousands of years. Human civilization, however, has not. The word civilization is tied to the Latin word for city: *civis*, which is also the foundation for the words "civil" and "civic." The key element of the definition is the idea that a large number of people come together in a group that is too large to consist only of an extended family group. Once that occurred, other discoveries and developments, from writing to mathematics to organized religion, followed.

Up until that point in history, however, cities had not been possible because there was never enough food to sustain a large group that stayed in a single place for long. Ancient humans were hunter-gatherers. They followed herds of animals on the hunt and they gathered edible
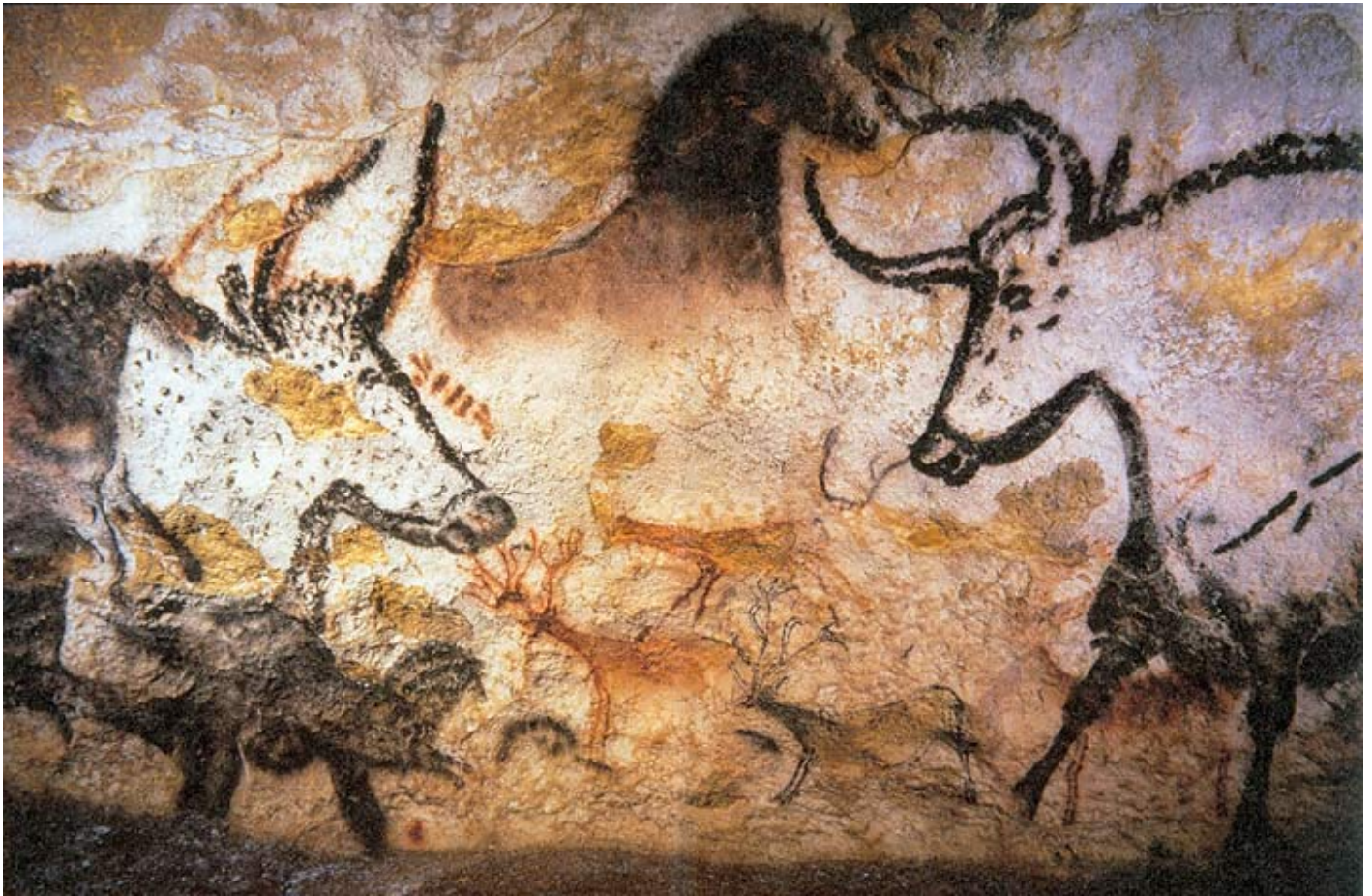
Part of the Lascaux cave paintings in southern France.

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. Sometimes after that, people in the same regions began to domesticate animals, keeping herds of cattle, pigs, sheep, and goats in controlled conditions, defending them from predators, and eating them and using their hides. It is impossible to overstate how important these changes were. Even fairly primitive agriculture can produce fifty times more caloric energy than hunting and gathering does. The very basis of human life is how much energy we can derive from food; with agriculture and animal domestication, it was possible for families to grow much larger and overall population levels to rise dramatically.

One of the noteworthy aspects of this transition is that hunting-gathering people actually had much more leisure time than farmers did (and were also healthier and longer-lived). Archaeologists and anthropologists have determined that hunter-gatherer people generally only "worked" for a few hours a

day, and spent the rest of their time in leisure activities. Meanwhile, farmers have always worked incredibly hard for very long hours; in many places in the ancient world, there were groups of people who remained hunter-gatherers despite knowing about agriculture, and it is quite possible they did that because they saw no particular advantage in adopting agriculture. There were also many areas that practiced both – right up until the modern era, many farmers also foraged in areas of semi-wilderness near their farms.

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.

This map shows the location and extent of the Fertile Crescent, a region in the Middle East incorporating Ancient Egypt; the Levant; and Mesopotamia.

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

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

1. Crop rotation, which people discovered sometime around 8000 BCE. Crop rotation is the process of planting a different kind of crop in a field each year, then "rotating" to the next field in the next year. Every few years, a field is allowed to "lie fallow," meaning nothing is planted and animals can

   graze on it. This process serves to return nutrients to the soil that would otherwise be leached out
   by successive years of planting, and it greatly increases yields overall.

2. The metal plow, which people invented around 5000 BCE. Plows are hugely important; they
   opened up areas to cultivation that would be too rocky or the soil too hard to support crops
   normally.

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

The early civilization of Mesopotamia consisted of fairly small farming communities. A common theory
is that they may have originally came together in order 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 or even
small cities were Jericho in Palestine, which existed by about 8000 BCE, and Çatal Höyük in Turkey,
which existed by about 7500 BCE. There were certainly many others in the Fertile Crescent, but due to
their antiquity the remains of only a few – Jericho and Çatal Höyük most importantly – have survived to
be studied by archaeologists.

From their remains it becomes possible to piece together certain facts about ancient societies on the
cusp of civilization. First, it is clear that the earliest settlements (already) had significant social
divisions. Hunter-gatherer societies have very few social divisions; there may be chiefs and shamans,
but all members of the group are roughly equal in social power. One of the traits of civilization is the
increasing complexity of social divisions, and with them, of social hierarchy. In Çatalhöyük, 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. Çatalhöyük 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 Çatalhöyük's obsidian have been discovered by archaeologists
hundreds of miles from Çatalhöyük itself; thus, it is clear that Çatalhöyük was already part of long-

distance trade networks, trading obsidian for other goods with other towns and villages. In essence, Çatalhöyük'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 Çatalhöyük's graves reveal another key aspect of civilization: specialization. Social divisions themselves are only possible when there is a food surplus. If everyone has to work all the time to get enough food, there is little time left over for anyone to specialize in other activities. The reason that hunter-gatherer societies produce little in the way of scholarship or technology is that they do not have the resources for people to specialize in those areas. When agriculture made a food surplus possible for the first time in history, however, not everyone had to work on getting enough food, and soon, certain people managed to lay claim to new areas of expertise. Even in a settlement as ancient as Çatalhöyük, 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 Çatalhöyük is striking, because it means that people were trying in a systematic way to understand how the world worked. In turn, priests were probably the world's first intellectuals, people who use their minds for a living. Priests probably directed the efforts to build irrigation systems and made the decisions about building and rebuilding the town since they had a monopoly on explaining the larger forces at work in human life. Especially in a period like the ancient past when natural forces – forces like floods and disease – were vastly more powerful than the ability of humans to control them, priests were the only people who could offer an explanation.

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

Seated Woman of Çatalhöyük, Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara, Turkey

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

and it is one that ancient peoples grappled with in their religious systems.

Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia, on the eastern end of the Fertile Crescent, was the cradle of Western Civilization. It has the distinction of being the very first place on earth in which the development of agriculture led to the emergence of the essential technologies of civilization. Many of the great scientific advances to follow, including mathematics, astronomy, and engineering, along with political networks and forms of organization like kingdoms, empires, and bureaucracy all originated in Mesopotamia.

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

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

While the Tigris and Euphrates provided abundant water, they were highly unpredictable and given to periodic flooding. The southern region of Mesopotamia, Sumer, has an elevation decline of only 50 meters over about 500 kilometers of distance, meaning the riverbeds of both rivers would have shifted and spread out over the plains in the annual floods. Over time, the inhabitants of villages realized that they needed to work together to build larger-scale levees, canals, and dikes to protect against the floods. One theory regarding the origins of large-scale settlements is that, when enough villages got together to work on these hydrological systems, they needed some kind of leadership to direct the efforts, leading to systems of governance and administration. Thus, the earliest cities in the world may have been born not just out of agriculture, but out of the need to manage the natural resource of water.

The first settlements that straddled the line between "towns" and real "cities" existed around 4000 BCE, but a truly urban society in Mesopotamia was in place closer 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.

The result of these new hierarchies were 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. Farther up the rivers, the northern region of Mesopotamia was known as Akkad. The division is both geographical and lingual: ancient Sumerian is not related to any modern language, but the Akkadian family of languages was Semitic, related to modern languages like Arabic and Hebrew. Urban civilization eventually flourished in both regions, starting in Sumer but quickly spreading north.

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

Map of the Middle East during the last centuries of the 4th millennium BC: archaeological sites of the "urukean expansion".

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 professions working closely together in governing the cities. Each Mesopotamian city was believed to be "owned" by a patron god, a deity who watched over it and would respond to prayers if they were properly made and accompanied by rituals and sacrifices. The priests of Uruk predicted the future and explained the present in terms of the will of the gods, and they claimed to be able to influence the gods through their rituals. They claimed all of the economic output of Uruk and its trade network because the city's patron god "owned" the city, which justified the priesthood's control. They did not only tax the wealth, the crops, and the goods of the subjects of Uruk, but they also had a right to demand labor, requiring the common people (i.e. almost everyone) to work on the

irrigation systems, the temples, and the other major public buildings.

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. Kings had superseded priests as the rulers by about 3000 BCE, although in all cases kings were closely linked to the power of the priesthood. In fact, one of the earliest terms for "king" was *ensis*, meaning the representative of the god who "really" ruled the city.   Thus, the typical early Mesopotamian city-state, right around 2500 BCE, was of a city-state engaged in long-distance trade, ruled by a king who worked closely with the city's priesthood and who frequently waged war against his neighbors.

Belief, Thought and Learning

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

All of the Mesopotamian cities worshiped the same gods, referred to as the Mesopotamian pantheon (pantheon means "group of gods.") As noted above, each city had its own specific patron deity who "owned" and took particular interest in the affairs of that city. 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 in order to keep track of tax records sometime around 3000 BCE. Their style of writing is called cuneiform; it started out as a pictographic system in which each word or idea was represented by a symbol, but it eventually changed to include both pictographs and syllabic symbols (i.e. symbols that represent a sound instead of a word). While it was originally used just for record-keeping, writing soon evolved into the creation of true forms of literature.

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

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

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

returns to Uruk a wiser, better king.

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

Along with literature, the other great written accomplishments of the Mesopotamians were their systems of law. The most substantial surviving law code is that of the Babylonian king Hammurabi, dating from about 1780 BCE. Hammurabi's law code went into great detail about the rights and obligations of Babylonians. It drew legal distinctions between the "free men" or aristocratic citizens, commoners, and slaves, treating the same crimes very differently. The laws speak to a deep concern with fairness – the code tried to protect people from unfair terms on loans, it provided redress for damaged property, it even held city officials responsible for catching criminals. 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 represents the earliest indications of large-scale warfare. Mesopotamian cities always had walls – some of which were 30 feet high and 60 feet wide, essentially enormous piles of earth strengthened by brick. The evidence (based on pictures and inscriptions) suggests, however, that most soldiers were peasant conscripts with little or no armor and light weapons. In these circumstances, defense almost always won out over offense, making the actual conquest of foreign cities very difficult if not impossible, and hence while cities were around for thousands of years (again, from about 3500 BCE), there were no empires yet. Cities warred on one another for territory, captives, and riches, but they rarely succeeded in conquering other cities outright. War was instead primarily about territorial raids and perhaps noble combats meant to demonstrate strength and power.

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

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

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

Sargon himself was born an illegitimate child and was, at one point, a royal gardener who worked his way up in the palace, eventually seizing power in a coup. He boasted about his lowly origins and claimed to protect and represent the interests of common people and merchants. Sargon appointed governors in his conquered cities, and his whole empire was designed to extract wealth from all of its cities and farmlands and pump it back to the capital of Akkad, which he built somewhere near present-day Baghdad. While his 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 off their civic and military leaders against each other, appointing generals to direct troops in other cities and making sure that each governor's power relied on his loyalty to the king. The administration of the Ur III dynasty divided the empire into three distinct tax regions, and its tax bureaucracy collected wealth without alienating the conquered peoples as much as Sargon and his descendants had (despite its relative success, Ur III, too, eventually collapsed, although it was due to a foreign invasion rather than an internal revolt).

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

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

This precarity was responsible for the fact that these early empires were not especially long-lasting, and were unable to conquer territory outside of Mesopotamia itself. What came afterwards were the first early empires that, through a combination of governing techniques, beliefs, and technology, were able

to grow much larger and more powerful.

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Chapter 2: Egypt

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

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

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

Ancient Egypt's Old Kingdom came into being with the unification of Lower Egypt, where the Nile empties into the Mediterranean, and Upper Egypt, where the Nile leads into Nubia (present-day Sudan).

There were three major periods in ancient Egyptian history, the time during which Egypt was not subject to foreign powers and during which it developed its distinctive culture and built its spectacular examples of monumental architecture: the Old Kingdom (2680 – 2200 BCE), the Middle Kingdom (2040 – 1720 BCE), and the New Kingdom (1550 – 1150 BCE). There were also two "intermediate periods" between the Old and Middle Kingdoms (The First Intermediate Period, 2200 – 2040 BCE) and Middle and New Kingdoms (The Second Intermediate Period, 1720 – 1550 BCE). These were periods during which the political control of the ruling dynasty broke down and rival groups fought for control. The 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.

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

The Political history of ancient Egypt

Egypt was divided between "Upper Egypt," the southern stretch of the Nile Valley that relied on the Nile floods for irrigation, and "Lower Egypt," the enormous delta region where the Nile meets the Mediterranean. The two regions had been politically distinct for centuries, but (according to both archeology and the dating system created by Manetho) in roughly 3100 BCE Narmer, a king of Upper Egypt, conquered Lower Egypt and united the country for the first time. The date used for the founding of the Old Kingdom of Egypt, 2680 BCE, is when the third royal dynasty to rule all of Egypt established itself. Its king, Djoser, was the first to commission an enormous tomb to house his remains when he died: the first pyramid. The Old Kingdom represented a long, unbroken line of kings that presided over the first full flowering of Egyptian culture, architecture, and prosperity.

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

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

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

The pyramids are justly famous as the ultimate example of Egyptian prosperity and ingenuity. The Great Pyramid of Khufu, the single largest pyramid of the period, contained over 2.5 million stone blocks, each weighing approximately 2.5 tons. The sheer amount of energy expended on the construction of the pyramids is thus staggering; it was only the incredible bounty of the Nile and its harvests that enabled the construction of the pyramids by providing the calories consumed by the workers and draught

animals, the wealth used to employ the supporting bureaucracy, and the size of the population that sustained the entire enterprise. Likewise, while the details are now lost, the Old Kingdom's government must have been highly effective at tax collection and the distribution of food, supplies, and work teams. Pyramids on the scale of the Old Kingdom would have been all but impossible anywhere else in the world at the time.

A major factor in the stability of Old Kingdom Egypt was that it was very isolated. Despite its geographical proximity to Mesopotamia and Anatolia, Egypt at the time was largely separated from the civilizations of those regions. The Sinai Peninsula, which divides Egypt from present-day Palestine and Israel, is about 120 miles of desert. With a few violent exceptions, no major incursions were able to cross over Sinai, and contact with the cultures of Mesopotamia and the Near East was limited as a result. Likewise, even though Egypt is on the Mediterranean, sailing technology was so primitive that there was little contact with other cultures via the sea.

Around 2200 BCE, two hundred years after the last pyramids were built, the Old Kingdom collapsed, 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, though, would see their heart balance against the ideal of order and the soul would be rewarded with eternal life. Otherwise, their heart would be tossed to a crocodile-headed demon and devoured, the soul perishing in the process.

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

craftspeople.

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

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

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

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

The most significant innovation introduced by the Hyksos was the use of bronze (it should be noted that they introduced horses and chariots as well). There was very limited use of bronze in Egypt until the Second Intermediate Period, with both weapons and tools being crafted from copper or stone. Bronze, an alloy of copper and zinc or nickel, required technical skill and access to its component minerals to craft. The finished product was far harder and more durable than was copper alone, however, and with the advent of large-scale bronze use in Egypt thanks to the Hyksos, the possibilities for the growth of Egyptian power increased greatly. Bronze had already been in use for over a thousand years by the time

it became common in Egypt, but when it finally arrived with Canaanite craftsmen it radically altered the balance of power. Up to that point, Egyptian technology, especially in terms of metallurgy, was quite primitive. Egyptian soldiers were often nothing more than peasants armed with copper knives, spears with copper heads, or even just clubs. Egypt's relative isolation meant that it had never needed to develop more advanced weapons, a fact that the Hyksos were able to take advantage of, belatedly bringing the large-scale use of bronze with them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The imposing entrance to the Great Temple of Abu Simbel.

Detailed records of noteworthy pharaohs survive from the New Kingdom. The New Kingdom saw the only known female pharaoh, a woman who ruled from 1479 to 1458 BCE. Her name was Hatshepsut; she originally ruled as a regent (i.e. someone who is supposed to rule until the young king comes of age) for her stepson, but then claimed the title of pharaoh and ruled outright. She ruled for 20 years, waged war, and oversaw a period of ongoing prosperity. There were enormous building projects under her supervision, and it was also under her reign that large quantities of sub-Saharan African goods started to be imported from Nubia: gold, incense, live elephants, panther skins, and other forms of wealth. When she died, however, her stepson Thutmose III took the throne. Decades after he became pharaoh, for reasons that are unclear, he tried to erase the memory of his mother's reign, perhaps driven by simple resentment over how long she had held power.

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

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

Akhenaten's son restored all of the old religious traditions. This was the young king Tutankhamun ("King Tut") (r. 1336 – 1326), who is important for restoring the religion and, arguably, for the simple fact that his tomb was never looted by grave robbers before it was discovered by a British archaeologist in 1922 CE. It provided the single most significant trove of artifacts from the New Kingdom yet found when it was discovered, sparking an interest in ancient Egyptian history all over the world.

The sarcophagus of King Tutankhamun.

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

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

Continuities in Egyptian History

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

The most important figure in Egyptian spiritual life was the king; he (or sometimes she) was believed to form a direct connection between the gods and the Egyptian people. Each king had five names – his birth name, three having to do with his divine status, and one having to do with rulership of the two unified kingdoms. One of the divine names referred to the divine kingship itself, temporarily linked to the current holder of that title: whoever happened to be king at the time.

The Egyptians had a colorful and memorable set of religious beliefs, one that dominated the lives of the kings, who claimed to be not just reflections of or servants of the gods, but gods themselves on earth. The central theme among the great epic stories of Egyptian religion was that there was a certain order and harmony in the universe that the gods had created, but that it was threatened by forces of

destruction and chaos. It was the job of humans, especially Egyptians, to maintain harmony through proper rituals and through making sure that Egyptian society was stable. For Egyptians the world was divided between themselves and everyone else. This was not just a function of arrogance, however, but instead reflected a belief that the gods had designated the Egyptians to be the sacred keepers of order.

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

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

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

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

As iconic as hieroglyphic writing, which remains famous because of the sheer amount of it that survived carved in stone in tombs and palaces, was the creation of monumental architecture by the Egyptian state, first exemplified by the pyramids. Sometime around 2660 BCE the first pyramid was built for the king Djoser. Djoser was renowned in the Egyptian sources for his wisdom, and centuries after his death he became a legendary figure to later Egyptians. The architect who designed the pyramid, Imhotep, was later deified as a son of Ptah, the god who created the universe. Unlike Mesopotamian ziggurats, which were always temples, the pyramids were always tombs. The purpose of the pyramids was to house the king with all of the luxuries and equipment he would need in his journey to the afterlife, as well as to celebrate the king's legacy and memory.

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

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

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

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

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

Even though the essential characteristic of Egyptian religion and social structure was continuity, its relationships with neighboring cultures did change over time. One important neighbor of Egypt was the kingdom of Nubia to the south, in present-day Sudan. Nubia was rich in gold, ivory, and slaves, seized from neighboring lands, making it a wealthy and powerful place in its own right. Egypt traded with Nubia, but also suffered from raids by warlike Nubian kingdoms. One of the key political posts in Egypt was the Keeper of the Gateway of the South, a military governor who tried to protect trade from these attacks. At the start of the Middle Kingdom, Mentuhotep II managed to not only reunite Egypt, but to conquer the northern portion of Nubia as well. Kings continued this pattern, holding on to Nubian territory and building a series of forts and garrisons to ensure the speedy extraction of Nubian wealth. (Much later, a Nubian king, Piankhy, returned the favor by conquering Egypt – he claimed to be restoring a purer form of Egyptian rule than had survived in Egypt itself!)

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

That being said, by the time of the Middle Kingdom, there was an organized and fortified military presence on all of Egypt's borders, with particular attention to Nubia and "Asia" (i.e. everything east of

the Sinai Peninsula). One king described himself as the "throat-slitter of Asia," and all the way through the New Kingdom, Egyptians tended to regard themselves as being the most important and "central" civilization in the world.

Conclusion

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

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Chapter 3: The Bronze Age and The Iron Age

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

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

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

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

The Bronze Age States

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

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

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

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

united Mesopotamia before being forced to retreat against the backdrop of a wider collapse of the political and commercial network of the Bronze Age (described below).

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

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

Both the Minoans and Mycenaeans were seafarers. Whereas almost all of the other civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean were land empires, albeit ones who traded and traveled via waterways, the Greek civilizations were very closely tied to the sea itself. The Minoans ruled the island of Crete in the Mediterranean and created a merchant marine (i.e. a fleet whose purpose is primarily trade, not war) to trade with the Egyptians, Hittites, and other peoples of the area. One of the noteworthy archaeological traits of the Minoans is that there is very little evidence of fortifications of their palaces or cities, unlike those of other ancient peoples, indicating that they were much less concerned about foreign invasion than were the neighboring land empires thanks to the Minoans' island setting.

The Minoans built enormous palace complexes that combined government, spiritual, and commercial centers in huge, sprawling areas of building 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 that has never been deciphered. Their civilization was very rich and powerful by about 1700 BCE and it continued to prosper for centuries. Starting in the early 1400s BCE, however, a wave of invasions carried out by the Mycenaeans to the north eventually extinguished Minoan independence. By that time, the Minoans had already shared artistic techniques, trade, and their writing system with the Mycenaeans, the latter of which served as the basis of Mycenaean record keeping in a form referred to

as Linear B. Thus, while the Minoans lost their political independence, Bronze-Age Greek culture as a whole became a blend of Minoan and Mycenaean influences.

The Minoans were, according to the surviving archaeological evidence, relatively peaceful. They traded with their neighbors, and while there is evidence of violence (including human sacrifice) within Minoan society, there is no indication of large-scale warfare, just passing references from the Mycenaeans about Minoan mastery of the seas. In contrast, the Mycenaeans were extremely warlike. They traded with their neighbors but they also plundered them when the opportunity arose. Centuries later, the culture of the Mycenaeans would be celebrated in the epic poems (nominally written by the poet Homer, although it is likely "Homer" is a mythical figure himself) *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, describing the exploits of great Mycenaeans heroes like Agamemnon, Achilles, and Odysseus. Those exploits almost always revolved around warfare, immortalized in Homer's account of the Mycenaean siege of Troy, a city in western Anatolia whose ruins were discovered in the late nineteenth century CE.

From their ships, the Mycenaeans operated as both trading partners and raiders as circumstances would dictate; it is clear from the archeological evidence that they traded with Egypt and the Near East (i.e. Lebanon and Palestine), but equally clear that they raided and warred against both vulnerable foreign territories and against one another. There is even evidence that the Hittites enacted the world's first embargo of shipping and goods against the Mycenaeans in retaliation for Mycenaean meddling in Hittite affairs.

The Mycenaeans relied on the sea so heavily because Greece was a very difficult place to live. Unlike Egypt or Mesopotamia, there were no great rivers feeding fertile soil, just mountains, hills, and scrubland with poor, rocky soil. There were few mineral deposits or other natural resources that could be used or traded with other lands. As it happens, there are iron deposits in Greece but its use was not yet known by the Mycenaeans. They thus learned to cultivate olives to make olive oil and grapes to make wine, two products in great demand all over the ancient world that were profitable enough to sustain seagoing trade. It is also likely that the difficult conditions in Greece helped lead the Mycenaeans to be so warlike, as they raided each other and their neighbors in search of greater wealth and opportunity.

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

The Mycenaeans were a society that glorified noble warfare. As war is depicted in the *Iliad*, battles consisted of the elite noble warriors of each side squaring off against each other and fighting one-on-one, with the rank-and-file of poorer soldiers providing support but usually not engaging in actual combat. In turn, Mycenaean ruins (and tombs) make it abundantly clear that most Mycenaeans were dirt-poor farmers working with primitive tools, lorded over by bronze-wielding lords who demanded labor and wealth. Foreign trade was in service to providing luxury goods to this elite social

class, a class that was never politically united but instead shared a common culture of warrior-kings and their armed retinues. Some beautiful artifacts and amazing myths and poems have survived from this civilization, but it was also one of the most *predatory* civilizations we know about from ancient history.
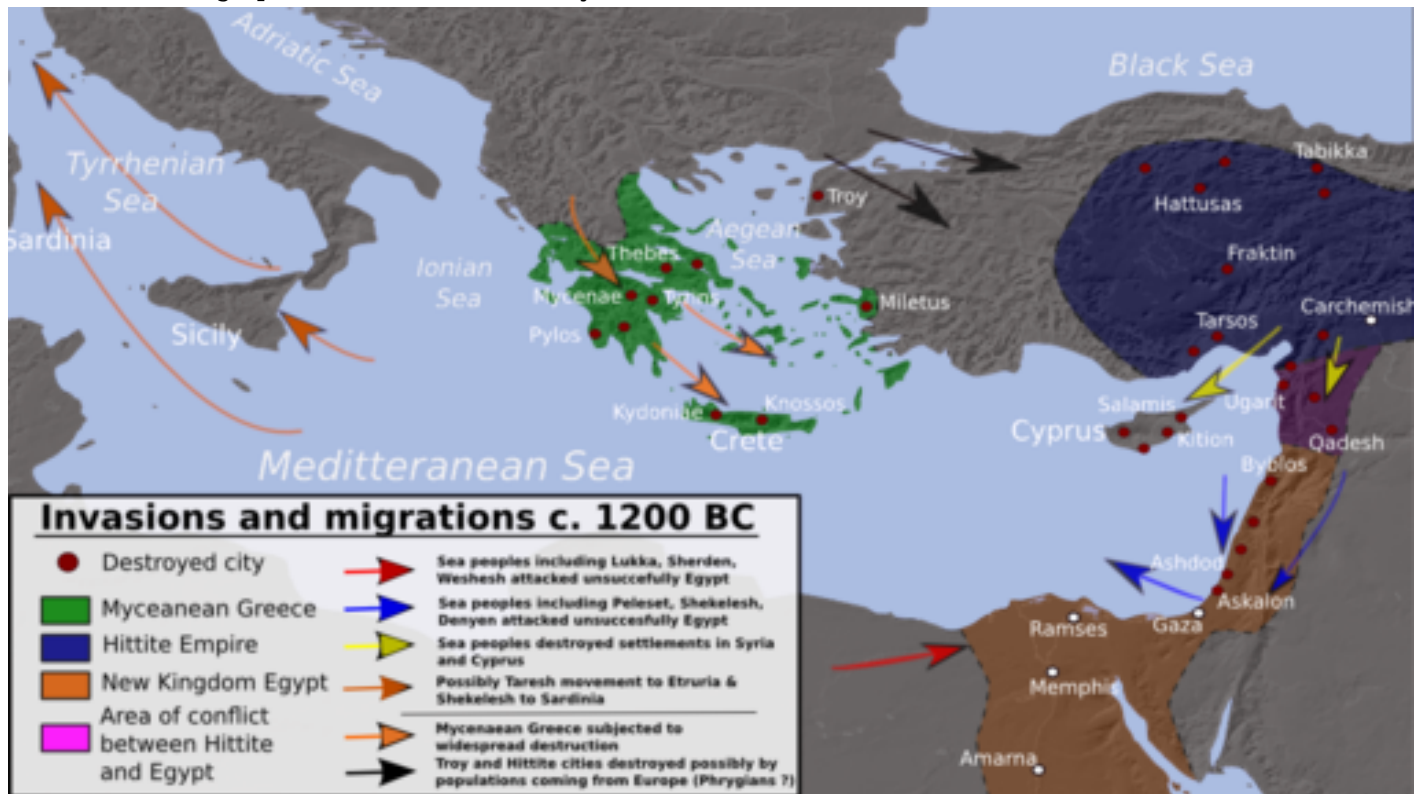
The Collapse of the Bronze Age

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

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

Around 1050 BCE, two of the victims of the collapse, the New Kingdom of Egypt and the Hittite Empire, left clear indications in their records that drought had undermined their grain stores and their social stability. In recent years archaeologists have presented strong scientific evidence that the climate of the entire region became warmer and more arid, supporting the idea of a series of debilitating droughts. Even the greatest of the Bronze Age empires existed in a state of relative precarity, relying on regular harvests in order to not just feed their population, but sustain the governments, armies, and building projects of their states as a whole. Thus, environmental disaster could have played a key role in undermining the political stability of whole regions at the time.

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

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

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

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

The Iron Age

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

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

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

Iron Age Cultures and States

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

The Phoenicians were not a particularly warlike people. Instead, they are remembered for being travelers and merchants, particularly by sea. They traveled farther than any other ancient people; sometime around 600 BCE, according to the Greek historian Herodotus, a Phoenician expedition even sailed around Africa over the course of three years (if that actually happened, it was an achievement

that would not be accomplished again for almost 2,000 years). The Phoenicians established colonies all over the shores Mediterranean, where they provided anchors in a new international trade network that eventually replaced the one destroyed with the fall of the Bronze Age. Likewise, Phoenician cities served as the crossroads of trade for goods that originated as far away as England (metals were mined in England and shipped all the way to the Near East via overland routes). The most prominent Phoenician city was Carthage in North Africa, which centuries later would become the great rival of the Roman Republic.

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

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

Empires of the Iron Age

While the Phoenicians played a major role in jumpstarting long-distance trade after the collapse of the Bronze Age, they did not create a strong united state. Such a state emerged farther east, however: alone of the major states of the Bronze Age, the Assyrian kingdom in northern Mesopotamia survived. Probably because of their extreme focus on militarism, the Assyrians were able to hold on to their core cities while the states around them collapsed. During the Iron Age, the Assyrians became the most powerful empire the world had ever seen. The Assyrians were the first empire in world history to systematically conquer almost all of their neighbors using a powerful standing army and go on to control the conquered territory for hundreds of years. They represented the pinnacle of military power

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The style of Assyrian rule ensured the hatred of conquered peoples. They demanded constant tribute and taxation and funneled luxury goods back to their main cities. They did not try to set up sustainable economies or assimilate conquered peoples into a shared culture, instead skimming off the top of the entire range of conquered lands. Their style of rule is well known because their kings built huge monuments to themselves in which they boasted about the lands they conquered and the tribute they exacted along the way.

While their subjects experienced Assyrian rule as militarily-enforced tyranny, Assyrian kings were proud of the cultural and intellectual heritage of Mesopotamia and supported learning and scholarship. The one conquered city in their empire that was allowed a significant degree of autonomy

was Babylon, out of respect for its role as a center of Mesopotamian culture. Assyrian scribes collected and copied the learning and literature of the entire Middle East. Sometime after 660 BCE, the king Asshurbanipal ordered the collection of all of the texts of all of his kingdom, including the ones from conquered lands, and he went on to create a massive library to house them. Parts of this library survived and provide one of the most important sources of information that scholars have on the beliefs, languages, and literature of the ancient Middle East.

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

The Neo-Babylonians adopted some of the terror tactics of the Assyrians; they, too, deported conquered enemies as servants and slaves. Where they differed, however, was in their focus on trade. They built new roads and canals and encouraged long-distance trade throughout their lands. They were often at war with Egypt, which also tried to take advantage of the fall of the Assyrians to seize new land, but even when the two powers were at war Egyptian merchants were still welcome throughout the Neo-Babylonian empire.

A combination of flourishing trade and high taxes led to huge wealth for the king and court, and among other things led to the construction of noteworthy works of monumental architecture to decorate their capital. The Babylonians inherited the scientific traditions of ancient Mesopotamia, becoming the greatest astronomers and mathematicians yet seen, able to predict eclipses and keep highly detailed calendars. They also created the zodiac used up to the present in astrology, reflecting the age-old practice of both science and "magic" that were united in the minds of Mesopotamians. In the end, however, they were the last of the great ancient Mesopotamian empires that existed independently. Less than 100 years after their successful rebellion against the Assyrians, they were conquered by what became the greatest empire in the ancient world to date: the Persians, described in a following chapter.

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Chapter 4: 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. (Note: it should be emphasized that the approach taken here is that of secular historical scholarship: what is known about the historical origins of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam based on empirical research carried out by historians and archaeologists).

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

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

According to Jewish belief, by far the most important thing Abraham did was agree to the Covenant, the promise made between the God Yahweh (the "name" of God is derived from the Hebrew

characters for the phrase "I am who I am," the enigmatic response of God when asked for His name by the prophet Moses) and the Hebrews. The Covenant stated that in return for their devotion and worship, and the circumcision of all Hebrew males, the Hebrews would receive from Yahweh a "land of milk and honey," a place of peace and prosperity of their own for all time.

Then, in about 1600 BCE, the Hebrews went to Egypt to escape famine and were welcomed by the Hyksos dynasty (during the Second Intermediate Period of ancient Egypt). The Hyksos were fellow Canaanites, after all, and they appear to have encouraged the Hebrews to stay. According to the Hebrew Bible, with the rise of the New Kingdom the Hebrews were enslaved, with their leader Moses leading them away sometime around 1300 – 1200 BCE. There is little archaeological or Egyptian textual evidence to support the story of the complete enslavement of the Hebrews, besides references in Egyptian sources to Canaanite laborers. A pharaoh, Merneptah, makes a passing reference to a people he simply called "Israel" as living in Canaan in 1207 BCE, which is the strongest evidence of the Hebrews' presence in Canaan in the late Bronze Age.

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

As noted above, the tales present in the Hebrew Bible cannot generally be verified with empirical evidence. They also bear the imprint of earlier traditions: many stories in the Hebrew Bible are taken from earlier Mesopotamian legends. The story of Moses is very close to the account of Sargon the Great's rise from obscurity in Akkadian tradition, and the flood legend (described in the Bible's first book, Genesis) is taken directly from the Epic of Gilgamesh, although the motivation of the Mesopotamian gods versus that of Yahweh in those two stories is very different: the Mesopotamian gods are cruel and capricious, while the flood of Yahweh is sent as a punishment for the sins of humankind.

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

The Kings and Kingdoms

While the early Hebrews were communalists, meaning they shared most goods in common within their clans (referred to as the twelve "tribes" in the Hebrew Bible), conflicts with the Philistines, another Canaanite people on the coast, led them to appoint a king, Saul, in about 1020 BCE. The Philistines were one of the groups of "Sea People" who had attacked the New Kingdom of Egypt. The Philistines were a small but powerful kingdom. They were armed with iron and they fought the Hebrews to a standstill initially – 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, neither was it markedly more exploitative than the norm in the region as a whole.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After being freed by Cyrus, the Jews were still part of the Persian Empire, ruled by a Persian governor (called a "satrap"). For most of the rest of their history, the Jews were able to maintain their distinct cultural identity and their religion, but rarely their political independence. The Jews went from being ruled by the Persians to the Greeks to the Romans (although they did occasionally seize independence for a time), and were then eventually scattered across the Roman Empire. The real hammer-blow of the Diaspora was in the 130s CE, when the Romans destroyed much of Jerusalem and

forced almost all of the Jews into exile – the word diaspora itself means "scattering," and with the destruction of the Jewish kingdom by Rome there would be no Jewish state again until the foundation of the modern nation of Israel in 1948 CE.

The Yahwist Religion and Judaism

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

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

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

The Prophetic Movement attacked both polytheism and the Yahwist establishment centered on the Temple of Jerusalem (they blamed the latter for ignoring the plight of the common people and the poor). The prophets were hostile to both the political power structure and to deviation from the exclusive worship of Yahweh. The prophets were also responsible for enunciating the idea that Yahweh

was the only god, in part in reaction to the demands of Assyria that all subjects acknowledge the Assyrian god Ashur as the supreme god. In other words, the claim of the Prophetic Movement was not only that Yahweh was superior to Ashur, but that Ashur was not really a god in the first place.

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

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

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

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

since the Persians were originally semi-nomadic).

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

What all of the cultures considered in this chapter have in common is that they were more dynamic and, in the case of the empires, more powerful than earlier Mesopotamian (and even Egyptian) states. In a sense, the empires of the Bronze Age and, especially, the Iron Age represented different

experiments in how to build and maintain larger economic systems and political units than had been possible earlier. The other major change is that it now becomes possible to discuss and examine the interactions between the various kingdoms and empires, not just what happened with them internally, since the entire region from Greece to Mesopotamia was now in sustained contact through trade, warfare, and diplomacy.

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

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Chapter 5: The Archaic Age of Greece

Overview

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 Mycenaeans were two of the civilizations that were part of the international trade and diplomacy network of the Mediterranean and Middle East. The Minoans were a major seafaring civilization based on the island of Crete. They created huge palace complexes, magnificent artwork, and great wealth. They eventually vanished as a distinct culture, most likely after they were conquered and absorbed by the Mycenaeans, their neighbors to the north.

The Mycenaeans developed as a civilization after the Minoans were already established in Crete. The Mycenaeans lived on the Greek mainland and the islands of the Aegean Sea and were known primarily as sea-going merchants and raiders. They were extremely warlike, attacking each other, their neighbors, and the people they also traded with whenever the opportunity existed to loot and sack. The Mycenaeans were the protagonists of the famous epic poems written by the (possibly mythical) Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

The Mycenaeans vanished as a civilization at the end of the Bronze Age. The cause was probably a combination of foreign invasions and local rebellions and wars. One strong possibility is that there

was a sustained civil war among the Mycenaean palace-settlements that resulted in a fatal disruption to the economic setting that was essential to their very existence. A bad enough war in Greece itself could have easily undermined harvests, already near a subsistence level, and when they were destroyed by these conflicts, towns, fortresses and palaces could not be rebuilt. Whatever the cause, the decline of the Mycenaeans occurred around 1100 BCE, marking the beginning of what historians refer to as the Dark Age in Greek history.

Of all the regions and cultures affected by the collapse of the Bronze Age, Greece was among those hit hardest. First and foremost, foreign trade declined dramatically. Whereas the Mycenaeans had been seafaring traders, their descendants were largely limited to local production and trade. Agriculture reverted to subsistence levels, and trade with neighboring areas all but vanished. In turn, this reversion to local subsistence economies cut 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 BCE – 490 BCE, is referred to as the "Archaic" (meaning "old") Age. The Archaic Age saw the re-emergence of sustained contact with foreign cultures, starting with the development of Greek colonies on the Greek islands and on the western coast of Anatolia; this region is called Ionia, with its Greek inhabitants speaking a dialect of Greek called Ionian. These Greeks reestablished long-distance trade routes, most importantly with the Phoenicians, the great traders and merchants of the Iron Age. Eventually, foreign-made goods and cultural contacts started to flow back to Greece once again.

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

Homer's epic poems – *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* – were written down in this period after being recited in oral form by traveling singers for centuries. They purported to recount the deeds of great

heroes from the Mycenaean age, in the process providing a rich tapestry of information about ancient Greek values, beliefs, and practices to later cultures. Both poems celebrated *arete* – a Greek virtue which can be translated in English as "excellence" and "success," but must be understood as a moral characteristic as much as a physical or mental one. Arete meant, among other things, fulfilling one's potential, which was almost always the highest goal espoused in Greek philosophy. Throughout the epics, men and women struggle to overcome both one another and their own limitations, while grappling with the limitations imposed by nature, chance, and the will of the gods.

The values on display in the Homeric poems spoke to the Greeks of the Archaic Age in how they determined what was good and desirable in human behavior in general. The 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 power 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 patriarcal, with men holding all official positions of political power. Likewise, both the Greek myths and epic tales are both rife with hostility and suspicion of assertive, intelligent women, celebrating instead women who dutifully served their husbands or fathers (Penelope, wife of the Greek hero Odysseus, is described as waiting faithfully for twenty years for Odysseus to return from the invasion of Troy despite a legion of suitors trying to win her and Odysseus's lands). Women were expected to be sexually monogamous with their husbands while men's sexual liaisons with female slaves as well as other men of their own social rank were perfectly acceptable behaviors.

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

Depiction of a symposium dating from c. 475 BCE.

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.

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

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

Greek colonies far from Greece were as important as the older 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.

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

The most noteworthy military innovation represented by the hoplites was that their form of

organization provided one solution to the age-old problem of how to pay for highly-trained and motivated soldiers: rather than a state paying for a standing army, the hoplites paid for themselves and were motivated by civic virtue. When rival 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 was among the most extreme forms of militarism the world has ever seen. Spartan boys were taken from their parents when they were seven to live in barracks. They were regularly beaten, both as a form of discipline and to make them unafraid of pain. Children with deformities of any kind were left in the elements to die, as were children maimed by the training regimen. Spartan boys were trained constantly in combat, maneuvering, and physical endurance. Spartan girls were allowed to stay with their parents, but were trained in martial skills as children as well, along with the knowledge they would need to run a household. When a man reached the age of twenty, assuming he was judged worthy, he would be elevated to the rank of "Equal" – a full Spartan citizen – and receive a land grant that ensured that he could concentrate on military discipline for the rest of his life without having to worry about making a living.

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

The reason for 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 of free noncitizens (inhabitants of towns near Sparta who were not considered helots, but instead free but subservient subjects), overseeing a much larger population of helots. Simply put, Spartan society was a military hierarchy that arose out of the

fear 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.

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Chapter 6: Persia and the Greek Wars

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

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

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

Persian 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 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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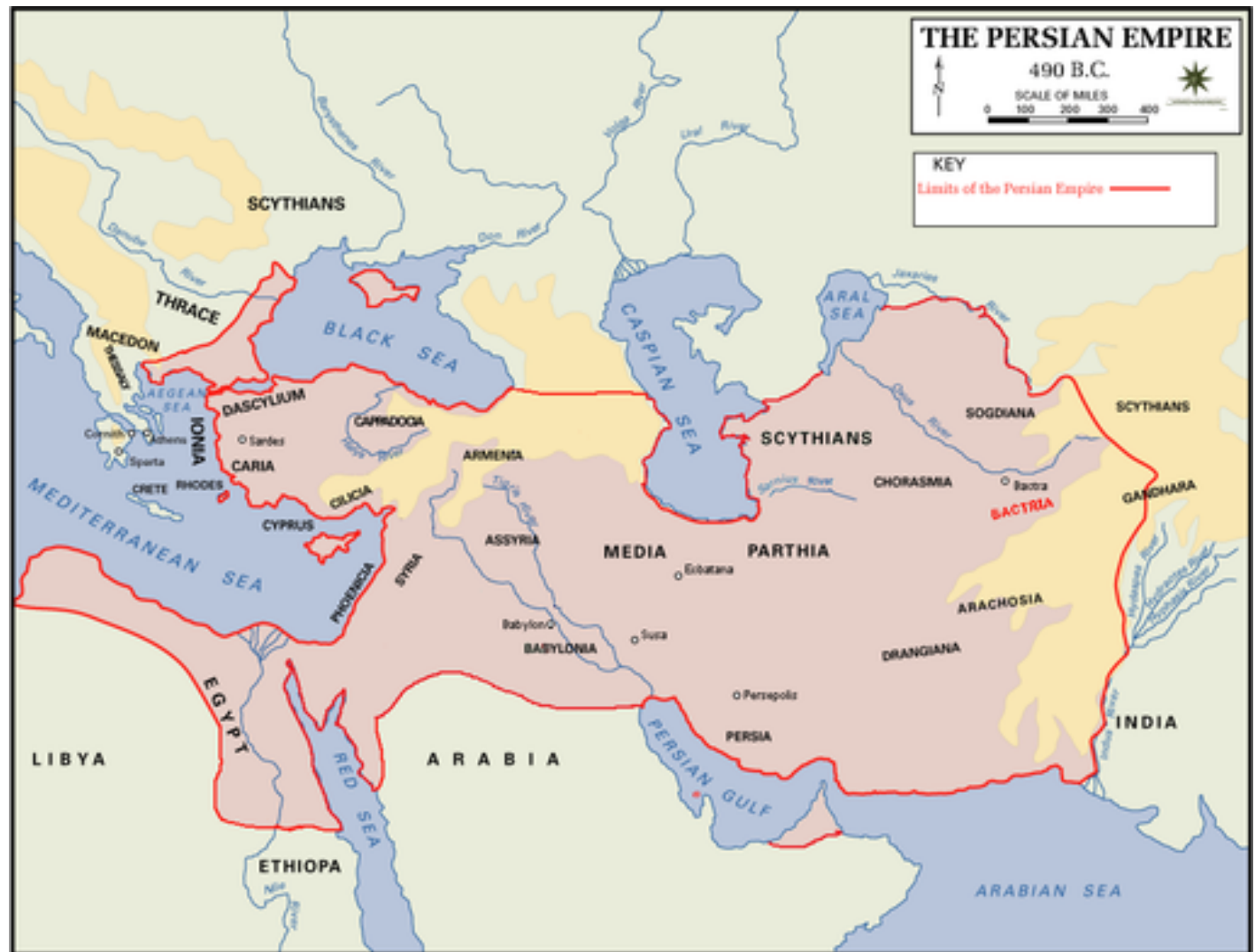
The Persian Empire at its territorial height under Darius I.

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

Darius was also interested in seizing more territory to the west, conquering the remaining Greek colonies on the coast of Anatolia. In 499 BCE several Ionian Greek 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 (considered below).

The Persian Government

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

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

The Persian kings introduced a system of governance that allowed them to gather intelligence and maintain control over such a vast area relatively successfully. The empire was divided into twenty *satrapies* (provinces), ruled by officials called *satraps*. In each satrapy, the satrap was the political governor, advised and supplemented by a military general who reported directly to the king; in this way, the two most powerful leaders in each satrapy could keep an eye on each other. In addition, roaming officials called the "eyes and ears of the king" traveled around the empire checking that the king's edicts were being enforced and that conquered people were not being abused, then reporting back to the Persian capitals of Susa and 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; 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, if not to God. Likewise, the Christian idea of the final judgment is clearly indebted to the Zoroastrian one: a great day of reckoning.

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

One noteworthy aspect of Zoroastrianism is that, in contrast to other ancient religions (including Judaism, and later, Christianity), Zoroastrianism appears to have banned slavery on spiritual grounds. This is important to bear in mind in the context of discussing the Persian War, described below. The Greeks thought of the war as the defense of their glorious traditions, including the political participation of citizens in the state, but it was the Greeks who controlled a society that was heavily dependent on slavery, whereas slavery was at least less prevalent in Persia than in Greece (despite the religious ban, slavery was clearly still present in the Persian Empire to some degree).

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

The Persian War

When the Greek cities of Ionia rose up against Persian rule, Darius vowed to make an example not just of them, but of the Greek 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 – consider the recent movie adaptations of the most famous battles of the Persian War, *300* and *300: Rise of an Empire*, in which the Persians are depicted as being literally monstrous, ruled over by a comically evil, eight-foot-tall king. The fact that both Sparta and Athens were slave-based societies is *not* part of those movies' narratives.

The war began in 490 BCE, when the Persians, with about 25,000 men, landed at Marathon, a town 26 miles from Athens. The Athenians sent a renowned runner, Pheidippides, to Sparta (about 140 miles from Athens) to ask for help. The Spartans agreed, but said that they could only send reinforcements when their religious ceremonies were completed in a few days. Pheidippides ran back to Athens with the bad news, but by then the Athenians were already engaged with the Persians.

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

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

It is entirely possible that, despite this victory, the Greeks would have still been overwhelmed by

the Persians if not for setbacks in Persia and its empire. A major revolt broke out in Egypt against Persian rule, drawing attention away from Greece until the revolt was put down. Likewise, it took years to fully "activate" the Persian military machine; preparation for a full-scale invasion took a full decade to reach completion. Darius died in 486 BCE, in the middle of the preparations, which disrupted them further while his son Xerxes consolidated his power.

In the meantime, the Greeks were well aware that the Persians would eventually return. A new Athenian general, Themistocles, convinced his countrymen to spend the proceeds of a silver mine they had discovered on a navy. Athens went into a naval-building frenzy, ending up with hundreds of warships called triremes, rowed by those free Athenians too poor to afford armor and weapons and serve as hoplites, but who now had an opportunity to directly aid in battle as sailors. This was perhaps the first time in world history that a fairly minor power transformed itself into a major power simply by having the foresight to build an effective navy.

The Persians had finally regrouped by 480 BCE, ten years after their first attempt to invade. Xerxes I, the new king, dispatched a huge army (as many as 200,000 soldiers and 1,200 ships) against Greece, supported by a navy over twice as large as that of the Athenians. The Greek 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.

THRACE

Persian Land Force

MACEDONIA

Persian Fleet

Persian invasion
proceeds by land
and sea.

Thessaly

AEGEAN SEA

Euboea

Storm off of Euboea
destroys large portion
of Persian fleet.

Thermopylae

Attica

PELOPONNESUS

Sparta

Persians defeated at Salamis
480 B.C., send fleet back to
Asia. Persian land force is
defeated at Plataea 479 B.C.

THE THIRD PERSIAN INVASION

480 - 479 B.C.

SCALE OF MILES

0   25   50   75   100

Route of the Persian invasion under Xerxes.

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

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

The next year, in 479 BCE, a decisive battle was fought in central Greece by a Greek coalition led by the Spartans, followed by a Greek naval battle led by the Athenians. The latter then led an invasion of Ionia that defeated the Persian army. Each time the Greeks were victorious, 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 for whom they had little personal loyalty. The core of the Persian army were excellent cavalry from the Iranian plateau and Bactria (present-day Afghanistan), but those were always a small minority of the total force.

479 BCE was the end of the Persian war and the beginning of the "classical age" of Greece, the period during which the Greeks exhibited the most remarkable flowering of their ideas and accomplishments, as well as perhaps their most selfish and misguided political blunders in the form of a costly and ultimately pointless war between Sparta and Athens: the Peloponnesian War.

The 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 a defensive coalition that existed to defend against Persia and to liberate the Ionian colonies still under Persian control, but in reality a political tool eventually used by Athens to create its own empire.

Each year, the members of the Delian League contributed money to build and support a large navy, meant to protect all of Greece from any further Persian interference. Athens, however, quickly became the dominant player in the Delian League. Athens was able to control the League due to its powerful navy; no other 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 – 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.

THRACE

MACEDONIA

Thessaly

AEGEAN SEA

AEOLIA

Thermopylae

Boetia

Attica

Corinth

Athens
&
Piraeus

Ionia

PELOPONNESUS

Sparta

Athenian Strategy:
Defend on Land
Offensive on Sea
Continue Foreign Trade

Spartan Strategy:
Offensive on Land

PELOPONNESIAN WAR

Alliances at the Start and Contrasting Strategies,

431 B.C.

Athenian Empire and Allies

Spartan Confederacy

SCALE OF MILES

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

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

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

The Aftermath

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

Nowhere was this more true than in Sparta. Sparta had been greatly altered 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 all adopted the practice of state-financed standing armies for the first time, rather than volunteer citizen-soldiers. Likewise, the poleis came to rely on mercenaries, many of whom (ironically) went on to serve the Persians after the war wound down. Thus, between 405 BCE –

338 BCE, the old order of the hoplites and republics atrophied, replaced by oligarchic councils or tyrants in the poleis and stronger, tax-supported states. The period of the war itself was thus both the high point and the beginning of the end of "classical" Greece. Meanwhile, Persia re-captured and exerted control over the Anatolian Greek cities by 387 BCE as Greece itself was divided and weakened. Thus, even though the Persians had "lost" the Persian War, they were as strong as ever as an empire.

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

Quote:

Cyrus Cylinder

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Chapter 7: The Classical Age of Greece

Introduction

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

Athens and the Ironies of Democracy

Just as the Classical Age is nearly synonymous with "ancient Greece" itself, "ancient Greece" in the Classical Age is often conflated with what happened in Athens specifically. Athens was the richest and most influential of all of the Greek poleis during this period, although its power waned once it plunged into the Peloponnesian War against Sparta starting in 431 BCE. The most famous Greek philosophers – Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle – were either native Athenians (Socrates and Plato) or studied and taught in Athens (Aristotle). Likewise, the Athenian democracy that 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 argumentative skill. The assembly also voted every year to appoint ten generals, who were in charge of both the military and foreign relations.

As the Delian League grew, which is to say as Athens took over control of its "allied" poleis, it increased the size of its bureaucracy accordingly. Under Pericles, there were about 1,500 officials who managed the taxation of the league's cities, ran courts and administrative bodies, and managed the League's activities. Pericles instituted the policy of paying public servants, who had worked for free in the past, a move that dramatically decreased the potential for corruption through bribes and opened the possibility of poorer citizens to serve in public office (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 government in the ancient world at the time, but that it did so on the backs of its Greek "allies."

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

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

Non-elite women had more freedom in the sense that they had to work, so they often sold goods in the marketplace or helped to run shops. Since the large majority of the Greek population outside of the cities themselves were farmers, women naturally worked alongside men on farms. Regardless, they did not have legal control over their own livelihoods, even if they did much of the actual work, with their husbands (or fathers or brothers) retaining complete legal ownership.

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

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

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

In turn, prostitution was very common, with the bulk of prostitutes being slaves. Elite prostitutes

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

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

One product of the divide between men and women was the prevalence of bisexuality among elite Greek men (and, as suggested by Sappho's work, also apparently among women). There was no concept of "heterosexual" versus "homosexual" in Greek culture; sexual attraction was assumed to exist, in potential, between men as easily as between men and women, although bisexuality appears to have been most common among men in the upper social ranks. 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 in order to both honor and defend their lovers. This certainly seemed to be true at times, as when the Theban army, led by the Sacred Band, was the city

that first defeated Sparta in open battle (this occurred after the Peloponnesian War, when Sparta found itself warring with its former allies like Thebes).

In addition to the dramatic gender disparities in Greek society, there was the case of slavery. Slaves in Greece were in a legal position just about as dire as any in history. Their masters could legally kill them, rape them, or maim them if they saw fit. Normally, slaves were not murdered outright, but this was because murder was seen as offensive to the gods, not because there were any legal consequences. As Greece became more wealthy and powerful, the demand for slaves increased dramatically as each 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 of the major civilizations of the ancient world; African slaves were captured and sold in Egypt, Greek slaves to Persia (despite its nominal ban on slavery, it is clear that at least some slavery existed in Persia), nomadic people from the steppes in Black Sea ports, and so on. With demand so high, any neighboring settlement was a potential source of slaves, and slavery was an integral part of the Mediterranean economy as a result.

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

The worst positions for slaves were the jobs involving manual labor, especially in mines. As noted in the last chapter, one of the events that lost the Peloponnesian War for Athens was the fact that 20,000 of its publicly-owned slaves were liberated by the Spartans from the horrendous conditions in the Athenian silver mines. Likewise, there was no worse fate than being a slave in a salt mine (one of the areas containing a natural underground salt deposit). Salt is corrosive to human tissue in large amounts, and exposure meant that a slave would die horribly over time. The historical evidence suggests that slaves in mines were routinely worked to death, not unlike the plantation slaves of Brazil and the Caribbean thousands of years later.

Culture

If Greek society was thus nothing like present-day concepts of fairness or equality, what about it led to this era being regarded as "classical"? The answer is that it was during the Classical Age that the Greeks arrived at some of their great intellectual and cultural achievements. The Athenian democratic experiment is, of course, of great historical importance, but it was relatively short-lived, with democratic government not returning to the western world until the end of the eighteenth century CE. In contrast, the Greek approach to philosophy, drama, history, scientific thought, and art remained living legacies even after the Classical Age itself was at an end.

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

That being noted, one of the major cultural innovations of the Greeks, the creation of drama, emerged from the worship of the gods. Specifically, the celebrations of the god Dionysus, god of wine and revelry, brought about the first recognizable "plays" and "actors." Not surprisingly, religious festivals devoted to Dionysus involved a lot of celebrating, and part of that celebration was choruses of singing and chanting. Greek writers started scripting these performances, eventually creating what we now recognize as plays. A prominent feature of Greek drama left over from the Dionysian rituals remained the *chorus*, a group of performers who chanted or sang together and served as the narrator to the stories depicted by the main characters.

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

Greek drama depicted life in human terms, even when using mythological or ancient settings. Playwrights would set their plays in the past or among the gods, but the experiences of the characters in the plays were recognizable critiques of the playwrights' contemporary society. Among the most powerful were the *tragedies*: stories in which the frailty of humanity, most importantly the problem of pride, served to undermine the happiness of otherwise powerful individuals. Typically, in a Greek tragedy, the main character is a powerful male leader, a king or a military captain, who enjoys great success in his endeavors until a fatal flaw of his own personality and psyche causes him to do something foolish and self-destructive. Very often this took the form of *hubris*, overweening pride and lack of self-control, which the Greeks believed was offensive to the gods and could bring about divine retribution. Other tragedies emphasized the power of fate, when cruel circumstances conspired to lead even great heroes to failure.

In addition to tragedy, the Greeks invented *comedy*. The essential difference is that tragedy revolves around *pathos,* or suffering, from which the English word "pathetic" derives. Pathos is meant

to inspire sympathy and understanding in the viewer. Watching a Greek tragedy should, the playwrights hoped, lead the audience to relate to and sympathize with the tragic hero. Comedy, however, is meant to inspire mockery and gleeful contempt of the failings of others, rather than sympathy. The most prominent comic playwright (whose works survive) was Aristophanes, a brilliant writer whose plays are full of lying, hypocritical Athenian politicians and merchants who reveal themselves as the frauds they are to the delight of audiences.

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

Greek drama, both tragedy and comedy, is of enormous historical importance because even when it used the gods as characters or fate as an explanation for problems, it put human beings front and center in being responsible for their own errors. It depicted human choice as being the centerpiece of life against a backdrop of often uncontrollable circumstances. Tragedy gave the Greeks the option of lamenting that condition, while comedy offered the chance of laughing at it. In the surviving plays of the ancient Greeks, there were very few happy endings, but plenty of opportunities to relate to the fate of, or make fun of, the protagonists. In turn, almost every present-day movie and television show is deeply indebted to Greek drama. Greek drama was the first time human beings acted out stories that were meant to entertain, and sometimes to inform, their audiences.

Science

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

The importance of Greek scientific work is not primarily in the conclusions that Greek scientists reached, which ended up being factually wrong most of the time. Instead, its importance is in its spirit

of rational inquiry, in the idea that the human mind can discover new things about the world through examination and consideration. The world, thought the Greek scientists, was not some sacred or impenetrable thing that could never be understood; they sought to explain it without recourse to supernatural forces. To that end, Greek scientists claimed that things like wind, fire, lightning, and other natural forces, were not necessarily spirits or gods (or at least tools of spirits and gods), but might just be natural forces that did not have personalities of their own.

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

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

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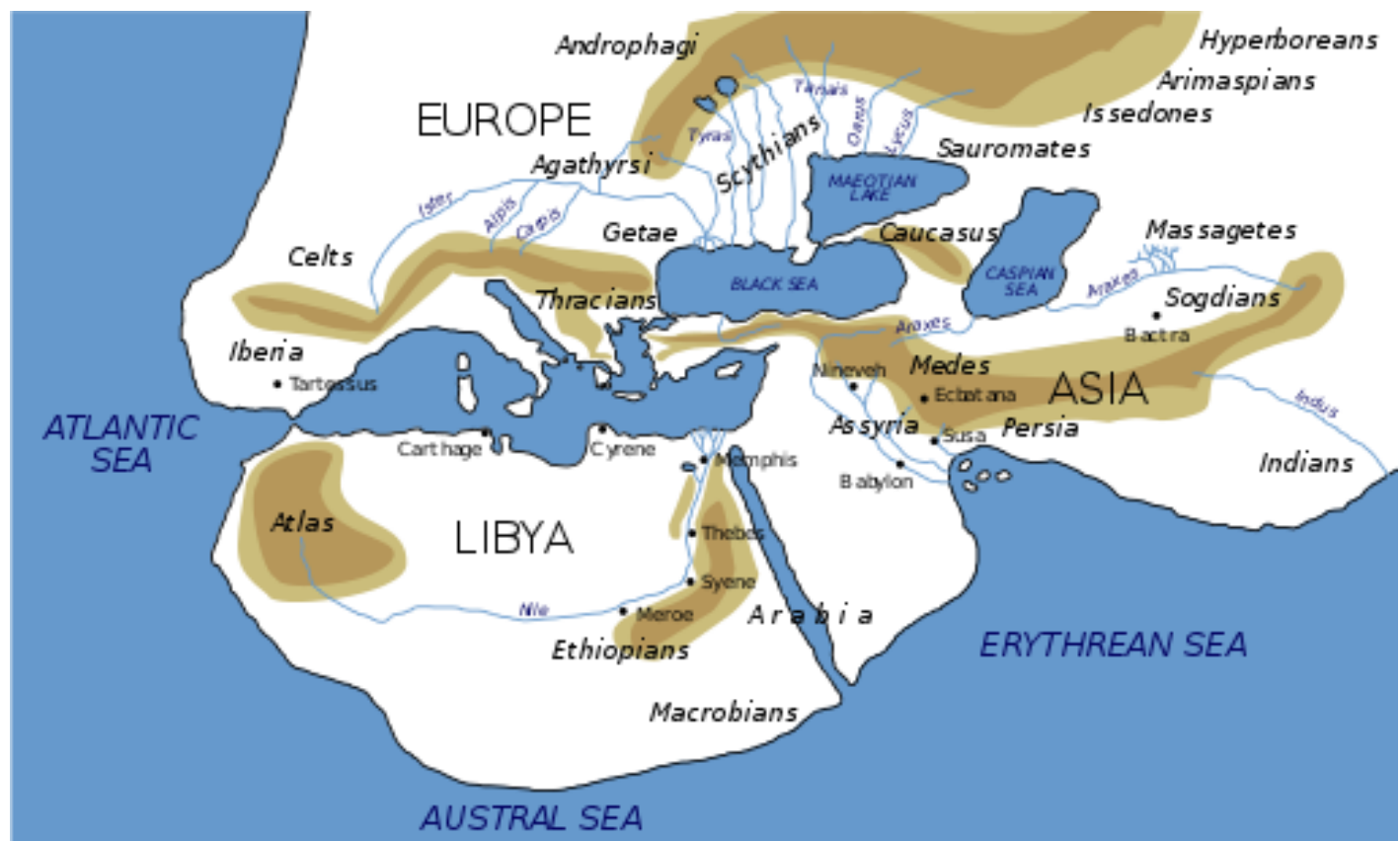
History

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

happened the way it did. In other words, history as it was first written by the Greeks is not just about listing facts, it is about explaining the human motivations at work in historical events and phenomena. Likewise, the Greeks were the first to systematically employ the essential historical method of using primary sources written or experienced at the time as the basis of historical research.

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

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

The world as described by Herodotus (the map is a contemporary image based on Herodotus's work). Note the central position of Greece, just south of the region marked "Thracians."

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

Philosophy

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

Among the important questions that most Greek philosophers dealt 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 represented a truly unified body of thought, the one common sophistic doctrine was that all human beliefs and customs were just habits of a society, that there were no absolute truths, and that it was thus vitally important for an educated man to be able to argue both sides of an issue with equal skill and rhetorical ability. Their focus was on training elite Greeks to be *successful* – the Greek term for "virtue" was synonymous with "success." Thus, the sophists were in the business of educating Greeks to be more successful, especially in the law

courts and the public assemblies. They did not have a shared philosophical doctrine besides this idea that truth was relative and that the focus in life ought to be on individual achievement.

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

Socrates never wrote anything down; like most of his contemporaries, he believed that writing destroyed the memory and undermined meaning, preferring spoken discourses and memorization. Instead, his beliefs and arguments were recorded by his student Plato, who committed them to prose despite sharing Socrates' disdain for the written word. Socrates challenged the sophists and insisted that there *are* essential truths about morality and ethical conduct, but that to arrive at those truths one must be willing to relentlessly question oneself. He took issue with the fact that the sophists were largely unconcerned with ethical behavior, focusing entirely on worldly success; according to Socrates, there were higher truths and meanings to human conduct than mere wealth and political power.

Socrates used what later became known as the "Socratic Method" to seek out these fixed, unchanging rules of truth and ethics. In the Socratic Method, the teacher asks a series of questions of the student, forcing the student to examine her own biases and gaps in logic, until finally arriving at a more satisfying and reasonable belief than she started with. In Socrates's case, his questions were meant to lead his interlocutors to arrive at real, stable truths about justice, truth, and virtuous politics. Unlike with the sophists' mastery of rhetoric, the point of the question-and-answer sessions was not to prove that nothing was true, but instead to force one to arrive at truths through the most rigorous application of human reason.
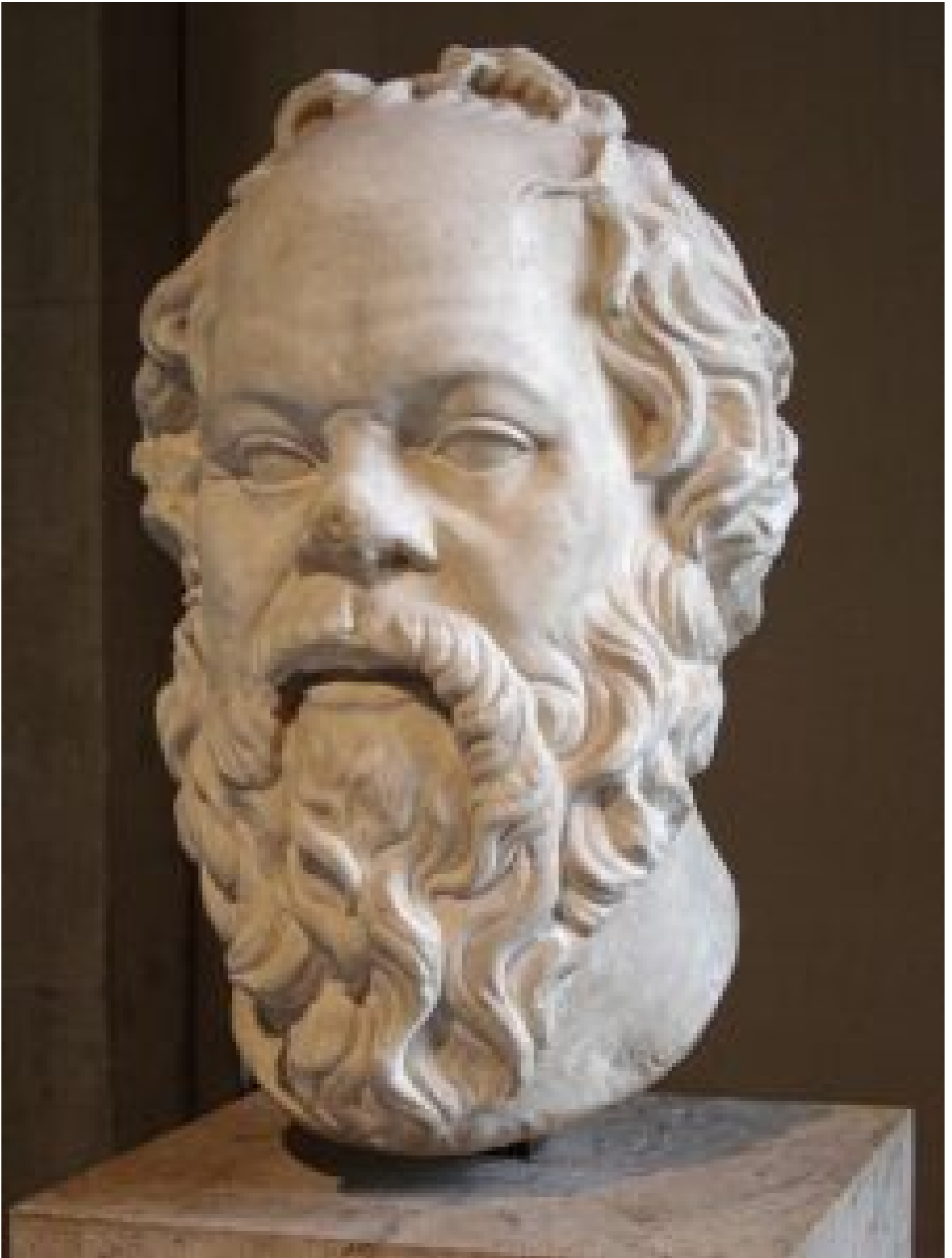
A Roman copy of an original Greek bust of Socrates – as with many Greek sculptures, only the Roman copy survives. Most Greek statues were made of bronze, and over the centuries almost all were melted down for the metal.

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

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

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

Plato's most gifted student was Aristotle, who founded his own institution of learning, the Lyceum, after he was passed over to lead the Academy following Plato's death. Aristotle broke sharply with his teacher over the essential doctrine of his teaching. Aristotle argued that the senses, while imperfect, are still reliable enough to provide genuine insights into the workings of the world, and furthermore that the duty of the philosopher was to try to understand the world in as great detail as possible. One of his major areas of focus was an analysis of the real-life politics of the polis; his conclusion was that humans are "political animals" and that it was possible to improve politics through human understanding and invention, not just contemplation.

Aristotle was the ancient world's greatest intellectual overachiever. He single-handedly founded the disciplines of biology, literary criticism, political science, and logical philosophy. He wrote about everything from physics to astronomy and from mathematics to drama. His work was so influential that philosophers continued to believe in the essential validity of his findings well into the period of the

Renaissance (thousands of years later) even though many of his scientific conclusions turned out to be factually inaccurate. Despite those inaccuracies, he unquestionably deserves to be remembered as one of the greatest thinkers of all time.

Art

The great legacy of Greek art is in its celebration of perfection and balance: the human body in its perfect state, perfect symmetry in buildings, and balance in geometric forms. One well known instance of this was in architecture, with the use of a mathematical concept known as the "golden ratio" (also known as the "golden mean") which, when applied to building, creates forms that the Greeks, and many others afterwards, believed was inherently pleasing to the eye. The most prominent surviving piece of Greek architecture, the Parthenon of Athens dedicated to the 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.

Contemporary view of the Parthenon.

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

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

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

Exploration

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

One exception to these limited horizons was a Greek explorer named Pytheas. A sailor from the small Greek 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 was heading off to conquer the Persian Empire, Pytheas evaded the Carthaginian blockade and sailed into Atlantic waters. He went on to sail up the coast of France, trading with and noting the cultures of the people he encountered. He then sailed across the English Channel, ultimately circumnavigating England and Scotland, then sailing east to (probably) Denmark, and ultimately returning home to Massalia. He subsequently wrote a book about his account titled *On the Ocean* that was met with scorn from most of its Greek audience since it did not have any fantastical creatures and mixed in genuine empirical

observation (about distances and conditions along the way) with its narrative. Armchair critics claimed that it was impossible that he had gone as far as north as he said, because north of Greece it was quite cold enough and there was no way humans could live any farther north than that. Practically speaking, despite Pytheas's voyage, the Greek world would remain defined by the shores of the Mediterranean.

Conclusion

"Classical Greece" is important historically because of what people *thought* as much as what they *did*. What the Greeks of the Classical Age deserve credit for is an intellectual culture that resulted in remarkable innovations: humanistic art, literature, and a new focus on the rational mind's ability to learn about nature and to improve politics and social organization. What the Greeks had never done, however, was spread that culture and those beliefs to non-Greeks, both because of the Greek belief in their own superiority 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.

Quote:

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

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Chapter 8: The Hellenistic Age

Introduction

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

Macedon and Philip II

The story starts in Macedon, a kingdom to the north of Greece. The Macedonians were warriors and traders. They lived in villages instead of 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), who repeatedly invaded and had to be repelled. The Macedonian army was comprised of free citizens who demanded payment after every campaign, payment that could only be secured by looting from defeated enemies. In short, Macedon bred some of the toughest and most wily fighters and political operators in Greece out of sheer necessity.

By the fifth century BCE, some of the larger villages of Macedon grew big enough to be considered cities, and elite Macedonians made efforts to civilize their country in the style of the southern Greeks. They competed in the Olympics and patronized the arts and literature. They tended to stay out of the political affairs of the other Greeks, however; they did not invade the Greek peninsula

itself in their constant wars, nor did they take sides in conflicts like the Peloponnesian War. This did nothing to improve the situation in Macedon itself, of course, which remained split between the royal family and the nobility. In 399 BCE, Macedon slid into an ongoing civil war, with the nobles openly rejecting the authority of the king and the country 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 started a campaign across Macedonia and the surrounding areas to the north, defeating and usually killing his noble rivals as well as hostile tribes. When men joined with him, he rewarded them with looted wealth, and his army grew.

Philip was a tactical innovator as well. He found a way to secure the loyalty of his nobles by organizing them into elite cavalry units who swore loyalty to him, and he proudly led his troops personally into battle. He also reorganized the infantry into a new kind of phalanx that used longer spears than did traditional hoplites; these new spearmen would hold the enemy in place and then the cavalry would charge them, a tactic that proved effective against both "barbarian" tribes and traditional Greek phalanxes. Philip was the first Macedonian king to insist on the drilling and training of his infantry, and the combination of his updated phalanx and the cavalry proved unstoppable. Philip attacked neighboring Greek settlements and seized gold mines in the north of Greece, which paid his soldiers and paid to equip them as well. He hired mercenaries to supplement his Macedonian troops, ending up with the largest army Macedon had ever seen.

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

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

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

of Greek civilization for centuries. Philip thus had his job cut out for him in managing his new conquest.

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

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

Alexander the Great

Alexander was one of the historical figures who truly deserves the honorific "the Great." He was a military genius and a courageous warrior, personally leading his armies in battle and fighting on despite being wounded on several occasions. He was a charismatic and inspirational leader who won the loyalty not only of his Macedonian countrymen, but the Greeks and, most remarkably, the people of the Persian Empire whom he conquered. He was also driven by incredible ambition; tutored by none other than Aristotle in his youth, he modeled himself on the legendary Greek hero Achilles, hoping to not only match but to surpass Achilles' prowess in battle. He became a legend in his own life, worshiped as a god by many of his 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 warrant and he refused to accept their surrender, sacking the city and slaughtering thousands of its inhabitants as a warning to the rest of Greece.

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

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

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

with lands and positions those who had fought against him and lost honorably. In sum, conquest by Alexander was not experienced as a disaster for most Persian subjects, merely a shift in rulership.

In 332 BCE, the Persian king, Darius III, tried to make peace with Alexander and (supposedly – there is reason to believe that this episode was invented by Greek propagandists afterwards) offered him his daughter in marriage, along with the entire western half of the Persian Empire. Alexander refused and marched into Egypt, where he was welcomed as a divine figure and liberator from Persia. Alexander made a point of visiting the key Egyptian temples and paying his respects to the Egyptian gods (he identified the chief Egyptian deity Amun-Ra with Zeus, father of the Greek gods), which certainly eased his acceptance by the Egyptians. In the meantime, Darius III succeeded in raising the entire strength of the Persian army, knowing that a final showdown was inevitable.

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

Alexander After the Conquest of Persia

Alexander paused his campaign to pay off his men and allow some of his troops to return to Greece. He then arranged for thousands of his Greek and Macedonian officers to marry Persian noblewomen in an effort to formally and permanently fuse together the Greek and Persian civilizations. His goal was not to devastate the empire, but to become the next "Great King" to whom all other leaders had to defer. He maintained the Persian bureaucracy (such as the organization of the Satrapies) and enlisted thousands of Persian soldiers who joined his campaign as his armies moved even farther east. He also made a show of treating Darius's family with respect and honor, demonstrating that he wanted to win the Persians over rather than humiliate them. Alexander declared that the ancient city of Babylon would be his new capital. Even though he now ruled over the largest empire in the world, however, he was unsatisfied, and he set off to conquer lands his new Persian subjects told him about beyond the borders of the empire.

Alexander headed east again with his armies, defeating the tribesmen of present-day Afghanistan and then fighting a huge battle against the forces of the Indian king Porus in the northern Indus River Valley in 327 BCE (Alexander was so impressed by Porus that after the battle he appointed

him satrap of what had been Porus's kingdom). He pressed on into India for several months, following the Indus south, but finally his loyal but exhausted troops refused to go on. Alexander had heard of Indian kingdoms even farther east (i.e. toward the Ganges River Valley, completely unknown to the Greeks before this point) and, being Alexander, he wanted to conquer them too. His men, however, were both weary and rich beyond their wildest dreams. Few of them could see the point of further conquests and wanted instead to return home and enjoy their hard-won loot. Some of his followers were now over 65 years old, having fought for both Philip II and then Alexander, and they concluded that it was high time to go home.

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

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

The return journey was arduous, and it took years to get back to the heartland of Persia. In 323 BCE, his armies finally arrived in Babylon. Alexander was exhausted and plagued by injuries from the many battles he had fought, but Macedonian and Greek tradition required him to drink to excess with his generals. Some combination of his injuries, alcohol, and exhaustion finally caught up with him. Supposedly, while he lay on his deathbed, his generals asked who would follow him as Great King and he replied "the strongest," then died. The results were predictable: decades of fighting as each general tried to take over the huge empire Alexander had forged.

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

The Hellenistic Monarchies

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

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

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

The Ptolemies ruled over Egypt. The Ptolemies were very powerful and, perhaps more importantly, they had the benefit of ruling over a coherent, unified state that had ancient traditions of kingship. Once they cemented their control, the Ptolemies were able to simply act as pharaohs, despite remaining ethnically and linguistically Macedonian Greek. In their state, the top levels of rule and administration were Greek, but the bulk of the royal bureaucracy was Egyptian. There were long-term patterns of settlement and integration, but right up to the end the dynasty 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. In the end, the Ptolemies were the longest-lasting of the Hellenistic dynasties.
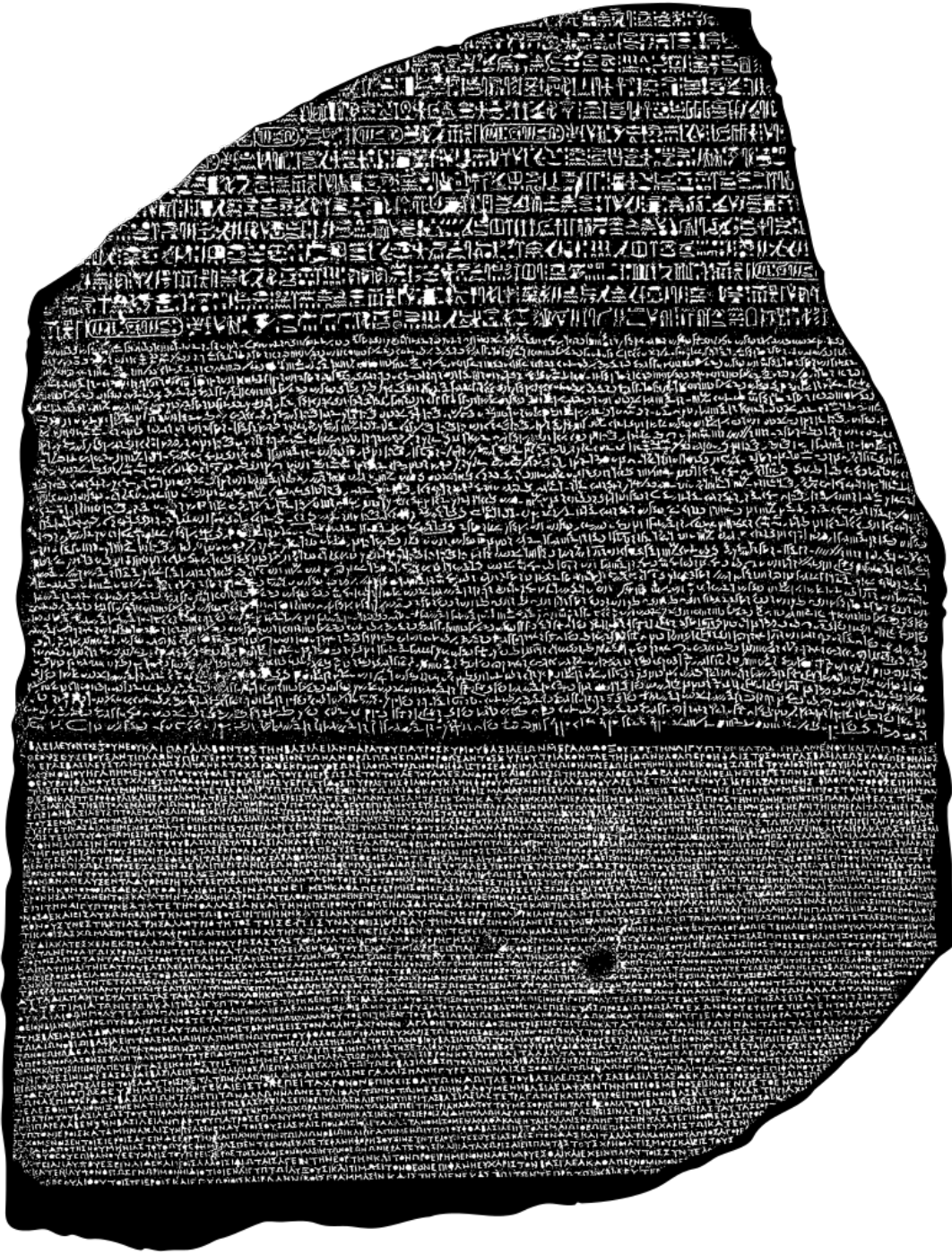
One of the most important artifacts of the Ptolemaic era: the Rosetta Stone, the object that enabled the translation of Egyptian hieroglyphics. Written during Ptolemaic rule, the stone consists of a single royal proclamation in two hieroglyphic alphabets as well as ancient Greek.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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, but did not quite succeed, to circumnavigate Africa itself. In addition to accounts by explorers, the Greeks of the Hellenistic lands enjoyed histories and accounts of foreign lands written by the natives of those lands. Major histories of Mesopotamia, Persia, and Egypt were written during the Hellenistic period and translated into Greek. Ambassadors from the Hellenistic kingdoms in foreign lands sometimes wrote accounts of the customs of those lands (such as India). In short, it was a period when knowledge of the world greatly expanded.

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 poor relief, which consisted of free food distributed within the cities to the poorest classes of permanent residents. This practice had nothing to do with charity; it was simply a means for keeping the peace in the growing cities.

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

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

Strikingly, Hellenstic women exercised considerable economic power and enjoyed much greater legal recognition than had women in earlier periods of Greek history. While they were sometimes obliged to do so with the backing of a male guardian, women controlled property, could borrow and lend money, and could manage the inheritances of their children. Some few women even served in political office – for example, a woman served as a magistrate in the 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 of the major schools of Hellenistic philosophy shared the same pursuit, albeit in different ways: to live in pleasure and tranquility. Three are of particular note: the Epicureans, Stoics, and Cynics.

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

The Cynics believed that social conventions were unfortunate byproducts of history that distracted people from the true source of virtue and happiness: nature. In turn, the only route to happiness was a more aggressive rejection of social life than that espoused by the Epicureans (who, again, were quite sedate). They advocated a combination of asceticism and naturalism, indulging in one's physical needs without regard to social convention. Practically speaking, this involved deliberately flouting social mores, sometimes in confrontational or even disgusting ways: Diogenes, founder of the

Cynics, notoriously masturbated and defecated in public. Most Cynics were slightly more restrained, but most took great pleasure in mocking people in positions of political authority, and they also belittled the members of other philosophical schools for their overly rigid systems of thought. One story had it that Alexander sought out Diogenes and found him lying in the street in a suburb of the polis of Corinth, asking him what he, the king, might do for him, the philosopher. The Cynic replied "stop standing in my sunbeam."

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

What these three schools of philosophy had in common, despite their obvious differences, is that they all represented different approaches to accepting the (political) status quo. The Epicureans avoided politics, the Stoics supported existing political structures, and the Cynics mocked everything without offering positive suggestions for change. This was a far cry from the earnest inquiry of a Socrates, a Plato, or an Aristotle in trying to establish a virtuous form of politics. While Greek culture enjoyed a period of unprecedented influence during the Hellenistic period, its experiments in rational (let alone democratic) political analysis were not a major component of that influence.

While political theory did not enjoy a period of growth during the period, there were significant accomplishments in science and mathematics. The most important Hellenistic mathematicians were Euclid and Archimedes. Euclid was the inventor of the mathematical discipline of geometry. He was the first to use obvious starting points called axioms – for instance, the idea that two parallel lines will never intersect – to be able to deduce more complex principles called theorems. Euclid is one of those relatively few ancient thinkers who really "got it right" in the sense that none of his major claims were later proved to be inaccurate. His work on geometry, the *Elements*, was still used as the standard textbook in many courses on mathematics well into the twentieth century CE, thousands of years after it was composed. Archimedes was also a geometrician, best remembered for his applications of geometry to engineering. He discovered the principle of using the displacement of water to calculate the specific gravity of objects, and he devised a number of complex war machines used against Roman forces when his home city of Syracuse, in Sicily, was under attack (including, according to some accounts, a giant mirror used to focus the sun's rays on Roman ships and set them on fire).

Hellenistic thinkers also made important discoveries in astronomy, most notably the fact that

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

Perhaps the most memorable achievement in scholarship during the period was the institutional form it took at the Library of Alexandria and its associated Museon, often considered to be the first research university in the western world. Funded directly by the Ptolemaic government, the Library collected and translated every scrap of available scholarship from the Hellenistic world and played host to scholars who based their own work on its archives. It housed lecture halls as well, representing the preeminent site of learning in the Hellenistic world as a whole. It was eventually destroyed, although to this day there are competing versions of who was to blame for its destruction (ranging from the forces of Julius Caesar during his involvement in an Egyptian civil war to either Christian or Muslim 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 in that the pace of technological change in the ancient world was *always* glacially slow by modern standards. Instead, what mattered at the time was the spread of ideas and knowledge, much of which had no immediate and practical consequences in the form of applied technology – this was as true of ancient Rome as it was of the Hellenistic kingdoms.

Conclusion

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

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Chapter 9: The Roman Republic

Introduction

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

The legend that the Romans themselves invented about their own origins had to do with two brothers: Romulus and Remus. In the legend of Romulus and Remus, two boys were born to a Latin king, but then kidnapped and thrown into the Tiber River by the king's jealous brother. They were discovered by a female wolf and suckled by her, eventually growing up and exacting their revenge on their treacherous uncle. They then fought each other, with Romulus killing Remus and founding the city of Rome. According to the story, the city of Rome was founded on April 21, 753 BCE. This legend is just that: a legend. Its importance is that it speaks to how the Romans wanted to see themselves, as the descendants of a great man who seized his birthright through force and power, accepting no equals. In a sense, the Romans were proud to believe that their ancient heritage involved being literally raised by wolves.

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

The Romans were a warrior people from very early on, feuding and fighting with their neighbors and with raiders from the north. They were allied with and, for a time, ruled by a neighboring people called the Etruscans who lived to the northwest of Rome. The Etruscans were active trading partners with the Greek 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 cultures, Etruscan, Greek, and Latin, included shared mythologies and stories. The Greek gods and myths were shared by the Romans, with only the names of the gods being changed (e.g. Zeus became Jupiter, Aphrodite became Venus, Hades became Pluto, etc.). In this way, the Romans became part of the larger Mediterranean world of which the Greeks were such a significant part.

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

fiercely proud (to the point of belligerence) of their heritage and identity.

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

Note: The Celts

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

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

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

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

Eventually, when the Romans began to expand beyond Italy itself, it was the Celts who were first conquered and then assimilated into the Republic. The Romans regarded Celts as barbarians, but they were thought to be barbarians who were at least capable of assimilating and adopting "true" civilization

from the Romans. Centuries later, the descendants of conquered Celts considered themselves fully Roman: speaking Latin as their native language, wearing togas, drinking wine, and serving in the Roman armies.

The Republic

The Roman Republic had a fairly complex system of government and representation, but it was one that would last about 500 years and preside over the vast expansion of Roman power. An assembly, called the Centuriate Assembly, was elected by the citizens and created laws. Each year, the assembly elected two executives called consuls to oversee the laws and ensure their enforcement. The consuls had almost unlimited power, known as *imperium*, including the right to inflict the death penalty on law-breakers, and they were preceded everywhere by twelve bodyguards called *lictors*. Consular authority was, however, limited by the fact that the terms were only a year long and each consul was expected to hold the other in check if necessary. Under the consuls there was the Senate, essentially a large body of aristocratic administrators, appointed for life, who controlled state finances. The whole system was tied closely to the priesthoods of the Roman gods, who performed divinations and blessings on behalf of the city. While the Romans were deeply suspicious of individuals who seemed to be trying to take power themselves, several influential families worked behind the scenes to ensure that they could control voting blocks in the Centuriate Assembly and the Senate.

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

The rich were referred to as *patricians*, families with ancient roots in Rome who occupied most of the positions of the senate and the judiciary in the city. There were about one hundred patrician families, descending from the men Romulus had, allegedly, appointed to the first senate. They were allied with other rich and powerful people, owners of large tracts of land, in trying to hold in check the *plebeians*, Roman citizens not from patrician backgrounds.

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

The Centuriate Assembly was divided into five different classes based on wealth (a system that

ensured that the wealthy could always outvote the poorer). The wealthiest class consisted of the *equestrians*, so named because they could afford horses and thus form the Roman cavalry; the equestrian class would go on to be a leading power bloc in Roman history well into the Imperial period. The Centuriate Assembly voted on the consuls each year, declared war and peace, and acted as a court of appeal in legal cases involving the death penalty. It could also propose legislation, but the Senate had to approve it for it to become law.

Class Struggle

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

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

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

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

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

Roman Expansion

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

A key moment in the early period of Roman expansion was in 338 BCE when Rome defeated its erstwhile allies in the Latin League. Rome did not punish the cities after it defeated them, however. Instead, it offered them citizenship in its republic (albeit without voting rights) in return for pledges of loyalty and troops during wartime, a very important precedent because it meant that with every victory, Rome could potentially expand its military might. Soon, the elites of the Latin cities realized the benefits of playing along with the Romans. They were dealt into the wealth distributed after military victories and could play an active role in politics so long as they remained loyal, whereas resisters were eventually ground down and defeated with only their pride to show for it. While Rome would rarely extend actual citizenship to whole communities in the future, the assimilation of the Latins into the Roman state did set an important precedent: conquered peoples could be won over to Roman rule and contribute to Roman power, a key factor in Rome's ongoing expansion from that point forward.

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

Rome rapidly expanded to encompass all of Italy except the southernmost regions. Those regions, populated largely by Greeks who had founded colonies there centuries before, invited a Greek

warrior-king named Pyrrhus to aid them against the Romans around 280 BCE (Pyrrhus was a Hellenistic king who had already wrested control of a good-sized swath of Greece from the Antigonid dynasty back in Greece). Pyrrhus won two major battles against the Romans, but in the process he lost two-thirds of his troops. After his victories, he made a comment that "one more such victory will undo me" – this led to the phrase "pyrrhic victory," which means a temporary victory that ultimately spells defeat, or winning the battle but losing the war. He took his remaining troops and returned to Greece. After he fled, the south was unable to mount much of a resistance, and all of Italy was under Roman control by 263 BCE.

Roman Militarism

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

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

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

The Punic Wars

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

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

The Romans suffered several defeats, but they were rich and powerful enough at this point to persist in the war effort. Rome benefited greatly from the fact that the Carthaginians did not realize that the war could grow to be about more than just Sicily; even after winning victories there, the Carthaginians never tried to invade Italy itself (which they could have done, at least early on). The Romans eventually learned how to carry out effective naval warfare and stranded the Carthaginian army in Sicily. The Carthaginians sued for peace in 241 BCE and agreed to give up their claims to Sicily and to pay a war indemnity. The Romans, however, betrayed them and seized the islands of Corsica and Sardinia as well, territories that were still under the nominal control of Carthage.

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

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

Carthaginian armies. In 218 BCE, the great Carthaginian general Hannibal (son of the most successful general who had fought the Romans in the First Punic War) launched a surprise attack in Spain against Roman allies and then against Roman forces themselves. This led to the Second Punic War (218 BCE – 202 BCE).

Hannibal crossed the Alps into Italy from Spain with 60,000 men and a few dozen war elephants (most of the elephants perished, but the survivors proved very effective, and terrifying, against the Roman forces). For the next two years, he crushed every Roman army sent against him, killing tens of thousands of Roman soldiers and marching perilously close to Rome. Hannibal never lost a single battle in Italy, yet neither did he force the Romans to sue for peace.

Hannibal defeated the Romans repeatedly with clever tactics: he lured them across icy rivers and ambushed them, he concealed a whole army in the fog one morning and then sprang on a Roman legion, and he led the Romans into narrow passes and slaughtered them. In one battle in 216 BCE, Hannibal's smaller army defeated a larger Roman force by letting it push in the Carthaginian center, then surrounding it with cavalry. He was hampered, though, by the fact that he did not have a siege train to attack Rome itself (which was heavily fortified), and he failed to win over the southern Italian cities which had been conquered by the Romans a century earlier. The Romans kept losing to Hannibal, but they were largely successful in keeping Hannibal from receiving reinforcements from Spain and Africa, slowly but steadily weakening his forces.

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

A brilliant Roman general named Scipio defeated the Carthaginian forces back in Spain in 207 BCE, cutting Hannibal off from both reinforcements and supplies, which weakened his army significantly. Scipio then attacked Africa itself, forcing Carthage to recall Hannibal to protect the city. Hannibal finally lost in 202 BCE after coming as close as anyone had to defeating the Romans. The victorious Scipio, now easily the most powerful man in Rome, became the first great general to add to his own name the name of the place he conquered: he became Scipio "Africanus" – conqueror of Africa.
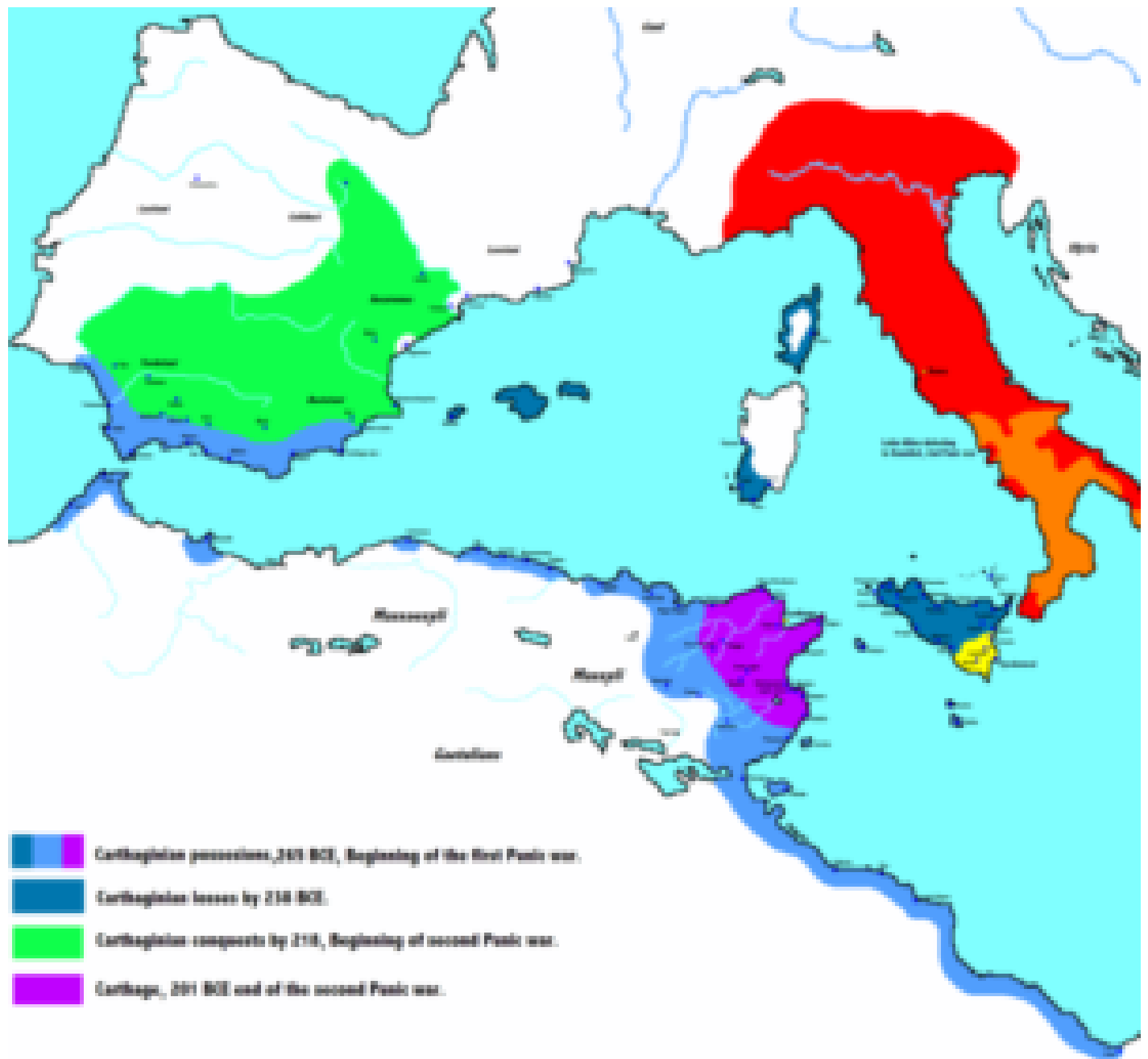
The Punic Wars over time – note how much Carthage's empire was reduced by the end of the Second Punic War, encompassing only the region marked in purple around Carthage itself.

An uneasy peace lasted for several decades between Rome and Carthage, despite enduring anti-Carthaginian hatred in Rome; one prominent senator named Cato the Elder reputedly ended every speech in the Senate with the statement "…and Carthage must be destroyed." Rome finally forced the issue in the mid-second century BCE by meddling in Carthaginian affairs. The third and last Punic War that ensued was utterly one-sided: it began in 149 BCE, and by 146 BCE Carthage was defeated. Not only were thousands of the Carthaginian people killed or enslaved, but the city itself was brutally sacked (the comment by Polybius regarding the terror inspired by Rome, noted above, was specifically in reference to the horrific sack of Carthage). The Romans created a myth to commemorate their

victory, claiming that they had "plowed the earth with salt" at Carthage so that nothing would ever grow there again – that was not literally true, but it did serve as a useful legend as the Romans expanded their territories even further.

Greece

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

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

Philip V's son Perseus took the throne of Macedon in 179 BCE and, while not directly threatening Roman power, managed to spark suspicion among the Roman elite simply by reasserting Macedonian sovereignty in the region. In 172 BCE Rome sent an army and Macedon was defeated in 168 BCE. Rome split Macedon into puppet republics, plundered Macedon's allies, and lorded over the remaining Greek poleis. Revolts in 150 and 146 against Roman power served as the final pretext for the Roman subjugation of Greece. This time, the Romans enacted harsh penalties for disloyalty among the Greek cities, utterly destroying the rich city of Corinth and butchering or enslaving tens of thousands of Greeks for siding against Rome. The plunder from Corinth specifically also sparked great interest in Greek art among elite Romans, boosting the development of Greco-Roman artistic traditions back in Italy.

Thus, after centuries of warfare, by 140 BCE the Romans controlled almost the entire

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

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

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

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

The Republic as of 40 BCE. The Republic itself is marked in dark green, with the other regions

consisting of other independent states. Many of those would subsequently fall under the sway of Rome or be conquered outright (such as Egypt).

Greco-Roman Culture

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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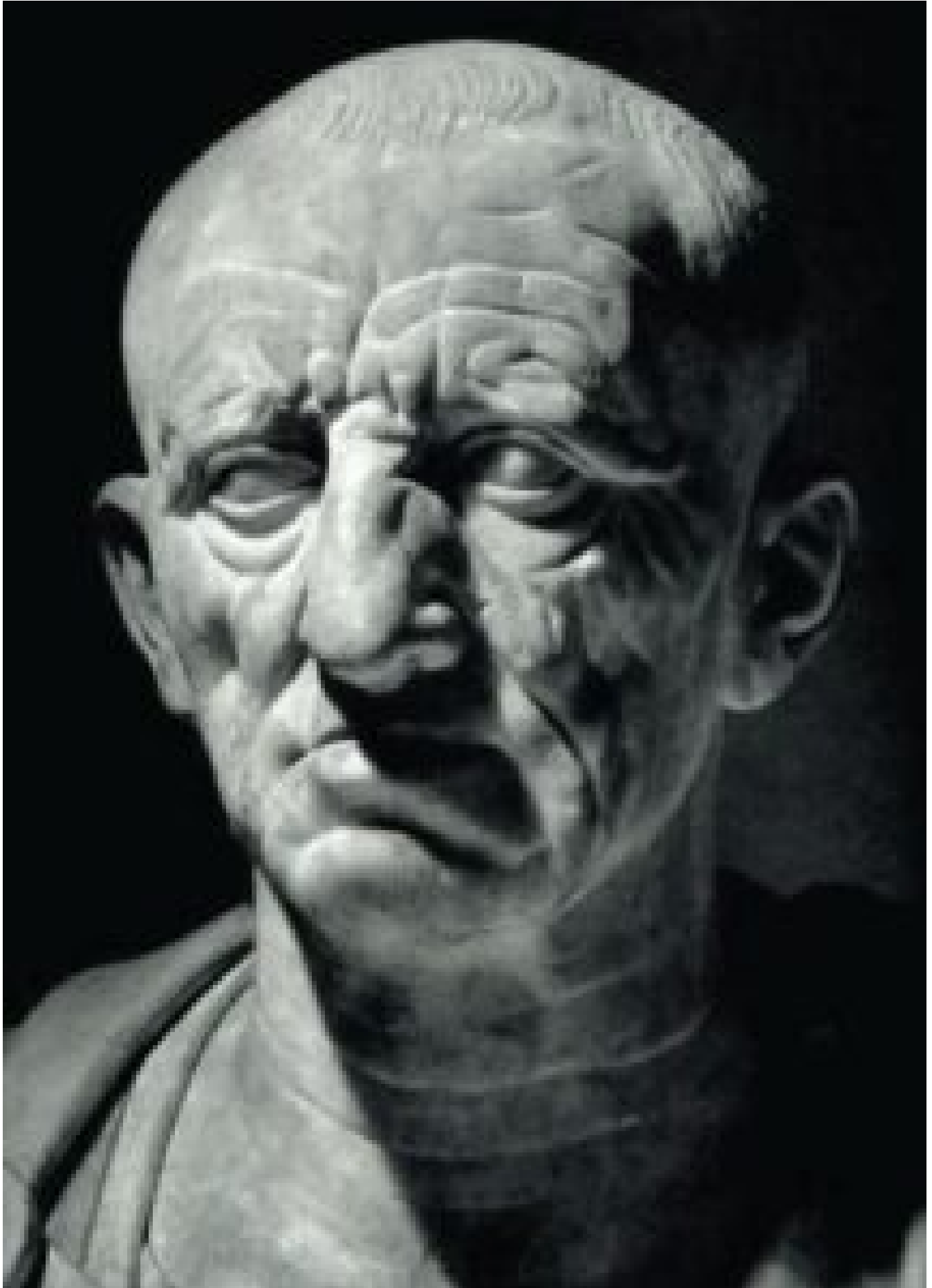
The "Patrician Torlonia," a bust of an unknown Roman politician from sometime in the first century BCE.

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

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

Roman Society

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

The government of the late Republic was still in the form of the Plebeian Assembly, the Centuriate Assembly, the Senate, ten tribunes, two consuls, and a court system under formal rules of law. By the late Republic, however, a network of patrons and clients had emerged that largely controlled the government. Elite families of nobles, through their client networks, made all of the important decisions. Beneath this group were the equestrians: families who did not have the ancient lineages of the patricians and who normally did not serve in public office. The equestrians, however,

were rich, and they benefited from the fact that senators were formally banned from engaging in commerce as of the late third century BCE. They constituted the business class of Republican Rome who supported the elites while receiving various trade and mercantile concessions.

Meanwhile, the average plebeian had long ago lost his or her representation. The Plebeian Assembly was controlled by wealthy plebeians who were the clients of nobles. In other words, they served the interests of the rich and had little interest in the plight of the class they were supposed to represent. This created an ongoing problem for Rome, one that was exploited many times by populist leaders: Rome relied on a free class of citizens to serve in the army, but those same citizens often had to struggle to make ends meet as farmers. As the rich grew richer, they bought up land and sometimes even forced poorer citizens off of their farms. Thus, there was an existential threat to Rome's armies, and with it, to Rome itself.

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

At the bottom of the Roman social system were the slaves. Slaves were one of the most lucrative forms of loot available to Roman soldiers, and so many lands had been conquered by Rome that the population of the Republic was swollen with slaves. Fully one-third of the population of Italy were slaves by the first century CE. Even freed slaves, called *freedmen*, had limited legal rights and had formal obligations to serve their former masters as clients. Roman slaves spanned the same range of jobs noted with other slaveholding societies like the Greeks: elite slaves lived much more comfortably than did most free Romans, but most were laborers or domestic servants. All could be abused by their owners without legal consequence.

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

There were many slave uprisings, the most significant of which was led by Spartacus, a gladiator (warrior who fought for public amusement) originally from Thrace. Spartacus led the revolt of his

gladiatorial school in the Italian city of Capua in 73 BCE. He set up a war camp on the slopes of the volcano Mt. Vesuvius, to which thousands of slaves fled, culminating in an "army" of about 70,000. He tried to convince them to flee over the Alps to seek refuge in their (mostly Celtic) homelands, but was eventually convinced to turn around to plunder Italy. The richest man in Italy, the senator Crassus, took command of the Roman army assembled to defeat Spartacus, crushing the slave army and killing Spartacus in 71 BCE (and lining the road to Rome with 6,000 crucified slaves).

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

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

The End of the Republic

The Roman Republic lasted for roughly five centuries. It was under the Republic that Rome evolved from a single town to the heart of an enormous empire. Despite the evident success of the republican system, however, there were inexorable problems that plagued the Republic throughout its history, most evidently the problem of wealth and power. Roman citizens were, by law, supposed to have a stake in the Republic. They took pride in who they were and it was the common patriotic desire to fight and expand the Republic among the citizen-soldiers of the Republic that created, at least in part, such an effective army. At the same time, the vast amount of wealth captured in the military campaigns was frequently siphoned off by elites, who found ways to seize large portions of land and loot

with each campaign. By around 100 BCE even the existence of the Plebeian Assembly did almost nothing to mitigate the effect of the debt and poverty that afflicted so many Romans thanks to the power of the clientage networks overseen by powerful noble patrons.

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

The first step toward violent revolution in the Republic was the work of the Gracchus brothers – remembered historically as the Gracchi (i.e. "Gracchi" is the plural of "Gracchus"). The older of the two was Tiberius Gracchus, a rich but reform-minded politician. Gracchus, among others, was worried that the free, farm-owning common Roman would go extinct if the current trend of rich landowners seizing farms and replacing farmers with slaves continued. Without those commoners, Rome's armies would be drastically weakened. Thus, he managed to 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.

A contemporary of the Gracchi, a general named Gaius Marius, took further steps that eroded the traditional Republican system. Marius combined political savvy with effective military leadership. Marius was both a consul (elected an unprecedented seven times) and a general, and he used his power to eliminate the property requirement for membership in the army. This allowed the poor to join the army in return for nothing more than an oath of loyalty, one they swore to their general rather than to the Republic. Marius was popular with Roman commoners because he won consistent victories against enemies in both Africa and Germany, and because he distributed land and farms to his poor soldiers. This made him a people's hero, and it terrified the nobility in Rome because he was able to bypass the usual Roman political machine and simply pay for his wars himself. His decision to eliminate the property requirement meant that his troops were totally dependent on him for loot and land distribution after campaigns, undermining their allegiance to the Republic.

A general named Sulla followed in Marius's footsteps by recruiting soldiers directly and using his military power to bypass the government. In the aftermath of the Italian revolt of 88 – 84 BCE, the Assembly took Sulla's command of Roman legions fighting the Parthians away and gave it to Marius in return for Marius's support in enfranchising the people of the Italian cities. Sulla promptly marched on Rome with his army, forcing Marius to flee. Soon, however, Sulla left Rome to command legions against the army of the anti-Roman king Mithridates in the east. Marius promptly attacked with an army of his own, seizing Rome and murdering various supporters of Sulla. Marius himself soon died (of old age), but his followers remained united in an anti-Sulla coalition under a friend of Marius, Cinna.

After defeating Mithridates, Sulla returned and a full-scale civil war shook Rome in 83 – 82 BCE. It was horrendously bloody, with some 300,000 men joining the fighting and many thousands killed. After Sulla's ultimate victory he had thousands of Marius's supporters executed. In 81 BCE, Sulla was named dictator; he greatly strengthened the power of the Senate at the expense of the Plebeian Assembly, had his enemies in Rome murdered and their property seized, then retired to a life of debauchery in his private estate (and soon died from a disease he contracted). The problem for the Republic was that, even though Sulla ultimately proved that he was loyal to republican institutions, other generals might not be in the future. Sulla could have simply held onto power indefinitely thanks to the personal loyalty of his troops.

Julius Caesar

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

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

Each member of the Triumvirate wanted something specific: Caesar hungered for glory and wealth and hoped to be appointed to lead Roman armies against the Celts in Western Europe, Crassus wanted to lead armies against Parthia (i.e. the "new" Persian Empire that had long since overthrown Seleucid rule in Persia itself), and Pompey wanted the Senate to authorize land and wealth for his troops. The three of them had so many clients and wielded so much political power that they were able to ratify all of Pompey's demands, and both Caesar and Crassus received the military commissions they hoped for. Caesar was appointed general of the territory of Gaul (present-day France and Belgium) and he set off to fight an infamous Celtic king named Vercingetorix.

From 58 to 50 BCE, Caesar waged a brutal war against the Celts of Gaul. He was both a merciless combatant, who slaughtered whole villages and enslaved hundreds of thousands of Celts (killing or enslaving over a million people in the end), and a gifted writer who wrote his own accounts of

his wars in excellent Latin prose. His forces even invaded England, 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 refusing to renew his governorship of Gaul and his military command, or allowing him to run for consul in absentia.

The Senate hoped to use the fact that Caesar had violated the letter of republican law while on campaign to strip him of his authority. Caesar had committed illegal acts, including waging war without authorization from the Senate, but he was protected from prosecution so long as he held an authorized military command. By refusing to renew his command or allow him to run for office as consul, he would be open to charges. His enemies in the Senate feared his tremendous influence with the people of Rome, so the conflict was as much about factional infighting among the senators as fear of Caesar imposing some kind of tyranny.

Caesar knew what awaited him in Rome – charges of sedition against the Republic – so he simply took his army with him and marched off to Rome. In 49 BCE, he dared to cross the Rubicon River in northern Italy, the legal boundary over which no Roman general was allowed to bring his troops; he reputedly announced that "the die is cast" and that he and his men were now committed to either seizing power or facing total defeat. The brilliance of Caesar's move was that he could pose as the champion of his loyal troops as well as that of the common people of Rome, whom he promised to aid against the corrupt and arrogant senators; he never claimed to be acting for himself, but instead to protect his and his men's legal rights and to resist the corruption of the Senate.

Pompey had been the most powerful man in Rome, both a brilliant general and a gifted politician, but he did not anticipate Caesar's boldness. Caesar surprised him by marching straight for Rome. Pompey only had two legions, both of whom had served under Caesar in the past and, and he was thus forced to recruit new troops. As Caesar approached, Pompey fled to Greece, but Caesar followed him and defeated his forces in battle in 48 BCE. Pompey himself escaped to Egypt, where he was promptly murdered by agents of the Ptolemaic court who had read the proverbial writing on the wall and knew that Caesar was the new power to contend with in Rome. Subsequently, Caesar came to Egypt and stayed long enough to forge a political alliance, and carry on an affair, with the queen of Egypt: Cleopatra VII, last of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Caesar helped Cleopatra defeat her brother (to whom she was married, in the Egyptian tradition) in a civil war and to seize complete control over the Egyptian state. She also bore him his only son, Caesarion.

Caesar returned to Rome two years later after hunting down Pompey's remaining loyalists.

There, he had himself declared dictator for life and set about creating a new version of the Roman government that answered directly to him. He filled the Senate with his supporters and established military colonies in the lands he had conquered as rewards for his loyal troops (which doubled as guarantors of Roman power in those lands, since veterans and their families would now live there permanently). He established a new calendar, which included the month of "July" named after him, and he regularized Roman currency. Then he promptly set about making plans to launch a massive invasion of Persia.

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

Mark Antony and Octavian

Following his death, Caesar's right-hand man, a skilled general named Mark Antony, joined with Octavian and another general named Lepidus to form the "Second Triumvirate." In 43 BCE they seized control in Rome and then launched a successful campaign against the old republican loyalists, killing off the men who had killed Caesar and murdering the strongest senators and equestrians who had tried to restore the old institutions. Mark Antony and Octavian soon pushed Lepidus to the side and divided up control of Roman territory – Octavian taking Europe and Mark Antony taking the eastern territories and Egypt. This was an arrangement that was not destined to last; the two men had only been allies for the sake of convenience, and both began scheming as to how they could seize total control of Rome's vast empire.

Mark Antony moved to the Egyptian city of Alexandria, where he set up his court. He followed in Caesar's footsteps by forging both a political alliance and a romantic relationship with Cleopatra, and the two of them were able to rule the eastern provinces of the Republic in defiance of Octavian. In 34 BCE, Mark Antony and Cleopatra declared that Cleopatra's son by Julius Caesar, Caesarion, was the heir to Caesar (not Octavian), and that their own twins were to be rulers of Roman provinces. Rumors in the west claimed that Antony was under Cleopatra's thumb (which is unlikely: the two of them were both savvy politicians and seem to have shared a genuine affection for one another) and was breaking with traditional Roman values, and Octavian seized on this behavior to claim that he was the true protector of Roman morality. Soon, Octavian produced a will that Mark Antony had supposedly written ceding control of Rome to Cleopatra and their children on his death; whether or not the will was authentic, it fit in perfectly with the publicity campaign on Octavian's part to build support against his former ally in Rome.

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

When he finally declared war in 32 BCE, Octavian claimed he was only interested in defeating Cleopatra, which led to broader Roman support because it was not immediately stated that it was yet another Roman civil war. Antony and Cleopatra's forces were already fairly scattered and weak due to a disastrous campaign against the Persians a few years earlier. In 31 BCE, 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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Chapter 10: The Roman Empire

Introduction

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 Civitatis*, "First Citizen," the term that Augustus invented for himself. For the sake of clarity, this chapter will use the anglicized term "emperor" to refer to all of the leaders of the Roman imperial system.

Augustus

The height of Roman power coincided with the first two hundred years of the Roman Empire, a period that was remembered as the *Pax Romana*: the Roman Peace. It was possible during the period of the Roman Empire's height, from about 1 CE to 200 CE, to travel from the Atlantic coast of Spain or Morocco all the way to Mesopotamia using good roads, speaking a common language, and enjoying official protection from banditry. The Roman Empire was as rich, powerful, and glorious as any in history up to that point, but it also represented oppression and imperialism to slaves, poor commoners, and conquered peoples.

Octavian was unquestionably the architect of the Roman Empire. Unlike his great-uncle, Julius Caesar, Octavian eliminated all political rivals and set up a permanent hereditary emperorship. All the while, he claimed to be restoring not just peace and prosperity, but the Republic itself. Since the term *Rex* (king) would have been odious to his fellow Romans, Augustus instead referred to himself as *Princeps Civitatus*, meaning "first citizen." He used the Senate to maintain a facade of republican rule,

instructing senators on the actions they were to take; a good example is that the Senate "asked" him to remain consul for life, which he graciously accepted. By 23 BCE, he assumed the position of tribune for life, the position that allowed unlimited power in making or vetoing legislation. All soldiers swore personal oaths of loyalty to him, and 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.

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

This extraordinary power did not prompt resistance in large part because the practical reforms Augustus introduced were effective. He transformed the Senate and equestrian class into a real civil service to manage the enormous empire. He eliminated tax farming and replaced it with taxation through salaried officials. He instituted a regular messenger service. His forces even attacked Ethiopia in retaliation for attacks on Egypt and he received ambassadors from India and Scythia (present-day Ukraine). In short, he supervised the consolidation of Roman power after the decades of civil war and struggle that preceded his takeover, and the large majority of Romans and Roman subjects alike were content with the demise of the Republic because of the improved stability Augustus's reign represented. Only one major failure marred his rule: three legions (perhaps as many as 20,000 soldiers) were destroyed in a gigantic ambush in the forests of Germany in 9 CE, halting any attempt to expand Roman power past the Rhine and Danube rivers. Despite that disaster, after Augustus's death the senate voted to deify him: like his great-uncle Julius, he was now to be worshipped as a god.

The Imperial Dynasties

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

The Julian dynasty: 14 – 68 CE – those emperors related (by blood or adoption) to Caesar's line.

The Flavian dynasty: 69 – 96 CE – a father and his two sons who seized power after a brief civil war.

The "Five Good Emperors": 96 – 180 CE – a "dynasty" of emperors who chose their successors, rather than power passing to their family members.

The Julian Dynasty

There is a simple and vexing problem with any discussion of the Roman emperors: the sources. While archaeology and the surviving written sources create a reasonably clear basis for understanding the major political events of the Julian dynasty, the biographical details are much more difficult. All of the surviving written accounts about the lives of the Julian emperors were written many decades, in some cases more than a century, after their reign. In turn, the two most important biographers, Tacitus and Suetonius, detested the actions and the character of the Julians, and thus their accounts are rife with scandalous anecdotes that may or may not have any basis in historical truth (Tacitus is universally

regarded as the more reliable, although Suetonius's *The Twelve Caesars* does make for very entertaining reading). Thus, the biographical sketches below are an attempt to summarize what is known for sure, along with some notes on the scandalous assertions that may be at least partly fabricated.

When Augustus died in 14 CE, his stepson Tiberius (r. 14 – 37 CE) became emperor. While it was possible that the Senate might have tried to reassert its power, there was no political will to do so. Only idealistic or embittered senators really dreamed of restoring the Republic, and a coup would have been rejected by the vast majority of Roman citizens. Under the Caesars, after all, the empire had never been more powerful or wealthy. Genuine concessions had been made to the common people, especially soldiers, and the only people who really lost out in the short term were the old elite families of patricians, who no longer had political power independent of the emperor (although they certainly retained their wealth and status).

Tiberius began his rule as a cautious leader who put on a show of only reluctantly following in Augustus's footsteps as emperor. He was a reasonably competent emperor for over a decade, delegating decisions to the Senate and ensuring that the empire remained secure and financially solvent. In addition, he oversaw a momentous change to the priorities of the Roman state: the Roman Empire no longer embarked on a sustained campaign of expansion as it had done ever since the early decades of the Republic half a millennium earlier. This does not appear to have been a conscious policy choice on the part of Tiberius, but instead a shift in priorities: the Senate was now staffed by land-owning elites who did not predicate their identities on warfare, and Tiberius himself saw little benefit in warring against Persia or invading Germany (he also feared that successful generals might threaten his power, at one point ordering one to call off a war in Germany). The Roman Empire would continue to expand at times in the following centuries, but never to the degree or at the pace that it had under the Republic.

Eventually, Tiberius retreated to a private estate on the island of Capri (off the west coast of Italy). Suetonius's biography would have it that on Capri, Tiberius indulged his penchant for bloodshed and sexual abuse, which is highly questionable – what is not questionable is that Tiberius became embittered and suspicious, ordering the murders of various would-be claimants to his throne back in Rome, and sometimes ignoring affairs of state. When he died, much to the relief of the Roman populace, great hopes were pinned on his heir.

That heir was Gaius (r. 37 – 41 CE), much better known as "Caligula," literally meaning "little boots" but which translates best as "bootsie." As a boy, Caligula moved with his father, a famous and well-liked general related by marriage to the Julians, from army camp to army camp. While he did so he liked to dress up in miniature legionnaire combat boots; hence, he was affectionately dubbed "Bootsie" by the troops (one notable translation of the work of Suetonius by Robert Graves translates Caligula as "Bootikins" instead).

Even if some of the stories of his personal sadism are exaggerated, there is no doubt that

Caligula was a disastrous emperor. According to the biographers, Caligula quickly earned a reputation for cruelty and megalomania, enjoying executions (or simple murders) as forms of entertainment and spending vast sums on shows of power. Convinced of his own godhood, Caligula had the heads of statues of the gods removed and replaced with his own head. He liked to appear in public dressed as various gods *or* goddesses; one of his high priests was his horse, Incitatus, whom he supposedly appointed as a Roman consul. He staged an invasion of northern Gaul of no tactical significance which culminated in a Triumph (military parade, traditionally one of the greatest demonstrations of power and glory of a victorious general) back in Rome.

Much of the scandalous gossip about him, historically, is because he was unquestionably the enemy of the Senate, seeing potential traitors everywhere and inflicting waves of executions against former supporters. He used trials for treason to enrich himself after squandering the treasury on buildings and public games. He also made senators wait on him dressed as slaves, and demanded that he be addressed as *"dominus et deus*," meaning "master and god." He was finally murdered by a group of senators and guardsmen.

The next emperor was Claudius (r. 41 – 54 CE), the one truly competent emperor of the 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. In addition, Nero took great pride in being an actor and musician, two professions that were considered by Roman elites to be akin to prostitution. His artistic indulgences were thus scandalous violations of elite sensibilities. After completely losing the support of both the army and the Senate, Nero committed suicide in 68 CE.

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

The Flavian Dynasty

In the aftermath of Nero's death, a brief civil war broke out. Four generals competed for the emperorship, supported by their armies. In the end, a general named Vespasian (r. 69 – 79 CE) seized power and founded a fairly short-lived dynasty consisting of himself and his two sons, known to history as the Flavians. The importance of Vespasian's takeover was that it reinforced the idea that real power in Rome was no longer that of the old power-broking families, but instead the armies; Vespasian had no legal claim to the throne, but his emperorship was ratified by the Senate nevertheless. The emperor's major concern had to be maintaining the loyalty of the armies above all else, because they could and would openly fight to put their man on the throne in a time of crisis – this occurred numerous times in the centuries to come.

Vespasian was one of the great emperors of the early empire. He pulled 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.

The outside of the Colosseum in present-day Rome.

Vespasian's older son Titus (r. 79 – 81 CE) had been groomed to follow his father and began as a promising and competent emperor. Unfortunately, almost as soon as he took the throne 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, but was then struck by fever and died in 81 CE.

Vespasian's second son, Domitian (r. 81 – 96 CE), who was not "supposed" to take the throne, proved to be a terrible ruler. He created an atmosphere of terror in elite Roman circles in an effort to watch out for potential rebels, murdering senators and elites he suspected. He adopted a Caligula-like concern for glorifying himself (like Caligula, he insisted that he be addressed as "*dominus et deus*") and liked to appear before the senate in the armor of a Roman commander returning from victory. He was moralistic about both sex and the divinity of the emperors, instituting the policy that all oaths had to be sword 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 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 "barbarians" of various kinds; as far as the Romans were concerned there were no civilized people outside of their borders except the Persians. Trajan's successor, the emperor Hadrian, built an enormous series of fortifications to consolidate power on the frontiers – these were eventually (by the third century CE) known as the *limes*, permanent garrisons and fortresses that were meant to serve as barriers to prevent "barbarian" incursions. Some of these survive to the present, including Hadrian's Wall in northern England. While fleets patrolled the rivers and oceans, these garrisons controlled access to the empire.

The Empire at the height of its territorial expanse under Trajan in 117 CE.

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, which was cold, wet, and uninviting from the Roman perspective. The "Germans" were a hugely diverse group of tribes practicing feudal law, the system of law in which offenses were met with clan-based violent retribution or blood payments. For hundreds of years there were complex relationships between various tribes and the Roman empire in which the Romans both fought with and, increasingly, hired German tribes to serve as mercenaries. Eventually, some of the Germanic tribes were allowed to settle along the Roman borders in return for payments of tribute to Rome.

The two major rivers, the Rhine and the Danube, were the key dividing lines to the north of Rome, with Roman legions manning permanent fortifications there. As far as the Romans were concerned, even if they were able to militarily they did not *want* to conquer German territory. The Romans tended to regard the Germans as being semi-human at best, incapable of understanding true civilization. Some Romans did admire their bravery and codes of honor – the same Tacitus who provides much of the information on the early emperors contrasted the supposed weakness and dissolution of his contemporary Romans with the rough virtue of the Germans. That being noted, most Romans believed that the Celts, conquered by Caesar centuries earlier, were able to learn and assimilate to Roman culture, but the Germans, supposedly, were not. Likewise, *Germania* was assumed to be too cold, too wet, and too infertile to support organized farming and settlement. Thus, the role of the *limes* was to hold the Germans back rather than to stage new wars of conquest. For about three hundred years, they did just that, until the borders started breaking down by the third century CE.

The Army and Assimilation

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

Perhaps the most important thing Augustus did besides establishing the principate itself was to reorganize the Roman legions. He created a standing professional army with regular pay and retirement benefits, permanently ending the reliance on the volunteer citizen – soldiers that had fought for Rome

under the republic. Instead, during the empire, Legionaries served for twenty years and then were put on reserve for another five, although more than half died before reaching retirement age. The major benefits of service were a very large bonus paid on retirement (equivalent to 13 years of pay!) and land: military colonies spread across the empire ensured that a loyal soldier could expect to establish a prosperous family line if he lived that long.

Service in the army was grueling and intense. Roman soldiers were expected to be able to march over 20 miles in a standard day's march carrying a heavy pack. They were subject to brutal discipline, up to and including summary execution if they were judged to have been derelict in their duties – one of the worst was falling asleep on guard duty, punishable by being beaten to death by one's fellow soldiers. Roman soldiers were held to the highest standards of unit cohesion, and their combat drills meant they were constantly ready for battle.

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

In turn, each legion was led by a *legionary legate*, usually a powerful noble appointed by the imperial government or the emperor himself. These legates were often politicians rather than soldiers, meaning that the key figures in actual battle were the centurions, each of whom had earned his position through exemplary service. Perhaps most important of all was the lead centurion, the First Spear, who dictated tactics on the field.

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

The legions were made up of Roman citizens, but not all members of the Roman military were citizens. Instead, as numerous as the legions were *auxiliaries*: Roman subjects (e.g. Celts, North

Africans, Syrians, etc.). who nevertheless served the empire. The auxiliaries were divided into cohorts of infantry and *alae* ("wings") of cavalry. In comparison to the infantry-focused Roman legions, the auxiliaries tended to vary their arms – auxiliaries could be slingers and archers as well as foot soldiers and cavalry. They tended to serve as scouts and support for the legions as well as engaging in combat in their own right. As of 23 CE they numbered about 150,000 men, which was the same as the legions at the time. The emperor Claudius rewarded 25 years of service with citizenship; by the early second century, all auxiliaries gained citizenship on discharge.

A key legion that stood apart from the rest of the military was the *Praetorian Guard*, whose major job was defending the emperor himself, followed in priority by the defense of Italy and the city of Rome. The Praetorian Guard started as nine cohorts of 480 men, but later each cohort was grown to 1,000 men. The terms of service in the Praetorian Guard were very attractive: 16 years instead of 25 and pay that was significantly higher (this was a necessity: emperors started with Claudius knew that they were vulnerable to the Praetorians and needed to keep them happy and loyal). Not surprisingly, Praetorians were recruited from veteran legionaries. They did not simply serve the emperor in the city of Rome, instead actively campaigning both when defending Roman territory from invasion (which became an increasing problem by the fourth century CE), and with the emperor while on campaign.

The army was important in integrating provincial subjects into Roman culture. A soldier recruited from the provinces had to learn Latin, at least well enough to take orders and respond to them. Auxiliaries served with men from all over the empire, not just their own home regions, and what each soldier had in common was service to Rome. Commanding officers were often from the Italian heartland, forming a direct link to the Roman center. Military families were a reality everywhere, with sons often becoming soldiers after their fathers. Thus, the experience of serving in the legions or the auxiliaries tended to promote a shared sense of Roman identity, even when soldiers were drawn from areas that had been conquered by Rome in the recent past.

In the provinces, there was a pattern that took place over a few generations. After being conquered by the Romans, there were often resistance movements and rebellions. Those were put down with overwhelming and brutal force, often worse than that of the initial invasion. Eventually, local elites were integrated in the governor's office and ambitious people made sure their sons learned Latin. Locals started joining the army and, if lucky, returned eventually with money and land to show for it. Roman amenities like aqueducts and baths were built and roads linked the province with the rest of the empire. In short, assimilation happened. A few generations after Roman conquest, many (local elites especially) in a given province would identify with Roman civilization. Regular people in the countryside, meanwhile, would at least be obliged to tolerate Roman rule even if they did not embrace it.

Roman Society

Rome itself was opulent during this period. The city of Rome boasted eleven aqueducts, enormous structures that brought fresh water into the city from miles away. The houses of the rich had indoor plumbing with drains that led to public sewers. There were 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.

Social Classes

That all being said, there were vast social distances that separated elites and commoners. Even in the city of Rome, most of the citizens lived in squalor, packed into apartment buildings many stories high, made out of flammable wood, looming over open sewers. The rich lived in a state of luxury that probably would not be equaled until the Renaissance, but the majority of Romans lived in squalid conditions.

Most people in the empire were, of course, poor farmers; only a minority of the imperial population lived in cities. Peasants sometimes joined the army, but most were simply poor folk struggling to get by. They were seasonal laborers, they rented from wealthy landowners, or they owned farms but were perpetually threatened by the predatory rich. Over the centuries, poor farmers found it more and more difficult to hold on to their land, both because they could not compete with the enormous, slave-tilled plantations of the rich and because of outright extortion. There are numerous accounts of rich landowners simply forcing small farmers off of land and seizing it; the peasants could not afford to battle the rich in court and the rich had few scruples about hiring thugs to terrify the peasants into submission. Once in a great while, a poorer Roman citizen could petition an emperor personally for redress and succeed, as could the occasional provincial to a governor, but the immense majority of the time the poor (citizen and non-citizen alike) were simply at the mercy of elite landowners.

One percent of the population of the empire were members of the aristocracy, those men who were allowed to participate as officials in the imperial government and their families. In turn, access to political power was explicitly linked to wealth, a system first introduced by Augustus himself. To serve in the imperial senate required an annual income of 1,000,000 sesterces (the basic coin of the empire). To serve on the governing council of a small city or town required an annual income of 100,000 sesterces. Meanwhile, a typical soldier earned about 1,200 a year, and poor farmers much less. Land ownership was by far the major determinant of wealth, and with the prevalence of slavery, economies of scale dictated that the more land a given family controlled, the more wealth they could generate.

The overall pattern in the Roman Imperial period is that the wealthy were highly successful in becoming richer from generation to generation, at the expense of the rest of Roman society: the wealth of elite landowners grew approximately eight times from 1 CE to 400 CE, with almost no new wealth coming into the Roman economy during that period. Thus, as a whole, social mobility was so limited as to be almost nonexistent (to cite a single example, a member of the equestrian class in the Empire might have about 17,000 times the annual income of a poor laborer). Roman elites kept taxes on their own property low, but the provinces were often ruthlessly exploited and overall tax levels were high. The immense majority of Roman citizens and subjects were born into the social class they would stay in for their entire lives regardless of their own intelligence and competence.

Still, while they might prey on poor farmers, elite Romans were well aware of the threat posed

by destitute city-dwellers. Thus, one striking characteristic of the Imperial period was "bread and circus government." Building on a precedent originally established by the Gracchi during the Republic, the imperial state distributed free grain (and, later, wine and olive oil) to the male citizens of the city of Rome. Eventually, other Roman cities adopted the practice as well. In addition, public games and theater performances were free, subsidized by the state or by elites showing off their wealth (the most popular were circuses: horse races around a track). Thus, a Roman citizen in one of the large cities could enjoy free bread – although it was not enough to sustain an entire family, necessitating at least some source of supplemental income – and free entertainment. This policy was both a cynical move on the part of the state to keep down urban unrest and a legal right of urban citizens. Free bread or not, the average life expectancy was 45 years for men and 34 for women, the latter because of the horrible conditions of bearing children.

Meanwhile, fully 40% of the population of Italy were slaves when Augustus took power. Not only were slaves captured in war, but children born to slave mothers were automatically slaves as well. Some slaves did domestic labor, but most were part of the massive labor force on huge plantations and in mines. The conditions of life for slaves were often atrocious, and strict oversight and use of violent discipline ensured that no slave revolt ever succeeded (despite the best efforts of leaders of revolts, like Spartacus in the first century BCE). Relatively large numbers of slaves did earn their freedom, and the "freedmen" as a class tended to be innovative commercial entrepreneurs, but many slaves had little hope of freedom. Slavery declined by about 200 CE because supplies started drying up and prices rose; without the constant expansion of the empire, there were far fewer slaves available. By that time, however, the legal and social conditions of farmers had degenerated to the point that they were essentially serfs (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 about the law, he *was* the law.

Conclusion

For the first two centuries of its existence, Rome was overwhelmingly powerful, and its political institutions were strong enough to survive even prolonged periods of incompetent rule. Trouble was afoot on Rome's borders, however, as barbarian groups became more populous and better-organized, and as the meritocratic system of the "Five Good Emperors" gave way to infighting, assassination, and civil war. 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.

Media Attributions

Chapter 11: The Late Empire and Christianity

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

In fact, the period between the end of the five good emperors and the collapse of Rome was much more complex than one of simple decline and weakness, and even when the city of Rome could not defend itself, Roman civilization left an enormous, permanent impression on Western Civilization. Perhaps most importantly, what began as an obscure cult in Roman-ruled Judea eventually became one of the great world religions – Christianity – thanks to its success in spreading throughout the Roman Empire before the western Empire's collapse.

Crisis and Recovery

Major crises affected the Empire from 235 to 284 CE. The basis of the crises was increasing pressure from foreign invaders on the Roman borders coupled with political instability within the Empire itself. The emperor Severus Alexander was murdered in 235 CE. All of the emperors to follow for the next fifty years were murdered or died in battle as well, save one; there were twenty-six emperors in those fifty years, and only one died of natural causes. Many emperors stayed on the throne for only a few months before they were killed. Not surprisingly, in this environment, most emperors were only concerned with either seizing the throne or staying alive once they had it, meaning they tended to neglect everything important 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, all being generals at this point, traveled constantly with their armies and made their courts wherever they had to while waging campaigns.

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

The problem was that the entire Roman imperial system hinged on the direct, personal decision-making of the emperor himself. The emperor was supposed to oversee all major building campaigns, state finances, and the worship of the Roman gods, not just military strategy. Thus, in an era when the speed a message could travel was limited by how fast a messenger could travel on horseback, the machinery of the Roman government ground to a halt whenever the latest emperor was weeks or even months away from Rome. Needless to say, the problem was exacerbated when the Empire was torn between rival claimants to the throne – for a few years toward the end of the crisis period the empire proper was split into three competing "empires"' under rival imperial pretenders.

The three rival "Roman Empires" as of 271 CE.

Sasanian Persia

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

While the Sasanian kings were obliged to govern both settled peoples and nomads, as had all earlier Persian dynasties, they were more successful in creating a stable *system* of rule, not just relying on their own charismatic authority. For the first time in its history, Zoroastrianism became the official state religion and its holy books were codified, in contrast to the earlier oral traditions of the religion. The state made major efforts to increase both agricultural productivity and the amount of land under cultivation, especially in Mesopotamia. The long-distance trade routes that had grown to such importance under Parthian rule continued to expand in scope and volume of trade, as did crafts and manufacturing in Sasanian territory (Sasanian silk textiles were of such high quality that they were

even exported to China itself). The Sasanian rulers drew a direct connection between stability, centralization, and prosperity at precisely the same time that the chaos in Rome undermined the Roman commercial economy.

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

One symptom of the success of the Sasanian state is its longevity in the face of nearly constant challenges: it lasted from the Sasanian seizure of power in 220 CE until it was conquered during the Arab invasions in 651 CE. Rome and Persia did not war constantly, but when they did Persia was obligated to devote enormous resources to containing Roman rapacity (the buffer state of Armenia changed hands a bewildering number of times in the process). Invaders from the Central Asian steppes and the mountains of Afghanistan proved an ongoing security threat to the empire as well, as did the Arab tribes 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 junior emperor. This created the *Tetrarchy*, the rule of four. Diocletian further subdivided the empire, so that for the rest of his reign, the four co-emperors (two "augusti" and two "caesars") worked together to administer the entire territory.

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

Diocletian's hope was that the tetrarchy would end the cycle of assassinations. The junior emperors were the senior emperors' respective heirs, destined to assume full power when their seniors stepped down. When that happened, each new senior emperor would then select new juniors. The overall effect was, if it worked, a neat succession of power instead of the constant bloodshed and uncertainty that had haunted Roman politics for half a century; this system was quite similar to the merit-based selection process of emperors that had held during the rule of the Five Good Emperors.

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

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

State finances were in shambles when Diocletian came to power. To try to deal with the problem, Diocletian reformed the tax system and instituted an official census for taxation purposes. He also tried to freeze wages and prices by decree, something that did not work since it created a black market for both goods and labor. Peasants bore the brunt of Diocletian's reforms; most independent farmers that still existed were turned into serfs (*coloni*), one step above slaves. State tax collectors were so feared that many peasants willingly gave their land to wealthy landowners who promised to protect them from the tax agents.

Finally, Diocletian tried to reinstate religious orthodoxy. He believed that too many people had turned away from worship of the Roman gods, which had in turn brought about the long period of crisis preceding his takeover. Thus, he went after sects that he thought threatened stability, including Christianity. He banned Christian worship and executed several thousand Christians who refused to renounce their beliefs in an attempt to wipe out the cult once and for all. Needless to say, this was a spectacular failure.

Diocletian retired in 305 CE due to failing health, as did (reluctantly) his co-emperor in the west. The idea behind the Tetrarchy was that the junior emperors would then become the senior emperors and recruit new juniors – this system worked exactly once, as the junior emperors under Diocletian and

Maximian took power. Instead of a smooth transition inaugurating a stable new beginning, however, the Empire was yet again plunged into civil war. A general (at the time stationed in Britain) named Constantine, son of the Tetrarch Constantius, launched a military campaign to reunite Rome under his sole rule. By 312 CE he had succeeded, claiming total control and appointing no co-emperor.

Constantine

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

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

In 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*, cults that promised spiritual salvation to their members. These mystery religions shared a belief that the universe was full of magical charms that could lead to spiritual salvation or eternal life itself. In many ways, they were more like cults of magic than traditional religious faiths. A worshiper could join multiple mystery religions, intoning chants and prayers and participating in rituals in hopes of securing good fortune and wealth in life and the possibility of spiritual immortality after death.

Even Rome's perennial adversary Persia supplied sources of spiritual inspiration to Rome. Mithras, the Zoroastrian god of war, the sun, and rebirth became immensely popular among Romans. Mithrans believed that Mithras had been a soldier, slain by his enemies, who then rose to enjoy eternal life. Roman soldiers campaigning in Persia brought Mithraism back to Rome since Mithras's identity as a former soldier made his worship all the more appealing to members of the Roman military. The worship of Mithras was so popular that, some historians have noted, it is easy to imagine the Roman Empire becoming Mithran instead of Christian if Constantine had not converted to the latter faith.

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

In some cases, non-Roman gods even came to supplant Roman ones; one of the Severan emperors embraced the worship of the Syrian sun god Sol Invictus (meaning "the unconquered sun") and had a temple built in Rome to honor the god alongside the traditional Roman deities. The notion of being as powerful and unstoppable as the sun appealed to future emperors, so subsequent emperors tended to venerate Sol Invictus along with the Roman Jupiter until the triumph of Christianity. In other cases, the worship of non-Roman gods was so popular that it simply could not be suppressed in the few cases in which Roman leaders saw a need to. The Egyptian goddess Isis, who was at the heart of the largest mystery cult in the entire Mediterranean region, was so popular among both women and men

that repeated attempts to purge her cult from Rome for being socially disruptive utterly failed.

The Jews and Jesus

The Roman territory of Palestine was a thorn in Rome's side thanks to the unshakable opposition of the Jews. Palestine suffered from heavy taxation and deeply-felt resentment toward the Romans. One key point of contention was that the Jews refused to pay lip service to the divinity of the emperors. The Romans insisted that their subjects participate in symbolic rituals acknowledging the primacy of the emperors, but since the Jews were strict monotheists, they would not do so.

In 66 CE there was a huge uprising against Rome. It took four years for imperial forces to crush the uprising, resulting in the greatest disaster in ancient Jewish history: the permanent destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE. In the aftermath, the Romans enslaved or deported much of the Jewish population, which contributed to the phenomenon of the Jewish *diaspora*, the people without a homeland united only by the Hebrew Bible, the teaching of the rabbis, and Jewish cultural traditions. Another uprising decades later (between 132 – 136 CE) resulted in the almost complete dispersal of the Jews, to the point that the Jewish homeland was truly lost to them until the foundation of the modern state of Israel in 1948 CE.

In the first century CE, Jewish society, especially its leadership, was divided between rival groups. Some powerful priests, the Sadducees, claimed that all Jews should follow the 10 Commandments, but only the priests of the Temple needed to follow the 613 laws and injunctions laid down by Moses. They were opposed by the Pharisees, who insisted that all Jews had to abide by all of the laws of Moses, and they also preached that a messiah – a savior – would soon come to bring about a day of judgment before Yahweh and bring about the fulfillment of the Biblical Covenant. In the deserts outside of the major cities, a group called the Essenes emphasized a life of asceticism and mysticism, while across Palestine anti-Roman revolutionaries known as the Zealots advocated for armed revolt against the Roman occupier.

The Jewish uprising that occurred against the Romans in 66 CE happened a generation after the death of another Jewish revolutionary of sorts: Jesus of Nazareth. The major source of information on the life of Jesus are the four Gospels, accounts of his life and teachings composed after his death by three of his apostles (his closest followers and students), Matthew, Mark, and John, and another early Christian leader, Luke. The Gospels were transmitted orally for decades before being recorded in their definitive versions; most scholars now date the written gospels to approximately 90 CE (about sixty years after the death of Jesus). While the specific language of the Gospels is, of course, different, and some of the events described are also described differently, the Gospels agree on most of the major aspects of the life of Jesus.

According to the Gospels, Jesus was the son of the miraculous union of the Holy Spirit, one of the

aspects of the Jewish God Yahweh, and a virgin named Mary. Jesus showed an aptitude for theological and spiritual understanding at a young age, debating Jewish doctrine with learned Jewish priests when he was still a boy. At the age of thirty, having earned his living as a carpenter up to that point, Jesus began to preach a message of salvation that revolved around the concept that mankind as a whole could be saved if it sought forgiveness from God for its sins. He traveled and delivered his teachings in the Roman province of Palestine and the nearby puppet kingdoms dominated by the Romans for three years, but was then arrested by the Roman authorities for inciting rebellion. In the end, Jesus was executed in the customary Roman fashion of crucifixion at the age of 33.

According to the Gospels, Jesus returned to life, with an angel rolling the boulder back from the entrance to the tomb in which his body had been laid to rest. He renewed his call for devotion to God and the offer of salvation for those who sought forgiveness, then passed into the divine presence. Jesus's followers, led by the twelve apostles, began to teach his lessons to others, and the new religion of Christianity was born. His followers began to refer to Jesus as "the Christ," meaning "the anointed one" in Greek, a reference to the idea that Jesus was anointed to provide salvation for humanity.

Early Christianity

At the beginning of the Christian faith, there was no single set of texts or beliefs that united Christians. The four major Gospels do not agree on everything, because they were written by different people from memory (decades after the apostles themselves were alive). It was St. Paul, a Jewish leader who underwent a profound conversion experience and became the foremost Christian evangelist, who popularized the notion that the death of Jesus on the cross was part of a divine plan that canceled out human sin. For hundreds of years, Christians debated and argued about what Christ's message had "really" been because many of Jesus's teachings were, and are, open to interpretation. Early Christians were divided on very significant issues, including:

What God did Jesus represent? One cult believed that the God of Christ was not the Jewish God, who had been vengeful and warlike. According to this sect, Christ's God was a more powerful and loving deity come to save the world from Yahweh.

Was Jesus the messiah? In Jewish doctrine, the messiah was to be a figure who liberated the Jews from oppression and made good on the Covenant between the Jews and God, delivering the Promised Land for all eternity. Many Jews had hoped that Jesus would be a revolutionary against Roman rule and, since Judea remained in Roman hands after his death, they did not believe that Jesus had been the messiah. Early Christians came to insist, following Paul, that Jesus had indeed been the messiah, but that the "liberation" he offered was spiritual in nature, rather than having to do with prosaic politics. In other words, the potential to save one's soul from damnation superseded the old Covenant.

Was Jesus human, or was he instead somehow God Himself? He lived like a normal man, but

according to the gospels he had also performed miracles, and he claimed to be the son of God. Likewise, while Jesus lived an exemplary life, he also displayed traits like anger and doubt (the latter most famously on the cross when he asked God why He had "forsaken" Jesus), traits that did not seem those of a "perfect" being. This debate would go on for centuries, with equally pious groups of Christians coming to completely different conclusions about Christ's divine and human natures.

Likewise, early Christians were torn as to whether everyone could be a Christian, or instead, if membership was limited to the Jews. If Jesus was indeed the specifically Jewish messiah, after all, it did not make sense for a Roman or a Persian or a Celt to be able to convert. In the end, thanks largely to the influence of St. Paul again, most Christians came to believe that the salvation offered by Christ was potentially universal, and that not just Jews could become Christians as a result.

Under the influence of the mystery religions noted above, many early Christians were *Gnostics*, meaning "those who know" in Greek. The Gnostics believed that Jesus had been a secret-teller, almost a magician, who provided clues in his life and teachings about how to achieve union with God. This had more to do with magic than with a recognizable set of religious rituals or customs – for example, many Gnostics believed that it was possible to deduce a series of incantations from Christ's teachings that included hundreds of secret "names of God." If a Gnostic was to properly chant all of the names of God, he would not only achieve salvation but might enjoy power on earth, as well. The Gnostics had no interest in converting people to their version of Christianity; it was a secret they wanted to keep for themselves.

Still, despite the bewildering diversity of beliefs among early Christians, there were common themes, most importantly the emphasis Jesus Himself had placed on the spiritual needs of the common people, even social outcasts. The most radical aspect of Christianity was its universalism. From Judaism, it inherited the idea that all human beings are spiritually equal. Once the debate about whether non-Jews could become Christians was resolved, it was also potentially open to anyone who heard Christianity's teachings and doctrine. Early Christians recognized no social distinctions, which was fundamentally at odds with the entire Roman system, reliant as it was on formal legal separations between social classes and a stark system of social hierarchy. Likewise, one unequivocal requirement placed on Christians was to love their neighbors, meaning in practice showing kindness and compassion to others regardless of their social rank. Few concepts could have been more alien to Roman sensibilities.

Christianity thus at least potentially threatened the hierarchical nature of Roman society. Likewise, it inherited from Judaism a strict monotheism that refused to accept the worship of the Roman emperors. What made it even more threatening than Judaism, however, was that Christianity actively sought out new converts (i.e. Christianity was inherently evangelical, in stark contrast to Judaism which did not seek new members). Roman authorities were thus already very much inclined to be suspicious of the Christians as potential rabble-rousers. In 68 CE, Nero blamed the Christians for the huge fire that consumed much of the city of Rome, and hundreds of Christian were rounded up and slaughtered in the arena. The persecution of Christians became a potent symbol for Christianity as a whole. Over a

thousand years later, when Christianity was firmly entrenched as the religion of Europe, the trope of martyrdom was still used to explain righteous suffering.

Early Christian Organization

Before Constantine's conversion, Christianity expanded through missionary work, which succeeded in founding congregations across the Empire but did not seriously disrupt polytheism or the Empire's religious diversity. Imperial sponsorship changed that because it linked secular power to Christian identity. Following Constantine's conversion, being a Christian became a way to get ahead in the Roman power structure, and over time it became a liability to remain a polytheist. Thus, whereas early Christianity had been a religion of the common people, Roman elites flocked to convert after Constantine did so in order to stay in the emperor's good graces.

Early Christians had already developed a distinct hierarchy of worshipers, a divide between priests and worshipers. Bishops were the head of each city's congregation, and they supervised a staff of priests and deacons who interacted with everyday worshipers and led services. The bishops of main cities, usually the imperial capitals of their respective provinces, came to be called an archbishop. Each bishop oversaw activity in the diocese, again following the imperial structure, in instructing people in Christian doctrine and in building charity networks. One important effect was that the church actively supported charities for the poor and hungry, a practice which won over new converts. This was one of the notable moments in history when a religion linked together a message of compassion for the needy and real, practical efforts to *help* the needy. In another strong contrast with Roman practice, Christianity saw disenfranchised groups like women and the poor (not to mention poor women) play major roles in the church's organization, especially before "official" Christianity came into being under Constantine.

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

The most important bishop was the archbishop of Rome, who for the first few centuries of Christianity was just one among several major church leaders. Originally, the archbishops of cities like Alexandria and Damascus were of comparable importance to the Roman archbishop, but over time Roman archbishops tried to assert authority over the entire church hierarchy in the west. Their authority, however, was not recognized in much of the eastern part of the Empire, and it should be

emphasized that it took more than six *centuries* after Constantine for the Roman archbishop's authority to receive acceptance even in the west. Eventually, however, that authority was at least nominally in place, and the Roman archbishop came to be known as the "pope," meaning simply "father," of the church.

The pope's role as leader of the church emerged for a few reasons. First and foremost, the symbolic power of the city of Rome itself gave added weight to the Roman archbishop's authority. Second, there was a doctrinal tie to the Apostle Peter, who was supposed to have been given the symbolic keys to heaven directly from Christ, which were in turn passed on to his successor in Rome (the archbishop of Rome) before being crucified. Roman archbishops could thus argue that the Christian church itself was centered in Rome, and that they inherited the spiritual keys to heaven upon taking office – this concept was known as the "Petrine Succession." By the mid-fifth century CE, the popes were claiming to have total authority over all other bishops, and at least some of those bishops (in Western Europe, at any rate) did look to Rome for guidance. In later centuries, the mere fact that the early popes had claimed that authority, and certain bishops had acknowledged it, was cited as "proof" that the Roman papacy had always been the supreme doctrinal power in the Church as a whole.

Christianity's Relationship with Non-Christian Religions

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

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

That being noted, the incorporation of non-Christian celebrations into the liturgical calendar did not imply that Christians were willing to accept polytheism. Unlike most ancient faiths, Christians could not tolerate the worship of other gods, which they regarded as nothing more than nonexistent delusions that endangered souls. They used the term "pagan," coming from the Latin *paganus*, which means

"country bumpkin" or "redneck," to describe all worshipers of all other gods, even gods that had been worshiped for thousands of years at that point. Christians thus used scorn and contempt to vilify worshipers of other gods – "pagan" indicated that the non-Christian was both ignorant and foolish, even if he or she was a member of the Roman elite.

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

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

Orthodoxy and Heresy

Christianity united self-understood "Western Civilization" just as Roman culture had a few centuries earlier. At the same time, because of the peculiarities of Christian belief, it was also a potentially divisive force. Christians spoke a host of different languages and lived across the entire expanse of the Empire. As noted above, there were serious debates around who or what Jesus was. For centuries, there could be no "orthodoxy," meaning "correct belief," because there was no authority within the church (very much including the popes) who could enforce a certain set of beliefs over rival interpretations.

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

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

In the late third century, an Egyptian Christian priest named Arius created a firestorm of controversy when he made a simple logical argument: God the father had created Jesus, so it did not make any sense for Jesus to be the same thing as God. Furthermore, it was impossible to be both human and perfect; since Jesus was human, he was imperfect and could not therefore be God, who was perfect. This belief came to be known as "Arianism" (note that the word has nothing whatsoever to do with the misguided belief in some kind of ancient Germanic race – the "Aryans" – so important to Nazi ideology almost two thousand years later). Arianism quickly took hold among many people, most importantly among the Germanic tribes of the north, where Arian Christian missionaries made major inroads. Thus, Arianism quickly became the largest and most persistent heresy in the early Christian church.

In 325 CE, only a little over a decade after he had converted to Christianity, Constantine assembled a council of church leaders, the Council of Nicaea, to lay Arianism to rest. One of the results was the Nicene Creed (now usually referred to as the Apostles' Creed), to this day one of the central elements of Catholic Mass. In a single passage short enough to commit to memory, the Creed declared belief in Christ's identity as part of God ("consubstantial to the Father" in its present English translation), Christ's status as the son of God and the Virgin Mary, Christ's resurrection, and the promise of Christ's return at the end of the world. There was now the first "party line" in the early history of Christianity: a specific set of beliefs backed by institutional authority.

While united in belief, Christians were divided by language, since the western Empire still spoke Latin and the eastern Empire Greek. In 410 the monk Jerome produced a version of the Christian Bible in Latin, the Vulgate, which was to be the main edition in Europe until the sixteenth century. Surprising from a contemporary perspective, however, is that it was not until 1442 (during the Renaissance) that the definitive and in a sense "final" version of the Bible was established by the Western Church when it defined exactly which books of the Old Testament were to be included and which were not.

Meanwhile, in the east, Greek was not only the language of daily life for many, it was the official language of state in the Empire and the language of the church. The books of the New Testament, starting with the Gospels, were written in Greek in the first place, and the Greek intellectual legacy was still very strong. There was an equally strong Jewish intellectual legacy that provided accurate translations from Hebrew and Aramaic to Greek, providing Greek-speaking Christians with access to a reliable version of the Old Testament.

While it certainly clarified the beliefs of the most powerful branch of the institutional church, as the Council of Nicaea defined the official orthodoxy, it guaranteed that there would always be those who rejected that orthodoxy in the name of a different theological interpretation. Likewise, the practical issues of lingual and cultural differences undermined the universalism ("Catholicism") of the Christian

Church. Those differences and the diversity of belief would only grow over time.

Monasticism and Christian Culture

Near the end of the third century, a new Christian movement emerged that was to have major ramifications for the history of the Christian world: monasticism. Originally, monasticism was tied to asceticism, meaning self-denial, following the example of an Egyptian holy man named Antony. In about 280, Antony sold his goods and retreated to the desert to contemplate the divine, eschewing all worldly goods in imitation of the poverty of Christ. He would have remained in obscurity except for a book about him written by the bishop Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, that celebrated Antony's rejection of the material world and embrace of divine contemplation. According to Athanasius, normal life was full of temptation, greed, and sin, and that the holiest life was thus one that rejected it completely in favor of prayer and meditation away from human company. Thousands of people followed Antony's example, retreating to the wilderness. These early monks were called Anchorites: hermits who lived in deserts, forests, or mountains away from the temptations of a normal social existence (although they had to live close enough to civilization for the donations of food that kept them alive).

One particularly extreme sect of early monks were the *Stylites,* from the Greek word *stylos*, meaning "column." The founder of the group, St. Simeon the Stylite, climbed up a pillar in Syria and spent the next 30 years living on top of it. He was so famous for his holiness and endurance in the face of the obvious physical toll of living on top of a pillar that he attracted followers from all over the Roman world who came to listen to him preach. Soon, many others sought out columns in imitation of Simeon.

Ultimately, pillar-sitting did not become the predominant model of Christian life. Instead, groups of ascetics came together in communities called monasteries. Originally, these early monks spent almost all of their time in prayer, but over time most monastic communities came to embrace useful work as well as prayer and meditation. The most important development in the development of monasticism was the work of Benedict, an Italian bishop, who wrote a book known as the Rule in about 529 that laid out how monks should live. The Rule dictated a strict schedule for daily life that revolved around prayer, study, and useful work for the monastery itself (tending crops and animals, performing labor around the monastery, and so on). Going forward, many monasteries became economic powerhouses, owning large tracts of land and selling their products at a healthy profit.

More important than their economic productivity, at least from the perspective of the history of ideas, is that monasteries became the major centers of learning, especially in Western Europe after the collapse of the western Roman Empire. One of the tasks undertaken by monks was the painstaking hand-copying of books, almost all of which had to do with Christian theology (e.g. the Bible itself, commentaries from important Christian leaders, etc.), but some of which were classical Greek or Roman writings that would have otherwise been lost. Often, these books were beautifully illustrated by the

monks and are referred to as illuminated manuscripts – among the finest examples of medieval art.

Outside of monasteries, churches were built in practically every city and town (and many small villages) in the Roman sphere of influence. One interesting and, from a contemporary perspective, somewhat peculiar phenomenon in early Christianity was the focus on relics: holy objects. Relics were everything from the bones of saints to fragments of the "True Cross" on which Christ was crucified. Each church had to have a relic in its altar (contained in a special box called a reliquary) or it was not considered to be truly holy ground. All relics were not created equal: the larger the object, or the closer it had been to Christ or the apostles, the more holy power it was believed to contain. Thus, a thriving trade in relics (plagued by counterfeits – it was not easy to determine if a given finger bone was *really* the finger bone of St. Mark!) developed in Europe as rival church leaders tried to secure the most powerful relic for their church. This was not just about the symbolic importance of the relics, as pilgrims would travel from all over the Roman world to visit the site of noteworthy relics, bringing with them considerable wealth. Whole regional economies centered on pilgrimage sites as a result.

Christian Learning

Christian learning was a complex issue, because, strictly speaking, spiritual salvation was thought to be available to anyone simply by accepting the basic tenets of Christian doctrine. In other words, the whole intellectual world of Greek and Roman philosophy, literature, science, and so on did not necessarily relate to the Church's primary task of saving souls. Many church leaders were learned men and women, however, and insisted that there was indeed a place for learning within Christianity. The issue was never settled – one powerful church leader, Tertullian, once wrote "what does Athens have to do with Rome?", meaning, why should anyone study the Greek intellectual legacy when it was produced by pre-Christian pagans?

Once Christianity was institutionalized, church leaders generally came around to the importance of classical learning because it proved useful for administration. A vast Greco-Roman literature existed describing governance, science, engineering, etc., all of which was necessary in the newly-Christian Empire. A kind of uneasy balance was struck between studying classical learning, especially things like rhetoric, while warning against the spiritual danger of being seduced by its non-Christian messages.

The most important thinker who addressed the intersection of Christian and classical learning was St. Augustine of Hippo (a Roman city in North Africa), whose life spanned the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Augustine lived through the worst period of Roman decline, completing his work while his own city was besieged by a Germanic group called the Vandals. To Roman Christians, this posed a huge challenge – if all-powerful God had embraced them, why was their empire falling apart? Augustine's answer was that life on earth is not ultimately significant. In his work *The City of God*, Augustine distinguished between the perfect world of heaven, attainable through Christian faith, versus

the flawed and imperfect world of the living. This concept explained the decline of the Empire as being irrelevant to the greater mission of salvation. Thus, according to Augustine, all of learning was just a facet of material life; useful in its way but totally insignificant compared to the necessity of laying one's soul bare to God and waiting for the second coming of Christ.

The irony of these struggles over Christian doctrine versus ancient learning was that the issue was decided by the collapse of Rome. When Rome fell to Germanic invaders in the mid-fifth century, so began the decline of organized learning – there simply was no funding from Roman elites for what had been a robust private school system. In the absence of instruction, literature and philosophy and engineering all but vanished, preserved only in monasteries and in the eastern Empire. Once the western Empire collapsed, the church was the only institution that still supported scholarship (including basic literacy), but over time the levels of literacy and education in Europe unquestionably declined. This decline inspired the contempt of later Renaissance thinkers who wrote off the period between the fall of Rome and the beginning of the Renaissance in about 1300 CE as the "Dark Ages."

Ultimately, after the western part of the Roman Empire fell in the late fifth century, it was the Christian Church that carried on at least parts of Roman civilization, learning, and culture. One of the historical ironies of this period of history is that even though Rome's Empire began to decline and (eventually) collapse *politically*, it lived on thanks to ideas and beliefs that originally arisen in the Roman context – it lived on *ideologically* and *spiritually.*

The Fall of Rome

The fall of Rome, conventionally dated to 476 CE, is one of the most iconic events in the history of the western world. For centuries, people have tried to draw lessons from Rome's decline and fall about their own societies, a practice inspired by the question of how so mighty and, at one time, stable a civilization could so utterly disintegrate. The answers have varied considerably: Rome grew corrupt and weak over time, Rome was infiltrated by "barbarian" cultures, Rome was simply overcome by overwhelming odds, or perhaps Rome was simply transformed into a different, more diverse set of societies rather than destroyed in so many words. However the events of the period are interpreted, the simple fact remains: the political unity of the Roman Empire was shattered by the end of the fifth century CE.

While the debate as to the causes of Rome's fall will probably never be definitively answered, an important caveat should be noted: Rome did not "really" fall for another thousand years, even though the city of Rome itself, along with the western half of the Empire, did indeed lose its sovereignty in the face of invasion by Germanic "barbarians." The Roman capital had already been moved to Constantinople in the early fourth century, and the eastern half of the empire remained intact, albeit under constant military pressure, until 1453. Arguably, one of the major causes for the collapse of the

western empire was the fact that the Empire as a whole had focused its resources in the east for a century by the time waves of invaders appeared on the horizon starting in the fourth century CE.

At the time, most Christians blamed polytheism and heresy for Rome's fall: it was God's wrath exacted on a sinful society. In turn, the remaining polytheists blamed Christians for undermining the worship of the gods who had presided over the Empire while Rome was great.

From the contemporary perspective, Rome's fall seems to have less to do with divine intervention than routine defeats and growing threats.

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

Roman Relations with Barbarians

Romans had always held "barbarians" in contempt, and they believed that the lands held by barbarians (such as Scotland and Germany) were largely unsuitable for civilization, being too cold and wet for the kind of Mediterranean agriculture Romans were accustomed to. Romans believed that barbarian peoples like the Germans were inferior to subject peoples like the Celts, who could at least be made useful subjects (and, later, citizens) of the Empire. For the entire history of the Empire, the Romans never seem to have figured out exactly which groups they were interacting with; they would simply lump them together as "Goths" or even "Scythians," a blanket term referring to steppe peoples. Occasionally, hundreds of years after they "should have known better," Roman writers would actually refer to Germans as Celts.

It is easy to overstate this attitude; there were many members of Germanic tribes who did rise to prominence in Rome (one, Stilicho, was one of the greatest Roman generals in the late Empire, and he was half Vandal by birth). Likewise, it is clear from archaeology that many Germans made a career of fighting in the Roman armies and then returning to their native areas, and that many Germans looked up to Rome as a model of civilization to be emulated, not some kind of permanent enemy. Some Romans clearly did admire things about certain barbarian groups, as well – the great Roman historian Tacitus, in his *Germania*, even praised the Germans for their vigor and honor, although he did so in order to contrast the Germans with what he regarded as his own corrupt and immoral Roman society.

That said, it is clear that the overall pattern of contact between Rome and Germania was a combination of peaceful coexistence punctuated by many occasions of extreme violence. Various tribes would raid Roman lands, usually resulting in brutal Roman reprisals. As the centuries went on, Rome came increasingly to rely on both Germanic troops and on playing allied tribes off against hostile ones. In fact, by the late fourth century CE, many (sometimes even most) soldiers in "Roman" armies in the western half of the Empire were recruited from Germanic groups.

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

Meanwhile, there had been *hundreds of years* of on-again, off-again wars along the Roman borders before the "fall" of Rome actually occurred. Especially since the third century, major conflicts were an ongoing reality of the enormous borders along the Rhine and Danube. Those conflicts had prompted emperors to build the system of *limes* meant to defend Roman territory, and from that point on, the majority of Roman legions were usually deployed along the semi-fortified northern borders of the empire. There is evidence that many of those soldiers spent their careers as not-so-glorified border guards and administrators and never experienced battle itself; there is no question that the performance of the Roman military was far poorer in the late imperial period than it had been, for instance, under the Republic.

In turn, many of the Germans who settled along those borders were known as *federatii*, tribal groups who entered into treaties with Rome that required them to pay taxes in kind (i.e. in crops, animals, and other forms of wealth rather than currency) and send troops to aid Roman conquests, and who received peace and recognition (and usually annual gifts) in return. The problem for Rome was that most Germanic peoples regarded treaties as being something that only lasted as long as the emperor who had authorized the treaty lived; on his death, there would often be an incursion since the old peace terms no longer held. The first task new emperors had to attend to was often suppressing the latest invasion from the north. One example was the Goths, settled at the time somewhere around present-day Romania, whom Constantine severely punished after they turned on his forces during his war of conquest leading up to 312 CE.

The bottom line is that, as of the late fourth century CE, it seemed like "business as usual" to most political and military elites in the Roman Empire. The borders were teeming with barbarians, but they had *always* been teeming with barbarians. Rome traded with them, enlisted them as soldiers, and fought them off or punished them as Roman leaders thought it necessary. No one in Rome seemed to think that this state of affairs would ever change. What contemporary historians have determined, however, is that things *had* changed: there were *more* Germans than ever before, they were *better-organized*, and they were capable of defeating large Roman forces. What followed was a kind of

"barbarian domino effect" that ultimately broke the western Empire into pieces and ended Roman power over it.

One other factor in the collapse of the western half of the Empire should be emphasized: once Rome began to lose large territories in the west, tax revenues shrunk to a fraction of what they had been. While the east remained intact, with taxes going to pay for a robust military which successfully defended Roman sovereignty, Roman armies in the west were under-funded, under-manned, and vulnerable. There was thus a vicious cycle of lost land, lost revenue, and poor military performance that saw Roman power simply disintegrate over the course of less than a century. Even the handful of effective emperors and generals in the west during that period could not staunch the tide of defeat.

Invasions

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

In 376 the Huns drove a tribe of Goths from their lands in southern Russia. Those Goths were allowed to settle in the Balkans by the Romans, but were soon extorted by Roman officials, causing the Goths to rise up against Rome in retribution. In 378 the Goths killed the emperor, Valens, and destroyed a Roman army in an open battle. The new emperor made a deal with the Goths, allowing them to serve in the Roman army under their own commanders in return for payment. This proved disastrous for Rome in the long run as the Goths, under their king Alaric, started looting Roman territory in the Balkans, finally marching into Italy itself and sacking Rome in 410 CE. The Roman government officially moved to the city of Ravenna in the north (which was more defensible) following this sack.

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

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

Leading up to that event, the Roman legions were already losing their former coherence and unity. In 406 CE a very cold winter froze the Rhine river, and armies of barbarians invaded (literally walking across the frozen river in some cases), bypassing the traditional Roman defenses. One group, the Vandals, sacked its way to the Roman provinces of Spain and seized a large swath of territory there. The entire army of Britain left in 407 CE, when yet another ambitious general tried to seize the imperial throne, and Roman power there swiftly collapsed.

Roman armies from the western empire hastily marched back to Italy to fight the Goths, abandoning their traditional defensive posts. For the next fifty years, various groups of Germanic invaders wandered across Europe, both looting and, soon, settling down to occupy territory that had only recently been part of the Roman Empire. Most of these groups soon established kingdoms of their own. The Vandals pushed through Spain and ended up conquering most of Roman North Africa. After the Goths sacked Rome itself in 410, the emperor Honorius gave them southern Gaul to get them to leave; they ended up seizing most of Spain (from the Vandals who had arrived before them) as well. At

that point, the Romans came to label this group the *Visigoths* – "western Goths" – to distinguish them from other Gothic tribes still at large in the Empire.

Back in Italy, the Huns, under the leadership of the legendary warlord Attila, arrived in the late 440s, pushing as far as the gates of Rome in 451. There, the Pope (Leo I) personally appealed to Attila not to sack the city and paid them a hefty bribe. Attila died in 453 and the Huns were soon defeated by a combined army of their former Germanic subjects and a Roman army. By then, however, the damage was done: the domino effect set off by the Hunnic invasion of the previous century had already almost completely swallowed up the western empire. Only two years after the Huns were defeated, the Vandals sailed over from Africa in 455 and sacked Rome again. This sacking, despite occurring with relatively little carnage, nevertheless led to the use of the word "vandal" to mean a malicious destroyer of property.

Italy itself held out until 476, when an Ostrogothic ("eastern Goth") warlord named Odoacer deposed the last emperor and declared himself king of Italy; the Roman emperor in Constantinople (having little choice) approved of Odoacer's authority in Italy in return for a nominal pledge of loyalty. In 493, Odoacer was deposed and killed by a different Ostrogothic king, Theodoric, but the link with Constantinople remained intact. The Roman emperor worked out a deal with Theodoric to stabilize Italy, and Theodoric went on to rule for decades (r. 493 – 526). Thus, by 500 CE Italy and the city of Rome were no longer part of the empire still called "Roman" by the people of the eastern empire. By the end of the fifth century, the western empire was gone, replaced by a series of kingdoms ruled by Germanic peoples but populated by former citizens of the Roman Empire.

Theodoric presided over a few decades of prosperity, restoring peace to the Italian peninsula and joining together with other Gothic territories to the west. He maintained excellent relations with the Pope even though he was an Arian Christian, and he set up a system in which a government existed for his Goths that was distinct from the Roman government (with him at the head of both, of course). Some historians have speculated that Theodoric and the Goths might have been able to forge a new, stable Empire in the west and thereby obviate the coming of the "Dark Ages," but that possibility was cut short when the Byzantine Empire invaded to try to reconquer its lost territory (that invasion is considered in the next chapter).

In Gaul, a fierce tribe called the Franks, from whom France derives its name, came to power, driving out rivals like the Visigoths. Unlike the other Germanic tribes, the Franks did not abandon their homeland when they set out for new territory. From the lower Rhine Valley, they gradually expanded into northern Gaul late in the fifth century. Under the leadership of the warrior chieftain Clovis (r. 481/482 – 511), the various Frankish tribes were united, which gave them the military strength to depose the last Roman governor in Gaul, drive the Visigoths into Spain, absorb the territory of yet another barbarian group known as the Burgundians, and eventually conquer most of Gaul. Thus, what began as an invasion and occupation of Roman territory evolved in time to become the earliest version of the kingdom of France.

In almost every case, the new Germanic kings pledged formal allegiance to the Roman emperor in Constantinople in return for acknowledgment of the legitimacy of their rule. They often did their best to build on the precedent of Roman civilization as well; for example, Clovis of the Franks made a point of having the Frankish laws recorded in Latin, and over time the Frankish language vanished, replaced by the early form of French, a Latinate language. In fact, for well over a century, most Germanic "kings" were, officially, treaty-holding, recognized Roman officials from the legal and diplomatic perspective of Constantinople. That said, the "Roman" emperors of Constantinople had plenty of legal pretext to regard those kings as usurpers as well, since the treaties of acknowledgment were often full of loopholes. Thus, when the emperor Justinian invaded Italy in the sixth century, he was doing so to reassert not just the memory of the united Empire, but to restore the Empire 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.

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Chapter 12: Byzantium

As noted in the last chapter, the eastern half of the Roman Empire survived for 1,000 years after the fall of the western one. It carried on most of the traditions of Rome and added many new innovations in architecture, science, religion, and learning. It was truly one of the great civilizations of world history. And yet, as demonstrated in everything from college curricula to representations of ancient history in popular culture, the eastern empire, remembered as "Byzantium," is not as well represented in the contemporary view of the past as is the earlier united Roman Empire. Why might that be?

The answer is probably this: like the western empire before it, Byzantium eventually collapsed. However, Byzantium did not just collapse, it was absorbed into a distinct culture with its own traditions: that of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. More to the point, the religious divide between Christians and Muslims, at least from the perspective of medieval Europeans, was so stark that Byzantium was "lost" to the tradition of Western Civilization in a way that the western empire was not. Even though the Ottoman Empire itself was a proudly "western" civilization, one that eagerly built on the prosperity of Byzantium after absorbing it, there is a (misguided) centuries-long legacy of distinguishing between the Byzantine – Ottoman culture of the east and the Roman – European medieval culture of the west.

Byzantine civilization's origins are to be found in the decision by the emperor Constantine to found a new capital in the Greek village of Byzantium, renamed Constantinople ("Constantine's city"). By the time the western empire fell, the center of power in the Roman Empire had long since shifted to the east: simply put, by the fifth century CE the majority of wealth and power was concentrated in the eastern half of the empire. The people of Constantinople and the eastern empire did not call it "Byzantium" or themselves "Byzantines" – they continued to refer to themselves as "Romans" long after Rome itself was permanently outside of their territory and control.

After the fall of the western empire, the new Germanic kings acknowledged the authority of the emperor in Constantinople. They were formally his vassals (lords in his service) and he remained the emperor of the entire Roman Empire in name. At least until the Byzantine Empire began to decline in the seventh century, this was not just a convenient fiction. Even the Franks, who ruled a kingdom on the other end of Europe furthest from the reach of Constantinople, lived in genuine fear of a Byzantine invasion since the treaties they had established with Constantinople were full of loopholes and could be repudiated by any given emperor.

East versus West

Why was it that the west had fallen into political fragmentation while the east remained rich, powerful, and united? There are a few major reasons. First, Constantinople itself played a major role in the power and wealth of the east. Whereas Rome had shrunk steadily over the years, especially after its sacking in 410 and the move of the western imperial government to the Italian city of Ravenna (which was more easily defensible), Constantinople had somewhere around 500,000 residents. That can be compared to the capital of the Gothic kingdom of Gaul, Toulouse, which had 15,000 (which was a large city by the standards of the time for western Europe!). Not only was Constantinople impregnable to invaders, but its population of proud Romans repeatedly massacred barbarians who tried to seize power, and they deposed unpopular emperors who tried to rule as military tyrants rather than true emperors possessing sufficient Roman "virtue."

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

The east had long been the richest part of the empire, and because of its efficient bureaucracy and tax-collecting systems, much more wealth flowed into the imperial coffers in the east than it did in the west. Each year, the imperial government in Constantinople brought in roughly 270,000 pounds of

gold in tax revenue, as compared to about 20,000 in the west. This made vastly better-equipped, trained, and provisioned armies possible in the east. Furthermore, the west was still dominated by various families of unbelievably rich Roman elites who undermined the power, authority, and financial solvency of the western imperial government by refusing to sacrifice their own prerogatives in the name of a stronger united empire. In the east, while nobles were certainly rich and powerful, they were nowhere near as powerful as their western counterparts.

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

Lastly, the east enjoyed a simple stroke of good luck in the threats it faced from outside of the borders: the barbarians went west and Persia did not launch major invasions. The initial Gothic uprising that sparked the beginning of the end for the west was in the Balkans, but the Goths were then convinced to go west. Subsequent invasions from Central Europe were directed at the west. Even though the Huns were from the steppes of Central Asia, they established their (short-lived) empire in the west. Eastern Roman armies had to repulse threats and maintain the borders, but they did not face the overwhelming odds of their western Roman counterparts. Finally, despite Persia's overall strength and coherence, there was a lull in Persian militarism that lasted through the entire fifth century.

Justinian

The most important early emperor of Byzantium was Justinian, who ruled from 527 to 565. Justinian was the last Roman emperor to speak Latin as his native tongue; afterwards, all emperors spoke Greek. He is remembered for being both an incredibly fervent Christian, a major military leader, the sponsor of some of the most beautiful and enduring Byzantine architecture in existence, and the husband of probably the most powerful empress in the history of the empire, a former actress and courtesan named Theodora.

Justinian created a tradition that was to last for all of Byzantine history: that of the emperor being both the spiritual leader of the Christian Church and the secular ruler of the empire itself. By the time the western empire fell, the archbishops of Rome had begun their attempts to assert their authority over the church (they would not succeed even in the west for many centuries, however). Those

claims were never accepted in the east, where it was the emperor who was responsible for laying down the final word on matters of religious doctrine. Justinian felt that it was his sacred duty as leader of the greatest Christian empire in the world to enforce religious uniformity among his subjects and to stamp out heresy. He called himself "beloved of Christ," a title the later emperors would adopt as well. While he was never able to force all of his subjects to conform to Christian orthodoxy (especially in rural regions far from the capital city), he did launch a number of attacks and persecutory campaigns against heretical sects.

One aspect of Justinian's focus on Christian purification was the destruction of the ancient traditions of paganism in Greece and the surrounding areas initiated by his Christian predecessors. The Olympics had already been shut down by the emperor Theodosius I back in 393 CE (he objected to their status as a pagan religious festival, not an athletic competition). Justinian insisted that all teachers and tutors convert to Christianity and renounce their teaching of the Greek classics; when they refused in 528, he shut down Plato's Academy, functioning at that point for almost 1,000 years. (Many of the now-unemployed scholars fled to Persia, where they were welcomed by the Sasanian rulers.)

Justinian did not just enforce religious uniformity, he also imposed Roman law on all of his subjects. The empire had traditionally left local customs and laws alone so long as they did not interfere in the important business of tax collection, troop recruitment, and loyalty to the empire. Justinian saw Roman law as an aspect of Roman unity, however, and sought to stamp out other forms of law under his jurisdiction. He had legal experts go through the entire corpus of Roman law, weed out the contradictions, and figure out the laws that needed to be enforced. He codified this project in the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, which forms the direct textual antecedent for most of the legal systems still in use in Europe.

Theodora, who had come from decidedly humble origins as an entertainer, worked diligently both to free prostitutes from sexual slavery, expand the legal rights and protections of women, and protect children from infanticide. She was Justinian's confidant and supporter throughout their lives together, helping to conceive of not just legal revisions, but the splendid new building projects they supervised in Constantinople. In a famous episode from early in Justinian's reign, Theodora prevented Justinian and his advisors from fleeing from a massive riot against his rule, instead inspiring Justinian to order a counter-attack that may well have saved his reign. While most political marriages in Byzantium, as in practically every pre-modern society, had nothing whatsoever to do with love or even attraction, Theodora and Justinian clearly shared both genuine affection for one another and intellectual kinship.

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

Justinian was intent on re-conquering the western empire from the Germanic kings that had taken over. He was equally interested in imposing Christian uniformity through the elimination of Christian heresies like Arianism. He sent a brilliant general, Belisarius, to Vandal-controlled North Africa in 533 with a fairly small force of soldiers and cavalry, and within a year Belisarius soundly defeated the Vandal army and retook North Africa for the empire. From there, Justinian dispatched Belisarius and his force to Italy to seize it from the Ostrogoths.

What followed was twenty years of war between the Byzantines and the Gothic kingdom of Italy. The Goths had won over the support of most Italians through fair rule and reasonable levels of taxation, and most Italians thus fought against the Byzantines, even though the latter represented the legitimate Roman government. In the end, the Byzantines succeeded in destroying the Gothic kingdom and retaking Italy, but the war both crippled the Italian economy and drained the Byzantine coffers. Italy was left devastated; it was the Byzantine invasion, not the "fall of Rome" earlier, that crippled the Italian economy until the late Middle Ages.

In 542, during the midst of the Italian campaign, a horrendous plague (the "Plague of Justinian")

killed off half the population of Constantinople and one-third of the empire's population as a whole. This had an obvious impact on military recruiting and morale. In the long term, the more important impact of the plague was in severing many of the trade ties between the two halves of the empire. Economies in the west became more localized and less connected to long-distance trade, which ultimately impoverished them. A few years earlier, in 536, a major volcanic eruption in Iceland spewed so much debris in the air that Europe's climate cooled considerably with "years without a summer," badly undermining the economy as well. Thus, war, natural disaster, and disease helped usher in the bleakest period of the Middle Ages in the west, as well as leading to a strong economic and cultural division between west and east.

Even as the Byzantine forces struggled to retake Italy, Justinian, like the emperors to follow him, had a huge problem on his eastern flank: the Persian Empire. Still ruled by the Sasanians, the Persians were sophisticated and well-organized rivals of the empire who had never been conquered by Rome. Ongoing wars with Persia represented the single greatest expense Justinian faced, even as he oversaw the campaigns in Italy. The Byzantines and Persians battled over Armenia, which was heavily populated, and Syria, which was very rich. Toward the end of his reign, Justinian simply made peace with the Persian king Khusro I by agreeing to pay an annual tribute of 30,000 gold coins a year. It was ultimately less expensive to spend huge sums of gold as bribes than it was to pay for the wars.

The problem with Justinian's wars, both the reconquest in the west and the ongoing battles with the Persians in the east, was that they were enormously expensive. Because his forces won enough battles to consistently loot, and because the empire was relatively stable and prosperous under his reign, he was able to sustain these efforts during his lifetime. After he died, however, Byzantium slowly re-lost its conquests in the west to another round of Germanic invasions, and the Persians pressed steadily on the eastern territories as well.

Division and Decline

The relative political and religious unity Justinian's campaigns brought back to Byzantium declined steadily after his death. For almost 1,000 years, the two kinds of Christianity – later called "Catholic" and "Eastern Orthodox," although both terms speak to the idea of one universal and correct form of Christian doctrine – were sundered by the great political divisions between the Germanic kingdoms of the west and Byzantium itself in the east. In Eastern Europe, small kingdoms and poor farmers played host to rival missionaries preaching the slightly-different versions of Christianity. Trade existed, but was never as strong as it had been during the days of the united empire.

Byzantium's major ongoing problem was that it faced a seemingly endless series of external threats. Byzantium was surrounded by hostile states and groups for most of its existence, and it slowly but steadily lost territory until it was little more than the city of Constantinople and its immediate

territories. It is important to remember, however, that this process took many centuries, longer even than the Roman Empire itself had lasted in the west. During that time, Constantinople was one of the largest and most remarkable cities on the planet, with half a million people and trade goods and visitors from as far away as Scandinavia, Africa, and England. Its people believed that their empire and their emperor were preserved by God Himself as the rightful seat of the Christian religion. Thanks to the resilience of its people, the prosperity of its trade networks, and the leadership of its emperors (the effective ones, anyway), Byzantium remained a major state and culture for centuries despite its long-term decline in power from the days of Justinian.

The most significant leader after Justinian was the emperor Heraclius (r. 610 – 641). He was originally a governor who returned from his post in Africa to seize the throne from a rival named Phocas in the midst of a Persian invasion. The empire was in such disarray at the time that the Persians seized Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, cutting off a huge part of the food supply to Constantinople. In the process, the Persians even seized the "True Cross," the cross on which (so Christians at the time believed) Christ Himself had been crucified, from its resting place in Jerusalem. Simultaneously, the Avars and Bulgars, steppe peoples related to the Huns, were pressing Byzantine territory from the north, and piracy was rife in the Mediterranean.

Heraclius managed to save the core of the empire, Anatolia and the Balkans, by recruiting free peasants to fight instead of relying on mercenaries. He also focused on Anatolia as the breadbasket of the empire, temporarily abandoning Egypt but keeping his people fed. He led Byzantine armies to seize back Jerusalem and the True Cross from the Persians, soundly defeating them in 628, and in 630 he personally returned the True Cross to its shrine in Jerusalem. The fighting during this period was often desperate – Constantinople itself was besieged by an allied force of Avars and Persians at one point – but in the end Heraclius managed to pull the empire back from the brink.

Despite his success in staving off disaster, however, a new threat to Byzantium was growing in the south. The very same year that Heraclius returned the True Cross to Jerusalem, the Islamic Prophet Muhammad returned to his native city of Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula with the first army of Muslims. Heraclius had no way of knowing it, but Byzantium would soon face a threat even greater than that of the Persians: the Arab caliphates (considered in the following chapter). Indeed, Heraclius himself was forced to lead Byzantium during the first wave of the Arab invasions, and despite his own leadership ability vital territories like Syria, Palestine, and Egypt were lost during his own lifetime (he died in 641, the same year that most of Egypt was conquered by the Arabs).

Themes and Organization

Heraclius created a new administrative system to try to defend the remaining Byzantine territory: *themes*. He began by seizing lands from wealthy landowners and monasteries in Asia Minor,

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

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

There is an important caveat regarding the consideration of the themes, however. While Byzantium did indeed survive as a state for many centuries while neighboring empires like Persia fell, Byzantium itself arguably ceased to be an "empire" by the middle of the seventh century CE. The Arab invasions swiftly destroyed Byzantine power in the Near East and North Africa, and while fragments of Justinian's reconquest remained in Byzantine hands until the eighth century, "Byzantium" was basically synonymous with the contiguous territory of the Balkans, Greece, and most of Anatolia by then. It was, despite its continued pretensions to empire, really a kingdom after the territorial losses, populated almost entirely by Greek-speaking "Romans" rather than by those Romans as well as its former Syrian, Jewish, African, Italian, and Spanish subjects.

Imperial Control and Foreign Threats

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

While the losses of territory in Europe were mourned by Byzantines at the time, they proved

something of a blessing in disguise to the empire: with its territory limited to the Balkans and Anatolia, the smaller empire had much more coherent and easily-defended borders. Thus, those core areas remained under Byzantine control despite various losses for many centuries to come. The emperor Leo the Isaurian (r. 717 – 741) used themes-recruited soldiers to both fight off Arab sieges of Constantinople and to cement control of Anatolia. By the end of his reign, Anatolia was secure from the Arabs and would remain the major part of the Byzantine Empire for centuries.

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

A medieval illustration of Greek fire.

In the Balkans, Slavic tribes proved a major ongoing problem for the Byzantines. A people known as the Avars invaded from the north in the sixth century and raided not just the Balkans but all across Europe, making it as far as the newly-created Frankish kingdom in present-day France. In the eighth century an even more ferocious nomadic people, the Bulgars (for whom the present-day country of Bulgaria is named), invaded. While the Avars had converted to Christianity during the period of their invasions, the Bulgars remained pagan. They destroyed the remaining Byzantine cities in the northern Balkans, slaughtered or enslaved the inhabitants, and crushed Byzantine armies. In one especially colorful moment in Bulgarian history, the Bulgar Khan, Krum, converted the skull of a slain emperor into a goblet in about 810 CE to toast his victory over a Byzantine army. Fifty years later, however, another Khan, Boris I, converted to Christianity and opened diplomatic relations with Constantinople.

This was an interesting and surprisingly common pattern: many "barbarian" peoples and kingdoms willingly converted to Christianity rather than having Christianity imposed on them through force. The Bulgars were consistently able to defeat Byzantine armies and they occupied territory seized from the Byzantine Empire, yet Boris I chose to convert (and to insist that his followers do as well). The major reason for this deliberate conversion revolved around the desire on the part of barbarian kings to, simply, stop being barbarians. Most kings recognized that Christianity was a prerequisite to entering into trade and diplomatic relations with Byzantium and the Christian kingdoms of the west. Once a kingdom converted, it could consider itself a member of the network of civilized societies, carry out alliances and trade with other kingdoms, and receive official recognition from the emperor (who still wielded considerable prestige and authority, even outside of the areas of direct Byzantine control).

An important figure in the history of eastern Christianity was St. Cyril, who in the ninth century created an alphabet for the Slavic languages, now called Cyrillic and still used in many Slavic languages including Russian. He then translated Greek liturgy into Slavonic and used it to teach and convert the inhabitants of Moravia and Bulgaria. Monasteries sprung up, from which monks would go further into Slavic lands, ultimately tying together a swath of territory deep into what would one day be Russia. The success of these missionary efforts united much of Eastern Europe and Byzantium in a common religious culture – that of Eastern Orthodoxy. Thus, up to the present, the Greek, Russian, Ukrainian, and Serbian Orthodox churches all share common historical roots and a common set of beliefs and practices.

The origins of 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, at which point Constantinople became the heart of a European silk industry, an imperial monopoly which

generated tremendous wealth. The entire economy was regulated by the imperial government through a system of guilds, which helped ensure steady tax revenues.

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

Meanwhile, in the heart of the empire, the emperor held absolute authority. A complex and formal ranking system of nobles and courtiers, clothed in garments dyed specific colors to denote their respective ranks, separated the person of the emperor from supplicants and ambassadors. This was not just self-indulgence on the part of the emperors, of showing off for the sake of feeling important; this was part of the symbolism of power, of reaching out to a largely illiterate population with visible displays of authority.

The imperial bureaucracy held enormous power in Byzantium. Provincial elites would send their

sons to Constantinople to study and obtain positions. Bribery was rife and nepotism was as common as talent in gaining positions; there was even an official list of maximum bribes that was published by the government itself. That said, the bureaucracy was somewhat like the ancient Egyptian class of scribes, men who maintained coherence and order within the government even when individual emperors were incompetent or palace intrigue rendered an emperor unable to focus on governance.

The imperial office controlled the minting of coins, still the standard currency as far away as France and England because the coins were reliably weighted and backed by the imperial government. The emperor's office also controlled imperial monopolies on key industries like silk, which were hugely lucrative. It was illegal to try to compete with the imperial silk industry, so enormous profits were directed straight into the royal treasury.

Constantinople had as many as a million people in the late eighth century (as compared to no more than 15,000 in any "city" in western Europe), but there were many other rich cities within its empire. As a whole, Byzantium traded its high-quality finished goods to western Europe in return for raw materials like ore and foodstuffs. Despite its wars with its neighbors to the east and south, Byzantium also had major trade links with the Arab states.

Orthodox Christianity and Learning

To return to Orthodox Christianity, it was not just because Constantinople was at the center of the empire that Byzantines thought it had a special relationship with God. Its power was derived from the sheer number of churches and relics present in the city, which in turn represented an enormous amount of *potentia* (holy power). Byzantines believed that God oversaw Constantinople and that the Virgin Mary interceded before God on the behalf of the city. Many priests taught that Constantinople was the New Jerusalem that would be at the center of events during the second coming of Christ, rather than the actual Jerusalem.

The piety of the empire sometimes undermined secular learning, however. Over time, the church grew increasingly suspicious of learning that did not have either center on the Bible and religious instruction or have direct practical applications in crafts or engineering. Thus, there was a marked decline in scholarship throughout the empire. Eventually, the whole body of ancient Greek learning was concentrated in a small academic elite in Constantinople and a few other important Greek cities. What was later regarded as the founding body of thought of Western Civilization – ancient Greek philosophy and literature – was thus largely analyzed, translated, and recopied outside of Greece itself in the Arab kingdoms of the Middle Ages. Likewise, almost no one in Byzantium understood Latin well by the ninth century, so even Justinian's law code was almost always referenced in a simplified Greek translation.

This was a period in which, in both the Arab kingdoms and in Byzantium, there was a bewildering mixture of language, place of origin, and religious affiliation. For example, a Christian in

Syria, a subject of the Muslim Arab kingdoms by the eighth century, would be unable to speak to a Byzantine Christian, nor would she be welcomed in Constantinople since she was probably a Monophysite Christian (one of the many Christian heresies, at least from the Orthodox perspective) instead of an Orthodox one. Likewise, men in her family might find themselves enlisted to fight against Byzantium despite their Christian faith, with political allegiances outweighing religious ones.

Iconoclasm

One of the greatest religious controversies in the history of Christianity was iconoclasm, the breaking or destroying of icons. Iconoclasm was one of those phenomena that may seem almost ridiculously trivial in historical hindsight, but it had an enormous (and almost entirely negative) impact at the time. For people who believed in the constant intervention of God in the smallest of things, iconoclasm was an enormously important issue.

The conundrum that prompted iconoclasm was simple: if Byzantium was the holiest of states, watched over by the Virgin Mary and ruled by emperors who were the "beloved of God," why was the empire declining? Just as Rome had fallen in the west, Byzantium was beset by enemies all around it, enemies who had the depressing tendency of crushing Byzantine armies and occasionally murdering its emperors. Byzantine priests repeatedly warned their congregations to repent of their sins, because it was sin that was undermining the empire's survival. The emperor Leo III, who ruled from 717 – 741, decided to take action into his own hands. He forced communities of Jews in the empire to convert to Christianity, convinced that their presence was somehow angering God. He then went on to do something much more unprecedented than persecuting Jews: attacking icons.

Icons were (and are) one of the central aspects of Eastern Orthodox Christian worship. An icon is an image of a holy figure, almost always Christ, the Virgin Mary, or one of the saints, that is used as a focus of Christian worship both in churches and in homes. Byzantine icons were beautifully crafted and, in a largely illiterate society, were vitally important in the daily experience of most Christians. The problem was that it was a slippery slope from venerating God, Christ, and the saints "through" icons as symbols, versus actually worshiping the icons themselves as idols, something expressly forbidden in the Old Testament. Frankly, there is no question that thousands of believers did treat the icons as idols, as objects with *potentia* unto themselves, like relics.

A fourteenth-century icon of the Virgin Mary.

In 726, a volcano devastated the island of Santorini in the Aegean sea. Leo III took this as proof that icon veneration had gone too far, as some of his religious advisers had been telling him. He thus ordered the destruction of holy images, facing outright riots when workers tried to make good on his proclamation by removing icons of Christ affixed to the imperial palace. In the provinces, whole regions rose up in revolt when royal servants showed up and tried to destroy icons. In Rome, Pope Gregory II was appalled and excommunicated Leo. Leo, in turn, declared that the pope no longer had any religious authority in the empire, which for practical purposes meant the regions under Byzantine control in Italy, Sicily, and the Balkans.

The official ban of icons lasted until 843, over a century, before the emperors reversed it (it was an empress, named Theodora like the famous wife of Justinian centuries earlier, who led the charge to officially restore icons). The controversy weakened the empire by dividing it between iconoclasts loyal to the official policy of the emperors and traditionalists who venerated the icons, while the empire itself was still beset by invasions. Iconoclasm also lent itself to what would eventually become a permanent split between the eastern and western churches – Orthodoxy and Catholicism. The final and permanent split between the western and eastern churches, already *de facto* in place for centuries, was in 1054, when Pope Leo IX and Patriarch Michael I excommunicated each other after Michael refused to acknowledge Leo's preeminence – this event cemented the "Great Schism" (schism means "break" or "split") between the western and eastern churches.

In the wake of iconoclasm, the leaders of the Orthodox church, the patriarchs of Constantinople, would claim that innovations in theology or Christian practice were heresies. This attitude extended to secular learning as well – it was acceptable to study classical literature and even philosophy, but new forms of philosophy and scholarly innovation was regarded as dangerous. The long-term pattern was thus that, while it preserved ancient learning, Byzantine intellectual culture did not lend itself to progress.

The Late Golden Age and the Final Decline

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

scholars tried to find ways to make the work of the ancient Greek masters compatible with Orthodox Christian teachings.

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

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

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

Likewise, the relative calm of the Macedonian period ended with the rise of a new group of

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

Fewer independent citizens meant fewer good soldiers, and the armies of Byzantium thus became dominated by foreign mercenaries paid out of the imperial treasury, representing an enormous financial burden for the empire. Another disaster occurred in 1199 when Constantinople itself was invaded and sacked by crusaders (during the Fourth Crusade) from Western Europe who were supposed to be sailing to fight in the Holy Land. For about fifty years, Byzantium (already reduced to a fraction of its former size) was ruled by a Catholic king. Even when the king was deposed and a Greek dynasty restored, nothing could be done to recapture lost territory. The Muslim empires that surrounded Byzantium occupied its territory until Constantinople finally fell in 1453 to the Ottoman Turks. With it, the last vestige of Roman civilization, founded over two thousand years earlier on the banks of the Tiber River in Italy, ceased to exist as a political reality.

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Chapter 13: Islam and The Caliphates

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

Islam was born in the heartland of Western Civilization: the Middle East.

Islam is a religion of precisely the same religious tradition as Judaism and Christianity. In Islam, the prophets that came before Muhammad, from Abraham and Moses to Jesus, are venerated as genuine messengers of God. The distinction is that, for Muslims, Muhammad was the *last* prophet, bringing the "definitive version" of God's message to humanity. The word *Allah* simply means "God" in Arabic – He is the same God worshiped by Jews and Christians.

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.

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.

The Islamic states were the active trading partners and sometimes allies of their neighbors from India and Central Asia to Africa and Europe. Islam's initial spread was due to an enormous, unprecedented military campaign, but after that campaign ended the resulting empires and kingdoms entered into a more familiar economic and diplomatic relationship with their respective neighbors.

Thus, it is important to include the story of Islam as an inherent, intrinsic part of the history of Western Civilization, not the religious bogeyman Medieval Europeans sometimes imagined it to be. That being noted, it is not just medieval prejudices or contemporary geopolitical conflict that has created the conceit that Islam is some alien entity to Western Civilization. After the rise of Christianity and the conversion of the Roman Empire, the idea of a single, unified empire of Christianity, "Christendom" became central to the identity of Christians in Europe. Once Rome itself fell, this idea became even more important. The Germanic Kingdoms, what was left of the western empire, the new rising empires like the Kievan Rus, and of course Byzantium were all linked in the concept of Christendom. For many

of those Christian states, Islam was indeed the enemy, because the rise of Islam coincided with one of the most extraordinary series of military conquests in world history: the Arab conquests.

Thus, from its very beginning, there have been historical reasons that Christians and Muslims sometimes considered themselves enemies. The first generations of Muslims did indeed try to conquer every culture and kingdom they encountered, although not initially in the name of conversion. The important thing to bear in mind, however, is that throughout the Middle Ages many of the struggles between Christian and Muslim kingdoms, and Christian and Muslim people, were as often about conventional battles over power, wealth, and politics as religious belief. Likewise, once the years of conquest were over, Islamic states settled into familiar patterns of peaceful trade and they contained religiously diverse populations.

Origins of Islam

The pre-Islamic Arabian peninsula, most of which is today the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, was populated by the Arab people. The Arabs were herders and merchants. They were organized tribally, with tribes claiming descent from common ancestors and governing through meetings of the patriarchs of each clan. The Arabs were well known in the Roman and Byzantine world as merchants for their camel caravans that linked Europe to a part of the Spice Road, transporting goods from India and China. They were also known to be some of the most fierce and effective mercenary warriors in the eastern Mediterranean region; they rode slim, fast, agile horses and fought as light cavalry.

Arab trade, and population, was concentrated in the more fertile southern and western regions, especially in what is today the country of Yemen. By the late Roman Empire, small but prosperous Arab kingdoms were in diplomatic contact with both Rome and Persia (as well as the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, then called Aksum). As the wars between Rome and Persia became even more destructive after the Sasanian takeover in 234 CE, the Arabs emerged as important mercenaries and political clients for both empires. Persia in particular invested heavily in employing Arab soldiers and in cultivating the maritime trade route across the Indian Ocean and along the south and west coasts of Arabia. For a time, the southern coast of Arabia was ruled by Persia through Arab clients and Persia was clearly a major cultural influence (so great was the renown of the Persian Great King Khusrau that his name became the root of an Arabic word for king: *kisra*). This contact and trade enriched the Arabic economy and led to a high degree of tactical sophistication among Arab soldiers.

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 tribes and merchants. He traveled widely on business, dealing with both Christians and Jews in Palestine and Syria, where he learned about their respective religions.

An introspective man who detested greed and corruption, Muhammad was in the habit of retreating to hills near Mecca, where there was a cave in which he would camp and meditate. When he was about forty, he returned to Mecca and reported that he had been contacted by the archangel Gabriel, who informed him that he, Muhammad, was to bear God's message to the people of Mecca and the world. The core of that message was that the one true God, the God of Abraham, venerated already by the Jews and Christians, had called the Arabs to cast aside their idols and unite in a community of worshippers.

Muhammad did not meet with much success in Mecca 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, just two years after his arrival in Medina, Muhammad led a Muslim force against a Meccan army, and then in 630 CE, he conquered Mecca, largely by skillfully negotiating with his former enemies there – he promised to make Mecca the center of Islam, to require pilgrimage, and to incorporate it into his growing kingdom. He sent missionaries and soldiers across Arabia, as well as to foreign powers like Byzantium and Persia. By his death in 632, Muhammad had already rallied most of the Arab tribes under his leadership and most willingly converted to Islam.

Islam

The word Islam means "submission." Its central tenet is submission before the will of God, as revealed to humanity by Muhammad. An aspect of Islam that distinguishes it from Judaism and Christianity is that the Koran has a single point of origin, the recitations of Muhammad himself, and it is believed by Muslims that it cannot be translated from Arabic and remain the "real" holy book. In other words, translations can be made for the sake of education, but every word in the Koran, spoken in the classical Arabic of Muhammad's day, is believed to be that true language of God – according to traditional Islamic belief, the angels speak Arabic in paradise.

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

There is only one God and Muhammad is his prophet.

Each Muslim must pray five times a day, facing toward the holy city of Mecca.

During the holy month of Ramadan, each Muslim must fast from dawn to sundown.

Charity should be given to the needy.

If possible, at least once in his or her life, each Muslim should undertake the *Haaj*: the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.

In turn, a central concept of Islam is that of the worldwide community of Muslims, the *Ummah*, meaning "community of believers." The Ummah was a central idea from the lifetime of Muhammad onward, referring to a shared identity among Muslims that is supposed to transcend differences of language, ethnicity, and culture. All Muslims are to follow the five pillars, just as all Muslims are to meet other members of the Ummah at least once in their lives while on pilgrimage.

The Ka'aba (contemporary photograph).

One term associated with Islam, Jihad, has sparked widespread misunderstanding among non-Muslims. The word itself simply means "struggle." It does mean "holy war" in some cases, but not in most. The concept of Jihad revolves around the struggle for Muslims to live according to Muhammad's example and by his teachings. Its most common use is the "jihad of the heart," of struggling to live morally against the myriad corrupting temptations of life.

The Koran itself was written down starting during Muhammad's life (his revelations were delivered over the course of about twenty years, and were initially transmitted orally). The definitive version was completed in the years following his death. Of secondary importance to the Koran is the *Hadith*, a collection of stories about Muhammad's life, behavior, and sayings, all of which provided a model of a righteous and ethical life. In turn, in the generations following his death, Muslim leaders created the *Sharia*, the system of Islamic law based on the Koran and Hadith.

The Political History of the Arabs After Muhammad

When Muhammad died, there were immediate problems among the Muslim Arabs. He did not name a successor, but he had been the definitive leader of the Islamic community during his life; it seemed clear that the community was *meant* to have a leader. The Muslim elders appointed Muhammad's father in-law, Abu Bakr (r. 632 – 634), as the new leader after a period of deliberation. He became the first *Caliph,* meaning "successor": the head of the *Ummah*, the man who represented both spiritual and political authority to Muslims.

Under Abu Bakr and his successors, Umar (another of Muhammad's fathers in-law; r. 634 – 644), and Uthman (r. 644 – 655), Muslim armies expanded rapidly. This began as a means to ensure the loyalty of the fractious Arab tribes as much as to expand the faith; both Abu Bakur and Umar were forced to suppress revolts of Arab tribes, and Umar hit upon the idea of raiding Persia and Byzantium to keep the tribes loyal. For the first time in history, the Arabs embarked on a sustained campaign of conquest rather than serving others as mercenaries.

Riding their swift horses and camels and devoted to their cause, the Arab armies conquered huge amounts of territory extremely rapidly. It was the Arab army that finally conquered Persia in 637 (although it took until 650 for all Persian resistance to be vanquished), that hitherto-unconquered adversary of Rome. The Arabs conquered Syria and seized Byzantine territory in Anatolia equally quickly: Egypt was conquered by 642, with an attempted Byzantine counter-attack fought off in 645. Within twenty years of the death of Muhammad, the heartland of the Middle East was firmly in Arab Muslim hands.

Part of the success of the first decades of the Arab conquests was because of the vulnerability of Byzantium and Persia at the time, and another part was the tactical skill of Arab soldiers. The Arabs conquered Persia not just because it was weakened by its wars with Byzantium (most importantly its defeat by Heraclius in 627), but because many Arab clans had fought as mercenaries for both sides in the conflict; great wealth had been flowing into Arabia for decades, and the Arabs were already veteran soldiers. They had learned both Roman and Persian tactics and strategy and they were skilled at siegecraft, intelligence-gathering, and open battle alike.

The Arab armies were easily the match of the Byzantine and Persian forces. The Arabs were able to field armies of about 20,000 – 30,000 men, with a total force of closer to 200,000 by about 700 CE. Most were Arabs from Arabia itself, along with Arabs who had settled in Syria and Palestine and were then recruited. A smaller percentage were non-Arabs who converted and joined the armies. Tactically, the majority were infantry who fought with spears and swords and were lightly-armored.

The major tactical advantage of the Arab armies was their speed: horses and camels were important less as animals to fight from than as means of transportation for the lightly-armored and equipped armies. Soldiers were paid in coins captured as booty and whole armies were expected to buy

their supplies as they marched rather than relying on heavy baggage trains. Their conquests were a kind of sustained sprint as a result. Likewise, one specific military "technology" that the Arabs used to great effect was camels, since no other culture was as adept at training and using camels as were the Arabs. Camels allowed the Arab armies to cross deserts and launch sudden attacks on their enemies, often catching them by surprise.

Finally, especially in Byzantine territories, high taxes and ongoing struggles between the official Orthodox form of Christianity and various other Christian sects led many Byzantine citizens to welcome their new Arab rulers; taxes often went *down*, and the Arabs were indifferent to which variety of Christian their new subjects happened to be. In addition, the Arabs made little effort to convert non-Arabs to Islam for several generations after the initial conquests. To be clear, there was plenty of bloodshed during the Arab conquests, including the deaths of many civilians, but the long-term experience of Arab rule in former Byzantine territories was no more, and probably less, oppressive than it had been under Byzantium.

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 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; this marked the end of the Arab conquests in Europe. Likewise, despite conquering large amounts of Byzantine territory, Constantinople itself withstood a huge siege in 718 and Byzantine forces then pushed back Arab forces in Anatolia.
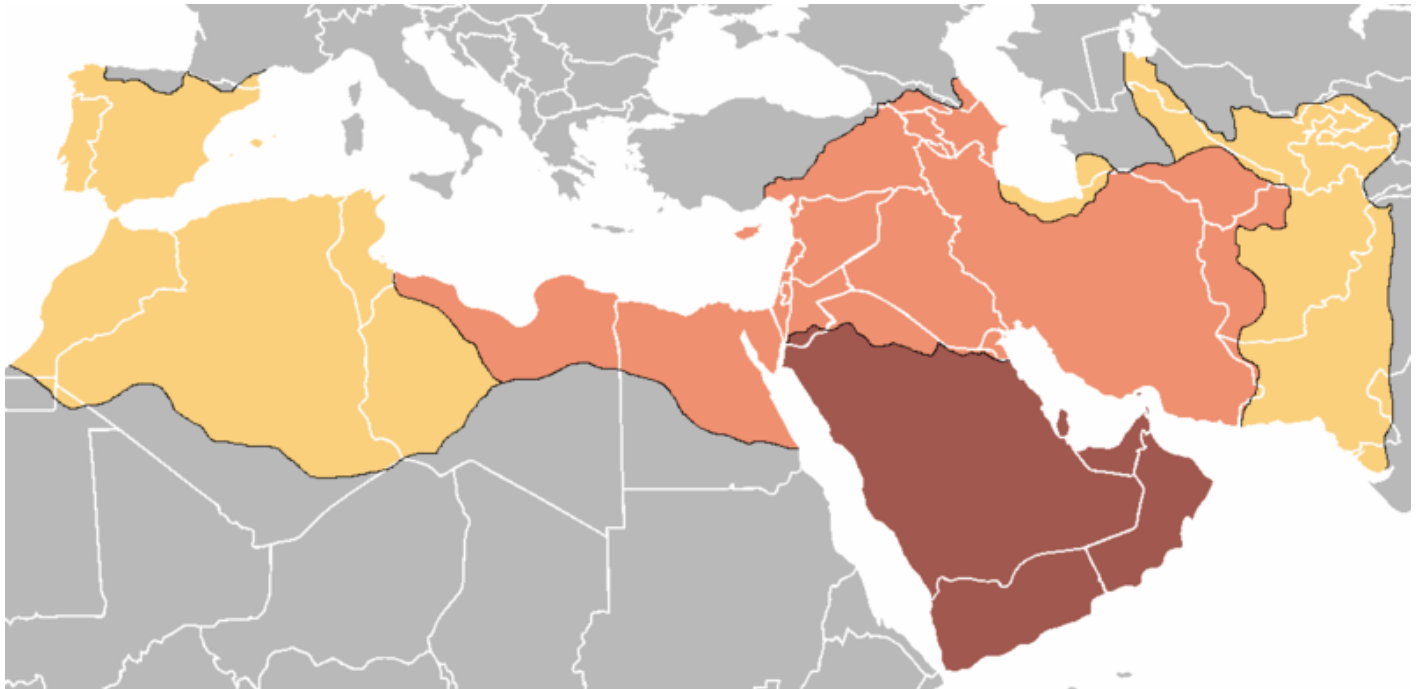
The Arab Conquests, stretching from Persia in the east to Morocco and Spain in the west. The colors correspond to chronology: Arabia itself was united under Muhammad and his immediate successors, the regions in orange under the first four caliphs, and the regions in yellow under the Umayyads.

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

holy war.

In 751, Arab forces went so far as to defeat a Chinese army in Central Asia outside of the caravan city of Samarkand (they fought an army of the Tang dynasty, which had been expanding along the Silk Road). The last Umayyad caliph had been murdered shortly before this conflict, however, and the Muslim forces thus had little reason to continue their expansion. This battle marked the furthest extent of the core Muslim-ruled territories. For several centuries to follow, the Muslim world thus consisted of the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain.

The Umayyad Government and Society

The Umayyads did not just complete and consolidate the conquests of the Arabs. They also established lasting forms of governance. They quickly abandoned the practice of having elders come together to appoint leadership, insisting on a hereditary line of caliphs. This alone caused a civil war in the late seventh century, as some of their Muslim subjects rose up, claiming that they had perverted the proper line of leadership in the community. The Umayyads won that war, too.

The major problem for the Umayyads was the sheer size of their empire. Just like other rapid conquests, like that of Alexander the Great 1,000 years earlier, in the course of just a few decades a people found itself in control of enormous swaths of territory. The Arabs had a strong lingual and cultural identity and many of the Arab conquerors saw themselves as a people apart from their new subjects, regardless of religious belief. Thus, while non-Arabs were certainly encouraged to convert to Islam, the power structure of the Caliphate remained resolutely Arabic. As with the Greeks under Alexander, the Romans during their centuries of conquest, and the Germanic tribes that sliced up the western Roman empire, the Arabs found themselves a small minority ruling over various other groups.

To try to effectively govern this vast new empire, the Umayyads took over and adapted the bureaucracies of the people they conquered, including those of both the Byzantines and, especially, the Persians. They created new borders and provinces to better suit their administration and ensure that tax revenue made it back to the capital at Damascus, with the idiosyncratic additional factor of needing to pay an ongoing salary to all Arab soldiers, even after those soldiers had retired.

One change that was to last until the present was lingual. Unlike in the Greek case during the Hellenistic period, Arabic was to replace the vernacular of the land conquered during the Arab conquests. The only exceptions were Persian, which would eventually become the modern language of Farsi (the vernacular of the present-day country of Iran), and Spain, where Arabic and Spanish coexisted until Christian kingdoms reconquered Spain many centuries later. This lingual uniformity was a huge benefit to trade and cultural and intellectual exchange, because one could travel from Spain to India and speak a single language, as well as be protected from bandits by a single administration.

Arabs also followed the patterns of Greek and Roman conquerors by colonizing the places they conquered. At first, they settled in garrison and administrative towns, but they also set up communities within conquered cities. As Arabic became the language of daily life, not just of administration, Arabs and non-Arabs mixed more readily. Arabs also built new cities all across their empire, the most notable being a small town in Egypt that would eventually grow into Cairo. They built these cities on the Hellenistic and Roman model: planned grids of streets at right angles. In the center of each city was the mosque, which served not only as the center of worship, but in various other functions. Mosques were both figuratively and literally central to the cities of the Umayyad caliphate. They were the predominant public spaces for discussion among men. They were the courthouses and the banks. They provided schooling and instruction. They were also often attached to administrative offices and governmental functions.

The Umayyads imposed taxes across their entire empire, even insisting that their fellow Arabs pay a tax on their land, which was met with enormous resistance because, to Arabs unused to paying taxes at all, it implied subordination. By channeling taxes through their new, efficient bureaucracy, the Umayyads were able to support a very large standing army. That allowed them not only to keep up the pressure on surrounding lands, but to quash rebellions.

The Umayyads supervised a tremendous expansion in trade and commerce across the Middle East and North Africa as well. Muhammad had been a merchant, after all, and the longstanding commercial practices and regulations of Arabic society were codified in Sharia law – in that sense, commercial law was directly linked to religious righteousness. Likewise, even from this early period, the caliphate supported maritime trade networks. Muslim traders regularly sailed all across the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and eventually as far as China and the Philippines. In waters controlled by the caliphate, piracy was contained, so trade prospered even more.

One effect of Arab seafaring is that Islam spread along sea routes well beyond the political control of any of the Arab empires and kingdoms to come; today the single largest predominantly Muslim country is Indonesia, thanks to Muslim merchants that brought their faith along the trade routes. By the time European explorers began to establish permanent ties to Asian kingdoms and empires in the sixteenth century, Islam was established in various regions from India to the Pacific, thousands of miles from its Middle Eastern heartland.

Other Faiths

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 that allowed 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, which made Mesopotamia nearly on par with Egypt as the richest farmland in the world.
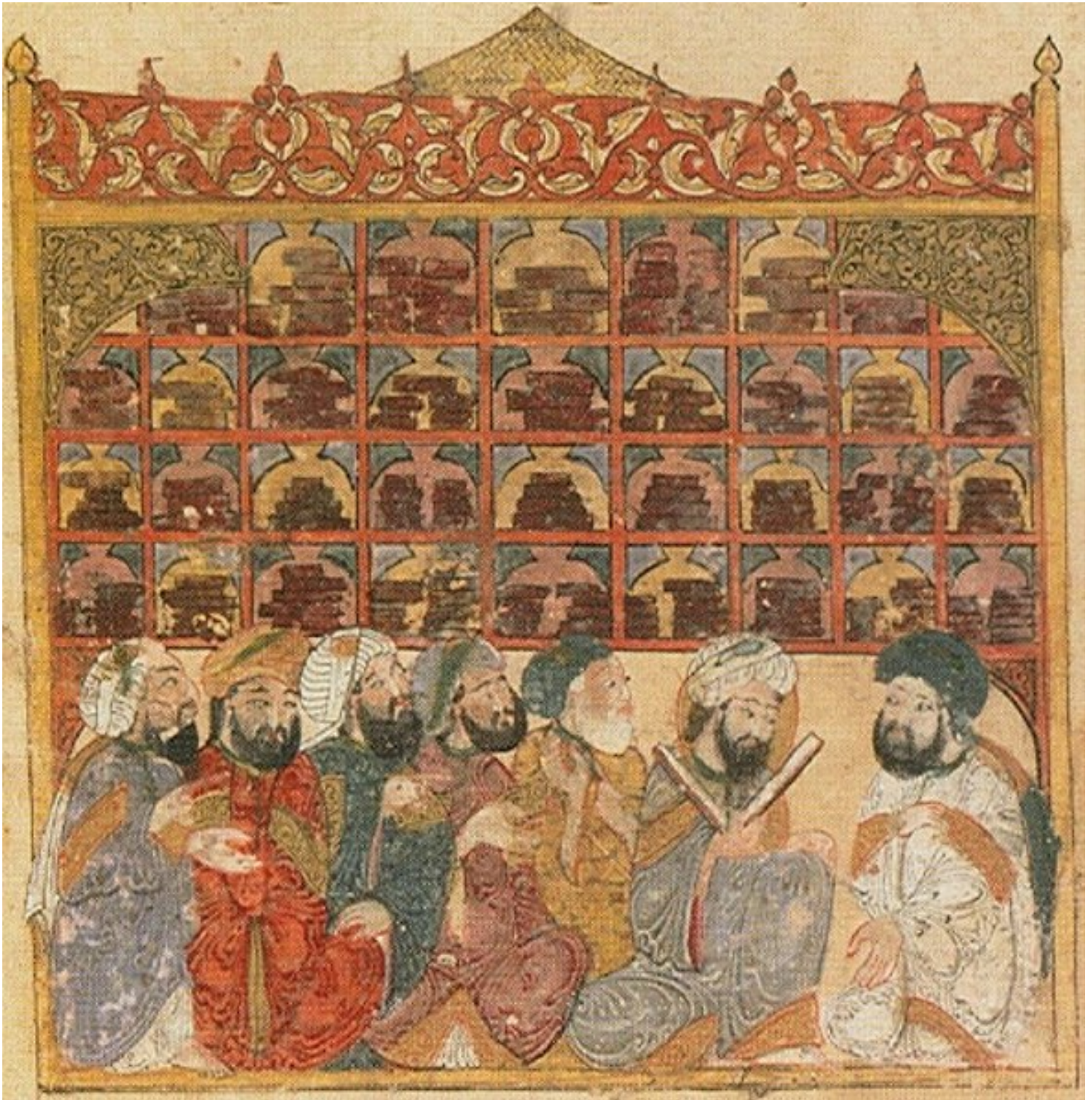
Scholars in the House of Wisdom in Baghdad.

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.

The success of the Abbasids in ruling a huge, diverse empire arose in part from their willingness to follow Persian traditions of rule (a pattern that would be repeated by later Turkic and Mongol rulers). The Abbasid caliphs employed Persian bureaucrats and ruled in a manner similar to the earlier Persian Great Kings, although they did not adopt that title. Their role as caliphs was in protecting the *ummah* and providing a political framework in which *sharia* law could prosper – it was in the Abbasid period that Islamic law was truly developed and codified. From the Persian tradition the Abbasid caliphs borrowed both practical traditions of bureaucracy and administration and an equally important tradition of political status: they were the rulers over many peoples, acknowledging local identities while expecting deference and, of course, taxes.

At its height, the Abbasid Empire was truly enormous– it covered more land area than had the Roman Empire. Its merchants traveled from Spain to China, and it maintained diplomatic relations with the rulers of territories thousands of miles from Baghdad. The Caliphate reached its peak during the rule of the caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786 – 809). His palace was so enormous that it occupied one-third of Baghdad. He and the greatest early-medieval European king, Charlemagne, exchanged presents and friendly letters, albeit out of political expediency: Charlemagne was the enemy of the Cordoban Caliphate of Spain, the last vestige of Umayyad power, and the Abbasids acted as an external pressure that Charlemagne hoped would make the Byzantine emperors recognize the legitimacy of his imperial title (as an aside, one of Charlemagne's prized possessions was his pet elephant, sent to his distant court by al-Rashid as a goodwill gift).

Already by al-Rashid's reign, however, the Caliphate was splintering; it was simply too large to run efficiently without advanced bureaucratic institutions. North Africa west of Egypt seceded by 800, emerging as a group of rival Islamic kingdoms. Other territories followed suit during the rest of the ninth century, leaving the Caliphate in direct control of only the core lands of Mesopotamia. Within its remaining territory the caliphs faced uprisings as well. Even the idea of a united (Sunni) ummah was a casualty of this political breakdown – the ruler of the Spanish kingdom claimed to be the "true" caliph, with a Shia dynasty in Egypt known as the Fatimids contesting both claims since it rejected the very idea of a Sunni caliph.

The political independence of the Caliphate ended in 945 when it was conquered by Persian tribesmen, who took control of secular power while keeping the Caliph alive as a figurehead. In 1055, a Turkish group, the Seljuks (the same group then menacing Byzantium), seized control and did exactly the same thing. For the next two centuries the Abbasid caliphs enjoyed the respect and spiritual

deference of most Sunni Muslims, but exercised no political power of their own.

As Seljuk power increased, that of the Caliphate itself waned. Numerous independent, and rival, Islamic kingdoms emerged across the Middle East, North Africa, and northern India, leaving even the Middle Eastern heartland vulnerable to foreign invasion, first by European crusaders starting in 1095, and most disastrously during the Mongol invasion of 1258 (under a grandson of Genghis Khan). It was the Mongols who ended the Caliphate once and for all, murdering the last caliph and obliterating much of the infrastructure built during Abbasid rule in the process.

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 Shariah law providing a sophisticated legal framework for business transactions. Especially as Byzantium declined, the Muslim kingdoms stood at the forefront of scholarship, commerce, and military power.

Conclusion

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

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# Chapter 14: The Early Middle Ages

Introduction

As the centralized imperial authority in the Western Empire gradually deteriorated during the fifth century CE, the previously stable boundaries between the Romans and the Germanic tribes, who had mostly remained north of the Danube and east of the Rhine rivers, became increasingly porous. This instability along the western frontiers contrasted with the Eastern Empire, which had maintained fairly stable borders until the early seventh century and could draw tax revenues from a larger number of cities to maintain the central imperial administration. The Western half of the Empire had always fewer and smaller cities than the Eastern portion, and this structural difference weakened the Western Emperors' ability to fend off mounting pressures from invaders.

Following the catastrophic loss to the Vandals in the naval battle of Cape Bon off the coast of North Africa in 469, the Eastern emperors realized that they could no longer afford to subsidize the military operations necessary to maintain political stability in the Western Empire. Germanic chieftains had already carved out areas of control in parts of modern-day Italy, Germany, France, England, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. Meanwhile, different groups of Celts also took advantage of western imperial weakness. They revolted in Brittany against Roman rule while Celtic Britons failed to protect previously Roman dominions south of Hadrian's Wall from a variety of invaders. Suffering from incursions of Pictish and Irish raiders, southern Britain succumbed to Germanic invasions during the mid-400s.   Centralized imperial authority in Western Europe gradually diminished during the fifth century.
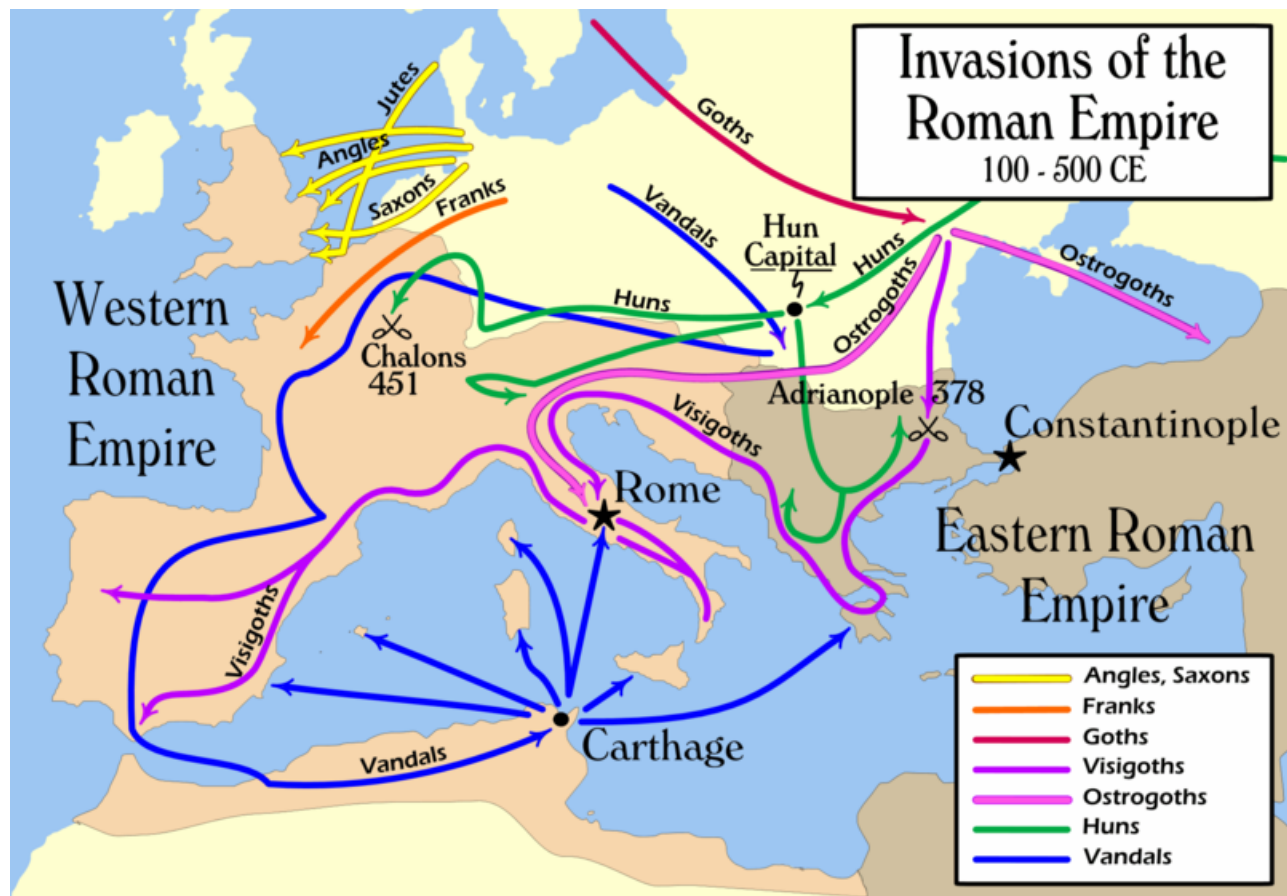
As the administrative structure of the Western Empire deteriorated in the fifth century, it became increasingly susceptible to invasion from outsiders. This map indicates the routes of these "barbarian" invasions.

Invasions spread across Gaul and Britannia. Vandals, Goths, Burgundians, Saxons, Angles, and Franks migrated over the traditional borders of the empire and fundamentally altered the language, customs, and social organization that had characterized these northern provinces. This transformation of western imperial lands was often violent and disruptive. The invaders seized land, enslaved people, and weakened the infrastructure of the civilization that the Romans and their subjects had developed. The populations of cities shrank, commerce dwindled, and intellectual activity became more parochial, less cosmopolitan. Gradually in most cases, more quickly in others, the so-called "barbarian kingdoms" formed. These new political entities established a framework for the medieval fusion between Germanic and Celtic cultures on one hand and the Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian influences on the other.
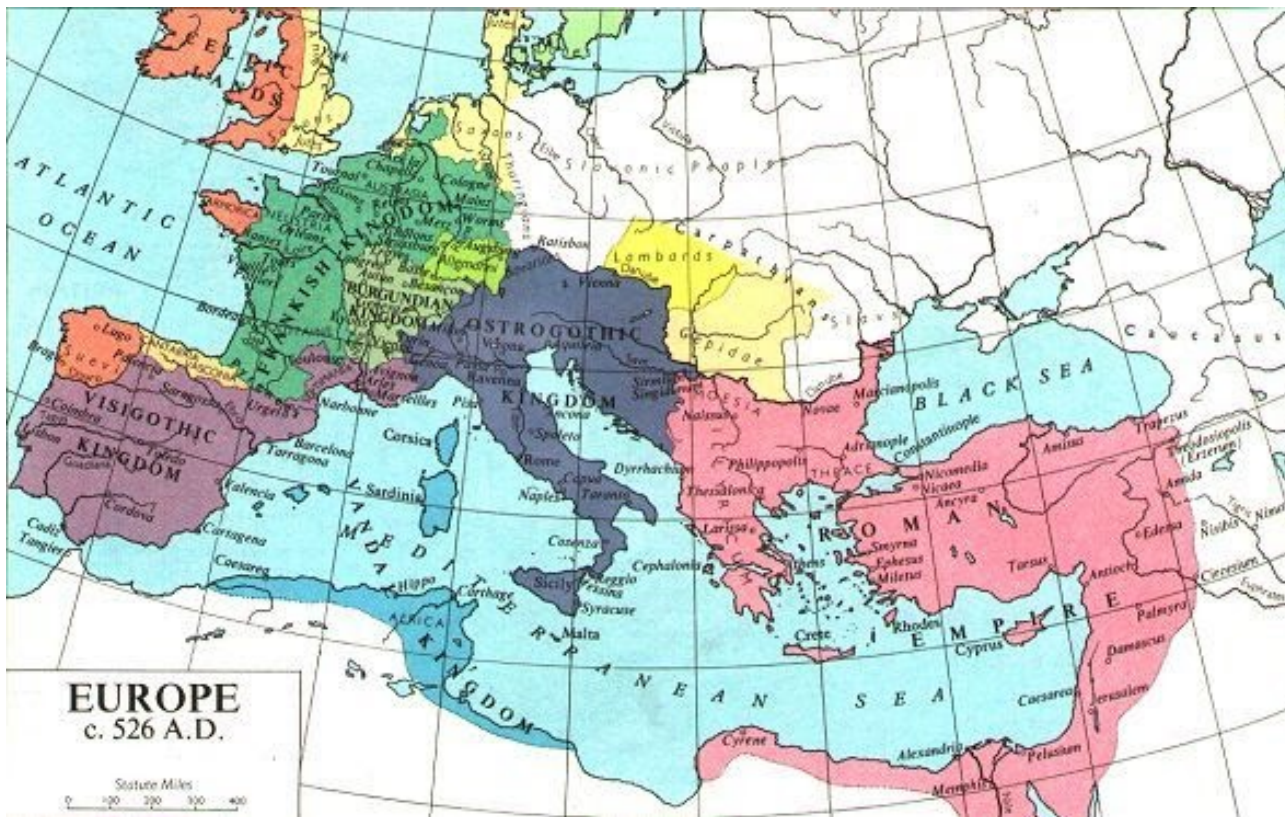
As the invaders of the fifth century settled and melded with the people who had formerly been under Roman Imperial rule, they carved out new boundaries and established political entities of their own. These barbarian kingdoms covered most of Western Europe by the mid-sixth century.

This fusion laid a foundation for the Western European Germanic and Celtic cultures that have endured for centuries. A similar process happened in the Eastern Empire between the sixth and eighth centuries when Slavic groups wrested control of the Balkans from the Eastern emperors. However, the formation of barbarian kingdoms that featured written laws, royal decrees, and bureaucratic administrators manifested later in areas that had not previously been part of the empire. Germanic tribes, such as the Franks, Burgundians, and Goths adopted some Roman administrative practices, often through the agency of Church leaders who had remained in place during the invasions.

As missionaries from Rome and Constantinople proselytized north of the Pyrenees, Alps, and Balkans, the so-called "barbarian" cultures of Celts, Germans, and Slavs very gradually fused with Christian customs and traditions to produce disparate variations of Christianity. These localized adaptations of the faith slowly shaped collective identities throughout Europe. Further north, in Scandinavia, the process came much later, near the end of the early medieval period and even into the High Middle Ages (1000-1300). Although some Scandinavian kings, such as Harold Bluetooth and Olaf Tryggvason embraced the faith in the tenth century, their people only gradually understood and adopted the kings' religion. People with less centralized authority, such as the Sami in Finland, converted much more slowly. They did not become Christian until the eighteenth century.

This process of fusion between barbarian and Christian customs and traditions also included Greco-Roman cultural influences, which were more pronounced south of the Alps. The Visigothic kings in

modern-day Spain used Latin as the court language and were quite familiar with the laws and customs of the Romans. Further north, the Merovingian Franks wrote a Latin legal code and absorbed enough Roman influence to develop a Romance language, centered on Latin, instead of a Germanic language. The Church often provided the primary vehicle for the preservation of these Greco-Roman influences, but collective memories of the imperial achievements of the Romans also sparked the desire to preserve the Roman legacy. In response, Church leaders often sought to repress writings by pagan authors who expressed thoughts contrary to Church doctrines.

Although some historians have tended to view the Early Middle Ages as a "Dark Age," the terminology is overly dramatic. Typically, a "dark age" occurs when contemporary written sources fail to illuminate the events of the period. And while many Germanic, Celtic, and Slavic leaders were pagan and illiterate around 500 CE, most rulers identified as Christian by 1000 CE. As they converted, they adopted the Christian practices of writing and record keeping. Some kings, such as the Frankish king, Clovis, and the Visigothic king, Alaric, were already Christian by 500, and they too produced written sources. Therefore, while the Early Middle Ages had many features of a dark age, including widespread violence, the decline of urban centers, and the dwindling of trade, the period also featured pockets of literacy. Monasteries, in particular, provided sanctuaries for monks to write explanations of the often violent and disruptive events that accompanied the transition away from centralized imperial authority toward more localized leadership.

At the beginning of this period the leaders of these Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic groups were primarily commanders of warbands. They were adept at raiding, plundering, and distributing spoils to loyal warriors. Their ability to rule civil society was limited. Instead, they left dispute settlement practices to families and kinship groups. Locally, minor chieftains formed marriage alliances, oversaw judicial practices such as the ordeal (described below), and brokered cessations of violence by offering compensation to injured parties in a dispute. Especially before the conversion to Christianity and often afterwards, these local leaders had no written laws, no trained jurists, and no cadre of bureaucrats to issue written commands or to account for taxation. Only gradually, spasmodically, and unevenly did more localized chieftains and kings nurture enough literate clerics to perform some of these functions. The sustenance of a central administrative government proved to be one of the enduring challenges of the Early Middle Ages, and many local rulers, such as warband leaders and later members of the warrior aristocracy, opposed the formation of a bureaucracy as an infringement on their autonomy.

The Celts

The Celts carved distinctive artistic patterns onto stone and metal. After their conversion to Christianity, they applied these patterns to Christian iconography, such as the Celtic cross.

Long before the Germanic invaders occupied most of central and western Europe during the late 300s and especially during the 400s CE, Celtic peoples had fought against the Romans, both north and south of the Alps. The Celts in northern Italy, called "Gauls," sacked Rome around 378 BCE, when Rome was still just a growing city-state in the central Italian peninsula. The Romans came to fear these Celts, who fought with notable bravery. Similar to the Germanic peoples, Celts were relatively slow to develop a strong collective identity that unified many different groups even though they spoke similar dialects of a common language, Gaelic. Consequently, with only localized political unity, they occupied various regions: Ireland, Wales, Scotland, Cornwall, Brittany, Gaul, and even as far east as Galatia, in Asia

Minor (Anatolia). Just as there was no king who commanded control over all of *Germania* or *Slavia*, there was no single king of the Celts; instead, they organized themselves more locally with strong familial attachments.

Because the Celts in Gaul rarely acted in concert, Julius Caesar took advantage of their local rivalries and played one group of Celts against another as he conquered Gaul during the middle of the first century BCE. One hundred years later, the middle of the first century CE, the Celts in Gaul were so deeply entrenched in the Roman Empire that their leaders became members of the Roman Senate. Other Celts, such as the Britons, joined the empire after conquest from the Romans. Gradually, the Romans integrated many Celts into the imperial administration, much as they latter did with Germanic leaders. Although some Celts eventually considered themselves Romans or allies of the Romans, relations between many Celtic peoples and the Romans were often tense or even hostile. One notable example of this tension occurred in 60 CE when the Celtic queen, Boudicca, amassed an army and destroyed Roman outposts in southeastern Britain. This uprising against Roman rule happened about 15 years after the Romans had first extended their conquests over southern Britain during the mid 40s CE.

Aristocratic women maintained position of power and authority in Celtic culture. Hilda, Abbess of Whitby, oversaw a monastery of both men and women, the site of the Synod of Whitby in 664.

The Celts differed from the Germans in that they spoke different languages (variations of Gaelic), organized their social relations less patriarchally, practiced different customs, and produced distinctive artwork. While both cultures promoted warrior chieftains, the Celts apparently regarded women–and especially aristocratic women–with more respect than the Romans or the Germanic peoples. Boudicca's uprising in 60 CE reinforced the image of a powerful female leader as portrayed in the Celtic epic, the Táin Bó Cúailnge. The story recounts the deeds of the warrior queen, Medb, who engaged in cattle raids against her local enemies. Later, when the Celts absorbed the teachings of Christian missionaries, they maintained this relative respect for women by recognizing female abbesses who ruled over both men and women in their monasteries. During the Early Middle Ages neither the Romans nor the Germans developed customs that recognized the abilities of women to rule a monastery or a kingdom.

Despite similarities among Celtic groups, they varied quite significantly from one place to another. Writing in the early eighth century, the monastic historian Bede noted that the Celts in Ireland differed from the Celts in western Britain (modern-day Wales). The Irish Celts embraced the Christian

propensities for asceticism and especially evangelism more readily than their British Celtic brethren. This distinction is understandable. The British Celts in Wales had been victims of the Germanic invasions, and they were less inclined to save the souls of their tormentors: the Angles, Saxons, and other Germanic warriors. However, the differences between Celtic Christians reflected a predilection for more decentralized authority. Unlike the Latin Church, which established an organizational hierarchy, the Celtic Christian leaders allowed for more local autonomy and variation. Some Celts embraced the practices of the Roman Church by the early seventh century while others maintained regional practices until the eighth century, allowing abbots or abbesses to determine doctrinal practices rather than adhering to the dictates of a far-away bishop.

Because of their relative isolation from the Mediterranean basin, where Christianity first developed in an urban context, the Celts often adapted Christianity to reflect the more rural and tribal conditions of Celtic culture. This fusion of Celtic and Christian cultural practices assumed several forms. For example, with their relative respect for women, Celts established dual-gendered monasteries, notably absent in the Latin Church, and sometimes had female abbesses. The strong attachment to family that characterized Celtic culture inspired the practice of green martyrdom, a form of suffering that emphasized deprivation and hermitage, divorced from the attractions of being connected to family.

The island of Skellig Michael off the coast of Ireland was the site of an Augustinian monastery where Celtic monks could live in isolation. The image on the right may be familiar to some students, as parts of the former monastery appear in Star Wars: The Force Awakens and Star Wars: The Last Jedi, both of which filmed some scenes on the remote island.

These green martyrs did not suffer the bloody torments of lions in the Colosseum, as previous

generations of Roman martyrs had done, but they isolated themselves away from family in remote enclaves in order to focus on their piety and to endure prolonged suffering, as part of the Christian propensity to practice asceticism. Likely inspired by the life of St. Patrick, who converted the Irish in the first half of the 400s, Celtic missionaries undertook the Christian duty to evangelize with notable zeal. Their green martyrdom combined with their evangelical zeal to inspire Celts to establish monasteries across Western Europe in a path between the British Isles and Rome. In these monasteries, they preserved numerous Christian and Greco-Roman texts. Differentiating themselves from Roman or Benedictine monks, who were often less tolerant of pagan classics, the Celtic monks typically sported a different haircut, called a "tonsure," that visibly identified them as Celtic instead of Roman or Latin Christians. Finally, because they tended to be less averse to preserving pagan classics, Celtic monks contributed significantly to the literary achievements of the Early Middle Ages, thereby contradicting the notion that Europe was undergoing a dark age.

Germanic Peoples

The success of the Germanic peoples in the domination of most of Europe between the time of Julius Caesar in the first century BCE and the sixth century CE is not well documented. Many of them were exceptional warriors, blessed with height and perhaps strength beyond the norms of Roman experience, and the Romans both feared and admired them. The Batavians, who lived near the mouth of the Rhine River on the North Sea, were so renowned for their martial skills and physical stature that the Roman emperors employed them as their personal retinue, the Praetorian Guard. Many other Germanic warriors served in the Roman legions, and they learned the logistical, technological, and organizational practices that made Rome's legions so effective at war. Writing in the late first century CE, Tacitus felt compelled to catalogue the Germans' cultural traits in *Germania*. Implicit in his work was an awareness of the Germans' success in remaining free from Roman rule. Tacitus' descriptions of the racial purity of Germanic tribes served as a misguided explanation for their martial success. This idealized view later inspired nineteenth and twentieth-century Aryan spin doctors, including the Nazis, to portray the Germans as an uncorrupted and, supposedly, biologically superior race. This myth is embedded in the terminology of "Western Civilization," which often glorifies western cultures and peoples.

One explanation for the Germanic dominance of Europe focuses on the incredibly violent and martial nature of their culture. Of course, the Romans and the Greeks before them had celebrated warrior prowess, and all of these cultures awarded political rights to those who had demonstrated their military skills in service. However, violence was apparently deeply embedded in Germanic warrior culture. Well into the tenth and eleventh centuries, Scandinavians celebrated young men who went *viking*, a term that involved travel, conquest, trade, and plunder; this verb is the origin of the people known as Vikings, discussed below. The Germanic people often buried their warriors with their weapons and with their plunder, and their burial mounds sometimes featured not only trophies of war, but also the vehicles for conquest–ships filled with weapons– in addition to armor, coin collections, favored animals,

and other prized belongings. In short, because pagan, Germanic peoples were illiterate, our understanding of this violent warrior culture relies quite a bit on outside observers, such as Tacitus, and on archaeological evidence, often found at grave sites.

Following the Germanic peoples' conversions, missionaries and monks recorded enough elements of their culture in legal codes and in accounts of enduring customs, embedded in poetry, that historians now have a fairly solid understanding of the warrior culture that dominated Germanic societies. The conversion of these illiterate, materialistic, and violent people to a religion that emphasized a holy book, asceticism, and turning the other cheek underscored the pliability of the Christian religion. The process of conversion mostly occurred between the 300s to the 900s and, once converted, the inculcation of Christian beliefs and traditions often took centuries to complete. As a consequence of this protracted process, Germanic practices which predated the conversion, such as the ordeal and the distribution of plunder, survived into the High and even Late Middle Ages in some areas.

Despite their command over violent warriors, Germanic kings were relatively weak in terms of their influence on civil society. They were essentially warband leaders, who commanded cohorts that frequently participated in raids and warfare. Often aware of the legendary power of the Roman emperors, these kings sought to increase their authority, and many of them viewed the Church as an ally in elevating their prestige above rival chieftains. Although these kings gained much more control over legal actions and the regulation of society during the High and Late Middle Ages, during the Early Middle Ages weak kingship and strong kinship characterized early medieval Germanic societies. Patriarchal clan leaders adjudicated disputes and regulated social relationships. These chieftains tended to have more localized authority than the warband leaders, the kings. Very gradually, with the adoption of Christianity the power of the kings waxed and the chieftains ceded some control over civil society to the emerging dynasties of monarchs.

In the meantime, kings needed to placate the chieftains and other leaders of kinship groups. The power of kinship groups and communities of warriors was deeply rooted in rituals such as "the ordeal," derived from the Germanic word "*Urteil*," meaning judgement. In contrast to later judicial processes, run by legal experts who were educated and trained in the nuances of legal precedents and laws, the early medieval Germanic peoples maintained social practices to resolve disputes. Local patriarchs, chieftains, and priests endowed such social practices with an aura of formality and solemnity, but the consensus of free men (warriors) in attendance imparted a sense of acceptance by a community as to the judgement.

Although many variations developed, the ordeal had two principal forms. In the bilateral ordeal, a physical fight typically settled disputes. A warrior represented his clan or kinship group against another warrior to find at least a temporary resolution to a dispute. In the unilateral ordeal a challenge faced the accused. This challenge could involve fire, water, or especially after the conversion to Christianity, the swearing of an oath. If the accused was successfully acquitted in the face of one of these challenges according to the judgement of the community, then divine judgment was clear. Some of these rituals endured well beyond the conversion to Christianity. Trial by water was still practiced in

England during the reign of Henry (1154-1189), and the Church allowed clergy to add an aura of legitimacy to such proceedings until the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.

The ordeal was not the only method that early medieval Germanic society had to settle disputes. The ordeal tended to be for serious matters that could not be settled merely by compensating the victim or plaintiff in a dispute. Germanic kings and chieftains tended to prefer compensation to the bilateral ordeal as a method of settling disputes because it was less destructive for the group. Like the ordeal, this method was also very ancient. Prior to the use of precious metals, Germanic peoples used cattle as a medium of exchange to pay for their offenses. By the end of the first century at the latest, the Germanic peoples who lived closest to the Romans adopted gold and silver and even Roman coins. The groups in central and eastern Europe, especially those more removed from imperial borderlands, slowly adopted precious metals although barter remained common across much of Europe well into the Early Middle Ages. By the end of the sixth century, the kingdom of Kent in southeastern Britain produced the earliest written document in the English language, a legal code known as the Laws of Aethelberht of Kent, which outlined a variety of monetary compensations for various crime.

This manuscript is a later copy of the first document written in the English language (Old English); these laws attempted to regulate the often violent behavior of Germanic warriors c. 600.

These laws reflected the violence that plagued early Germanic societies. Produced within only a few years of the king's acceptance of Christianity, Aethelberht's legal code consisted of dozens of compensations paid to plaintiffs for a variety of violent acts ranging from homicide to damage to a person's fingernail; even a black eye could be grounds for compensation. The compensation would be in measures of silver, described as a shilling, which consisted of one twentieth of a pound or a little less than an ounce. Monetary payment for injuries might well have been an effective method for settling disputes, just as they are today when plaintiffs demand damages in lawsuits. At the very least these payments forestalled feuding, a form of self-help practiced by families and their allies across much of Europe throughout the early Middle Ages. Kings, such as Aethelberht, had an interest in limiting feuds among their warriors so that they could keep their warbands intact for attacking groups outside of their kingdoms. Despite the kings' efforts to maintain social cohesion, infighting within kingdoms or warbands was one of the most persistent obstacles to the formation of civilization in Europe. And monetary compensation provided one of the easiest ways to avoid such infighting.

Even though none of Aethelberht's warriors could read his legal code when missionaries first sounded out the Germanic language of the early English, the code constituted an attempt to elevate the prestige of the king, to increase his authority in matters of dispute settlement. Initially more of an ornament that a king could point to rather than a practical guide to running a legal system, these early folk laws reflected the quest by Germanic kings to establish their authority in civil society. Powerful warriors and chieftains, later called nobles, recognized the threat that such legal innovations presented to their localized authority and prestige. They often resisted the extension of royal power–and the writing and literacy that facilitated it– well into the High and Late Middle Ages. Consequently, the establishment of royal courts and jurisdictions proceeded very gradually over hundreds of years because the king's right to settle disputes had not been a common practice.

In continental Europe, the Germanic legal codes often operated side-by-side with Roman law. The earliest of these codes, the Burgundian and Visigothic codes, included a number of Roman judicial principles and preceded the early English example by a century or more. The Romans had previously established their institutional and linguistic influences in these areas far more effectively than they had in northern Gaul, where the Salian Franks produced a legal code that more closely resembled the Laws of Aethelbert. In all of these continental codes, the Franks, Burgundians, and Visigoths employed the remnants of Roman imperial administration, mostly in the form of bishops, jurists, and counts. The Romans had a penchant for establishing an institutional hierarchy for governance, and this structure continued in areas such as Gaul and the Iberian peninsula, where Roman governance had been uninterrupted for centuries. Although the Romans had ruled southern Britain for 400 years, the Roman administration of law had ceased to function in Germanic Britain well before the mid fifth century, 150 years before the laws of Aethelberht.

In addition to reflecting the violent character of Germanic society, these legal codes also conveyed a

fairly extreme form of male domination. The Franks only allowed inheritance through the male line, and the early English allowed men to purchase women. Although noblewomen had more legal rights than commoners, a Frankish noble who married her slave lost her property and became an outlaw, meaning she no longer had the king's legal protection. Since law was a form of privilege in Germanic culture, noblewomen who produced male heirs typically had greater legal protection than unwed or childless women by virtue of their enhanced social status or standing. In Aethelberht's code a woman could receive half her husband's property if she bore a child before her husband died. The Franks had severe penalties, including death and outlawry, for rapists. Nevertheless, the Germanic legal codes only offered minor protections for noblewomen, who often appeared in the codes as dependents or property. In all likelihood, peasant women and men had few legal rights in these societies.

Early Germanic literature also reinforced the violent and patriarchal values evident in the laws. This literature did not appear in abundance until centuries after the conversion to Christianity. However, it often portrayed characters and events from an earlier era. For example, *Beowulf* was likely composed around 800, although its date of composition has remained the subject of intense scrutiny and debate. Despite this disagreement, it is fairly clear that an anonymous Christian scribe wrote the only existing manuscript of the poem around 1000. The language of the poem was clearly from a much earlier period, probably around 800. Perhaps it existed in a now lost manuscript or in an oral tradition before a scribe copied it down in the eleventh century. Regardless, the poem described the exploits of a legendary warrior who lived during the sixth century. It alluded to feuding and the ordeal. It celebrated martial prowess and gave scant attention to women. Beowulf, the titular pagan warrior in the poem, never married or produced an heir. He was apparently too preoccupied with attaining glory by winning battles. This epic viewed the pagan, Germanic hero from centuries past through the lens of a Christian scribe to a Christian, English and Anglo-Danish audience, apparently with the dual purpose of portraying the limits of pagan wisdom and virtue and of strengthening the faith of its intended Christian audience. To understand this point further, we must turn to the defining features of early Christianity as it arose in the Latin Church.

The Latin Church

After the fall of the western Roman empire, the Church provided some continuity with the Roman imperial administration and gradually fostered a sense of a collective European identity, which in itself constituted a unifying force among the ethnically diverse population of Germanic and Celtic peoples who inhabited western Europe. It actively extinguished the so-called "pagan" religions, despite the political fragmentation left in the wake of the fall of Rome. By the time of the First Crusade at the end of the eleventh century, if not before, most European leaders west of the Balkans understood that they were members of the Latin Church governed by a hierarchy of prelates with the bishop of Rome as its leader. For the sake of clarity, this chapter will use the term "Latin" instead of "Catholic" to describe the western Church based in Rome during this period, because both the western Latin Church in Rome

and the eastern Orthodox Church in Constantinople claimed to be "catholic," which means "universal" when in lower case. In addition, the practices of the Latin Church differed substantially from the Roman Catholic Church after the Council of Trent redefined features of the faith during the mid-1500s.

The Latin Church preserved at least some of the legacy of ancient Rome. Archbishops, bishops, and priests served as administrators in every Christian monarchy in Europe throughout the Middle Ages. Some administrators functioned as treasurers and judges, and others were diplomats, educators and propagandists. While these clerics preserved knowledge of Roman laws and maintained the type of literate bureaucracy that had accompanied civilizations since Sumerian origins, they also actively suppressed certain Greco-Roman texts deemed incompatible with Christian beliefs. For example, Aristotle had claimed that the sun revolved around the earth, a concept that the Christian Bible reinforced, mostly in the Old Testament; Latin Christian monks preserved some of his works and discarded others. By contrast, Aristarchus of Samos viewed the sun as the center of the universe, a view incompatible with the centrality of humanity perpetuated in Latin Christian thinking. His works were virtually unknown in early medieval Europe.

Despite this selectivity, the Church preserved fundamental elements of the intellectual traditions of the Roman Empire even in the wake of Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic invasions. Although Latin faded away as a spoken language, all but vanishing by around the eighth century even in Italy, the Bible and written communication between educated elites were in Latin. By 700 Latin had transformed from the common language of the Roman Empire to the written language of the educated elites all across Europe. Some members of the clergy could not only write but speak in Latin. They corresponded in Latin with other members of the European clergy via letters and sermons. This communication was unlikely to occur in the vernacular because local languages varied so drastically.

By contrast, some members of the Church were exceptionally persuasive in the vernacular. Christian missionaries converted kings and chieftains who had no knowledge of Latin. Although these warriors may have proven militarily stronger than Christian opponents, from the Germanic invaders who had dismantled the western empire to the Slavic peoples who fought the Byzantines, they seem to have recognized the allure of the religion of the Romans. Conversion often took place both because of the astonishing perseverance of missionaries and because of the desire of non-Christians to improve political relationships with Christians. Nevertheless, forced conversions occurred, most notably in the case of Saint Olaf Tryggvason, who allegedly forced a snake down the throat of a reluctant convert. Whether through heartfelt conversion or force, most Europeans were either Latin or Orthodox Christians by the First Crusade (1096-1099).

The Bishop of Rome

Between the 300s and the 600s the Latin Church gradually coalesced under the leadership of the

Bishop of Rome, later known as *il papa*, the pope. As early as 325 the Bishop of Rome was the most senior of five patriarchs recognized by the Roman emperors. These patriarchs were the leaders of the Church who lived in Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria. Each patriarch had dozens of bishops under his authority. However, ultimate authority in the Church during this period rested mostly in Church councils, which were gatherings of all the bishops and patriarchs of the Church. These councils established religious doctrines called "orthodoxy," which meant "straight thinking" in terms of beliefs and practices.

After the fall of Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria to Islam during the 600s, the patriarchs of Constantinople and Rome exercised greater autonomy within their own dominions. By 700 Church councils became less frequent and less ecumenical, meaning that they became more compartmentalized into eastern and western sects, with the Patriarch of Rome ruling over Western or Latin Christendom and the Patriarch of Constantinople ruling over Eastern or Byzantine Christianity. Consequently, Latin and Byzantine religious beliefs and practices gradually diverged over a number of issues, culminating with the Great Schism in 1054.

Both the Latin and Eastern Churches adopted the hierarchical structure of governance that had characterized Roman imperial administration. Beneath the bishop of Rome, numerous archbishops ruled over the local bishops who governed their dioceses, an imperial unit of administration introduced during the reign of Diocletian (see chapter 10 above). Each diocese was essentially a district that was further subdivided into numerous parishes under the spiritual guidance of the local priest. While in theory, the bishop of Rome ruled over the entire Latin Church, in practice the local autonomy of bishops often proceeded with little interference from Rome before the eleventh century.

This map from the 1000s depicts the Italian peninsula, including the Papal States, labeled as the "Patrimony of St. Peter." The origins of this territory, which shifted over the centuries, was the eighth century Donation of Pepin.

During the early Middle Ages, the popes operated not only at the apex of the Latin Church, but they also belonged to the Italian nobility, who fought for control of the papacy in order to gain control over the Church's increasing wealth and power. In the eighth century Pepin the Short, king of the Franks and father of Charlemagne (discussed below), conquered northern and central Italy from the Lombards and ceded to the papacy a large swath of central Italy. This territory, known as the Donation of Pepin, later became known as "the Papal States." From this point until the 1800s, the bishop of Rome not only claimed spiritual authority over most of Europe but also claimed secular authority, meaning he ruled as a monarch over the Church's territory in the central Italian peninsula.

Throughout the early Middle Ages (500-1000), the popes rarely exercised the absolute powers that they later wielded over the Church hierarchy. Instead, the popes claimed authority over doctrine and organization. Centuries later, popes used the claims of their predecessors to argue for their right to control the entire Church hierarchy in an absolute and unchallenged manner.

An important example of an early pope who created such a precedent was Pope Gregory I (r. 590-604), commonly referred to as "Gregory the Great." Although he had spent several years living in a Benedictine monastery, Gregory proved to be a capable administrator. He hailed from the Roman nobility and was the first pope to have been a monk. Inspired by this experience, he wrote a life of St. Benedict, which recounted the saint's miracles and unyielding faith in God. Such an account was itself inspiration to the inhabitants of the city of Rome, who faced constant threats from Germanic invaders. Pope Gregory was keenly interested in developing the independence of the papacy from the Roman

emperors in Constantinople, and he shrewdly played different Germanic kings in the Italian peninsula against each other by employing his spiritual authority to gain their trust and support. Although he was often preoccupied with events in the Italian peninsula, he sent missionaries into pagan lands, such as Kent in southern Britain, to spread the faith, both out of a genuine desire to save souls and a pragmatic desire to extend his influence across Europe.

Gregory's authority was not based on military power, nor did most Christians around 600 assume that the bishop of Rome was the spiritual head of the entire Church. Instead, the papacy gradually expanded its 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 document, later proven to be a forgery, known as the Donation of Constantine in which the Roman emperor Constantine (r. 306-337) vaguely granted the bishop of Rome authority over the western Roman Empire. Over the next several centuries popes pointed to this document as the basis for their wide-ranging claims to spiritual and political authority. Nevertheless, even powerful and assertive popes recognized the limits of their power, and several popes were 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 dedication, flexibility, and pragmatism of a few capable popes, their missionaries, and their allies among the rulers of Germanic peoples. Missionaries often had official instructions not to battle pagan religious practices, but to subtly integrate them into Christian rituals. It was less important that pagans understood the nuances of Christianity and more important that they accepted the religious authority of the Latin Church. Many pagan practices, words, and traditions survived into the present as a result of the fusion between Christianity and the older Germanic, Celtic, and Slavic religious practices.

This fusion was particularly evident in rituals. In pre-literate societies, rituals conveyed solemnity, meaning, and significance to occasions. They imbued something as routine as the passage of time or as momentous as the transfer of power with meaning and importance. Church leaders maintained elements of pagan customs and traditions in these rituals, such as the celebration of Easter, a name derived from a Germanic goddess of fertility, *Ēostre*. Local saints even assumed the qualities of pagan deities. They protected cities and ensured the harvest. They facilitated procreation and the perpetuation of the species. Similar to the pagan religions that preceded it, medieval Christianity provided succor to people who were often victims of violence, illness, and natural disasters.

The leaders of the Latin Church understood the need to introduce Christian beliefs and practices gradually into a population that had revered pagan deities for centuries. In a letter to a missionary, Melitus, Pope Gregory advised him to refrain from tearing down pagan temples; he encouraged his missionaries instead 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 a more respectful introduction of Christianity into cultures that had a strong attachment to their ancestors' traditions. This respect for pagan ancestors encouraged and enabled the fusion of Christian and barbarian cultures throughout most of the Early Middle Ages.

Characteristics of Medieval Christianity

A 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 Christians understand any of the details of Christian theology than it was that they participated in Christian worship and received the sacraments administered by the clergy. Because very few members of early medieval societies were literate, they depended on local bishops to relay important information because most Christians could not read about the theological complexities surrounding the virgin birth or the Trinity. The path to salvation relied mostly on participation in Christian rituals, such as baptism, prayers, communion, and eventually confession. However, during the early Middle Ages, the Church had not yet fully defined the necessary rituals for salvation.   That level of definition eventually emerged in the High Middle Ages at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) in the form of the seven sacraments.

Nevertheless, the Latin Church retained and reinforced some of the ancient elements of Christianity:

1. **Asceticism**: The denial of pleasure and comfort was never popular, but those who engaged in prolonged dedication to this principal garnered enormous respect. This element of Christianity likely derived from the ancient Jewish sect of the Essenes and persisted in the practices of monks and some of the Church's most revered leaders, who later became saints.
2. **Evangelism**: Although Jesus and his apostles were somewhat reticent to spread the faith beyond Jews, the missionary work of St. Paul (in Hebrew, Saul of Tarsus) transformed Christianity dramatically during the first century. Increasingly, Christians had a duty to spread the faith.
3. **Book religion**: By the time of Jesus, Judaism had a deeply ingrained reverence for writing in general and sacred texts in particular. Because Christianity evolved as a sect of Judaism, its early leaders maintained this attachment. In addition to the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), by 400 St. Jerome had compiled and translated into Latin the original Greek texts of the New Testament, which included the letters of Paul, the canonical gospels, the Book of Acts, and the Book of Revelation. St. Jerome's Vulgate Bible became the standard sacred text in the Latin Church until the 1500s.
4. **Martyrdom**: Bloody acts against Christians contributed to the growth of Christianity during the Roman Empire. Martyrs were Christian heroes. Stories of their heroism proliferated, and the definition of martyrdom evolved after Christianity became the imperial religion under the Roman emperor, Theodosius I. Increasingly, ascetics became Christian martyrs along with many Christian missionaries who suffered the traditional martyrs' fate: violent death.
5. **Hierarchy**: Although Jesus of Nazareth and the early Church promoted equality and the veneration of the poor, by the fourth century Christianity became more like other ancient religions, which supported the existing social hierarchy, ruled by wealthy elites. During the course of the Early and High Middle Ages, the Latin Church strengthened its hierarchical organization and decreased early Christianity's emphasis on egalitarian principles.

These elements of Christianity combined in various ways during the early Middle Ages. For example, missionaries were evangelical by definition and often practiced asceticism. Most monks maintained vows of obedience to hierarchical authorities and practiced celibacy, and some of them produced elegant Bibles at great cost. Celtic monks often lived in remote places and practiced green martyrdom (described above), but many of them also practiced evangelism as opportunities arose. With all these possibilities for religious expression, bishops oversaw their flocks to ensure both conformity and obedience. However, as the Latin Church evolved during the Middle Ages, the ability of Church leaders to maintain clear lines of authority in the hierarchy came under enormous stress.

The adoption of this complex and rich religion, which had arisen in the cities of the Mediterranean basin, by the illiterate leaders of Germanic, Celtic, and Slavic peoples was often problematic. Some kingdoms underwent apostasy, the reversion to paganism, particularly as some Christian kings lost battles to pagans. Constantine's claim that God was the source of his victory at the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312 had perpetuated the idea that victory in battle reflcted divine grace. Defeat, on the other hand, caused some to doubt or question the faith of their leaders. These setbacks provided obstacles to Christian missionaries. In addition, specific elements of Christianity, such as asceticism and literacy, were notably foreign concepts to barbarian chieftains who took pleasure in raiding. Nevertheless, missionaries demonstrated enormous conviction and persisted in spreading the faith.

One of the tools that aided these missionaries was the vast and growing collection of stories that belonged to the Christian tradition. The lives of saints, also known as hagiography, proliferated in the period 600 to 800, sometimes referred to as the Age of Saints. These stories resembled the heroic tales of warrior heroes conveyed by bards or *scops,* medieval entertainers and storytellers. Hero worship was deeply embedded in barbarian cultures, and saintly missionaries such as Germanus, Patrick, and Boniface exhibited the type of courage so evident in warrior epics. Undeterred by the prospect of death, their loyalty to God was unconditional, something any warrior chieftain could appreciate. In hagiographical narratives, the heroes calmed storms, averted natural disasters, healed the sick, and even raised the dead. In one case, St. Genevieve (419-512) convinced the people of Paris to pray collectively in order to avoid defeat at the hands of the Huns. The Huns bypassed the city, and Genevieve became the Parisian patron saint. In this fashion, tales of saints reinforced loyalty to the faith by celebrating commonly held values such as faith, hope, and charity.

Christianity also proliferated because it strengthened a sense of community with its many rituals, festivals, and feast days. In monasteries, monks gathered together in prayer five times a day. They dressed alike, prayed together, and shared meals. Outside of monasteries, people celebrated feast days and heard stories of heroic saints as a community. They gathered to receive communion, and some watched as their kings received the biblical chrism, a ceremony in which a bishop anointed temporal kings as God's chosen rulers. These rituals promoted and fostered a sense of loyalty, community, collective identity. This aspect of the religion is why the term "ecclesiastical," which derived from the Greek word for community, became synonymous with religion. Religion promoted a sense of common identity.

In addition to this social cohesion, Christianity also promoted political unity, but very gradually. Over the course of centuries the beliefs and practices of Christianity strengthened royal power. Kings often relied on literate clergy to administer their kingdoms. They employed scribes to keep track of tribute money, which later evolved into taxation. They also learned the power of written commands, which reduced the need to travel constantly across their kingdoms to exert their will. Instead, they established a hierarchy of administrators in local districts, much as the Church had done. They produced legal codes and recorded histories of their people and their successes over their enemies. Monarchs began to assemble their own collection of stories, which encouraged collective actions against commonly acknowledged foes. Gradually, some monarchs embraced charters as a way to document land transfers and minimize the disruptive disputes that threatened political cohesion.

By the late Middle Ages, when this charter was written (1304), documents were a well-accepted method of documenting land ownership. However, in the Early Middle Ages, most Germanic warriors distrusted this seemingly novel way of establishing control over land.

Land was the ultimate source of virtually all wealth in these mostly agricultural societies, and as such, its transfer often provoked conflict as disagreements arose over the details of an agreement. Because charters could document precise terms of a land transfer, they offered the prospect of reducing the conflicts that plagued early medieval societies. However, charters did not become widely accepted for settling disputes over land until the High or even Late Middle Ages. The Church routinely falsified charters, and most members of the warrior aristocracy remained illiterate and distrustful of writing. Nevertheless, writing gradually strengthened the centralized power of kings at the expense of local nobles, and the Church leaders were instrumental in promoting the use of charters.

The Church's role in promoting centralization of its own power at the expense of the nobility arose

during the tenth century in the monastic reform movement. Led by the monks at Cluny in Burgundy, adherents of the movement called for more centralized control of monasteries. Since the 600s, nobles had established monasteries for a variety of purposes, including the salvation of their souls and comfort of their offspring. These nobles considered the monasteries to be part of their familial patrimony or landholdings. However, with little supervision from the Church, the monks at these monasteries often failed to follow monastic rules related to celibacy, obedience, and hard work. In response to this lax supervision of monastic rules, the monks at Cluny gradually established themselves as the mother house of the many hundreds of monasteries that had proliferated over hundreds of years. They argued that the only way to ensure monastic purity was to wrest control of these lands from the nobles and place them in the hands of the Church. Not everyone agreed, and the reform movement sparked violent disagreements for over 100 years.

Monastic reform eventually led to general Church reform, which included enforced celibacy for all clergy including priests and bishops. Both sets of reforms had a destabilizing effect on political authority across Europe during the tenth and eleventh centuries because they threatened traditional assumptions about the control of land. Monastic and Church reforms fundamentally altered the distribution of wealth and therefore the balance of power. Gradually, these reforms increased the wealth and power of the Church, which became the most powerful rival to several kings at various points during the High Middle Ages.

Early Medieval Politics

While most Europeans came to share a religious identity by the eleventh century, Europe was still 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 Romanized and Celtic subjects, especially in the kingdoms of the Franks, the Burgundians, and the Lombards. In areas that had been part of the empire, they were often able to utilize the remnants of the Roman bureaucracy and relied on its officials and laws when ruling their subjects, but they also had their own traditions of Germanic law based on clan membership. In short, the legal orders of the Early Middle Ages were not universal or systematic in their treatment of transgressions. Different laws applied to different people.

Political unification in Europe was not a forgone conclusion after the collapse of Rome. The gothic kingdoms which were established in the 5th and 6th centuries, such as the Ostragoths on the Italian peninsula and the Visigoths on the Iberian peninsula, fell to the Lombards and Muslims, respectively. Western Europe fragmented into numerous loosely-tied political entities, as the map above indicates. The map below shows Europe in 814, by which point Charlemagne had brought many kingdoms under his control.
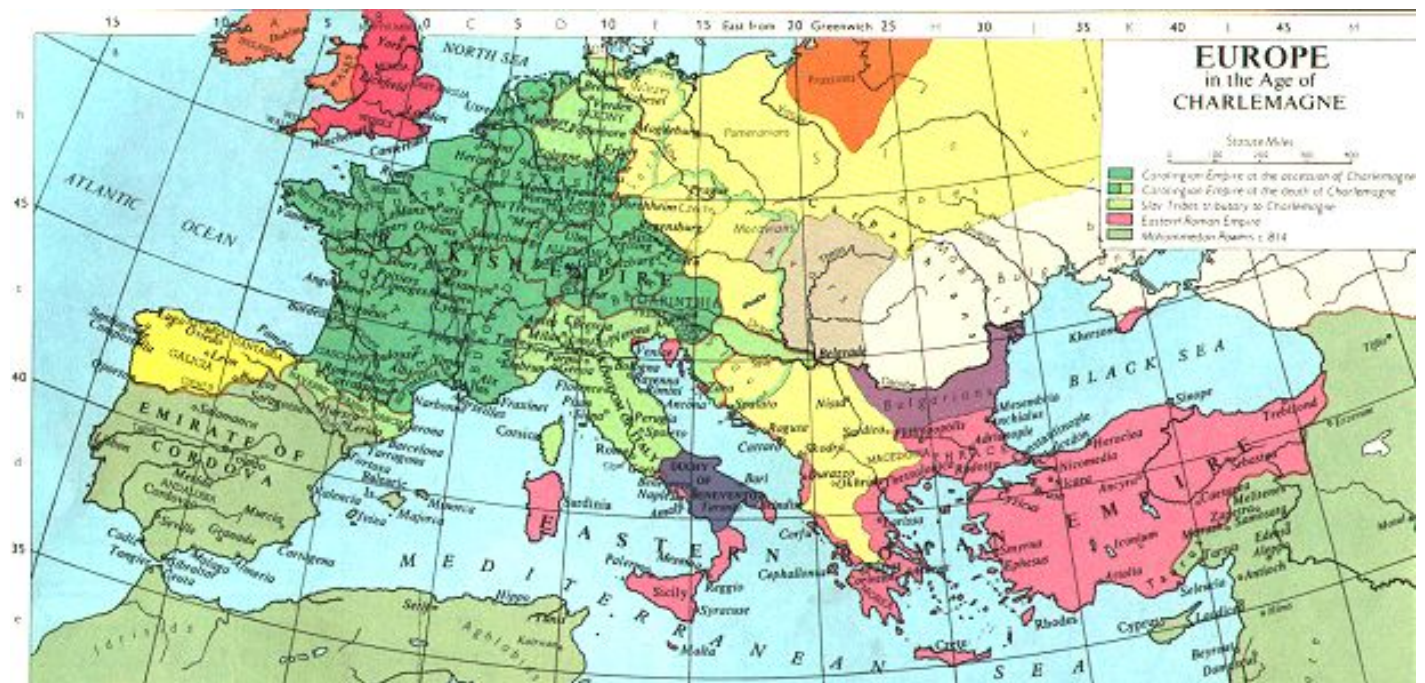
Charlemagne's conquests in the late 700s and early 800s reignited European visions of a resurrected Roman Empire. Charlemagne's territories included most of modern France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, northern Italy, Austria, Hungary, and Bohemia.

The so-called "feudal" laws applied specifically to the nobility or holders of fiefs (*feodum* in Latin). Feudal laws were based on codes of honor and reciprocity. In the original Germanic codes each free person or warrior was obliged to support his (it was patriarchal) clan above all else, and an attack on an individual became an issue for the entire kinship group. Any dishonor had to be answered by an equivalent dishonor, most often meeting insult with violence. Likewise, the most powerful kings arose because of clan dominance, with the king being the head of the most powerful clan rather than an elected official or even necessarily a hereditary monarch who transcended clan lines. This unregulated, traditional, and violence-based system of the competition for power often produced feuds, the interfamilial and sometimes intrafamilial infighting that destabilized European politics during much of the Early Middle Ages.

Gradually, the Germanic warrior elites mixed with their Latin or Celtic subjects to the point that cultural distinctions became less prominent. Likewise, Roman law faded away as a very complex web of rights and privileges emerged. Granted to warrior clans and others by monarchs, these feudal laws were intended to ensure the loyalty of their subjects. Thus, clan loyalty became less important over the centuries. However, it still exercised considerable sway through much of the Early Middle Ages. In the process, medieval politics evolved over time into a more hierarchical, class-based structure in which kings, lords, and Church leaders ruled over the vast majority of the population: peasants.

In some parts of Europe, especially in the territories of the Franks, the relationship between lords and kings evolved into a formalized system of mutual protection. Lords accepted oaths of personal loyalty, called a "pledge of fealty," from other free men called "vassals." In return for vassals' support in war, the lord offered them protection and land-grants, called "fiefs." Each vassal had the right to extract wealth from his land in the form of fees and taxes on peasants who inhabited the fief or manor. The lord could then use this wealth to procure horses, armor, and weapons in addition to the needs of his household and retainers. In general, vassals did not have to pay taxes or tribute money to their lords. Instead, the lord expected them to perform military service. Likewise, the Church itself became an increasingly wealthy and powerful landowner, and Church holdings were frequently tax-exempt. However, kings expected bishops to provide them with services in administrative capacities: overseeing revenues, presiding as judges, recruiting capable scribes, and enforcing orthodoxy. These bishops were lords of extensive estates, and every king worked to recruit bishops who would serve them ably. Monarchs relied on these Church leaders to administer their kingdoms.

This system based on personal bonds withered as generations passed.

This image from the Bayeux Tapestry depicts an early English nobleman, Harold Godwinson, pledging fealty to William of Normandy in 1064. Two years later William used the broken oath to justify his invasion of England.

Sometimes royal vassals became less attached to the kings' sons than they had been to the fathers. This form of political organization, based on personal loyalty, was fundamentally unstable and arose because of the absence of other, more effective forms of government and the constant threat of violence posed by raiders. The feudal order was never as neat and tidy in practice as it was in theory; many vassals were lords of their own vassals, with the king simply being a remote entity with weak legal claims. In turn, the problem for royal authority was that some kings had vassals who had more land, wealth, and power than they did; it was fairly common for powerful nobles to wage war against their king. It would take centuries before the monarchs of Europe consolidated enough wealth and power to dominate their nobles, and it rarely happened during the Early Middle Ages.

One method that kings used to punish unruly vassals was simply to visit and eat 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 rare during the Early Middle Ages was any widespread recognition of what was later called the "Divine Right" of monarchs to rule. From the perspective of the noble and clerical classes in the Early Middle Ages, the monarch had to hold on to power through force of arms and personal charisma, not on empty

claims about being on the throne because of God's will. In other words, laws and legal rights had much less influence than one might assume.

Unsurprisingly, there are many instances in early medieval European history when a powerful lord simply usurped the throne, defeated the former king's forces, and became the new king. Ultimately, early medieval politics involved widespread violence and treachery. Pledges of loyalty between lords and vassals provided a weak framework for political stability. In a legal code produced around 890, Alfred the Great of England recognized the weaknesses associated with loyalty oaths, and the very first law of his legal code addressed this issue. While the law itself may not have been that effective, he emphasized to his nobles that he was keenly aware of the issue and its importance to political stability. Meanwhile, the Church encouraged lords to live in accordance with Christian virtue. However, the nobility defined itself as "those who fight," meaning they were warriors first and foremost. Thus, all too often politics was synonymous with armed struggle throughout much of the Middle Ages.

Perhaps the most conspicuous failure of the practice of oaths of loyalty to sustain political stability occurred in Francia, the western remnants of the Carolingian or Frankish Empire (described in detail below) during the 900s. At this point the king's direct authority had deteriorated to include the areas around the Isle de France near Paris. Other areas of Francia were under the nominal control of counts, but real control fell into the hands of castellans, knights who lived in wooden fortresses, scattered across the countryside. They periodically rode from these rudimentary castles and plundered peasants, merchants, monks, and anyone who could sustain their needs. Consequently, commerce declined significantly, as the risks of travel heightened. As we will see in the next section, political instability in Francia was more pronounced than stability, following the reign of Charlemagne.

After a three-year civil war, Charlemagne's grandsons divided his empire into three distinct regions for Charles in the West, Louis in the East, and Lothar between them. Political fragmentation became especially marked by the 900s in Western Francia.

In response to the epidemic of violence that arose in Francia during the 800s and 900s, communities became desperate for a solution, especially in the central and southern region known as Aquitaine, where little centralized authority existed. In 989 at Charroux in Aquitaine, a local convocation of clergy proclaimed the Peace of God, based on centuries of Church proclamations aimed at limiting violence. Such proclamations gradually spread across much of Francia. The primary purpose of these measures was to limit violence against peasants, priests, and other non-combatants. However, the Church too relied on oaths, sometimes sworn on the relics of saints, to secure enforcement. By the eleventh century, another council at Toulouse in southern France proclaimed the Truce of God in 1027. This proclamation sought to disallow violence on weekends and feast days. Neither the Peace of God nor the Truce of God proved particularly effective, and violence remained an epidemic in much of Francia well into the High Middle Ages.

The Frankish Empire

The former Roman province of Gaul eventually became 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 the eastern shore of the Rhine River as Roman power crumbled in the mid-400s. However, the Franks' relationships with the Romans and later with the Latin Church were complicated. Some Franks fought with the Romans against the Huns at the Battle of Chalons in 451, while others fought on the side of Attila. After that battle, one of the dominant clans, the descendants of Merovech under the leadership of Childeric I, established his principal seat of power first at Tournai in modern-day Belgium and then at Paris after consolidating his control over rival Frankish leaders. Childeric I essentially established the Franks' Merovingian dynasty, named after his father.

His son, Clovis I (r. 481 – 511), was the first to unite all the Franks and begin the process of creating a lasting kingdom named after them: Francia, later France. Clovis murdered rivals both in other clans and within his own family. He then expanded his territories and defeated the last remnants of Roman and Visigothic powers in southern Gaul by the end of the fifth century. Around 496 CE Clovis and his warband converted to Latin Christianity, the religion of Clovis's wife, Clotilde.

Queens were often instrumental in the conversion to Latin Christianity. This influence, referred to as "domestic proselytization," was a conscious strategy of Latin Church leaders, who encouraged queens to exert their influence on their monarchical spouses. In this case, Clovis's conversion to Roman Christianity had practical benefits: he planned to attack the Visigoths in southern Gaul. The Visigoths were an Arian Christian (see chapter 10) minority who ruled over a Latin Christian population. By converting to Latin Christianity, Clovis ensured that the Latin Christian subjects of the Visigoths 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 in the Mediterranean region.

By the seventh century, the Merovingians expanded their territories across the Rhine into areas that had not been part of the Roman Empire and across the Alps into the northern Italian peninsula. Their grasp over these territories was never absolute and varied according to the strength and charisma of individual kings. Meanwhile, the sons of Frankish kings typically divided their territory into equal parts, a tradition known as partible inheritance. Gradually, Francia became an assemblage of four kingdoms: Austrasia in the northeast, Neustria in the northwest, Burgundy in the southeast, and Aquitaine in the southwest. Infighting between the kingdoms was frequent, and consequently, centralized control of the Merovingian empire was tenuous. In addition, the kings themselves increasingly relied on officials called "mayors of the palace" to command troops and lead the Franks into battle. Some Merovingian kings became ceremonial figureheads rather than warband leaders, a change that further weakened their control.
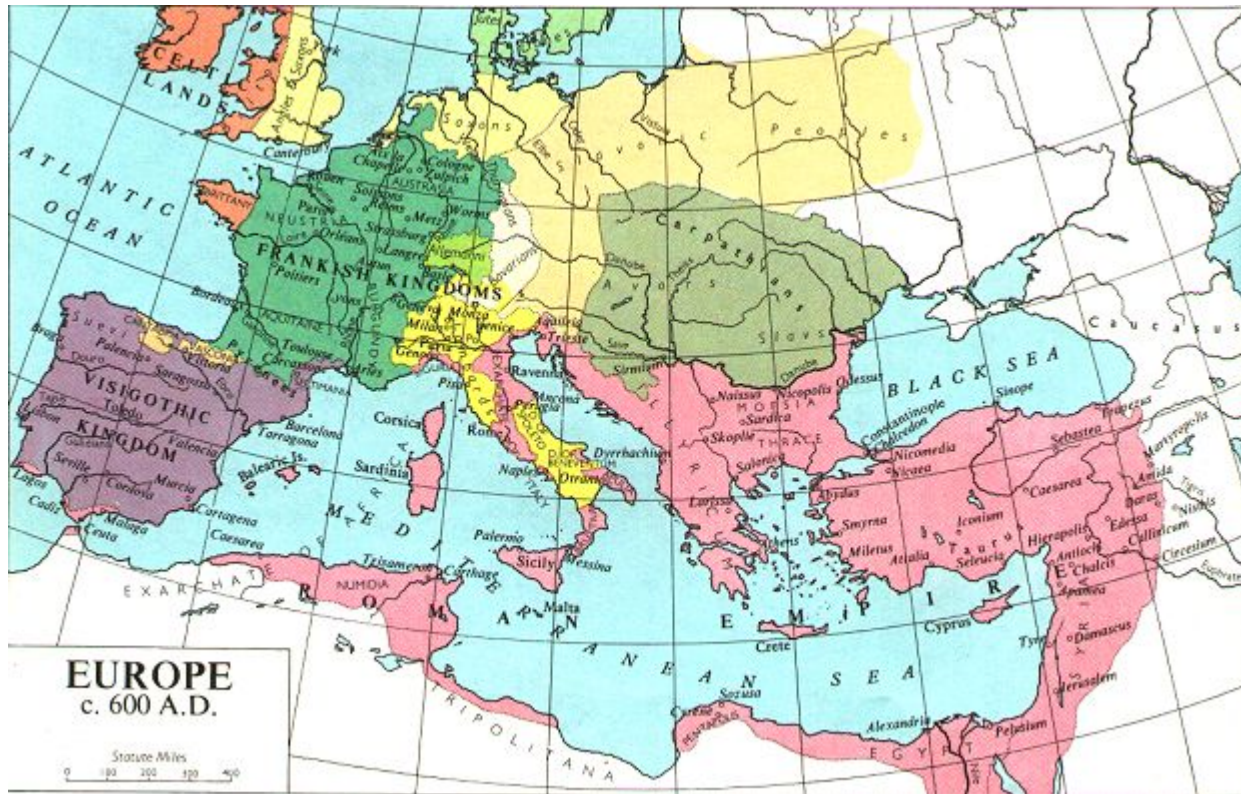
Between 486 and the early 600s, the Merovingians secured control of disparate Frankish dominions and extended the borders of what would become the Frankish Kingdom.

Although the Merovingians retained monarchical power for two hundred years, they became relatively weak and ineffectual by the early 700s. Meanwhile another clan, the Pippinids (later Carolingians), the family of Pepin the Short, demonstrated their leadership as military commanders. They were the mayors of the palace in Austrasia, but they ran the military and political affairs both of Austrasia and of Neustria by the early 700s. One of them, Charles Martel, defeated the invading Muslim armies at the Battle of Tours (also referred to as the Battle of Poitiers) in 732. Soon afterwards, Charles Martel's son, Pepin, seized power from the Merovingians in a coup, one later ratified by the pope in Rome. This act strengthened the legitimacy of the dynastic shift and established the Carolingians as the rulers of the Frankish Empire.

Only the first few kings in the Carolingian dynasty of the Franks were particularly capable. When Pepin seized control in 750, 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 sons had equal rights of inheritance after the death of the father. Thus, with every generation, a family's holdings could be split into separate, smaller pieces. Over time, this custom could reduce a large and powerful kingdom into a large number of small, weak ones, and it often increased intrafamilial violence. When Pepin died in 768, his sons Charlemagne and Carloman each inherited half of the kingdom. When Carloman died a few years later, 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) ruled over the largest territory of any European king or emperor in the

early Middle Ages. He waged constant wars during his long reign (lasting over 40 years) in the name of converting pagan Germans in Saxony to Latin Christianity. His conquests inspired the notion that the Roman Empire had reemerged in large parts of western Europe. By the 1200s, part of his territory became known officially as the Holy Roman Empire, an expansive state that was nominally controlled by a single emperor with the support of the papacy in Rome. This myth of a resurrected empire was enduring in its appeal. However, Charlemagne was the only emperor to rule this territory effectively as a united state, and the papacy often opposed his successors. Nevertheless, several Holy Roman Emperors exercised considerable power over the empire until the end of the Thirty Years War in 1648, and the empire itself remained a legal fiction until 1806 when Napoleon permanently discarded it.

Charlemagne distinguished himself not

only by the extent of the territories that he conquered but also by his insistence that he rule those territories as their legitimate 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 un-traditional 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 and an important precedent: kingship could pass to a different clan or even kingdom itself depending on the political circumstances. Charlemagne clearly embraced an imperial vision: the Franks were the rulers over an amalgam of Germanic and Slavic peoples.

On Christmas day in 800, the Bishop of Rome, Pope Leo III, crowned Charlemagne "Emperor of the Romans." Although historians often claim that Charlemagne's crowning was a surprise or even unwanted, the pope's recognition of Charlemagne imparted a level of prestige, at least in Italy, and suggested a return to the *Pax Romana*. It also established a precedent that ultimately rendered the Frankish/German emperors dependent on papal recognition for their authority. In other words, the elevation of Charlemagne as the Emperor of the Romans also increased the power of the papacy, which was mired in the political rivalries of central Italy. As the papacy became more powerful in subsequent centuries, the tensions between emperors and popes escalated, sometimes into civil wars that involved much of the northern Italian peninsula and the empire north of the Alps.

Charlemagne's empire did not exhibit the organizational effectiveness that characterized ancient Rome. Although Charlemagne developed a rudimentary bureaucracy with written orders emanating from his entourage to various localities via *missi dominici*, meaning envoys of the lord king, it often lacked the literary competence to function effectively. In addition, his armies paled in comparison to the Roman legions in terms of size, logistical support, and training. Similar to the majority of Germanic rulers, he spent most of his reign traveling around his empire with his armies, while waging wars and issuing decrees. Medieval historians refer to this form of governance as "peripatetic kingship," meaning the king had to travel around a lot, which was a sign of a weak administrative structure. Charlemagne recognized this weakness and initiated numerous reforms.

In imitation of King Offa across the English Channel, Charlemagne reformed the currency by minting high quality silver pennies (pictured below), called *deniers*. He realized that gold was notoriously scarce, which limited its usefulness as a currency. By contrast, silver was more plentiful and therefore practical for widespread use. Consequently, regional trade improved with the introduction of a more practical currency. Meanwhile, he organized large royal estates that produced commodities for burgeoning markets and he sustained a modicum of peace spread across his vast dominions. Long distance trade flourished as the empire exported slaves, mostly war captives from Slavic eastern Europe to Muslims on the Iberian peninsula and in North Africa. All of these economic initiatives strengthened the royal treasury and enabled patronage of intellectual activities. His initiatives teetered on the

precipice of civilization and reflected the exploitation and the production of amenities that came with it. However, it failed to produce the necessary urban infrastructure that has traditionally accompanied civilizations.

Recognizing the weakness of imperial administration, Charlemagne channeled growing tax revenues into a determined effort to improve literacy and learning within his empire. Thirteen years into his reign (781), he recruited the scholar Alcuin from northern Britain (Northumbria) to his court in Aachen, where Alcuin served as the master of the palace school. Over the next four decades, scribes preserved ancient Roman documents and wrote royal decrees. They recorded legal proceedings and kept records of the administration of royal estates. Historians often refer to this growth of literary production, which accompanied artistic and architectural achievements, as the "Carolingian Renaissance." Unlike the Italian Renaissance of the 1300s and 1400s, it did not extend to widespread literacy among the middle class. In fact, there was only a very small percentage of the population in his empire whom we might label "middle class." Instead, the Carolingian Renaissance was mostly confined to royal and monastic circles.
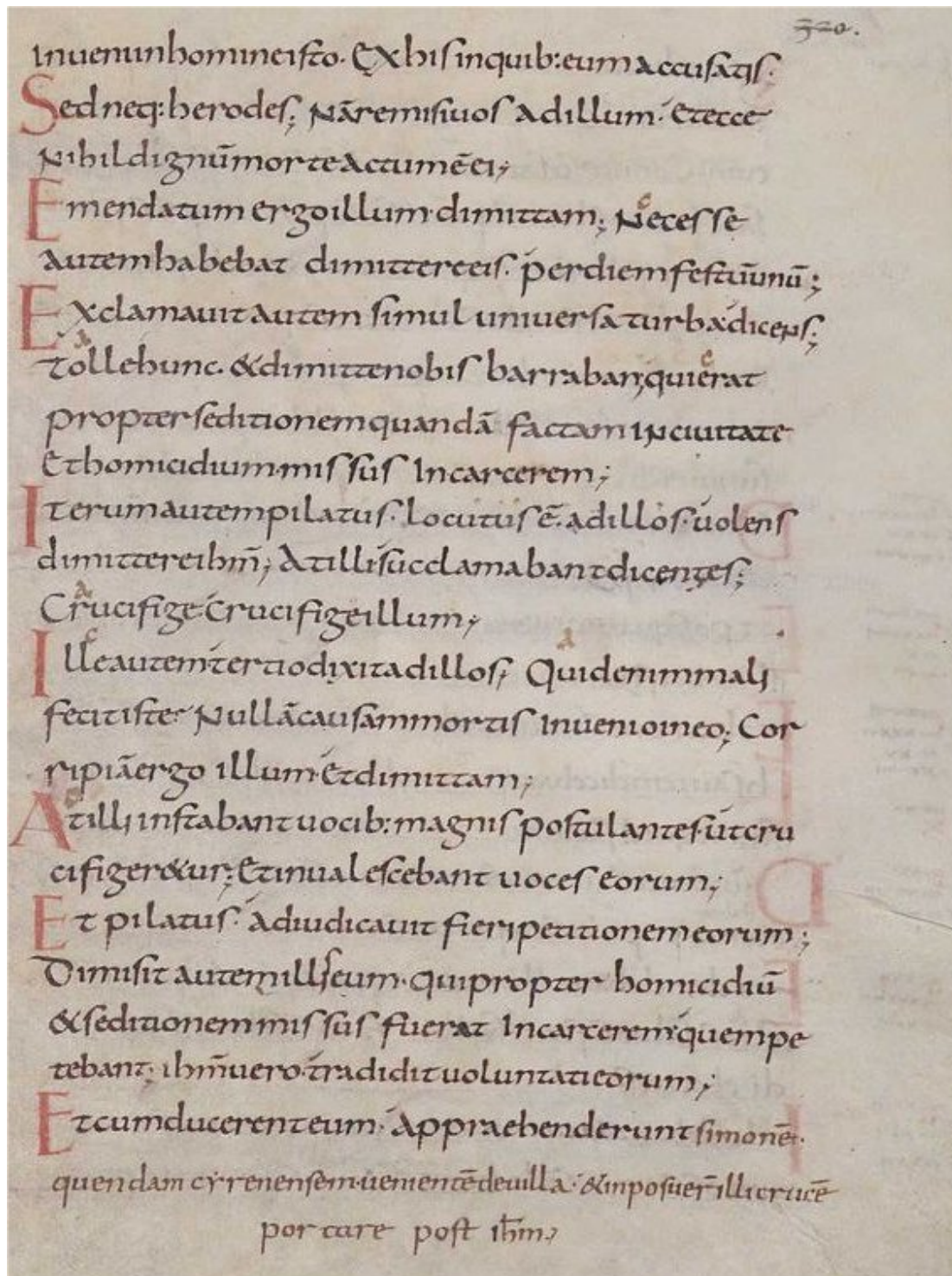
Charlemagne hoped to improve literacy by making texts easier to read. Note the capital letters at the beginning of sentences and the punctuation at the end.

During the Carolingian Renaissance significant improvements in handwriting occurred. Scribes imitated the Roman practice of large, clear letters that had distinct separations. They inserted more spacing between words and punctuation, including question marks and periods, to separate sentences. Scribes increasingly introduced the division between upper and lower-case letters and the practice of starting sentences with a capital letter, a minor improvement that facilitated comprehension of writing. While all of these changes seem fairly minor, their impact was significant because they facilitated the

growth of literacy and comprehension of written commands, judicial proceedings, and the intellectual heritage of ancient Rome. This new form of handwriting, known as Carolingian minuscule, developed during the Carolingian Renaissance. Punctuation, capitalization, more pronounced spaces between words, and more clearly rendered letters became standard and facilitated the exchange of ideas through writing.

These reforms in writing also enabled one of Charlemagne's other initiatives: the reform of the Church. He insisted on a strict hierarchy of archbishops to supervise bishops who, in turn, supervised priests. He sponsored the education of priests and the creation of libraries. To be effective at conveying the teachings of Christianity, priests had to be literate, and they also needed to have accurate Bibles in their possession. He had flawed versions of the Vulgate Bible (the Latin Bible) corrected and he revived Greco-Roman disciplines, such as rhetoric, logic, and astronomy, that had fallen into disuse. An educated clergy was essential for increasing the prestige of the Church and the emperor. As we will see in the following chapter on the High Middle Ages, the Carolingian educational and religious reforms laid the foundation for significant changes in theological studies across Western Europe.

Another element of Charlemagne's reforms included the reorganization of his empire into counties, ruled by (appropriately enough) counts. He appointed trusted military officials and some literate commoners to rule lands where they had little or no social connections. This tactic of employing men deemed as foreigners to administer counties minimized the risk of these men drawing followers of their own and ensuring some degree of impartiality in justice because they were not tied to local clan networks. He protected his borders with marches, lands ruled by margraves who were military leaders ordered to defend the empire from foreign invasion. He established a group of officials who traveled across the empire inspecting the counties and marches to ensure loyalty to the crown. Despite all of his efforts, rebellions against his rule were frequent, and Charlemagne waged war against rebellious subjects to re-establish control on several occasions.

Despite the significant reforms introduced during Charlemagne's long reign, the Carolingian dynasty lasted for an even shorter period than had the Merovingian. The problem, again, was the Frankish succession laws related to partible inheritance, which encouraged the division of kingdoms and the infighting that plagued the quest for political stability during the Early Middle Ages. Following his death in 814, many of his reforms lost traction. Lacking a strong unifying story, such as a history of his people, his empire lacked cohesion, and without an effective charismatic leader to suppress revolts, regions rebelled soon after Charlemagne's reign. 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 his son, Louis the German. A different line, not directly descended from the Carolingians, eventually ruled East Francia by the 900s (see next chapter). Its king, Otto the Great, 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.

The Early English State

Around 400 CE, the Romans began withdrawing from Britain, where they had maintained three to five legions since the middle of the first century CE. In the fifth century the Romans redeployed their legions to meet the growing threat of instability and invasion at the imperial borders along the Rhine and Danube rivers. Britain had always been an imperial frontier, with too few Romans to completely settle and organize it. During the 400s and 500s Germanic warriors from Saxony, Frisia, modern-day Denmark (land of the Angles), and even Scandinavia raided, invaded, migrated, and settled in the southern half of the island of Britain. By at least the 700s and likely earlier, this area became known as the "land of the Angles" or England.

These pagan Germanic peoples fought the Celtic Britons, who had inhabited the island in large numbers for approximately 1500 years. By the 400s these Britons identified as Christians. Fleeing the Germanic invaders, the Celtic refugees maintained control of the western parts of the island in modern-day Cornwall, Wales, and Scotland. Some fled as far away as Brittany across the Channel. Roman culture all but vanished as Germanic clans fought for control of various parts of the island. Consequently, the kingdoms established by the Germanic invaders in southern Britain became some of the most thoroughly de-Romanized of the old Roman provinces in the west.

ANGLO-SAXON BRITAIN
"THE HEPTARCHY."

English Miles

By the early 700s approximately seven Germanic kingdoms ruled over southern and eastern Britain.

Around 597, King Aethelberht, who ruled over Kent in the southeastern corner of the island of Britain, received Christian missionaries from Rome. His wife, Bertha, a Christian Merovingian princess, exercised her influence on her husband, as her daughter and granddaughter later did on their husbands, to embrace the teachings of the Latin Church. Similar to the conversion of the Merovingian king, Clovis, a century earlier, Aethelberht's decision to embrace the teachings of the Latin Church accompanied the conversion of hundreds or even thousands of his warriors. The Latin Church practiced a top-down strategy of conversions: convert the king, and the kingdom will follow. Although this approach was highly effective in the long run, sometimes early English kingdoms experienced apostasy, the return to pagan practices, as new kings rejected their predecessors' conversions. Slowly, with much determined effort by dedicated missionaries, all of the previously pagan Germanic kingdoms in Britain converted by the second half of the 600s.

Aside from Roman missionaries, Celtic missionaries had established a monastery at Iona off the East coast of Scotland by 565. By the early 600s, they were successfully converting Celtic and English kings. In the 630s they established a monastery at Lindisfarne on the West Coast in the kingdom of Northumbria. These Celtic missionary-monks solidified the Northumbria kings' previously tenuous attachment to Christianity. Northumbria had been one of the most violent and politically unstable kingdoms of the early English. By the 640s that infighting showed signs of subsiding under the brutal but effective reign of King Oswy (642-670) Oswy defeated one of the last powerful pagan kings, Penda of Mericia, in 655. Afterwards, Northumbria enjoyed a period of relative peace and dominance among other English kingdoms during the final 15 years of Oswy's reign, and Celtic monks were primarily responsible for ensuring that Northumbria's kings remained in the Christian fold.

One issue that threatened to divide the Northumbrians centered on the type of Christianity the kingdom would practice. Although raised in a Celtic Christian tradition (described in the section on the Celts above), King Oswy had married the granddaughter of Bertha and Aethelberht of Kent, Eanfled. She followed Latin Christian teachings that her grandparents had introduced into Kent around 600. Meanwhile under the influence of Celtic missionaries, led by the saintly bishop, Aidan (c. 590-651), Celtic Christian practices had become the norm in Northumbria. While the differences between the two forms of Christianity might seem insignificant to us today, they mattered for a king who sought religious unity in his kingdom. Not only was the queen loyal to the Church of Rome, but so was the heir apparent. Following the death of Aidan in 651, disagreements between Celtic and Roman churchmen about the timing of Easter celebrations intensified in Northumbria. The differences in the dates could vary between the Roman and Celtic calendars by as much as a week.

One of the main attractions of Christianity to Germanic kings was its uniformity, but the divisions between the Celtic and the Latin Church leaders on a number of issues, including the nature of religious authority, threatened to divide the Northumbrians. Whereas Celtic Christians often recognized the more localized authority of abbots, Roman Christians adhered to the hierarchy of the Church with the pope at its apex. At Oswy's request, the clergy convened a small council, known as a synod, of Church

leaders and royal followers to resolve the dispute at Whitby Abbey in 664. Oswy's decision to embrace Latin Christianity at the Synod of Whitby had long-term implications for the English attachment to the Church of Rome. It weakened the independence of the Celtic Christians, who gradually adopted Roman practices and accepted the authority of the Bishop of Rome. Consequently, the Christianity practiced in the British Isles slowly became more aligned with Continental customs, associated with the Latin Church, and this uniformity facilitated marriage alliances and treaties among royal families.

In the decades that followed the Synod of Whitby, the English, and the Northumbrians in particular, expanded their literary production. Similar to the Carolingian Renaissance, which started 100 years later, the Northumbrian Renaissance featured the achievements of monks and religious scholars. They produced Bibles of exquisite artistry at considerable expense. They wrote legends of saints' lives, hagiography, and recounted the history of their own conversion to Christianity. They sent missionaries to convert the Saxons and Frisians on the Continent. They introduced charters for land transfers. And they educated some of the most renowned scholars in Europe, such as Alcuin, Charlemagne's master of the palace school.

By the late 700s King Offa of Mercia minted coins made of almost entirely pure silver; this purity encouraged general acceptance of its value and resulted in the widespread use of Mercian coinage.

By the mid 700s the most powerful of the English kingdoms was Mercia. Two Mercians kings, Aethelbald and Offa, ruled for approximately forty years each, almost consecutively from 815 to 896. Perhaps Aethelbald was the unknown Mercian king who recorded tribute payments not only from the small tribes within his expanding dominions but also from rival kingdoms, such as Kent, East Anglia, and Wessex. This document, known as the Tribal Hidage, constituted an early attempt at levying taxes, a bedrock of royal power. Aethelbald also used a charter to document a land transfer to one of his

fighting companions for the establishment of a monastery. Later, King Offa of Mercia built his famous dyke, a turf wall, between Mercia and the Celtic Britons to the West and introduced a silver penny, which facilitated trade. He sought to arrange a marriage alliance with the Carolingians, and Charlemagne referred to Offa as "King of the English." To a contemporary in the late 700s it might have seemed that the English were uniting under Mercian leadership, but this outcome was not to be.

The Mercians' hegemony over southern Britain, England, began to wane. They suffered from unstable succession in the early 800s, just as Danish raiders went viking with increasing frequency and duration. Meanwhile, Mericia's rivals to the South, the West Saxons, had a string of successful military commanders, starting with Egbert who ruled for 37 years and repeatedly defeated the Mercians. By the 860s the Danish invaders had arrived with a large army under Ivar the Boneless. As the name suggests, Ivar apparently suffered from physical ailments (although there are several theories about the origin of his name or sobriquet), but he was a gifted military leader. He and his sons conquered all of the early English kingdoms except Wessex. Barely escaping a Danish attack in 878, Egbert's grandson, Alfred, fled to the marshes and woods of Somerset, where he assembled a small army of English who resolved to attack the pagan Danes.

Alfred's successes against the Danes became the stuff of legend. By the 1500s he was "Alfred the Great" and allegedly the founder of the royal navy. Similar to Ivar, Alfred also suffered from physical challenges, but his military record was impressive. More strategic than Ivar, Alfred built a network of fortresses known as burghs, across southern Britain, which were built within one day's march of one another to easily defend the entire network in the event of an invasion. He repulsed repeated Danish invasions, published both a legal code, and a history of the English people (the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*), and established a framework for the expansion of the West Saxon state. Similar to Charlemagne one hundred years earlier, Alfred understood the importance of increasing literacy; however, in contrast to Charlemagne, he understood that Latin proved to be an obstacle to the widespread mastery of literacy. Therefore, he commissioned the translation of several Judaeo-Christian and Greco-Roman classics into English and promoted English rather than Latin as the language of government. His children and grandchildren built upon his achievements by establishing the shire structure, similar to Charlemagne's counties, for the administration of justice and the levying of troops. By the mid 900s the West Saxon kingdom had expanded northward and encompassed most of modern-day England. The kings of England won periodic victories over the Scots and gained control of the Danish area around York, known as *Jorvik*.

Their success in establishing a well-organized bureaucracy and state machinery faced several tests in the late 900s and early 1000s: the monastic reform movement divided the English nobility; the Danes returned with more formidable armies in the 990s and 1000s, and the English king, Aethelred II, was not prepared for these challenges. Although some historians have debated his incompetence, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* claimed that his own ruling council, the Witan, agreed to his return from his flight to his wife's relatives in Normandy during 1014 "only if he agreed to rule them better than he had before." Clearly, Aethelred had made some missteps. Despite these challenges, the early English state,

which had grown out of Alfred's West Saxon kingdom, endured even as a Danish ruler, Cnut (or Canute) the Great, seized the throne after defeating Aethelred and his son, Edmund Ironside in 1016.

The success of the English in establishing a solid infrastructure for government during the Early Middle Ages was the exception rather than the rule. Unlike the Carolingians, their dominions were smaller and somewhat more manageable given the technologies of the day. By employing the vernacular, English, rather than Latin as the language of government, Alfred and his successors removed a big obstacle to the establishment of a bureaucracy, which could protect the state from kings who lacked charisma or military successes. However, the dynasty of the House of Egbert, which included Alfred and his descendants, also experienced some luck. The Danish invasions of the 800s had removed rival kingdoms, such as Mercia and Northumbria. Infighting within the West-Saxon dynasty was relatively rare compared to both the Carolingians and some of the other early English royal families. Consequently, when William of Normandy defeated the English at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, he maintained the governmental structure established by Alfred and his successors. He changed the language of the court to Anglo-Norman French, and he and his nobles built hundreds of castles to dominate the English. However, the well-run administrative machinery, established by Alfred and his successors and inherited by the Normans, endured and evolved for centuries.

The Vikings

Until the eighth century, the Scandinavian region was on the periphery of European trade, and the Norse and Danes had little influence on the people of neighboring regions. Scandinavian tribesmen had long traded amber (petrified sap, prized as a precious stone in Rome and, subsequently, throughout the Middle Ages) with both other Germanic tribes and even with the Romans directly during the imperial period. During the eighth century, the Baltic Sea region became increasingly vibrant economically as navigation technology improved and as the climate gradually warmed. Traders from elsewhere in northern Europe actively sought out Baltic goods such as furs, timber, fish, and amber. This trade enriched the Scandinavians, who increasingly practiced their custom of going viking (plundering and trading) abroad.
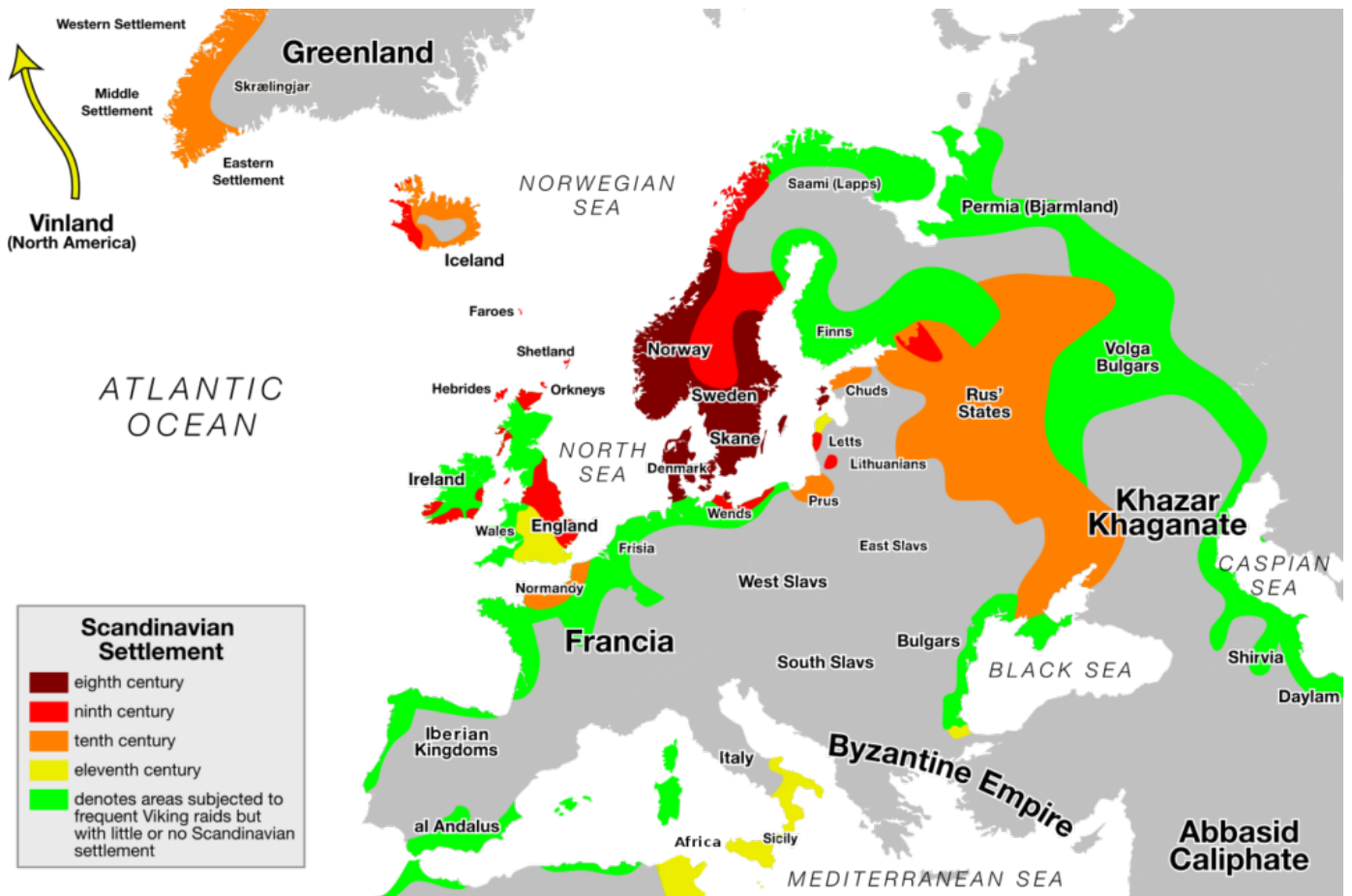
Enabled by superior maritime technology, the Scandinavian warriors established a reputation for brutality and ingenuity as they invaded lands from North America to modern Russia during the ninth through eleventh centuries.

During this period the Norse and Danes added sails to their vessels, longships, which facilitated longdistance voyages across the Baltic, into the North Sea, and throughout the waterways of Europe. These invaders, known as Vikings, exploded into the consciousness of other Europeans during the eighth century. They attacked unprotected Christian monasteries in the 790s, with the first major raids in 793 at Lindisfarne and at Iona, off the east coast of Britain. The Vikings demonstrated virtually unmatched nautical prowess by the 800s. 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. By the mid-800s, relatively small 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 highly lucrative. Unfortunately for the monks and nuns of Europe, silver was most often used in sacred objects in monasteries, making the monasteries and nunneries a favorite target of Viking raiders. The raids were so sudden and so destructive that Charlemagne ordered the construction of fortifications at the mouth of the Seine river and began expanding his naval defenses to try to defend against them. 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.

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

By the ninth century, the Vikings fielded large fleets of 100 ships or more. They raided small towns and major cities of Europe and North Africa. By the late ninth century they were formally organized into a "Great Fleet" based in their kingdom in *Jorvik*, modern day York, England. They established a trade network that extended from Ireland to modern-day Russia. While the size of their armies defies precise reckoning, partly because the surviving sources bear a pronounced anti-Viking bias, clearly their invading armies were on a scale that dwarfed their earlier raids. In 844 more than 150 ships sailed up the Garonne River in southern France, plundering settlements along the way. In 845, an estimated 800 ships forced the city of Hamburg in northern Germany to pay a large ransom of silver. In 881, the Great Fleet pillaged across present-day Holland and raided as far inland as Aachen, where Charlemagne had ruled decades earlier. Then, in 885, at least 700 ships sailed up the Seine River and besieged Paris. In this attack, they extorted thousands of pounds of silver and gold. Vikings attacked Constantinople at least three times in the ninth and tenth centuries, extracting tribute and concessions in trade, and perhaps most importantly, they came to rule over what would one day become Russia. In the end, the Vikings became increasingly knowledgeable about the places they were raiding, in some cases actually working as mercenaries for kings who hired them to defend against other Vikings.

By approximately 850 the Vikings increasingly settled in the lands they raided, especially in the British Isles, and eventually in Iceland and in northern France by the 900s. Outside of Russia, their most significant settlement occurred in Normandy, which later conquered England. It was founded in 911 as a land-grant to the Viking leader, Rollo, in order to defend the French against other Vikings. Likewise, the Vikings settled areas in the north and east of England that shaped the English language and culture. In *Jorvik* they minted coins with high levels of silver content and prospered from raiding and trading.

The Vikings were also explorers. Once they settled Iceland, they made their way to North America. A group of Icelandic Vikings arrived in Newfoundland, in present-day Canada, around the start of the eleventh century, nearly 500 years before Christopher Columbus landed in what is now the Bahamas. The Viking attempt at colonization in Newfoundland failed quite possibly because of a conflict between the Vikings and the indigenous people they encountered. The people of the Americas were spared the presence of further European invaders for almost five centuries.

On the eastern end of their voyages Viking exploration, conquest, and colonization had begun even earlier. They traveled down Russian rivers from the Baltic in the mid-eighth century, even before the raiding period began farther west. Their initial motive was not conquest, but trading and collecting goods like furs, amber, and honey and transporting them south, both to Byzantium and to the Abbasid Caliphate. The Vikings engaged in a slave trade by capturing Slavic peoples in Eastern Europe and sold them in the Mediterranean. In turn, they brought a great deal of Byzantine and Abbasid currency to the north, introducing high quality silver coinage into the mostly barter-based economies of Northern and Western Europe. Eventually, they settled along their trade routes. Their reputation for martial prowess induced leaders in Kiev to encourage them to settle in order to establish order, much as they did in Normandy. This settlement formed the earliest nucleus of Russia as a political entity. The very name "Russia" is derived from "Rus," the name of the specific Viking people (originally from Sweden) who settled in the Slavic lands bordering Byzantium.

A Thracian woman killing a member of the Varangian Guard who attempted to rape her. The image depicts his comrades congratulating her for defending herself. The guard was composed of Viking warriors who became the crack troops of the Byzantine emperors in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

As the Vikings settled in the lands they had formerly raided and as powerful states emerged in Scandinavia itself, these formidable warriors relied less on plunder and more either on large-scale invasions or on trade. By the mid-tenth century, the kings of the Scandinavian lands organized more coordinated invasions as they gained control of parts of Francia, England, and Ireland. By 1000 Scandinavian rulers embraced Christianity, and some of them forcefully converted their subjects. Stable monarchies arose in Denmark under king Harald Bluetooth in 958, in Norway under Olaf Tryggvason in 995, and in Sweden under Olof Skötkonung in 995. Meanwhile, in northern France, the duchy of Normandy emerged as the most powerful of the former Viking states, with its duke, William, conquering England in 1066. All later monarchs of England were among his descendants.

Conclusion

The spread of Christianity from the Mediterranean basin to Scandinavia took centuries. Sometimes these conversions were coordinated by the pope, and sometimes a local sense of Christian duty drove conversion efforts. Christian missionaries brought rituals, writing, stories of saintly heroes (hagiography), and a hierarchical administrative and geographic structure that facilitated the organization of Germanic and Celtic warbands into more stable monarchies. Working together, Church leaders and barbarian kings introduced legal codes, charters, book-making, and several of the defining features of civilization. While many horrific acts took place in the name of Christianity, the Church provided a vessel for many of the stabilizing forces that gradually transformed the character of European culture north of the Alps.

Sometimes this fusion of Christian and barbarian practices produced social customs and traditions that were essentially destabilizing. Vassalage was one such case. It included elements of Christianity, such as swearing an oath on a Bible or on the relics of saints and organizing authority hierarchically. Its barbarian elements included the distribution of land or goods in exchange for military service and personal bonds of loyalty. Vassalage was not entirely to blame for the destabilization of western Francia during the 800s and 900s. Along with partible inheritance and the building of rudimentary castles, it contributed to the chaos and violence that inflicted the heartland of the Frankish empire by 850. Consequently, it would be a mistake to assume that Christianity alone guaranteed the formation of European civilization.

In other cases, the fusion between Christianity and barbarian practices improved political stability. Leveraging his excellent education, which involved a stint studying in Rome, Alfred the Great consciously crafted a view of history that portrayed him as a sort of savior figure and suggested that the English as God's chosen people. Such narratives galvanized a collective identity that promoted political unity. He recognized the potential of Christianity to unify his people to fight against so-called "heathens," that is non-Christians. The vilification of the Danish pagans who invaded Britain during the 800s and 900s provided a foretaste of the rhetoric that popes later used to declare war on non-

Christians and heretical Christians during the High Middle Ages. By legitimizing Germanic practices, such as slavery and class-based retributive justice, Germanic kings leveraged the instruments of the Christian Church to justify the exploitation of their subjects and their enemies, while at the same time assuring their warriors that they would rest easy in Valhalla or Heaven in the afterlife. Despite their inherent contradictions on topics such as violence, literacy, and materialism, Christianity and the barbarian cultures of Europe gradually fused to produce a culture that glorified conquest and swaggered in the self-righteousness that came with religious certainty.

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Chapter 15: The High Middle Ages

Introduction

Europe developed the defining features of a civilization during the High Middle Ages (1000-1300) due to a variety of factors, including population growth, the exportation of violence, recovery of ancient texts, and the development of a market-based economy. Situated between the Early Middle Ages and the Late Middle Ages, the High Middle Ages is sometimes referred to as the Central Middle Ages. However, we are using the terminology of the High Middle Ages because the period included significant cultural developments that became integral to European civilization and its collective identity. It was "high" in the sense of reaching an apex in population growth, socioeconomic evolution, and cultural expansion. This chapter will focus on those features of Europe, while addressing significant political patterns in the Holy Roman Empire, England, and to a lesser degree, France.

During this period, the population likely tripled, the number and size of cities increased, trade networks became more reliable, and literacy spread as rulers sought the services of administrators, scribes, storytellers, and propagandists. This proliferation of literacy was particularly important for the study of history, which relies on documents to make sense of the past. As literacy increased, Europeans produced more documents. Consequently, we have much more informed insights into the thoughts, behavior patterns, motivations, and objectives of Europe's elites, who often oversaw document production. Although we would very much like to know more about the less literate members of society, our written sources have remained heavily biased toward understanding Europe's warrior aristocracy, Church leaders, and the scribes who worked for them.

These fundamental changes altered the economic and cultural landscape of Europe. Rulers extended the lands under their control. First and foremost, they successfully fended off invasions. In fact, they expanded the dominions of European culture by reconquering much of the Iberian peninsula from Muslims who had cultivated a vibrant culture there since the 700s; likewise, they uprooted Byzantine and Muslim control of southern Italy and Sicily. They settled much of eastern Europe by campaigning against allegedly pagan Slavs, and they established colonies overseas, most notably in the crusader states in the Levant and on islands across the Mediterranean. In short, during the High Middle Ages Europeans transformed from being the objects of invasions to being the invaders of other lands. The areas controlled by Europeans were growing territorially and economically.

As these conquests proceeded, the peasants drained swamps, cleared forests, and brought more land under cultivation. Agricultural production, population, and trade grew, as did tax revenues. The Church and the secular rulers across Europe invested their growing wealth in the construction of

elaborate Gothic cathedrals and sophisticated castles. These undertakings enhanced the power and prestige of the elites, who became increasingly confident in divine support of their missions. They hired legions of administrators, educated in a growing number of universities, where knowledge of Greco-Roman works became more widespread.

This increasing familiarity with the achievements and knowledge of the ancients arose, in part, from increased interaction with the Islamic and Byzantine civilizations to the south and to the east. Some scholars traveled over the Pyrenees to access the highly literate Muslim culture of al-Andulus in the Iberian peninsula, while others traveled to and from Constantinople to bring copies of ancient works back to Latin Christian Europe. Scholars introduced Aristotelian texts to universities and pursued the development of scholasticism. The fundamental assumption of scholastic discourse was that ancient authors, such as Aristotle, were worthy of serious study. However, the ancients often contradicted each other, on a variety of topics including philosophy, astronomy, and their assessment of human nature, supposedly because they lacked the insights of Christian teachings. Therefore, scholastics deemed it necessary and fruitful to apply logic and Christian wisdom to resolve these apparent contradictions. Both Jews and Muslims had undertaken similar initiatives, based on their own religious orientations, in previous centuries.

European scholars had traveled to Muslim and Byzantine centers of learning since at least the mid-tenth century. However, the rate of transmission of ancient writings increased during the eleventh and especially during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, partly as a byproduct of the establishment of crusader states in the Levant. Even before the crusades, western Europeans had gained control of southern Italy, Sicily, and the northern half of the Iberian peninsula in the late 1000s. As the fighting eventually abated, these conquests strengthened commercial and social interactions with Byzantines and Muslims. Trade and diplomacy nourished cultural interaction, and the Latin Christian scholars expressed admiration for the intellectual abilities of their religious rivals: Eastern Christians, Jews, and Muslims.
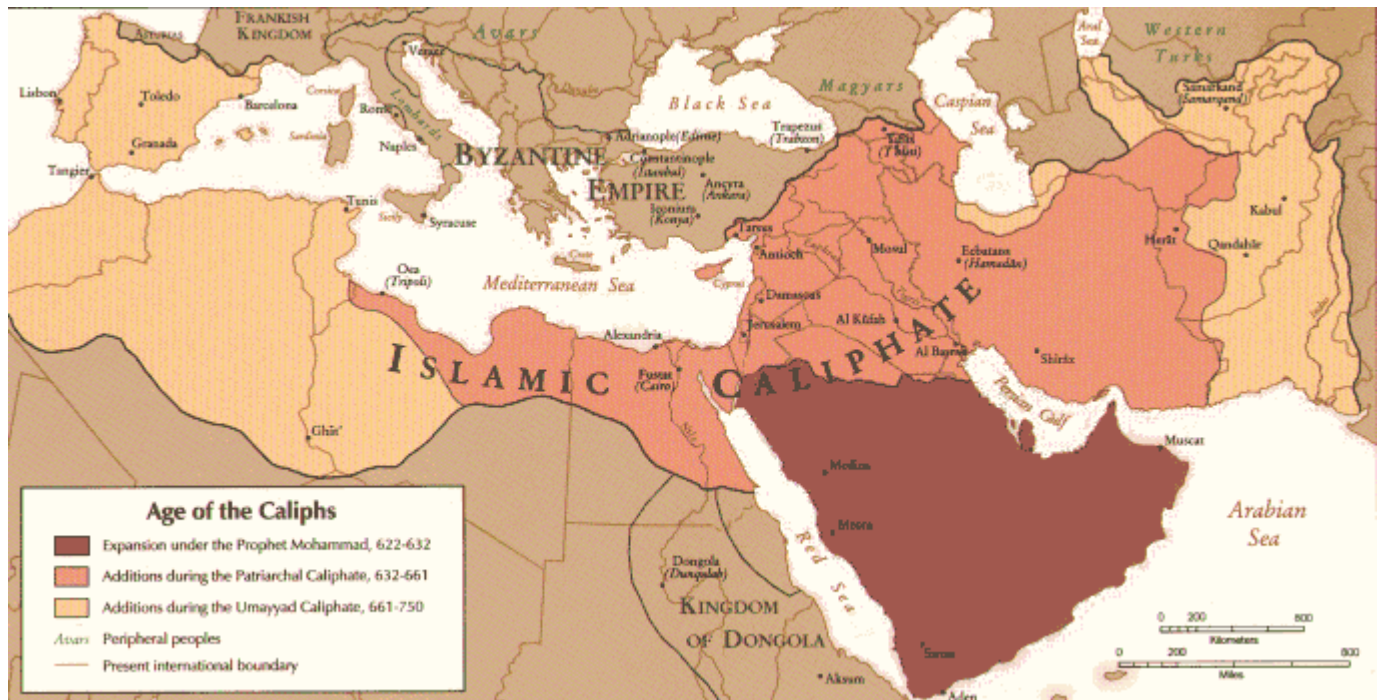
The territories under Islamic control grew rapidly between the 630s and the 750s. By the ninth century the Abbasid rulers were attracting scholars from India, Egypt, and Byzantium by offering patronage and an environment that favored the cross cultural exchange of knowledge.

Social interactions with the Muslims were especially beneficial for the Latin Christians partly because the territory under Islamic control spanned from the Iberian peninsula to India. The enormity of this territory, with more landmass than the Roman Empire at its height, facilitated long-distance trade and the transmission of ideas, technologies, and social practices. Sometimes these Islamic territories functioned as a conduit for the transmission of science, learning, and technology from China. In some cases, such as the pointed arch and the construction of rounded towers, Europeans were more willing to accept Islamic technology and learning. In others, however, Europeans rejected new ideas, as was the case with paper-making; Europeans refused to adopt paper for centuries, viewing it as inferior to animal skins (vellum) for book production. In still other cases, we do not know precisely how much influence Islamic knowledge had on European practices.

One of the less understood cases involves Islamic knowledge of agricultural practices, agronomy. During the High Middle Ages the Muslim understanding of crop rotation, irrigation, and the construction of pleasure gardens surpassed the most advanced practices in western Europe. Although Muslims in al-Andalus introduced crops, including chickpeas, lentils, lemons, rice, and spinach, from India and as far away as China by the tenth century, many of these crops probably did not make their way north of the Pyrenees for centuries. The Europeans' distrust of Muslims combined with the conservatism of European peasants further inhibited the ready adoption of advanced agricultural practices beyond Castile, Leon, Aragon, and Portugal. In addition, many Muslim texts about herbs, crops, irrigation, and soil remained in Arabic, untranslated into Latin until the thirteenth century or even later. Knowledge of these advanced techniques traveled primarily through observation and through word of mouth. Consequently, the Muslim agronomy diffused very slowly to the rest of Europe,

over the course of several centuries, primarily from the Muslim-occupied Iberian peninsula.

Economic Growth

The economy of medieval Europe was pre-industrial; approximately 90% of all economic activity revolved around agriculture: the production of food and raw materials for clothing. In such an economy, land was the primary means for generating wealth. The lords of manors, both secular and ecclesiastical, extracted payments from residents on their lands. Free peasants typically paid an annual rent to the lord who owned the land they occupied. By contrast, serfs were often subject to a number of fees for the right to inherit the right to occupy land, for the lord's permission to marry, and for a variety of seemingly random assessments called *tallage*. This last sort of fee was particularly odious because lords often levied it at will. In addition, lords routinely required both peasants and serfs to use the lord's mill in order to profit from their need to mill grain. In short, the wealth generation that occurred during the High Middle Ages accumulated mostly into the hands both of the warrior aristocracy and of the Church, both of whom were the lord of the manors.

In some principalities and kingdoms of Europe, the Church controlled over half of the land. In other areas, the number was closer to 20%. Still, the Church's landholdings were substantial. The Church also had other means for generating revenue. A system of taxation, known as the tithe, extracted approximately 10% of the harvest every year from peasants who lived on the lands of the aristocracy. Eventually monarchs also taxed the commoners, usually in the context of declaring wars. However, the Church led the way in terms of devising an annual system for the extraction of Europe's growing prosperity.

That prosperity was due to a combination of factors, including naturally occurring climate change, improvements in agricultural technology, and changing social practices. The northern Atlantic climate underwent a warming trend that lasted from approximately 900 to 1300 CE. Although the warming was nowhere near as pronounced as the climate change experienced globally in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it was enough to lengthen the growing season slightly in Northern Europe. The warming lengthened the growing season and reduce the likelihood of crop failure.

The improvements in agricultural technology occurred slowly and unevenly. Early medieval peasants had literally scratched away at the soil with light plows, usually drawn by oxen or donkeys. These scratch plows resembled those used in ancient Rome: the weight of the plow was carried on a pole that went across the animal's neck. Thus, if the load was too heavy, the animal would suffocate. In turn, that meant that only relatively soft soils could be farmed, limiting the amount of land that could be made arable. Europe north of the Alps mostly had heavy soil with lots of clay. The scratch plow did not work well there.

By 1100 a new kind of collar for horses and oxen became common across Europe. It rested on the

shoulders of the animal and thus allowed it to draw much heavier loads, enabling the use of heavier plows. The Latin word for such plows was a *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. We commonly refer to such plows as the moldboard or heavy-wheeled plow. Simultaneously, iron horseshoes became increasingly common, which dramatically increased the ability of horses to pull heavier loads. Further complementing these improvements was the widespread use of iron plowshares, the leading edge of the plow, which turned over the soil with greater efficiency. Although individually these advancements were fairly minor, collectively they had a pronounced impact on agricultural productivity.

The heavy-wheeled plow was much more effective, especially in Europe north of the Alps, where the soil tended to have more humus and clay and less sand. The plow was especially effective because it went deep into the soil, where the nutrients often were, and it also removed the weeds at the surface as the earlier plow had done. The old scratch plow, which had been developed in the Mediterranean basin, where sandy soils predominated, was not really suitable for the heavy soils of northern Europe. The heavier plow first appeared in China by about 200 BCE, and such plows were known in the Roman Empire. However, it was not until the late tenth century that use of the heavy-wheeled plow became common in Europe. The reasons for the slow adoption were manifold. First, peasants tended to be very traditional. A small change in agricultural practices could mean starvation if those practices proved unworkable. In addition, peasant communities often required consensus because they worked their fields collectively. Therefore, the adoption of a new type of plow was not an individual decision but a communal one. Finally, the heavy-wheeled plow required a substantial investment in animal power because, as its name suggests, it was heavy; sometimes peasants needed as many as eight oxen to pull the plows. Oxen were also expensive and often stubborn.

As knowledge of the selective breeding of animals improved, Europeans employed draft horses to pull the plows. Two draft horses could pull the plow much more rapidly than four or eight oxen. The draft horses were also more maneuverable and cooperative. With a heavy-wheeled plow hitched up to two draft horses, a peasant could work more land with greater effect.

Another significant factor in the improvement of agricultural output was the adoption of crop rotation. During the High Middle Ages some manors adopted the three-field system, which addressed the problem of nitrogen depletion caused by growing grain successively in one field. Europeans had known about this problem for centuries and had often implemented the two-field system during the Early Middle Ages. This system featured grain production in one field, while another field sat fallow, possibly with some livestock grazing. However, the three-field system included a third field with a nitrogen-fixing crop, such as beans, peas or clover, planted in the Spring. These crops absorbed nitrogen from the atmosphere and secreted it into the soil. Once this Spring crop was harvested, usually in the late Summer, the livestock could graze that field and their manure further enriched the soil. In a three-field system, the peasants then rotated the crops at the end of the manorial year, which occurred near Michaelmas at the end of September.

Because only a third, instead of half of the land, remained fallow compared to the two-field system, more land was productive at any given time. The three-field system also increased the nitrogen content of the soil so that the yields of the grain harvest improved. Whereas the yields in a two-field system could be as low as 2 to 1 or 4 to 1 pieces of grain per seed planted, yields in a three-field system were often two to five times higher than in the two-field system. In addition, the three-field system could support more livestock because the three-field system often provided more nutritious feed for animals. Consequently, Europeans ate more meat with the adoption of the three-field system. The meat provided more iron in the diet, an added benefit for pregnant women, who suffered severe blood loss and sometimes mortality during childbirth. For the first time in European history, women as a group started to outlive men, partly as a result of more iron in their diet.

Additionally, the conversion of grain into usable flour became more efficient as windmills and watermills populated much of the European countryside, especially north of the Alps. 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. Although peasants resented having to pay for access to mills, typically controlled by the warrior aristocracy or the Church, the increase in productivity constituted a big attraction despite the exploitative nature of the mill fees.

Improvements in agricultural techniques, along with longer life expectancy for women, stimulated significant population growth in Europe during the High Middle Ages. Between 1000 and 1300 Europe's population more than tripled from approximately 30 million to approximately 100 million people. Unfortunately, we do not have exact numbers as governments did not perform censuses. However, manors often kept track of births and deaths, and births outnumbered deaths over the three-hundred year period.

Gradually, as agricultural productivity improved and as the European population grew, markets arose. Many manors shifted away from a subsistence economy that featured the production of many crops, even those that did not thrive in certain climates and soils. Peasants chose to plant those crops that grew most vivaciously on their land, relying on the burgeoning markets to supply them with goods that were not as likely to succeed on their plots. Thus, specialization increased as a small but growing number of people relied on markets rather than trying to subsist only on what they could produce for themselves. In short, markets enabled specialization which further enhanced productivity and the diversity of goods that were available. Market towns and cities grew, although they remained small by modern standards.

Europe's largest cities formed in Italy during the High Middle Ages. Naples boasted at least 80,000 people by 1300. Further north, Rome remained puny with only 10,000 inhabitants, compared to over a million in its imperial glory in the first century CE. By contrast, Florence and Venice were lively merchant republics with well over 50,000 people at the end of the High Middle Ages. The growth and independence of northern Italian mercantile city-states accelerated during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Their development often involved violent uprisings against the traditional warrior

aristocracy by merchants and laborers of lesser means and lower status, who established representative governments dominated by men of commerce instead of men at arms. In the Late Middle Ages the republics of the northern Italian city-states became the breeding ground for the pronounced production of literary, artistic, architectural, and engineering achievements that historians refer to as the Italian Renaissance.
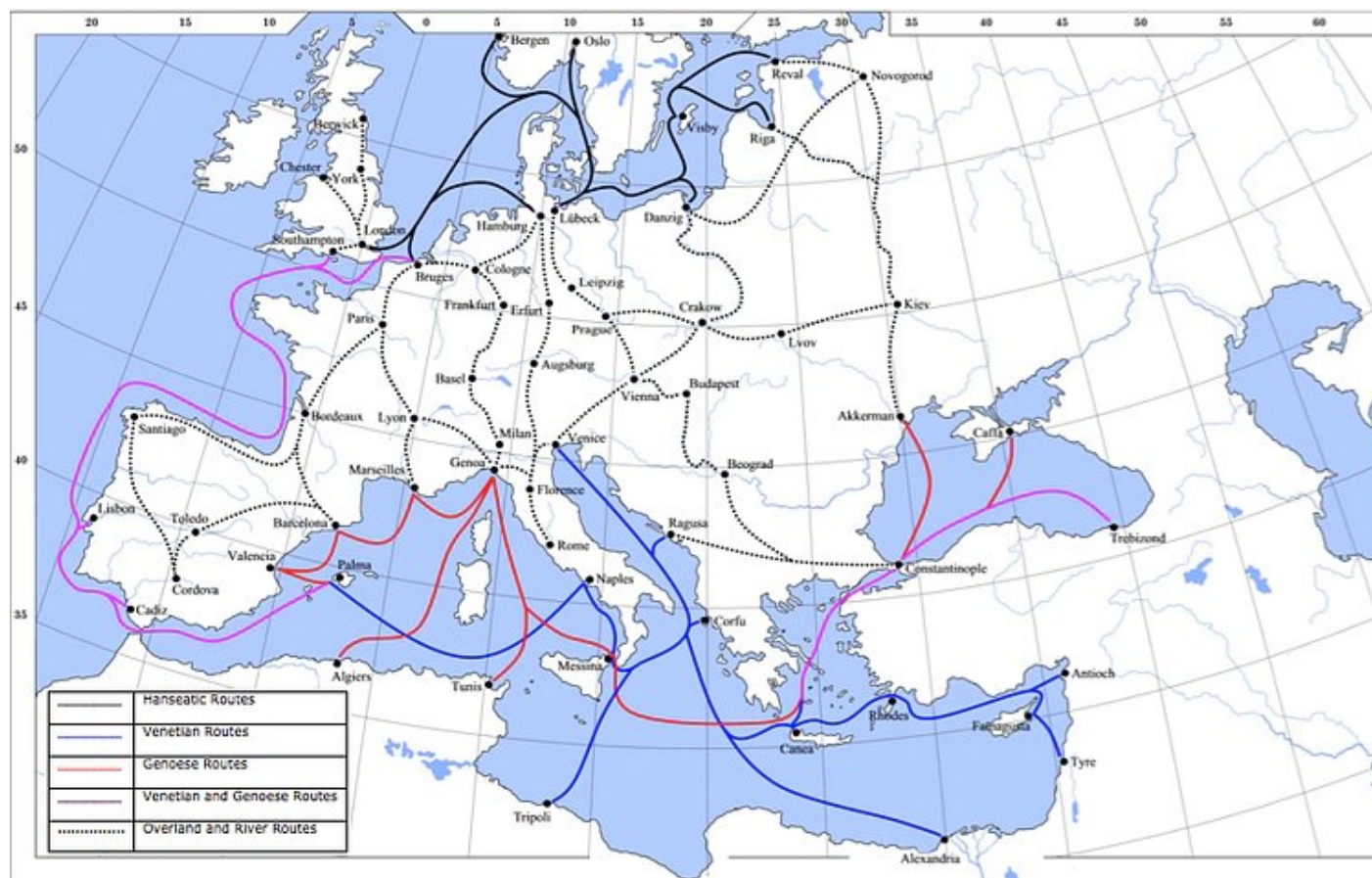
During the High Middle Ages, the network of markets expanded significantly. This map highlights the Genoese and Venetian trade routes that dominated much of the Mediterranean, while the nascent Hanseatic League formed in Northern Europe around 1300.

Because the Mediterranean had been an incubator of vibrant trade routes for millennia, the Italian city-states during the High Middle Ages had a distinct advantage. They functioned as a point of entry for the importation of luxury goods from the eastern Mediterranean, which had been more urban, cosmopolitan, and sophisticated than most of Europe for millennia. The importation of spices, porcelain, silk, and other luxury goods was particularly lucrative, and Genoa, Venice, and Florence became prominent centers of international trade by the 1200s.

North of the Alps, the situation differed substantially. There were fewer cities, and they tended to be much smaller with less political independence. Consequently, northern European merchants tended to be less powerful in relationship to the warrior aristocracy, who often demanded high taxes and tolls for commercial activities. Nevertheless, merchants communities formed. One such community arose in the Champagne region of France, where a series of towns took turns hosting trade fairs throughout the year between 1150 and 1300. These fairs improved contacts between merchants in northern and southern

Europe particularly in the cloth trade.

Also beginning in the 1100s, merchants in Lübeck, northern Germany (the Holy Roman Empire), increasingly organized into guilds. This form of social organization strengthened their ability to negotiate some level of independence from noble taxation, and by the 1200s they established the rudiments of, what became known as, the Hanseatic League or Hansa. They established a flotilla system that protected ships at sea from pirates, and they armed caravans on the land to protect against nobles who sought to exact fees from Hansa members. However, as the Lübeck merchants gradually allied with guilds of merchants from other cities across the Baltic and North Seas, their ability to resist the depredations of the warrior aristocracy and pirates improved. The Hansa developed a powerful presence from London to the Slavic republic of Novgorod in modern-day Russia.

Other types of guilds also arose across Europe during the 1100s. Aside from the merchant guilds, which resembled a more localized version of the Hansa, craft guilds arose in various nascent industries. Some guilds, such as goldsmiths and armourers, specialized in producing products for the nobility. Others catered to a broader clientele. For example, cloth production often involved many different specialized processes including carding, weaving, dying, and fulling. The guilds ensured some level of standardization and quality in each of these manufacturing processes. By the 1200s they had become ubiquitous in Europe, and they gradually ensconced themselves in the administration of most cities. They enforced regulations related to the behavior of guild members, who essentially controlled economic activity in urban centers. In addition to these economic functions, guilds also provided a sense of community and belonging for adult Christian males while excluding women, Jews, and foreigners.

The extension of lands under plow, the improvements in agricultural productivity, and the establishment of robust trade and production networks contributed to the growth of the economy of Europe during the High Middle Ages. This growth did not bring prosperity to most Europeans, however. The exactions wrought by landlords, the tithes collected by the Church, and the taxes levied by the secular rulers enriched those in positions of power. The exploitation both of natural resources and of workers gained momentum for most of the period. This exploitation enabled Europe to accrue the characteristics of an advanced civilization with beautiful cathedrals, fortified castles, and highly literate poets and administrators. Those in power were successful in creating the impression that they deserved to profit from the labor of their subjects and believers. They then invested their profits in acts of patronage to enhance their status and brand, as we will explore more fully when we address the Italian Renaissance in the Late Middle Ages.

The Rise of the Papacy

Although the Bishop of Rome had been one of the original five patriarchs of Christendom, the office was

much more limited prior to 1000 than afterwards. Occasionally popes, such as Gregory the Great (r. 590-604), who sent missionaries to convert the early English, and Leo III (r. 795-816), who crowned Charlemagne in 800, exerted bursts of papal authority and success. However, the position of the Bishop of Rome was so contested by ruling families of the central Italian nobility that the extent of papal influence outside of the Italian peninsula was extremely limited before 1000 as powerful nobles appointed their own popes and declared others to be antipopes. It was hard to claim wide ranging powers or divine approval when rival claimants to the office also boasted those same rights and powers. Further exacerbating the impact of the internecine conflicts between Italian ruling families, the Christian morality of the individuals holding the office was often suspect at best.   The result was that the papacy prior to 1000 had a fraction of the power that it gained in the High Middle Ages.

The most influential catalyst for the reform and strengthening of the papacy was the monastic reform movement. It started in Lorraine and in Burgundy during the 900s. Over the course of the next two centuries it became one of the most disruptive movements in European history because it threatened to transfer enormous wealth and power away from aristocratic families and into the hand of the Church. For the most part, it was successful in this endeavor until the 1500s, when many secular rulers confiscated monastic lands during the Protestant Reformation. The essence of the movement was two-fold.

First, the warrior aristocracy (nobles) had long established monasteries for the salvation of their souls. Monks in these family-controlled monasteries plied the Lord for mercy in order to atone for the atrocities committed by the founders of their monasteries. The nobles treated these monasteries as familial property. Members of noble families governed the monasteries and nunneries as abbots and abbesses. The running of monasteries and nunneries provided younger sons and daughters of nobles with career paths that did not interfere with the family patrimony. Instead of inheriting the family properties in the secular realm, the ecclesiastical aristocrats often busied themselves with the affairs of the Church and of local monasteries that the family controlled.

Second, in such an environment the dedication of the monks and nuns in these monasteries was suspect. They rarely adhered to the tenants of Benedictine rule, including moderation, hard work, obedience, celibacy, and humility. Instead, they drank, fornicated, and hired peasants to do their labor. Occasionally, the Church leaders intervened and attempted to establish order. However, without oversight and guidance from dedicated brethren, the monasteries suffered from bouts of moral decay and self indulgence. Many monasteries were a blemish on the reputation of the Church as a source of moral authority.

Determined to reverse these lapses in the rule of St. Benedict, two different movements arose, one in Lorraine (the Holy Roman Empire) under Otto I (r. 962-973) and one at Cluny in Burgundy, under the control of Duke William the Pious of Aquitaine (r. 895-918). The purpose of these movements was similar. If the Church was to improve its influence among the powerful nobles, it had to improve its prestige. Monks in these monasteries could no longer disregard their vows. The proposed way to enforce such a program was to wrest the estates of the monasteries away from the noble families, who

considered monastic lands to be part of their family patrimony. While the movement at Lorraine demonstrated enormous scholarly dedication and devotion, Cluny became the dominant force in the monastic reform movement because it established a hierarchical structure that supervised the activities of monks in hundreds of monasteries by 1100.

Cluny's mission to exert control over hundreds of monasteries and their enormous landholdings divided the European nobility. Some nobles who believed in the aspirations and goals of the reformers supported it wholeheartedly. Others who were threatened by the Church's attempt to wrest control of lands held by their family for generations resisted reform vigorously and sometimes violently. Because land was the source of most wealth, the reformers constituted a threat to the economic resources and privileges of many nobles. Nevertheless, the movement was ultimately successful partly because monarchs often supported it. It weakened the power of many of their nobles, but it also gradually increased the wealth, prestige, and power of the Latin Church and its leadership in Rome.

Reassured by the growing wealth and prestige of the Church, the reformist leaders of the Church cultivated powerful allies. Among them was none other than the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry III (r. 1046-1056). Henry exercised enormous control over members of the clergy in his territories, the very practice that monastic reform opposed. However, Henry also recognized the advantages that a reformed Church could impart to emperors, such as himself, who typically received their coronation from the Bishop of Rome. If the popes became more prestigious, the emperor would too, because the pope recognized his authority. Similar to many monarchs after him, Henry sought to control the increasingly powerful Church leaders as a strategy to strengthen his claims to power. However, during the High Middle Ages, secular leaders such as the Holy Roman Emperor and the King of England sometimes underestimated the growing power of the Church and its leaders. And, as we will see in the following sections of this chapter, this competition for power between Church and secular leaders had fundamental effects on European political development.

When Henry III died in 1056, he left behind a six-year-old son, Henry IV (1050-1105). During the young king's minority, the leaders of the reform faction in the Church strengthened their control of the papacy and its independence from the Holy Roman Emperor. They cultivated powerful allies to the south of Rome in 1059 when they concluded the Treaty of Melfi, which recognized the Normans' claims to parts of southern Italy and Sicily. The result was the removal of Byzantine and Muslim rulers in those regions. Although relations with the Norman rulers in southern Italy were often strained, the papacy was becoming increasingly aware of the power of religious conviction to inspire men to go to war.

By the 1070s, the popes engaged in open conflict with the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV. The conflict arose over a number of issues, including the right to appoint bishops. This conflict, sometimes referred to as the Investiture Controversy or Investiture Contest also addressed the power of the Holy Roman Emperor in Italy and the pope in Germany. It was part of a larger competition for power that spread across much of Europe for the next three-hundred years as popes and secular rulers sought to exert their control, not only over the appointment of Church officials, but also over the rights to collect taxes and to administer justice. This competition for power grew out of the rising prestige of the papacy,

which allowed popes to influence events well beyond the Italian peninsula, and it only intensified as a result of the crusading movement, which began near the end of the eleventh century.

The First Crusade, 1095-1099

Emboldened by the rising power and prestige of his office, Pope Urban II (r. 1088-1099) traveled across the Alps from Rome to Clermont, which lay in the heart of modern-day France. Francia at this time (November 1095) was suffering from frequent bouts of chaos and violence. Many knights wantonly disregarded any allegiance they may have had to an overlord. They built wooden castles and considered land conferred to their ancestors by Frankish kings as their own. Despite the attempts of ecclesiastical leaders to reform the Church and society, political authority had few moral obligations. Might made right. Violence disrupted commercial and cultural activities.

For over a century, since the late 900s, Church leaders had attempted to persuade members of the knightly class, who raided the countryside from their rudimentary castles, to recognize certain constraints on their behavior. As described in the previous chapter, the Peace of God and the Truce of God arose as social movements, inspired by local clergy, to persuade knights to restrict their violence against non-combatants and to limit violence to certain time periods. Neither movement was particularly successful. Urban II understood that violence was endemic to much of Francia, and he addressed the topic in 1095 at Clermont, where he convened a council composed mostly of Church leaders. There he noted the prevalence of violence and the need to correct local clergy who had made their services available to the corrupt local nobility. He cautioned the clergy in attendance to care for their local congregations as a shepherd would for a flock. He reminded them of the horrors of Hell for failure to take their clerical responsibilities seriously.

Urban II then asked his listeners to spread the news that the lands of the Romans, meaning the Byzantine Empire, had suffered invasions from people he deemed abominable. He called all Christians who recognized his authority to save their brethren in the east. Although relations between the papacy and the Byzantines were not particularly friendly in the late 1000s, he implored those in attendance to liberate eastern lands, including Byzantium and the Holy Land, from the control of the Seljuk Turks. Several sources recorded the speech of the pope, and his precise motives for proclaiming the crusade have attracted the attention of numerous historians.

Whatever the pope's motives, the crusade was a qualified success for the office of the papacy. Clergy left the Council of Clermont in November 1095 and encouraged their flocks, their parishioners, and their neighbors to travel to the Holy Land to liberate Jerusalem from this alleged threat. Although some preachers may have presented their quest to perpetuate violence against non-Christians in terms of protecting pilgrimages to the Holy Land, the pope's speech was not so limited in its goals, and various preachers interpreted the pope's exhortation differently. The liberation of the the lands under Muslim

rule constituted his primary talking point. However, given the widespread dereliction of the Frankish knights who had failed to adhere to oaths to abide by the Peace and Truce of God, the pontiff understood the need for those warriors to save their souls. He promised the cleansing of sins for those who undertook the journey to the Holy Land, including those who died before they arrived.
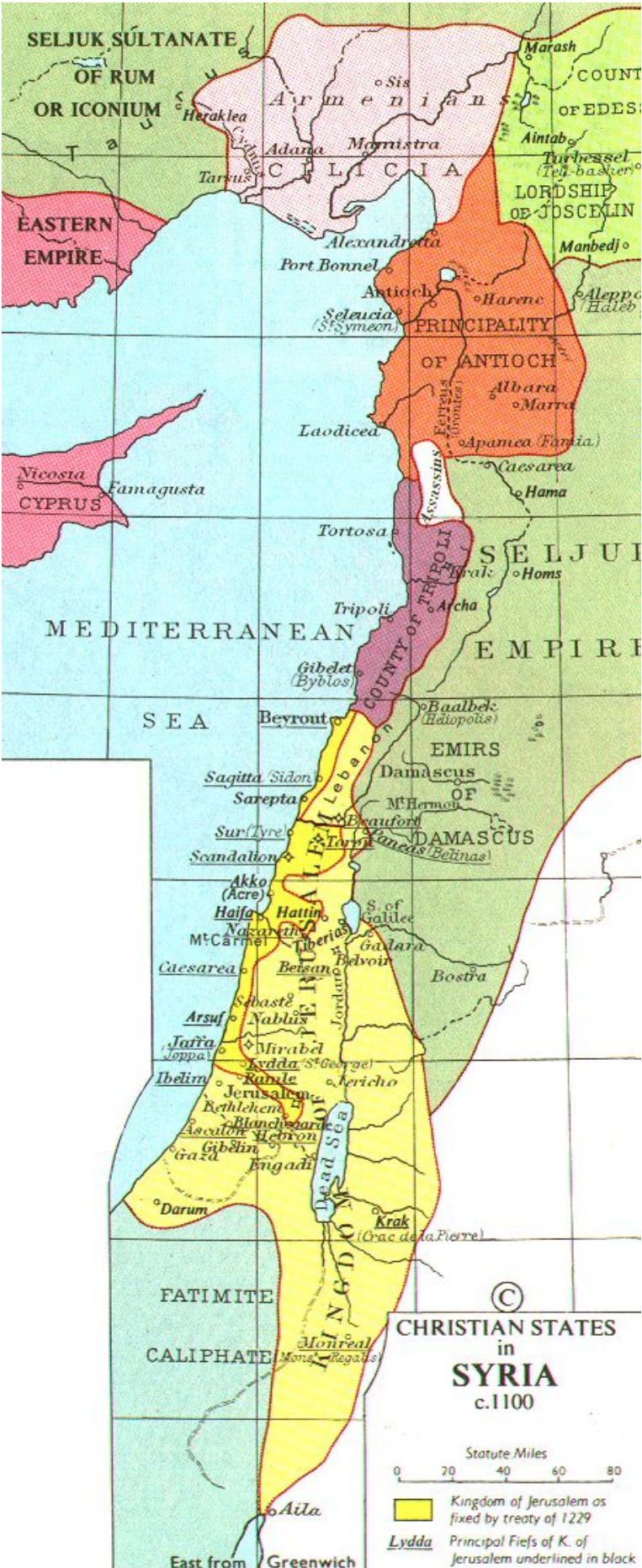
Although the papacy had framed warfare in religious terms in the past, the reaction to the Clermont speech and the subsequent preaching of the First Crusade was unprecedented. Europeans responded in the tens of thousands; maybe as many as 50,000 crusaders heeded the message. If so, it was the largest army in European history since the Romans and their allies met Attila the Hun and his allies at the Battle of Chalons in 451 CE. Commoners and nobles left their families in Francia, the German Empire, southern Italy, England, and Flanders to join a growing pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Before trekking across central and eastern Europe, a large number of them attacked Jewish communities along the Rhineland, most notably at Cologne and Mainz. This anti-semitic response to the call for crusade highlighted the crusading rhetoric's prmotion of violence, intolerance, and divisiveness. It was not just the liberation of the Holy Land that the crusaders sought. Encouraged by the rhetoric against non-Christians, the crusaders attacked Jewish communities who had inhabited the Rhineland and contributed to the growing culture and commerce of the area since the time of Charlemagne.

As the crusaders marched eastward through the recently-converted Christian Kingdom of Hungary they sparked fear among Christians and Jews. Led by a charismatic preacher, Peter the Hermit, and some nobles, most notably Godfrey of Bouillon, who later became the first ruler of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, they caused panic and mayhem wherever they traveled. The Christian Hungarians responded and massacred a few large bands of the disorganized crusaders. By the time they reached Constantinople in late 1096, the crusaders constituted a threat to order and safety in the city. The Byzantine emperor ferried them across the Bosphorus to Anatolia, where they met a swift and decisive defeat at the hands of the Seljuk Turks. A few thousand of the survivors, including Peter and Godfrey, retreated in safety to Constantinope to await the arrival of more organized, professional warriors, mostly from southern Italy, France, and Flanders. So ended the first wave of the First Crusade, sometimes referred to as the People's Crusade.

It is safe to say that the People's Crusade was not what Urban II had in mind in late 1095 when he proclaimed the crusade at Clermont, where he had met with Adhemar, Bishop of Le Puy, to plan the journey to Jerusalem. The first wave of crusaders was disorganized and ineffective. By contrast, after the pope appointed the bishop as his legate or representative, nobles and their retinues gathered under the leadership of Raymond, Count of Toulouse, one of the wealthiest and most powerful nobles in Adhemar's diocese. Other bands coalesced, principally among the Normans both in Sicily and in France and also under the leadership of the Count of Flanders.

In short, this second wave of the First Crusade, the Princes' Crusade, consisted mostly of the type of warriors who had proven so disruptive to political stability in Francia for more than a century. In late 1096 and early 1097 they traveled in separate clusters to Constantinople, where they swore to the Byzantine emperor oaths of loyalty, oaths that they would later forswear. They often quarreled among

themselves, but they maintained enough unity to capture Edessa and Antioch in 1098, and ultimately Jerusalem in 1099. By 1102, they established a contiguous strip of Latin Christian territories that stretched from the Sinai Peninsula to Anatolia. The leaders and their retinues were hardened warriors who had caught many of the Muslim inhabitants of the Holy Land completely unprepared for this type of religious-inspired violence.

SELJUK SULTANATE
OF RUM
OR ICONIUM

EASTERN
EMPIRE

Marash

Sis

COUNT
OF EDES

Heraklea

Armenian

Adana
Mamistra

Aintab

Tarsus

Turbessel
(Tell-basher)

CILICIA

LORDSHIP
OF JOSCELIN

Alexandretta

Manbedj

Port Bonnel

Antioch

Harene

Aleppo
(Haleb)

Seleucia
(St Symeon)

PRINCIPALITY

Laodicea

Albara
Marra

OF ANTIOCH

Nicosia

Famagusta

CYPRUS

Apamea (Famia)

Caesarea

Hama

Tortosa

Assassins

SELJU

Krak

Homs

MEDITERRANEAN

Tripoli

Archa

EMPIRE

COUNTY OF TRIPOLI

Gibelet
(Byblos)

SEA

Beyrout

Baalbek
(Heliopolis)

EMIRS

Damascus

Sagitta (Sidon)

OF

Sarepta

Mt Hermon

DAMASCUS

Sur (Tyre)

Beaufort

Scandalion

Toron

Paneas (Belinas)

Akko
(Acre)

Lebanon

Haifa

Hattin

S. of
Galilee

Nazareth

Tiberias

Mt Carmel

Gadara

Belvoir

Caesarea

Beisan

Bostra

Sebaste

Jordan

Arsuf

Nablus

Jaffa
Joppa

Mirabel

Ibelim

Lydda (St George)

Jericho

Ramle

Jerusalem

Bethlehem

KINGDOM OF JERUSALEM

Blanchegarde

Ascalon

Hebron

Gibelin

Dead Sea

Gaza

Engadi

Darum

Krak
(Crac de la Pierre)

FATIMITE

CALIPHATE

Monreal
(Mons Regalis)

© CHRISTIAN STATES
in
SYRIA
c. 1100

Statute Miles

0   20   40   60   80

Kingdom of Jerusalem as
fixed by treaty of 1229

Lydda   Principal Fiefs of K. of
Jerusalem underlined in black

Aila

East from Greenwich

The Crusader States at their height. Note how the Seljuk territories (colored green on the map) almost completely surrounded the principalities.

Pope Urban II died two weeks after the capture of Jerusalem in July of 1099. He never heard the news. However, the office of the papacy benefitted mightily from the success of these bloody victories. Over the coming century, the bishops of Rome became some of the most powerful leaders in Europe. The First Crusade had demonstrated the popes' ability to rally Europeans to their banner, to fight wars, to murder innocents, and to inspire their followers to undertake enormous personal and familial risks for the defense and extension of Latin Christendom. The First Crusade also demonstrated the powerful response to the pope's claim to remit sins. The promise of facilitating entry to a blissful, eternal afterlife had enormous attraction. In the coming centuries the papacy continued to dangle this carrot in front of Europeans when popes wanted to raise money to wage wars against political rivals and heretics.

Religious Enthusiasm

In addition to altering the balance of power between the papacy and secular rulers across Europe, the First Crusade also reinforced the collective identity of the Latin Church's followers. A shared sense of Christian values, history, and culture manifested in a variety of ways: the establishment of social organizations, the patronage of great literary and artistic works, the building of architecture, the development of theories related to religious doctrine, the persecution of non-Christians, and the waging of religious wars. Oftentimes, the religious enthusiasm sparked by the success of the First Crusade and the rising prestige of the papacy encouraged the defining creative and intellectual works of the High Middle Ages. On other occasions, the deep sense of devotion caused immense pain and suffering both for Christians and their adversaries, both real and imagined.

Crusading inspired Europeans to explore new ways to organize themselves into Christian communities. Of course, they had been creating such communities since Jesus had gathered his apostles. However, as the European economy expanded and the population developed more socioeconomic and cultural diversity, the types of Christian communities diversified to meet the needs of a more heterogeneous Europe. In response, the papacy sought to control the proliferating modes of Christian association, lest they stray into heretical beliefs and practices. Typically, these heresies arose in areas where trade enabled the dissemination of ideas. Cities tended to house more diverse, literate, and cosmopolitan populations, and the emerging religious orders and movements of the High Middle Ages often addressed the various devotional needs of an increasingly urban and heterogeneous society.

The Mediterranean ports were one of the principal areas where these trends were in evidence. The Templars and Hospitallers were military-religious orders that formed in the wake of the conquest of Jerusalem. Their initial purposes were to protect pilgrims to the Holy Land and to protect the Holy

Land itself. By the end of the Third Crusade (1193), the Teutonic Knights formed as an order in the port city of Acre in the Levant, but like the Templars and Hospitallers, their sphere of operations shifted away from the Holy Land and toward Europe after the Crusader States collapsed during the 1200s. The Templars became international bankers. Their rivals, the Hospitallers, settled for political control of islands in the Mediterranean and eventually the Carribean, and the Teutonic Knights ruled over vast stretches of northern and eastern Europe near modern-day Poland.   All three of these military religious orders melded Christian practices, such as asceticism and celibacy, with knighthood in what St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) deemed a new form of chivalry.

In addition to these military orders, several ascetic Christian sects of monks formed. Asceticism had always been one of the defining features of Christianity, and it became a prominent element of both orthodox and heretical Christian movements in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. One of the most prominent ascetic Christian movements of the early 1100s became known as the Cistercian order or the White Monks to differentiate them from the more traditional Benedictine order or Black Monks (discussed in previous chapter). The White Monks practiced a more austere form of the Benedictine rule established around 600 by Gregory the Great. They believed that the Black Monks had become lax in their observance of the rule. The monastic reform movement of the tenth and eleventh centuries (described above) had intended to mitigate some of the lapses in the observance of the Benedictine rule. However, the reforms gradually faded in many monasteries, including the mother house at Cluny. During the First Crusade in 1098 a group of monks, led by Robert of Molesme, left the Cluny abbey to found a new monastery dedicated to a more strict observance of the rule of St. Benedict.

The Cistercians initially settled in some swampland south of Dijon in Burgundy. They drained the swamp, cleared trees, and turned wasteland into productive agriculture holdings. This dedication to undertake hard work in a collective effort combined with their willingness to experiment with crop rotation and other innovative forms of agriculture sustained the order's economic footing as it gradually expanded across Europe during the 1100s. During the order's heyday in the first half of the twelfth century the Cistericans attracted the most charismatic holy man in Europe: Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard became a powerful presence in the growth of the order and his name became legendary across Europe. He prayed routinely to the Virgin Mary, a somewhat innovative form of devotion in Latin Christianity during the 1100s. In addition to encouraging converts to the Knights Templar, Bernard was an austere ascetic and a mystic. These approaches to Christian devotion put him into conflict with Christians who sought to uncover the divine through the study of logic.

Shortly after the fall of the crusader state of Edessa at the end of 1144, Bernard began advocating for the Second Crusade (1047-1150). In Burgundy Pope Eugene III (r.1145-1153) commissioned Bernard to preach the crusade in 1145. The pope understood Bernard's capacity to influence powerful people, such as the monarchs of France (Louis VII and his queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine) and the German imperial family (Conrad III and his nephew, Frederick Barbarossa). The leadership of the Second Crusade differed markedly from the First Crusade, which had no monarchs. The inclusion of monarchs should have been a boon to the crusading effort; however, the lack of coordination and cooperation

between these rulers undermined the crusade's success. They ultimately failed to reclaim Edessa and Bernard, at one time the crusade's most vocal proponent, ultimately characterized the Second Crusade as a humiliating defeat.

Edessa had been one of the first crusader states; however, its stability had always been dependent upon outside support. Its conquest in 1144 under the leadership of Imad al-Din Zengi (r.1127-1146), commonly referred to as Zengi, signaled a rising unity among the disparate Muslim states in opposition to Christian control of the Levant. The failure of the Latin Christian monarchs to retake Edessa encouraged the formation of a face-saving plan: the conquest of Damascus. The plan was never particularly well thought out. Damascus had opposed Zengi and his army. The political situation in the Levant was more complicated than the crusaders realized. Their siege of Damascus in 1148 was such a dismal failure that the crusade fell apart shortly afterwards. The crusaders returned to Europe.

The Second Crusade's only military success from a European perspective did not take place in the Levant. Instead, it occurred on the Atlantic coast of the Iberian peninsula during the summer of 1147 when northern European ships headed for the Holy Land sought refuge from rough seas. Landing in Porto, they came into contact with the first king of Portugal, Alfonso I (r. 1139-1185), who enlisted the military services of the crusaders by offering to let them plunder and despoil the city of Lisbon if they wrested it from the Muslims, who had held it for over 400 years. Despite some infighting between the English and Flemish crusaders, they managed to force Lisbon to surrender in less than four months as the large population grew short of supplies.

These warrior Christians started their voyage as part of the Second Crusade but ended up as part of the reconquista, which had begun during the late 700s. Although the reconquest of the Iberian peninsula had progressed slowly during the 800s and 900s, by the eleventh century Christian soldiers were rallying against al-Andulus, a collection of Muslim states that controlled the southern half of the Iberian Peninsula. Unsurprisingly, Europeans found it much easier to conquer and hold land closer to their heartland, what became known as Continental Europe rather than in faraway territories, such as the Near East.

Despite or perhaps because of these religious conflicts, trade and intellectual exchanges between Europeans and Muslims increased during the twelfth century. The Holy Land had long been a portal between Mediterranean commerce and trade routes, such as the Silk Road, from India and the Far East. As such, the control of this area by Christians enhanced the profits of Italian merchants, who already had significant trade infrastructure in place before the crusades. The influx of capital generated as a result of the crusades enriched Italian merchants who increasingly sent their children to study in universities, which originally appeared in the Italian peninsula during the eleventh century and spread to much of Europe by the thirteenth century. Although modern universities in Europe are mostly secular, during the High Middle Ages they constituted religious communities, focused on the study of ancient authoritative texts in both the Christian and Greco-Roman traditions.

The success of the *reconquista* contributed significantly to the growth and development of these

emerging educational institutions. The Iberian peninsula had long been a center of learning admired by Christian monks. Around 970 Gerbert of Aurillac, later Pope Sylvester II (r. 999-1003), had studied Arabic texts and especially mathematics in Catalonia. He used Arabic numerals and re-introduced the abacus to Europe. His admiration for the learning and resources of the Kingdom of Cordoba inspired some to claim that he was in league with the Devil, while others recognized his intellectual leadership.

One hundred and fifty years later, by the end of the Second Crusade, the previously Muslim city of Toledo became the epicenter of an unprecedented translation effort. Although some translations proceeded from Arabic to Castilian and then into Latin (the primary language of intellectual discourse in European universities), many followed a more direct route from Arabic to Latin. The most productive of these translators was probably Gerard of Cremona (1114-1187), who translated over 80 books from Arabic into Latin. Most of the books were of a scientific and mathematical nature. In Toledo he rendered into Latin Ptolemy's work on astronomy, the Almagest, which had originally been composed in Greek. This work was virtually unknown in western Europe at the time, but it was well known in Constantinople. This lack of cooperation between the Byzantines and the Latin Christians highlighted how poor relations were between Greek Orthodox Christians in Byzantium and Latin Christians. Gerard also wrote original works on mathematics and algebra, and his writings eventually persuaded Latin Christians to adopt Arabic numerals.

The harvesting of knowledge from the Toledo libraries was not limited to astronomy and math. Benedictine monks, traveling from Cluny and Italy, worked with local Mozarabs (Christians who spoke Arabic), Jews, and Muslims to render ancient and Islamic sources into the language of western European intellectuals: Latin. They translated works covering Euclidean geometry, optics, medicine, ethics, physics, and logic. The latter was especially relevant to the burgeoning form of intellectual activity in the Christian universities: scholasticism, a method of harmonizing apparent contradictions through logic. It often addressed the verity of Christian belief through the application of logic. When addressing the complicated topic of the Divine, both Muslims and Jews had developed similar approaches, such as the Kalām, the study of Islamic doctrine.

Some teachers in the scholastic tradition became intellectual celebrities. The most controversial of these teachers in the twelfth century was Peter Abelard (1079–1142), a Parisien philosopher, poet, composer, and theologian. He explored both the pros and cons of various important questions that had been considered by the Church fathers. Abelard specialized in the application of reason to faith; he argued that ultimate truth could and should sustain reasoned investigation of its precepts. By emphasizing the quest for truth even if it contradicted Church dogma, he fell afoul of the Church authorities, and especially of Bernard of Clairvaux, a powerful Church leader. Abelard's point was that educated Christians should challenge their own beliefs and try to understand them. He advocated for reliance on the Bible as the ultimate source of truth in order to expand Christian knowledge throughout society. Martin Luther would argue a similar point approximately 400 years later. Perhaps unsurprisingly, both men fell afoul of Church authorities.

Medieval universities differed substantially from the modern institutions. Typically, they resembled

craft guilds, with organizations of apprentices (students) and masters (teachers) negotiating over the cost of classes and preventing unauthorized lecturers from stealing students. Students often paid teachers directly, and there were no grades. Teachers were generally members of the clergy, "professing" religion, hence the term "professor." A guild of students founded the first university, a law school at Bologna in northern Italy in 1088. However, by the 1200s the Sorbonne in Paris became the most prestigious university in Europe, partly because of its emphasis on theology, which many considered the highest form of intellectual activity with its emphasis on studying the divine. The University of Paris had emerged from the cathedral school of Notre Dame, where Abelard had taught in the 1100s.

Despite these differences from modern practices, medieval universities created a number of traditions 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. 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.

Medieval manuscript depicting Hildegard of Bingen receiving a divine vision and recording it with a scribe.

The overwhelming majority of students and professors were male, since the assumption was that the whole purpose of studies was to create better church officials. However, in the thirteenth century Bettisia Gozzadini (1209–1261) became the first woman not only to receive a degree in a European university, but one of the first to teach at one as well. Because of the highly patriarchal nature of medieval society, many of the great female thinkers of the period were either wealthy enough to hire a tutor 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 towering 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 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. Hildegard was exceptional in her range of intellectual production. Medieval women faced enormous obstacles to their intellectual journeys. Nevertheless, many other religious women, including Peter Abelard's beloved Héloïse d'Argenteuil, also contributed significantly to medieval learning and scholarship.

Although the deep intellectual studies were not entirely new to Europe during the 1100s, scholasticism was becoming the most influential form of intellectual discourse in European universities, where it remained prevalent for more than 500 years. Monks and clerics who attended universities applied scholastic, dialectical reasoning to questions related to the existence of God, access to the afterlife, the nature of divine justice, and many other topics related to Christian theology. Although scholasticism eventually garnered a reputation for sterile debates (how many angels could dance on a pinhead?), it provided an avenue to innovation in religious devotion. Scholastics pioneered the doctrines of Purgatory, which addressed the afterlife and transubstantiation, which claimed miraculous powers for priests. Both doctrines assumed a growing importance after the Church recognized them as canonical in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council.

To the medieval mind, a priest's ability to transform a wheat wafer into the flesh of Jesus and ordinary wine into the blood of Jesus was nothing short of a miracle. This doctrine claimed that the external appearance and taste of the wine and bread remained unchanged; however, the internal substance had, according

A Corpus Christi procession celebrating the miraculous transformation of bread into the flesh of Jesus, according to the doctrine of transubstantiation. Note the presence of the Eucharist under the canopy in the center. These processions arranged communities in hierarchical order, with the clergy at the front.

to the dogma, transformed. Inspired by this doctrine celebrations arose across much of Europe during

the early 1200s , and by the 1260s Corpus Christi Day had become part of the calendar of the Latin Church (as it still is). Celebrated approximately six weeks after Easter, it provided an occasion for bishops to lead a large, orderly and hierarchical procession through the streets of cities. They held the Eucharist up high for all to see in a device called a monstrance, typically protected by a canopy overhead. Such rituals provided occasions for Christian communities to gather and demonstrate their devotion to a medieval doctrine, a powerful fiction that elevated the prestige of the clergy by claiming that they had supernatural powers.

By the Late Middle Ages most large cities of Europe had religious confraternities, guild-like, male social organizations, formed to support a variety of Christian teachings and customs, such as the feast of Corpus Christi. They discussed the theology, planned the event, and ensured that the celebration remained orderly and respectful. In the coming centuries, the Corpus Christi processions provided moments of tension when the doctrine came under increasing scrutiny by those who questioned the priests' ability to perform such a miracle. Nevertheless, the Corpus Christi celebrations reflected the depth and breadth of Christian devotion in the High and Late Middle Ages. Performed across the Empire, Poland, Hungary, France, England, and the Mediterranean peninsulas, the celebrations expressed the growing devotion to Christian doctrines.

St. Chapelle exhibits the classic features of Gothic architecture: pointed arches over the windows, large stained glass windows, and webbed vaulting on impressively high ceilings.

This devotion became an increasingly visible element of the European urban landscapes during the High Middle Ages. Gothic cathedrals rose to new heights, dwarfing the earlier Romanesque churches. Featuring the pointed fifth arch, web vaulting, and relatively thin pillars, they often showcased large stained glass windows full of Christian iconography. On the exterior they relied on flying buttresses to offload some of the weight from the walls in order to accommodate the large windows. They towered above the urban landscape and struck awe into the minds of newcomers to the cities. For locals, they fostered a sense of civic and religious pride.

The intensification of religious devotion during the High Middle Ages assumed many forms from theological disputations to celebrations of Christian saints and doctrines to the formation of religious military orders, such as the Hospitallers, Templars, and Teutonic Knights. Church leaders fanned the flames of devotion, which often had constructive consequences in terms of intellectual, social, and artistic development. However, as the Church became more wealthy and powerful partly as a result of intensified devotion, it attracted the jealousy, fear, and even hostility of some secular leaders. Its legions of well-educated clerics, administrators, and lawyers in addition to its ability to raise the largest armies in Europe put it in direct competition with emperors, kings, and princes who developed a wide spectrum of approaches to dealing with the ecclesiastical colossus. This tension lasted into the Late Middle Ages even as the power of the Church began to wane during the 1300s.

To a certain degree, the Latin Church was a victim of its own success. Religious enthusiasm was so intense that the Church could not control the beliefs and actions of the devout. This tendency emerged clearly during the crusades when fervent Christians attacked Jewish communities during the First and Third Crusades. The pogroms in the Rhineland in 1095 were led by preachers and minor nobles. They villainized Jewish communities who sought shelter but ultimately suffered either at the hands of the crusaders or by committing mass suicide. A similar pogrom occurred in York England in 1190 during the Third Crusade.

Although the Church officially condemned these horrific events, its leaders often encouraged anti-semitism. At the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, Canon 68 stipulated that Jews must wear identifying clothing to prevent carnal relations with Christians. The canon also demanded that they stay indoors during Easter because they failed to show deference to the Eucharist. Church leaders had always been somewhat ambivalent about Jews, with some leaders appreciating Jewish scholarship and expertise and others claiming that they were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus, even though crucifixion was a peculiarly Roman form of execution. It was not just Church leaders who promoted these stories. By the middle of the 1200s rumors spread that Jews were eating children and desecrating the Eucharist in private rituals. These stories circulated across Europe for centuries. By the thirteenth century secular leaders who had once relied on Jews for their skills in literacy, medicine, and trade, expelled them from their kingdoms. This trend also continued into the Late Middle Ages.

This dark side of religious enthusiasm was not reserved solely for the persecution of Jews. As the variety of Christian forms of devotion expanded during the 1100s and 1200s, the papacy responded by identifying some Christian groups as heretical. The Christian practice of asceticism had inspired some

Europeans to embrace a life devoted to apostolic poverty, living poor as Jesus and the Apostles did. Their behavior differed markedly from the luxury that increasingly surrounded the papacy. This contrast in approaches to Christian devotion divided the Latin Church. For example, most mendicant friars, such as the Dominicans, the Carmelites, and most of the Franciscans, remained orthodox by maintaining a strict obedience to the papacy, even though they embraced apostolic poverty. Other ascetic groups, such as the Waldensians and the Cathars, became the victims of persecution, because they threatened the authority of the Church leadership.

The Waldensian movement, begun by Peter Waldo in Lyon, advocated for the vernacular instead of Latin as the language of preaching and the Bible. Waldensians questioned the emerging Church doctrines of transubstantiation and purgatory. They rejected the Church's claims on the sacred powers of holy water and relics. In general, they doubted the ability of clergy to perform miracles. The movement spread to the Holy Roman Empire and Italy by the 1200s. Hauled before the medieval inquisition, Waldo recanted and went underground; despite his disappearance from the historical records, the movement continued to spread. The Waldensian sect of Christianity later merged with Calvinist movement during the sixteenth century and survived into the modern period. Some emigrated from Europe to the US.

By contrast, the Cathars were more openly defiant. Their leaders called themselves "perfecti" and eschewed all physical contact with anything that copulated. They formed a rival Church hierarchy in southern France. In 1209, Pope Innocent III (r. 1198-1216) proclaimed a crusade against them that lasted 20 years. Although the Cathar leaders and their followers considered themselves devout Christians, they questioned the holiness and authority of the Bishop of Rome. They attracted members of the southern French nobility, including the Count of Toulouse and crusader heroes to their side, but ultimately they succumbed to the combined forces of the papacy and the King of France, Louis VIII (r. 1223-1226).

The line between heretic and orthodox Christian was not always clear. Originating in the Low Countries and spreading into France and the Empire, beguines were lay women who embraced celibacy and apostolic poverty. Unlike nuns, they could leave their religious life and enter into marriage if they chose. They did not live under the guidance of a religious rule and did not have designated spiritual oversight from a priest. This level of freedom for communities of religious women was very rare. They never received a license from the pope, and they gradually attracted many critics. By the Late Middle Ages they faced open hostility from Church authorities. In 1310 the Inquisition sentenced Margueritte Puerette, a beguine mystic, to death by burning. Although beguine communities continued to attract adherents well into the 1500s, their status *vis-à-vis* Church authorities remained more than uncomfortable.

Another group that skirted the lines between heresy and orthodoxy was the Spiritual Franciscans. They emerged as devout adherents of the Franciscan order, which received papal recognition and blessing in 1210. Francis himself became a religious celebrity. He traveled on the Fifth Crusade and attempted to convert the Sultan of Egypt without success. The Church recognized him as a saint less than two years

after he died, an unusually short period of time for such an act. In the coming decades Franciscans attracted the admiration of Christians across Europe for their devotion to apostolic poverty. Many were also excellent preachers. Ironically, the order became wealthy from pious bequests, and its members gradually splintered into two groups: the Coventuals accepted the growing wealth of the order and the wealth of the Church, while the Spirituals remained ardent proponents of apostolic poverty. Some Spirituals embraced messianic prophecies and identified the pope as the antichrist. Unsurprisingly, they gradually came into conflict with the papacy, and in the 1320s and 1330s Pope John XXII declared them heretics and ordered many of them imprisoned and burned. A similar group of ardent Franciscans emerged in the 1400s. Known as the Observants, they refrained from attacking the pope and continue to exist.

During the High Middle Ages the breadth and intensity of religious devotion was on full display. Christianity proved to be malleable as an increasingly diverse population adapted the religion to its needs. The crusades, the *reconquista*, international trade, the formation of guilds and cities, and the spread of literacy broadened the experiential and intellectual horizons of broad cross sections of society. As these different groups sought to reconcile their faith with their experiences, Latin Christianity resembled a collection of religions 300 years before the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. Limiting the range of religious expression, the papacy sought to maintain a semblance of coherence and, more importantly, the recognition of its authority over religious expression. It did not always succeed.

One of the clearest episodes of the papacy's lack of control over its believers occurred during the Fourth Crusade (1202-1204). Initially intended to be an expedition to attack Cairo, the seat of power over the Holy Land, the crusade changed course before it left port. As most of the crusaders descended on Venice as the point of embarkation for the crusade, the Venetians demanded a contractually-agreed-upon compensation for transporting the crusaders across the Mediterranean. When the crusaders were unable to pay the full amount owed, the blind, nonagenarian Doge of Venice, Enrico Dandolo, forged a deal between the Venetians and the crusaders. They invaded Venetian adversaries in the city of Zara, in modern-day Bosnia, where they installed a pro-Venetian government. They then proceeded to attack another Christian city, Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire.

The Mourning of Christ reflected the emotional expressions and religious subject matter that were characteristic of Giotto's works in the late 1200s and early 1300s. Sometimes referred to as the "father of Western Arts, Giotto's work is generally associated with the earliest phase of the Italian Renaissance.

The pope, Innocent III, excommunicated the crusaders twice on the crusade, which never really materialized in Cairo because the crusaders became preoccupied with plundering Zara and especially Constantinople. The pope eventually lifted the excommunications as he realized that the crusade had eliminated one of his main rivals for religious authority, the Patriarch of Constantinople.

Religious enthusiasm constituted a powerful force for shaping European culture. It inspired great works of art, such as the paintings of Giotto (c. 1267-1337), the poetry of Dante (1265-1321), and the monumental architecture of the period: Gothic cathedrals. It was such a powerful cultural force that it intoxicated the leaders of the Church, who claimed to represent God and to perform miracles. However, power in Europe remained highly contested, fragmented, and contingent even by those who claimed to be the successors of Roman imperial rulers, the popes and the emperors. In fact, the

competition for power was one of the most powerful forces to shape European political and cultural development during the High Middle Ages. Before we explore that topic, let us turn to one of the most powerful fictions to inspire European rulers to action.

The Quest for Empire

After the collapse of Carolingian power in the 800s, the intention to unite the remnants of the Frankish Empire persisted, especially in East Francia, which became the nucleus of what would later be called the "Holy Roman Empire" during the mid-1200s. Rulers in this region maintained a vision of wielding power in disparate lands, from the northern parts of Germany and Poland on the Baltic Sea to central and even southern Italy and Sicily in the heart of the Mediterranean. Inspired by the quest to reconstitute Roman imperial rule, this vision was mostly at odds with the ability of would-be emperors to exercise such power effectively, and it was typically contingent upon recognition by the pope. Consequently, German kings often felt obliged to extend their power into the Italian peninsula in order to substantiate the impression that they were successors to Roman emperors and also to pressure popes to recognize their authority. This ambitious paradigm for political control repeatedly undermined the German emperors' control over their native lands north of the Alps; rebellions arose, and loyalties fractured as the strains of the imperial vision took their toll. Consequently, those German rulers who claimed to be emperors frequently traveled with sizable armies to and from the Italian peninsula, where their presence was often, but not always, unwelcome. In order to maintain a semblance of authority in such far-flung regions, the emperors often ceded much of their power to local rulers who feigned their loyalty. Gradually, the Holy Roman Empire became a collection of semi-autonomous states that were nominally under imperial control.

The inability to control the empire effectively was in part due to dynastic instability. Three different dynasties, Ottonians, Salians, and Hohenstaufens, ruled as emperors for most of the period from the mid-900s to the mid-1200s. Because these German rulers were frequently at war, subduing uprisings across their dominions, they often died with child heirs, which hampered the orderly transfer of power. In addition, as the bishops of Rome became more powerful by the mid-1000s due to the reform movement (described above), they often allied themselves with the emperors' imperial rivals in order to preserve and extend their control over parts of the Italian peninsula from their power base in the Donation of Pepin or what became known as the Papal States.

After the death of the last Carolingian king, Louis the Child (r. 900-911), the German nobility established the procedure of electing its king. This procedure attempted to resolve the problems inherent in dynastic kingship; the death of a king without a legitimate male heir provided opportunities for intrigue and even civil war. Despite the attempt to overcome these problems, the elections did not solve the problem. They provided occasions for bribery and political wrangling and invested the German nobles with significant power. The electors typically consisted of the most influential nobles

and churchmen in Germany. They traditionally elected the designated heir of the previous emperor, but when an emperor died without a suitable male heir, complications and violence arose.
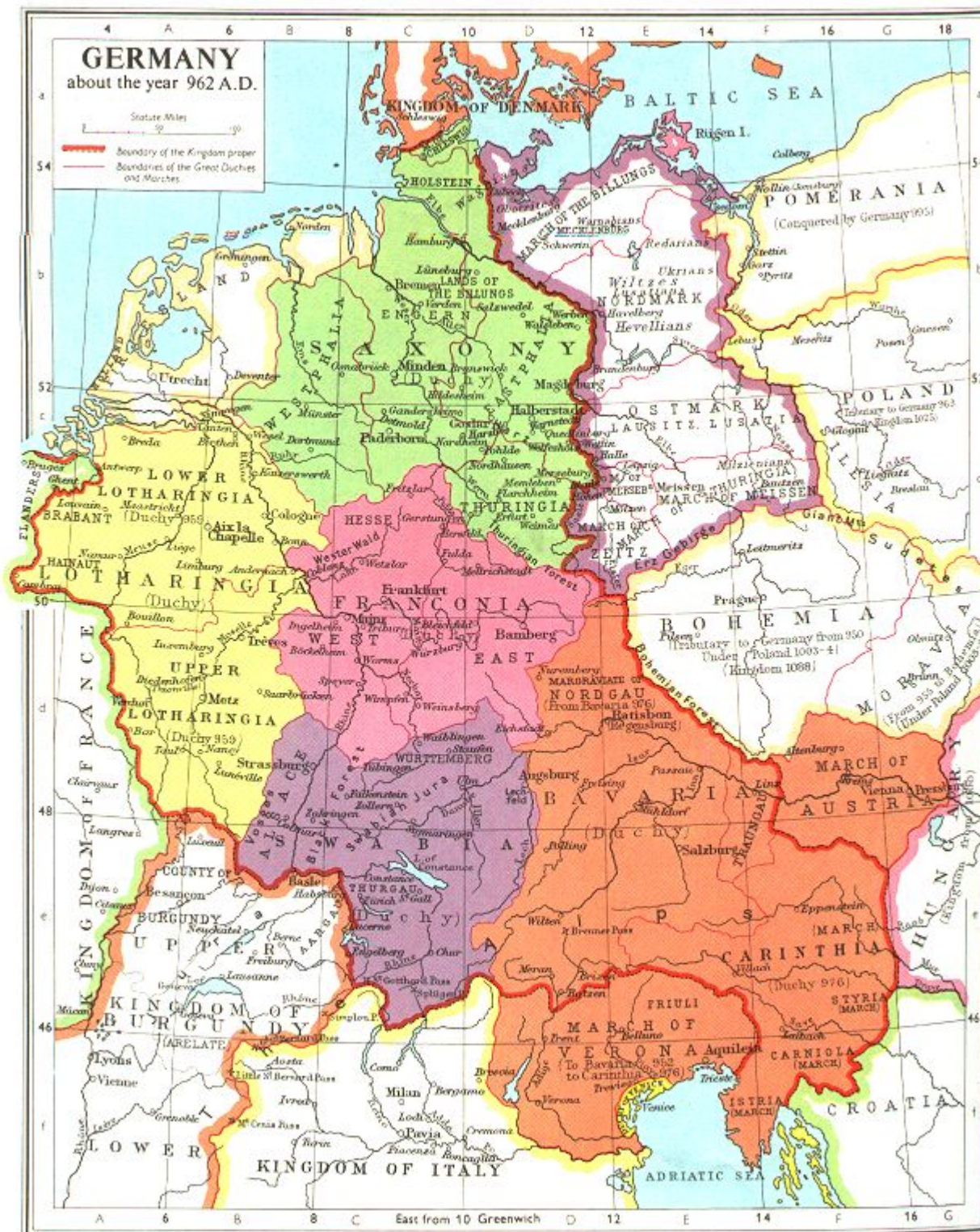
The Holy Roman Empire at the time of the coronation of Otto the Great as Holy Roman Emperor in 962. Notice how Otto did not yet control territories in the Italian peninsula. Instead, he had spent most of the past two decades shoring up the western and especially eastern frontiers of his power base in Saxony.

There was no Holy Roman Emperor from 924 to 962 when rival claimants vied for the title. In 962 Pope

John XII (r. 955-964) crowned Otto the Great (r. 962-973), who demonstrated both military and diplomatic acumen. At the time of his coronation Otto had spent most of his reign wresting control of various regions of Germany from other families, defeating the pagan Magyars of Hungary at the Battle of Lechfeld in 955, and exerting his claims to rule northern Italy after his coronation. His son, Otto II (r. 967-983) proved to be less capable but very ambitious. He attempted to extend imperial control into southern Italy, traditionally under Byzantine and Muslim rule. Ultimately, Otto II failed to achieve his designs and died at the age of 28. His successor, Otto III became king at age 3 and emperor at age 16. During his minority in the 980s and 990s his mother and grandmother acted as capable regents, but Otto III died by age 21 in 1002 and left as his successor his Bavarian cousin, Henry II. Henry spent 12 years gaining control of Germany and parts of modern-day Poland before making his way to Rome for an imperial coronation in 1014.

The Ottonian dynasty demonstrated the precarious position of the German emperors for the next 300 years. They relied on the recognition not only of the German nobility, who elected them the kings of Germany, but also of the popes who crowned them as emperors. Further complicating this challenge, the central Italian nobles had traditionally controlled the papacy, giving them power over the German kings as well. These competing responsibilities required military expeditions across the Alps. Despite the efforts of Otto I to revive learning and to build the sort of durable governmental structure that the English had achieved during the 900s, the territory that the Ottonians claimed to rule was much larger. Consequently, the German kings had to practice the same sort of peripatetic kingship that Charlemagne undertook in the 700s and 800s, constantly travelling throughout their dominions suppressing rebellions.

A big part of this challenge involved control of the papacy. Otto III sought to secure the allegiance of the pope by installing his cousin, Gregory V (r. 996-999), as the first German pope. The Italian nobles, under the leadership of Crescentius II, would have none of it. They elected John XVI as a rival pope, referred to as an "antipope" by those who did not accept the rival. Otto had to return to Rome where he proceeded to cut off the nose, ears, and tongue of the rival pope before blinding and publicly humiliating him. He restored his German relative as pope only to have him die under mysterious circumstances the next year. He then appointed Gerbert of Aurillac, who became the first French pope in 999.

The transition to the next dynasty of German kings (r. 1024-1125), the Salians, was relatively smooth. The German princes elected Conrad II shortly after the last Ottonian emperor, Henry II, died in 1024. The system of electors seemed to be working. The new emperor, Conrad II, took precautions to ensure the smooth transition of power to his son, Henry III, by appointing him as joint ruler of Germany at age 11 in 1028. Although Henry III only lived to be 40, he successfully enhanced the prestige of the papacy by supporting the growing reform movement, which opposed the practice of simony, the purchase of Church offices.   The papacy had suffered systemic corruption for centuries as nepotism and bribery had scuttled attempts to reform the office. Additionally, multiple claimants fought for control of the Church and its growing resources (described above). Perhaps the most conspicuous embodiment of

these problems arose in the 1030s when Benedict IX (r. 1032-1044, 1045, 1047-1048) succeeded his uncle, John XIX (r. 1024-1032) at the age of 20, after his father bribed the papal electors. He later sold the papacy and then reclaimed it. In all, he held the papacy three times between 1032 and 1048.

The Roman people were weary of such corrupt leadership and welcomed Henry III when he removed three rival popes who claimed the office concurrently in 1046 and installed a reformer, who subsequently crowned him emperor. Although the tenure of popes during this period was short due to the violence and chicanery surrounding the office, the emperor Henry III remained committed to reforming the papacy, even as he practiced simony. Henry III apparently believed that the elevation of the prestige of the popes was essential to the growth and power of the office of the emperor. He invested quite a bit of his reign trying to win Italian support for the German kings as rulers of the Italian peninsula, a quest that German monarchs continued to pursue well into the early modern period.

Following the death of Henry III in 1056, the papal reformers continued their rise to dominance as the young Henry IV and his regents sought to avert the crises that often accompanied the reign of a child king. The regents supported the losing side in a civil war that erupted in Hungary. They relinquished powerful positions within the empire in order to gain support from nobles. Most importantly, the regents watched as their opponents among the Italian nobility gained control of the papacy. The young Henry IV's response was to appoint his own pope. The presence of an antipope was not new, but it crippled Henry's prestige as rival factions formed across the empire. When Henry IV assumed direct personal rule at the age of 15 in 1065, he found himself in a very difficult position, with his nobles divided over loyalties to rival popes. Although Henry improved his situation somewhat in Germany, the election of the Church firebrand reformer, Hildebrand (Pope Gregory VII who ruled from 1073-1085) magnified a personal and institutional rivalry between the Holy Roman Emperor and the pope. This crisis persisted well beyond the lives of both Henry IV and Gregory VII.

The Investiture Conflict (1075-1122) was part of a longer and larger competition for power that spanned several centuries across much of Europe. The central issue in the conflict was the right to appoint bishops in the Church. For centuries, emperors and kings had exercised this right without much resistance from the papacy. However, the reform movement in the Church called for the papacy to assert its right to appoint bishops. The conflict brought the papacy into direct conflict with the German emperors; eventually, the larger competition for power extended to both France and England. As the power and prestige of the Church grew, its ability to compete with local rulers for the loyalties of warriors and for the taxes of commoners increased as popes and bishops periodically clashed with monarchs across Europe on a variety of issues. "Freedom of the Church" was a rallying cry that united powerful nobles against emperors and kings. That freedom entailed the right to appoint bishops and archbishops. It also meant the right to control Church assets, including not only the revenues generated from the Church's vast landholdings but also those from tithes levied on tenants in secular estates. Perhaps the most stringent assertion of the rights of the Church appeared in Gregory VII's register around 1075. Known as the *Dictates of the Pope*, the document claimed wide-ranging powers to control Church offices, to depose emperors, and to use the imperial seal, traditionally the exclusive

right of emperors.

Eventually the popes relinquished some of these claims. At the end of the Investiture Conflict in 1122, both parties compromised. Civil war had destabilized the empire. Much of Germany and northern Italy had divided into factions supporting either the papacy or the emperors. By the mid-1100s, these factions assumed names in Italy where the divisions lingered. Generally, the Guelph (or Guelf) faction supported the papal claims, and the Ghibellines supported the imperial aspirations of the Hohenstaufen dynasty. However, the House of Welf, from which the Guelfs drew their name, were just a rival dynasty to the Hohenstaufens (Ghibellines). The Welfs tended to support the papacy in its struggle with the Hohenstaufen, but in the late 1100s, the pope switched sides, abandoned the Welf Otto IV, and allied himself with the Hohenstaufen Frederick II (1194-1250) during his minority. Otherwise, Guelph meant pro-papacy, and Ghibelline meant pro-emperor.

Frederick II was a talented and ambitious man, conversant in five languages. Born in central Italy, he became King of the Romans at age 2, King of Sicily at age 3, King of Germany at age 18, Holy Roman Emperor at age 26, and King of Jerusalem at age 31. However, his power weakened in all of these realms whenever he was absent. He granted wide-ranging powers to German nobles in 1232 with the Statute in Favor of the Princes, which granted them the rights to control the administration of justice, to veto imperial legislation, and to strike their own coins. Essentially, they were autonomous rulers. Although Frederick attempted to reassert Christian control of the Holy Land in the late 1220s, his efforts garnered him the hatred of the nobles in the Holy Land and an excommunication from the pope. He spent most of the remainder of his life trying to secure his control over Italy, which resulted not only in additional excommunications (following some brief lifting of the excommunications) by the pope but also the division of Italian cities and nobles into pro-papal and pro-imperial factions.

When Frederick II died in 1250, his son, Conrad, was unable to accede to the imperial title. Frederick had so weakened the Hohenstaufen grip on power north of the Alps that a period known as the Great Interregnum emerged as foreigners, such as the King of Castile and the Earl of Cornwall, vied with members of the German nobility for the imperial title. Although Rudolf of Habsburg (1218-1291) was elected King of the Romans in 1273, the pope never crowned him emperor. His descendants, the Habsburgs, later emerged as a powerful dynasty who reasserted authority in the empire beginning in the 1400s. Yet, imperial authority was severely crippled from the late 1200s until the mid-1400s. In fact, the imperial vision remained unachievable. Western and central European monarchs were never able to unite Italy and reproduce an empire that resembled the grandeur of ancient Rome. Power remained much more localized across all of Europe. Although the resuscitation of the Roman Empire enticed would-be emperors well into the early modern period, the power of local nobles and the princes of the Church fractured political authority as the competition for power remained intense, destructive, and creative throughout the High Middle Ages.

The Competition for Power: Dynastic Instability

Although the size of the Holy Roman Empire presented enormous challenges for the various rulers who claimed authority over its lengthy dominions, which crossed mountainous terrain, rival sources of authority and dynastic transitions presented equally formidable obstacles to the centralization and organization of political authority in Europe during the High Middle Ages. To a certain extent these problems were inherent in the nature of hereditary monarchies that were contingent on the blessings of religious leaders. Further exacerbating this destabilizing influence, the patrilineal view of legitimate royal power excluded female rulers and thereby decreased the likelihood of a smooth transition of power. Agnatic kinship, based on male ancestry, weakened European monarchies by negating claims by women to rule in their own right and by questioning the right of women to confer legitimacy onto their sons and daughters. It effectively reduced the number of legitimate heirs to the throne.

Dynastic continuity posed a common problem for all European monarchies, especially because women were generally not accepted as reigning monarchs in most states until the 1500s, and even then only in some places and with considerable challenges. The perceived need to have a healthy, capable, adult, male heir who was ready to assume control of power upon his father's death placed a serious limitation to the smooth transition of power. This problem had plagued Egyptian pharaohs and Roman emperors. It constituted a structural weakness in the patriarchal model of monarchical power. In addition, the hereditary nature of medieval kingship was prone to problems because some heirs to the throne failed to understand the contingencies surrounding their power. They disregarded the collective power of their nobles and of the Church. They fell prey to the very rhetoric that was intended to convince their subjects that they had a divine sanctioned right to rule. In fact, medieval kingship was based on a lie. God did not favor one ruler over another. Nevertheless, this fiction of divine sanction simultaneously reinforced their claims to authority and strengthened the influence of one of their most influential rivals: the Church.

Religious leaders have been in competition for power with secular leaders since the first dynasties emerged in Egypt and Sumeria. Although medieval secular and ecclesiastical leaders often collaborated in order to maximize their wealth and power, personalities sometimes clashed, and objectives differed. On other occasions, the balance of power between the two forms of authority shifted significantly, and this change inspired one side to repel the encroachment of the other. Because hereditary kingship became more commonly accepted during the High Middle Ages than it had been in the Early Middle Ages, emperors, kings, and princes (secular rulers) came to wield power over vast territories when they were either disinclined or incapable of assuming such tireless work. When the monarchy experienced a lapse in capable leadership, an opportunity arose for the Church to increase its power at the expense of secular rulers. Furthermore, as the Holy Roman Empire demonstrated in spades, nobles often sided with the Church against the monarchy or vice versa. Consequently, even though political power was becoming more centralized, organized, and bureaucratic during the High Middle Ages, it still retained many of the disruptive tendencies that plagued political stability during the Early Middle Ages.

Although the kingdom of England had developed a highly organized governmental structure by the middle of the tenth century (see previous chapter), dynastic stability evaded the English chronically in the eleventh century. Prior to the conquest of England by William of Normandy (a.k.a "the Conqueror" or "the Bastard") between 1066 and 1070, the English had experienced at least three changes in dynastic rule: the House of Wessex fell to the Danish House of Knýtlinga in 1016; the Wessex dynasty then returned to power in 1043, only to slip into the hands of the House of Godwin in January 1066, nine months before William of Normandy established the Norman dynasty. This reckoning is actually an understatement because it brushes aside the confusing events of 1014-1015 when the monarchy traded hands twice.

The Bayeux Tapestry depicts the Battle of Hastings in 1066. In this scene, Norman knights and archers, led by William of Normandy, are gearing up for battle against England. Norman conquest of England that year established a French aristocracy in an English-speaking land.

Aside from William I's brutal determination to dominate his English subjects, he owed quite a bit of his success to the papacy. Like Henry III of the empire, William of Normandy had allied himself with the moderate reformers in the Church, and Pope Alexander II gave him a papal banner and his ring in order to generate support among the Norman nobility for the conquest of England. Subsequently, William virtually exterminated the native English nobility and replaced them with his Norman comrades in arms, who held land in both Normandy and Britain. He also transplanted Norman clergy, including his half-brother, Bishop Odo of Bayeux, into positions of power in the newly conquered lands. William ruled England with an iron fist. Near the end of his twenty-year reign in England William gradually fell out of favor with the more radical reform faction that gained control of the papacy under Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073-1085).

This tension between the monarchy and the papacy only worsened during the reign of William II (r. 1086-1100), who aggravated and ignored the growing power of the Church. When William I's hand-picked Archbishop of Canterbury, Lanfranc, died in 1089, the hardline reformer and Abbot of Bec, Anselm, became the favored candidate of the Anglo-Norman clergy and Pope Urban II (also a firebrand reformer). At first William II tried to oppose the appointment of Anselm. He confiscated the lands of the vacant See (territories) of the Archbishop of Canterbury and publicly vowed to oppose Anselm's accession to Canterbury. However, as William II fell seriously ill and pondered his sins, he summoned

Anselm to hear his confession and eventually agreed to Anselm's appointment. Relations between the king and prelate remained tense until a suspicious hunting accident put an end to William II's life. Because William II died without a male heir and because his older brother (never his father's favorite), Robert Curthose, was out of the kingdom on his way back from the First Crusade, his younger brother and hunting companion, Henry I (r. 1100-1135), quickly secured the throne.

Henry I certainly encountered problems with the strident demands of the Church. However, unlike his father and brother, he compromised and gained a reputation for dispensing justice. Aware of the need to build a coalition of powerful supporters against the rival claims of his older brother, Robert Curthose, Henry I authored a coronation charter that guaranteed the freedom of the Church and specific rights of the nobility. He eschewed the tyrannical practices of his predecessor (William II) and ruled for 35 years. Victorious in war and adept at handling his political rivals, Henry I's style of leadership differed markedly from the Conqueror, his father, and even more markedly from his brother and predecessor, William II. He married a descendant of the House of Wessex (an ancient English lineage) and began the long process of healing divisions between the Norman aristocracy and the English subjects.

Despite cementing his authority, Henry I failed to ensure a smooth transition of power at the end of his reign. Although it is easy to assign this failure to bad luck, the fragility of the patriarchal succession of hereditary monarchies in the period constituted the fundamental obstacle to the smooth transition of power. His heir apparent, William Clito, had died at sea in 1120. By 1126, nine years before he died, Henry I forced his nobles to swear an oath of allegiance to his daughter, Matilda, who had married the Holy Roman Emperor (Henry V of the Salian dynasty) and acted as a powerful empress from 1114 to 1125. Matilda not only faced the patriarchal and misogynistic opposition toward female overlordship that was characteristic of the period, but her father also arranged for her to re-marry after the emperor died. She wed a longstanding rival of the Norman nobility, the count of Anjou. In 1128 at the age of 27, Matilda married Geoffrey of Anjou, age 15. Although Matilda was less than thrilled with the match, she pursued dynastic ambition as many noble women did during the Middle Ages. By 1133 she had given birth to a son, Henry Plantagenet. Twenty-one years later, he became Henry II, arguably the most capable monarch of England during the High Middle Ages.

Between the death of Henry I in 1135 and the accession of Henry II in 1154, England endured a dynastic struggle between Matilda and her cousin Stephen. Often referred to as "the anarchy of Stephen," the civil war between Matilda and her cousin divided the loyalties of the Anglo-Norman aristocracy. Some nobles switched sides multiple times during the conflict as the balance of power shifted repeatedly. Unlike Henry I before him, Stephen was unable to cement the loyalties of nobles, and he alienated several members of the Church hierarchy. He demonstrated a proclivity for inviting nobles to court on the pretense of entertaining and rewarding them, only to imprison them and confiscate their castles. Similar tactics gradually weakened his support among the clergy.

Between 1000 and 1160 the English witnessed five to seven dynastic changes, depending on how one counts. Amazingly, the governmental structure remained intact during this period. Nevertheless, the power of the crown waned as monarchs sought to legitimize their reigns by currying favor with the

clergy and by granting protections to their nobles. The rules of accession to hereditary monarchies were not fixed. They were open to interpretation, and when a nobleman, such as Stephen I of England (r. 1135-1154), saw an opportunity to claim the throne with the support of the Church, the attraction was too strong to ignore. Stephen succumbed to the allure of power. Similarly, how could Henry I have resisted the throne in 1100 when his brother somehow ended up with an arrow in his heart while hunting? One monastic scribe from the period claimed that it was God's will that the archer made the mistake. Both the transmission and the retention of power were tenuous in an age when the crown had powerful rivals.

The Competition for Power: Innovations in Governance

When Henry II began his 35-year reign in 1154, he and his very capable and engaging queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, ruled over most of western France in addition to England. Over the coming decades, the couple expanded their influence by courting members of the French aristocracy, by creating an attractive court culture with troubadours and poets, and by gaining a reputation for justice. Henry's gradual formation of the common law system, featuring juries of presentment, returnable writs, traveling justices (justices in *eyre*), and the predictability of legal precedent established the foundation for one of the most influential and enduring legal systems in history.

Documented by his chief justice, Ranulf Glanvill, at the end of his reign in a treatise, simply called "*Glanvill*," Henry's legal system protected knights from the tyrannical practices of their lords. Knights who lost their manors or rights that often accompanied those landholdings could seek a remedy in the king's courts. Because of the unreliability of ancient practices such as the ordeal and because of the corrupt justice offered by local lords, dissatisfaction with the legal system was widespread after the civil war (1135-1154), when rights to landholdings were often contested. Meanwhile, the Church had established a relatively reliable and predictable legal system following the completion of Gratian's *Decretum*, a Church legal code from the 1140s. Because the Church often ruled on disputes related to marriage, inheritance, and the right to hold property, its reputation for dispensing justice was increasing across Europe by the mid 1100s. In addition, the leaders of the Church often claimed jurisdiction over cases that royal courts might otherwise adjudicate. To maintain control over the administration of justice in his realm, Henry II felt he needed to respond to these perceived ecclesiastical encroachments on royal power.

The 1170 murder of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, by knights loyal to Henry II became emblematic of growing fears of royal tyranny. Becket had been a trusted advisor to Henry prior to becoming an authority figure in the Church.

In 1164, ten years into his reign, Henry enacted the *Constitutions of Clarendon*, which defined in detail the limits of ecclesiastical jurisdiction in his lands. When disputes arose as to whether a case belonged in Church courts, the king would decide. Henry limited the rights of the clergy to excommunicate his advisors, to leave the country without his permission, and to seek judgement from the papacy. He recognized that his most formidable rival for power was the Latin Church and especially the bishop of Rome, il papa, the pope. He thought he could limit the pope's influence in his English dominions by appointing his trusted advisor and friend, Thomas Becket, to become Archbishop of Canterbury, at the time the highest religious office in England. Unfortunately, Henry II underestimated Becket's loyalty to the Church. Once Becket assumed the office of archbishop, he wore a hairshirt (a form of punishment for his previous behavior) and opposed Henry's attempts to control the Church in his realm. The

ensuing conflict pitted two strong-willed men against each other. Neither was willing to compromise, as the issue was not only royal and ecclesiastical power, but also one of honor. Ultimately, the conflict between Henry II and Becket led to Becket's murder by some of Henry's knights. Henry performed penance for Becket's death, but whether the king actually ordered the assassination or not is debated even today.

Aside from these destructive elements of the competition for power, certain constructive elements arose. Henry realized that if he was to compete with the Church for the loyalties of his subjects, he needed to devise a legal system that operated as effectively and reliably as the clergy's rival system of canon law. In 1166, when Becket was still alive, Henry promulgated the *Assize of Clarendon*. Unlike the *Constitutions of Clarendon*, which delineated the boundaries between royal and ecclesiastical jurisdictions, the *assize* spelled out the procedures for prosecuting serious crimes in royal courts. It defined the processes for obtaining evidence from juries of inquest. It empowered royal officials, such as sheriffs and traveling justices, to administer justice. And, most importantly, it addressed the concerns of the landholding warriors, knights, who could lose their property at the hands of a tyrannical lord. It required that Henry's traveling judges rule according to established precedents, thereby imbuing the legal system with predictability and a modicum of rationality.

However, this system, known as the common law, only applied to members of the nobility when Henry II developed the system between the 1160s and the 1180s. The common law especially benefited members of the lower nobility, knights, because it afforded them legal protections related to the possession of their land, the primary source of their wealth and privilege. It was less popular with the upper nobility, the barons, who held land directly from the king. If they had a problem with their feudal overlord, the king, the common law allowed them to seek a remedy in the king's court, a decidedly biased venue to receive relief from a grasping king. The barons' frustration with the system boiled over in the decade leading up to the signing of Magna Carta (1215).

TRACTATUS

DE

Legibus et Consuetudinibus

REGNI ANGLIÆ,

TEMPORE REGIS HENRICI SECUNDI

COMPOSITUS,

Justiciæ gubernacula tenente illustri viro

RANULPHO DE GLANVILLA

Juris Regni et antiquarum Consuetudinum
eo tempore peritissimo.

ET ILLAS SOLUM LEGES CONTINET ET CONSUE-
TUDINES SECUNDUM QUAS PLACITATUR
IN CURIÂ REGIS, AD SCACCARIUM,
ET CORAM JUSTICIIS UBI-
CUNQUE FUERINT.

Cum MSS. Harl. Cott. Bodl. et Mill.
COLLATUS.

—— JUVAT INTEGROS ACCEDERE FONTES. Lucret.

LONDINI:

The 1780 edition of Glanvill, published approximately 600 years after the completion of the original manuscript, became the foundation of English common law for centuries

Despite the protests of the upper nobility, the common law had a profound impact on the prestige of the monarchy and the culture of England. As the royal courts grew and became more sophisticated, the crown recruited literate administrators of the law.   By the thirteenth century, guild-like training clubs, known later as the Inns of Court, arose in London. Young men, mostly from the lower nobility, sought instruction in the intricacies of the common law. They read *Glanvill* and became conversant in the precedents and legal actions, writs, pertaining to various types of cases. Thus, service to the crown by members of the knightly class expanded from the battlefield to the courts.

As the crown's need for literate and loyal members of the knightly class increased, its patronage of tales, depicting knights as loyal and literate, emerged. By the mid to late 1100s, precisely when the common law was in its genesis, chivalric tales increasingly portrayed a more sophisticated type of knight. Whereas a century earlier chivalrous knights were primarily concerned with personal glory-seeking on the battlefield in a genre known as *chanson de geste* (or songs of deeds), the chivalrous knight depicted in the literature around 1180 increasingly projected courtliness, manners, literacy, and fair speech. These knights sometimes read tales and expressed interest in securing justice for dispossessed landholders, especially heiresses. They became models of behavior for the aristocracy as a whole, and for the emerging class of knightly jurists in particular. Over the following centuries some members of the knightly class gradually gravitated toward a form of service to the crown that emphasized legal and administrative skills. They evolved into a group sometimes called the gentry in England or *noblesse de robe* in France, a group of lesser nobles who differentiated themselves from commoners by adopting the very qualities portrayed in chivalric literature. By the 1300s, monarchs across Europe actively promoted the cult of chivalry in order to instill courteous behavior and obedience into the warrior aristocracy.

Although this image of a chivalrous warrior was an attractive one, it was often a ruse. As a patron of chivalric literature, Henry II nevertheless broke promises to his sons who had rebelled against him. He imprisoned his wife, a very un-chivalrous act, for the last sixteen years of his life. He claimed that he was going on crusade, collected taxes for it on three separate occasions, and always found an excuse to remain within his empire. In short, he was neither particularly trustworthy toward men nor gracious toward women. His actions were the antithesis of the chivalric ideal. His successor, Richard I (r.1189-1199), was also a patron of troubadour poets and gained a reputation as a chivalrous warrior. Richard, a leader of the Third Crusade (1189-1193), developed a relationship of mutual respect with his Muslim adversary, Saladin, who also embraced a code of ethics that resembled chivalry. However, in contrast to the literary ideal of the courteous knight, Richard demonstrated open contempt for women. He barred women from attending his coronation, and he apparently exhibited blatant sexual violence toward women on more than one occasion. In contrast to chivalrous ideals of exhibiting courtesy and granting mercy, he ordered the execution of approximately 2,000 Muslims following the capture of Acre in August of 1191. Just before his death in 1199 from a crossbow bolt shot by a young man, Richard granted the youth mercy but failed to ensure the lad's safety; the boy was flayed alive before being

hanged. The graciousness of chivalry had a thin veneer.

Because Richard died without a male heir, the transition of power was somewhat contested. His brother John (r. 1199-1216) was just as cruel and cunning as his father and brother had been. He may have murdered Arthur of Brittany, his sixteen-year-old nephew and rival claimant to the throne of England, with his own hands as some sources claimed. Regardless, rumors of John's treachery, publicized by the French king, Philip II (Philip Augustus, r. 1190-1223), undermined loyalty to John among the Anglo-Norman and French nobility. Some of John's powerful vassals recognized the dangers that John posed, and they transferred their allegiance to Philip Augustus. Over the following fifteen years, their instincts proved them right. John displayed the hallmarks of tyranny and carries the legacy of tyrannical rule even today.

The Competition for Power: Opposition to Tyranny
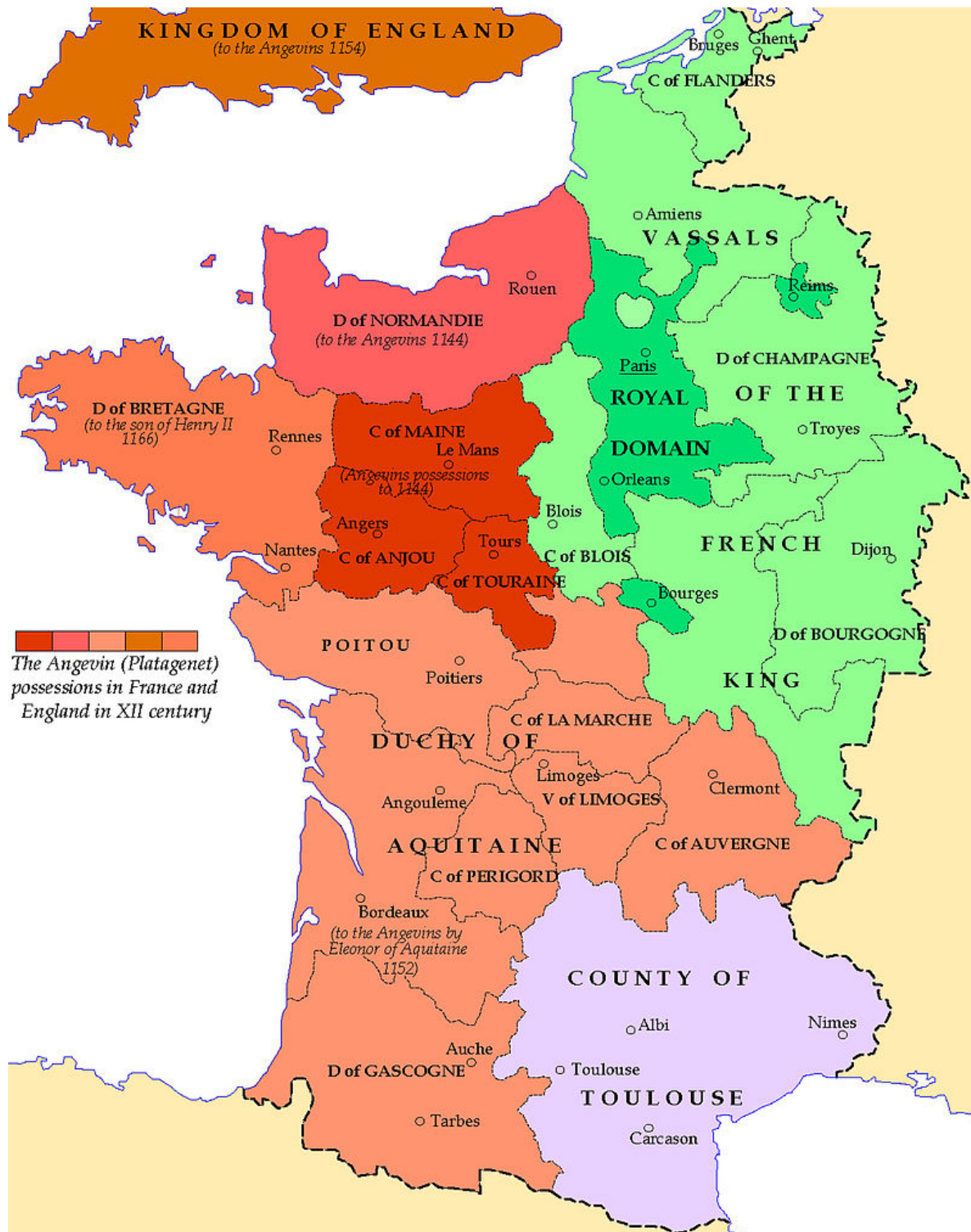
The Angevin Empire 1154-1199 consisted of England and the red and pink areas on the map. It was substantially larger than the territories held by Philip II (Augustus) of France at the beginning of King John's reign. By 1216 John had lost most of his possession in France except parts of Gascony and Aquitaine.

In contrast to Henry I, 100 years earlier, John consistently alienated both the nobility and the Church. Having lost most of his hereditary lands in France to Philip Augustus, he became desperate to raise enough money to compete with his powerful French rival. He charged his English nobles excessive fees to inherit their property and expropriated the revenues of the See of Canterbury when Archbishop

Hubert Walter died in 1205. Although he won several military engagements in Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, he consistently lost in France, where much greater potential for harvesting tax revenue existed.

As he depleted his treasury, John became increasingly desperate. After escaping an assassination plot in 1212, he ceded England in 1213 to Pope Innocent III, a particularly capable pope, and pledged himself as the pope's vassal. He finally accepted Stephen Langton as Archbishop of Canterbury and levied a heavy tax on the kingdom in order to finance an invasion of his lost French lands. It did not work. After John attempted to lure Philip Augustus away from Paris with an incursion into southern France, his ally, Otto IV of Saxony, invaded France and lost to the formidable Philip Augustus at the Battle of Bouvines in July of 1214.

During the reign of King John, a trifecta of anti-monarchical forces aligned. In contrast to the successful actions of Henry I a century earlier, John failed to account for his weak dynastic claim. He then alienated the leadership of the Church by initially failing to accept the pope's nominee for Archbishop of Canterbury. He taxed and abused his barons, who were incapable of seeking remedies against the king in his own courts. In addition to these three challenges, he suffered a series of military losses around 1204, when he lost most of his French territories, and in 1214, when he failed to retake them. Faced with these setbacks, his northern barons, who had few interests in France, joined forces with the Londoners and their ally, Walter Fitzwalter, who styled himself "marshal of the Army of God." They confronted the king and his allies in a meadow called Runnymede on the western side of London, near modern-day Windsor Castle, where they forced him to sign an agreement, Magna Carta.

Magna Carta was essentially a peace treaty between John I and his opponents within the Church, among the nobility, and throughout the city of London. As with many legal documents since the time of Aethelberht of Kent (c. 600), John guaranteed the rights of the Church in the first item of the Great Charter. He then proceeded to restore the rights of the nobles on matters of inheritance, including the marriage of aristocratic widows, the supervision of wealthy minors (wardship), and the fees paid to the crown for inheritance. Most importantly, the agreement guaranteed the rights of the barons to rebel against the king if he failed to abide by its provisions. It contained many items of long-term importance. For example, it provided the foundation for what later became known as "due process of law." The king agreed to follow the judicial processes allowed to barons, as free men, and this provision applied to all the Crown's male subjects by the mid-1300s and female subjects by the 1900s. Finally, Magna Carta also imposed significant limits on taxation. The king was obligated to seek "common counsel" before taxing his subjects. This aspect of the charter later formed the basis for the establishment of parliament as the body that controlled taxation.

John's reign underscored the fundamental weakness of most European monarchs. On one hand, they often felt pressure to expand their dominions in order to have a ready supply of land to distribute to the military commanders, the nobles. On the other hand, they struggled to maintain control of lands that were far from their base of power. In John's case, a capable rival, the King of France, took advantage of John's inability to garner support among the French nobility. And John's losses in western France

weakened his support among members of the Anglo-Norman nobility back in England. Without the backing of many of his barons in England and with lukewarm support from members of the Church, John felt pressure to agree to the significant limitations to royal power laid out in Magna Carta. He even had to acknowledge that his opponents had the right to rebel if he failed to live by the agreement.

Seven years later King Andrew II of Hungary consented to similar constraints on his power in the Golden Bull of 1222. Similar agreements were signed by political leaders in the kingdom of Aragon (1205), southern France (1212), and the Holy Roman Empire (1220). The long-term significance of these documents, and especially of Magna Carta, was that royal power was not absolute and that kings needed to build consensus among their most powerful subjects if they were to rule effectively. Ironically, medieval kingship, as it evolved in the High Middle Ages, gradually laid the foundations for representative institutions, such as Parliament in England, the *Estates General* in France, the Imperial *Diet* in the Holy Roman Empire, and the *Cortes* in Spain.

Following the signing of Magna Carta in June 1215, John turned to the pope to annul the agreement. Though he received the papal annulment, both John and the pope died the following year. The barons took advantage of the minority of John's son, Henry III (r. 1216-1272), who had just celebrated his ninth birthday, to modify and reissue the Magna Carta. Once he reached the age of maturity, the nobles pressured Henry to reaffirm it. A custom arose whereby the clergy read it aloud once a year in every parish in England. Magna Carta became enshrined in the political culture of England, much like the Constitution in the United States would become some 600 years later.

Although Henry III enjoyed a long reign, it became increasingly tense in its final decades. Henry apparently ignored two fundamental tasks that medieval kings faced. His close-knit circle of nobles expected to receive royal gifts while ignoring the broader nobility, and like his father, he failed to win the expensive wars he waged. While he placated the Church by investing in an extensive renovation of Westminster Abbey and by allying himself with the pope in a bid to conquer the Kingdom of Sicily, he angered many of his powerful barons by distributing lands and riches to his wife's French relatives. The opposition to this behavior reflected a growing sense among the Anglo-Norman nobility that they were culturally English rather than French; in other words, Henry's French-speaking barons who lived in England were developing a disdain for Poitevin and Savoyard aristocrats from central and southern France. This separation between the English and French nobles became increasingly pronounced in the following century.

Divisions also arose at court. Henry III's patronage of his foreign relatives from Poitou and Savoy, along with high taxes and war losses, ignited open opposition by 1258. His brother-in-law, Simon de Montfort (from southern France), assumed leadership of the opposition to Henry's policies. He compelled the king to sign the Provisions of Oxford (1258) in exchange for a grant of taxation. Similar to the Magna Carta, the Provisions more explicitly ensured the barons' involvement in reforming the government's policies related to taxation and the distribution of royal favors. Although the king signed the document, he later persuaded the pope to release him from honoring it, just as John had done a half-century earlier. The barons rose in open revolt. By 1264, they had captured and imprisoned the king.

Simon de Montfort acted as head of state and assembled what was arguably the first English Parliament in 1265. Similar to previous councils convened by the Crown, the 1265 Parliament invited representatives of the barons, the clergy, and the knights. However, with a nod to the growing wealth and power of merchants, the 1265 Parliament also included the election of two representatives from various boroughs across England. Thirty years later, Henry's successor Edward I (r. 1272-1307) convened a similarly organized parliament in order to win support for his expensive wars in Wales and Scotland. Monarchs gradually recognized the need to seek accord among their nobles, partly to overcome the power of the Church.

The growth of a representative institution, Parliament, was not unique to England. However, the power that Parliament assumed in the coming centuries differentiated the English institution from other representative bodies. In France, for example, the *Estates General* did not gain the power to compose and ratify legislation. The Imperial *Diet* had similar limitations. Because the various kingdoms that became Spain did not unify until much later, its *Cortes* remained local in their provenance. However, the persistent dynastic instability that plagued the English monarchy and the ability of the barons and the Church to curtail royal power gradually strengthened the authority of the English nobles and Parliament. By the early 1400s, King Henry IV ceded Parliament the power to control most taxation, and this representative body eventually became the *de facto* sovereign of England during the 1600s.

The Rise of France

In contrast to the English or the German monarchs, the Capetian kings of France ruled without dynastic interruption from the late 900s to the early 1300s. Their successors, the Valois, occupied the French throne until 1589, when the Bourbon dynasty ascended to the throne, which they occupied for the next 200 years. In other words, the French crown experienced fewer dynastic changes in 800 years than England did during the first half of the eleventh century. This stability was only one of the factors that transformed the Kingdom of France from one of the weakest states in Europe at the beginning of the High Middle Ages to the most powerful kingdom in Europe by 1300.

Louis IX of France gained a reputation for dispensing justice during his reign (1226-1270), when the wealth of the French crown grew enormously. He squandered much of that wealth on two failed crusades.

In addition to their attention to dynastic stability, the French monarchs built a sense of collective identity and unity among their nobles while placating the Church. Philip Augustus was the first of those

kings to style himself King of France. The assumption of this moniker only partially explains his seizure of so much territory from John of England. Philip's successors gained control of additional regions of France by arranging royal marriage alliances with noble families and by gaining territories controlled by so-called heretics. Perhaps most impressively, the French kings promoted a series of fictions that elevated the prestige of the monarchy, including the claims that the French king could heal skin diseases through touch and that he was "the most Christian king." Eventually, these fictions found purchase with the Latin Church who recognized Louis IX (r. 1226-1272) as a saint in 1297. By that time, the French monarchy had become the most powerful in Europe.

Unlike the far-flung territorial ambitions that weakened the monarchs of England and especially the Holy Roman Empire, the French kings focused mostly on solidifying their control over territories where they had long claimed authority. Some of their more powerful vassals, such as the dukes of Normandy, who doubled as kings of England, had contested that authority. As luck would have it, several capable rulers, including Louis VII (r. 1137-1180), Philip II (r. 1180-1223), Louis IX (1226-1270), and Philip IV (r. 1285-1314) occupied the French monarchy between the middle of the twelfth century until the early fourteenth century; their lengthy reigns, their determination to produce legitimate heirs, and the success in war bolstered the French monarchy near the end of the High Middle Ages. They solidified control over most of their vassals while promoting the cult of chivalry and forging a sense of loyalty among their subjects. They even gained control over the papacy by the early 1300s. They laid the foundations for what became the most centralized and authoritarian monarchy in Europe.

High Medieval Civilization

Despite the success of the French monarchy in consolidating its control over the western territories, which had been part of the Frankish Empire in the Early Middle Ages but had fallen into the hands of the Angevin kings of England, political power in most of Europe remained highly localized through much of the High Middle Ages. The Iberian peninsula consisted of a half-dozen different states. The Italian peninsula had over a dozen. The Holy Roman Empire was an assemblage of over 100. Even the most powerful monarchs, who ruled over England and France, had to rely on representative institutions and the Church to solidify their abilities to tax, administer justice, and collect taxes. Similar to ancient Sumerian and Greek city-states, medieval Europe developed a civilization with numerous power bases.

These limitations and contingencies on political power persisted into the late medieval and early modern periods despite the quest for empire. Europe certainly had monarchs who feigned and claimed absolute authority. However, these claims were generally hollow. Even the French monarchs learned to cooperate, to negotiate, and to forge alliances in order to maintain power. Opposition to tyranny was deeply ingrained into the beliefs and practices of the Swiss, the Scots, the English, and the Flemish, to name a few. As an international corporation with landed interests in every kingdom of Europe, the Church also contributed to the fragmentation of political power. On the one hand, Church leaders

sought political stability in order to maintain peace, commercial relations, the collection of tithes, and the construction of impressive cathedrals. On the other hand, The Church's enormous wealth was always a target for expropriation by overly powerful monarchs. Threats of such appropriation grew during the Late Middle Ages and became fully realized in the Early Modern period. However, during the High Middle Ages the Church remained a powerful counterbalance to tyrannical monarchical power.

Despite this tension, Church leaders often cooperated with monarchs over shared interests. The construction of the first Gothic cathedral at St. Denis in France during the 1140s exemplified this convergence of interests. Abbot Suger, an influential advisor both to Louis VI (r. 1108-1137) and to Louis VII (r. 1137-1180), supervised the building of an impressive monument, dedicated to God, the Church, and the monarch. St. Denis was not only the final resting place of French monarchs but also an inspiration for future building projects. Across most of northern Europe, Gothic cathedrals became a distinctive form of architecture that represented the intense religious devotion that characterized medieval Europe, and several monarchs patronized the construction of such impressive structures.

The convergence of interests that often nurtured relations between Church leaders and monarchs had gradually strengthened medieval kingship, which had been conspicuously weak throughout most of the Early Middle Ages. Just as powerful religious sentiments could inspire learning in universities, the formation of religious orders, and the creation of works of art and literature, Christian devotion became intertwined with loyalty to the king in the form of rituals, such as anointing, coronation oaths, and royal funerals. Similarly, Christian devotion also inspired horrific acts of violence against so-called heretics, Jews, and Muslims. And it led Church leaders such as Thomas Becket and Stephen Langton to oppose unfettered royal power. In short, the Latin Church proved to be a complex and powerful force in medieval culture and politics. It frequently strengthened royal power, and sometimes curtailed it when it became a threat.

This depiction of the Great Chain of Being hails from the 1500s; however, the concept was was well known to medieval students of Aristotle, such as Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).

Part of that complexity revolved around the religion's posture toward power. According to the Bible, Jesus of Nazareth had scoffed at traditional authorities. He famously cleared the Temple in Jerusalem of money-changers with a bullwhip and suffered execution by crucifixion for preaching against Roman authority. In contrast to most ancient religions, which glorified the rulers, he claimed that God favored the poor and downtrodden. Early Christianity included egalitarian ideas that were very much at odds with the hierarchical nature of authority in the Roman Empire, not the Republic. However, as the Church transformed into the imperial religion, its leaders advocated a more hierarchical approach to authority that eventually strengthened medieval kingship. By the High Middle Ages, the egalitarian elements of Christianity became subordinate to more stratified and rigid teachings. Power-hungry popes purposefully kept vernacular translations of the Bible out of circulation. Even preaching in the common tongue was contrary to Church practices. A rigid hierarchy, headed by the bishop of Rome, sought to contain Christianity's more subversive elements.

Consequently, by the end of the High Middle Ages, Europe had developed a very hierarchical and authoritarian culture, both in the secular and the ecclesiastical realm. Guilds, vassalage, Church offices, processions, chivalric literature, and so many other features of this civilization promoted a hierarchical approach to humanity and even to nature and the cosmos. Scholastics examined and promoted the Aristotelian vision of nature, which later became known as the *Great Chain of Being.* This fiction provided a powerful justification for the authoritarian impulses of kings, popes, and emperors well into the Early Modern period. However, a variety of forces, including the egalitarian elements of Christianity and the dramatic social changes introduced in the Late Middle Ages, kept Europeans from falling victim to the hazards associated with the rigidity and arid thinking that so often accompany hierarchy and deference to authority. As we will see in the following chapter, European civilization gradually nurtured innovative forms of thinking and organization that challenged the often sterile and hollow claims to absolute authority.

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Chapter 16: The Late Middle Ages

Introduction

Several fundamental changes occurred in Europe between 1300 and 1500 that differentiated this period, known as the Late Middle Ages, from the High Middle Ages (1000-1300). Perhaps most significantly, instead of expanding for 300 years, European population declined for most of the 200-year period due to famine, war, and disease, especially plague. A thousand years earlier the Roman Empire had encountered a similar demographic collapse during the 200s CE, a period sometimes referred to as the Crisis of the Third Century. Similarly, Europe and especially the Holy Roman Empire would encounter another collapse during the 1600s with the Thirty Years' War, the most deadly war that Europeans had ever encountered up to that time.

In all three cases––200s, 1300s, and 1600s––demographic decline did not result in the destruction of these civilizations, but rather sparked a restructuring. In the case of the Late Middle Ages, the widespread loss of life coincided with significant achievements in art, architecture, literature, education, technology, and the organization of society. These achievements not only contributed to the loosening of the rigid social hierarchies of the High Middle Ages, but they also transformed Europeans' relationship with non-Europeans. They cemented the cultural differences between Europe and Asia because they deepened the cultural distinctiveness and collective identity of Europeans. Instead of being a cultural backwater that suffered from second-rate technology, illiteracy, and limited opportunities for education, and poor social organization, Europeans became increasingly educated, literate, and organized, as they continued many of the developments from the High Middle Ages.

A broader spectrum of society, including a growing middle class, increasingly exploited new technologies, such as the printing press, improved metallurgy, and the discovery of new navigational tools, to advance their wealth and comfort. Even though the economy was contracting overall, the possibilities of attaining an improved standard of living improved as books became more available, markets continued to develop, and new occupations emerged in urban settings. Accompanying these trends was the advent of gunpowder technology and new methods of warfare, which sometimes threatened the power of established authorities, such as kings and popes, and other times allowed those same authorities to expand their dominions. Consequently, by 1500 Europeans were armed with new weapons, new knowledge, and new means of accessing resources across the globe as they entered into the Early Modern period (1500-1800).

The Transformation of Warfare

At the intersection of many of these changes was the transformation of warfare. Initially, the changes in warfare were more related to recruitment and the organization of members of the middle and lower classes than they were with the introduction of new technologies, such as gunpowder. During the last two centuries of the Early Middle Ages and during the entirety of the High Middle Ages, cavalry charges constituted the most effective battlefield tactic. Historians often refer to this method of warfare as "mounted shock combat" because the shock of the charge from mounted knights produced chaos and confusion on infantry formations. Although the training and expense of mounted shock combat were significant, the general consensus was that this method of fighting was so effective that kings could reasonably expect an army composed of 2,500 cavalry to overwhelm an infantry force four or even ten times that size, especially if that infantry lacked intensive training, discipline, and organization. Mounted knights could move swiftly to exploit gaps in disorganized infantry formations, as they did at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and the Battle of Bouvines in 1214. An investment in knights often seemed worthwhile to kings, and the fondness that the European nobility had for chivalric literature only reinforced this attachment to fighting on horseback. A king who invested heavily in maintaining an army of loyal knights by conferring land and titles on warriors could assemble a formidable and effective fighting force in order to gain control of more land, people, and taxes.

Such was the plan of King Philip the Fair of France (r. 1285-1314), who set his sights on the conquest of Flanders in the last decade of the thirteenth century. At that time Flanders, located in modern Belgium, was the home of the largest concentrations of cities north of the Alps. With a dense population engaged in textile production and trade, the County of Flanders represented a tempting opportunity to expand the growing dominions and tax revenues of the French crown. Like so many other parts of the early medieval Frankish Empire, Flanders was nominally part of the Kingdom of France. However, in practice, the territory had been under the autonomous control of the powerful counts of Flanders since the fragmentation of Francia in the 900s.
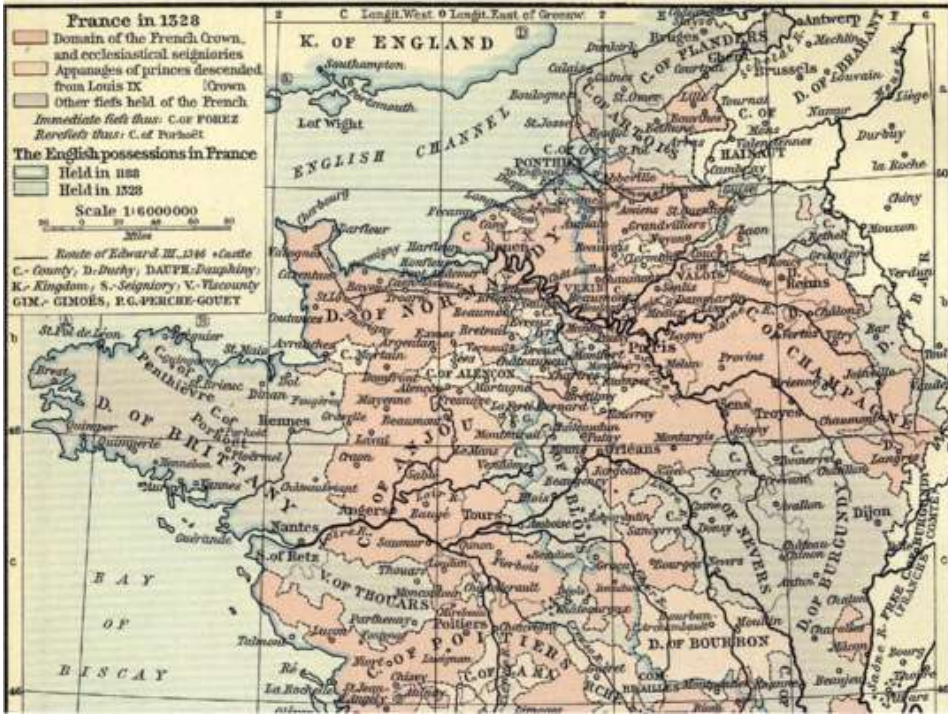
Flanders, in the upper right portion of this map, was one of the most populous and economically productive regions of Europe when the king of France sought to exercise his control over the area in the late thirteenth century.

After locals in Bruges massacred French occupying forces in May 1302, the cities of Flanders banded together to field an army composed almost entirely of 8,000 to 10,000 infantry. These Flemish militias were unusually well-trained to handle pikes and other weapons, such as crossbows, that were well-suited to the defense of their cities. They knew the King of France would seek retribution for the Bruges rebellion, and they prepared to defend their land. They intercepted the invading French forces at Courtrai on July 11th, 1302. Led by one of France's most experienced commanders, Robert of Artois, the French had defeated the Flemish handily five years earlier and apparently expected a repeat performance at Courtrai in 1302. However, the battlefield did not favor cavalry charges. It was marshy and uneven. Although the French had horses specially bred for cavalry charges, their steeds failed to build enough momentum, and the well-trained Flemings did not break ranks in their defensive formations. They routed the French attacks, killed Robert of Artois, and hung the spurs of the French knights in a local church to commemorate the victory, often referred to as the Battle of the Golden Spurs.

Narratives of this victory of middle-class militias over the forces of the French crown became part of the collective identity of the peoples who later called themselves Belgians. Similar victories by commoners against kings and their mounted nobles occurred increasingly over the next two hundred years and beyond. Scottish, English, Portuguese, and Swiss commoners won resounding victories against cavalry charges at Bannockburn (1314), Crecy (1346), Aljubarrota (1385), and Grandson (1476). Generally, these victories pitted commoners in a defensive position using pikes, halberds, and other ancient weapons combined with some sort of missile weapon, such as the crossbow. Sometimes, the commoners fought alongside a significant contingent of cavalry, as they did at Bannockburn, Crecy, and

Aljubarrota; other times, such as Grandson and Courtrai, the commoners had little or no noble support.

Some monarchs took advantage of the growing possibilities of commoners in warfare; others maintained a commitment to chivalric norms that emphasized the nobility of men fighting with blades and lances on horseback. One of the earliest monarchs to innovate was Edward I of England (r. 1272-1307). During the late 1200s he launched an expensive and protracted campaign to gain control of Wales, where he encountered archers who wielded a powerful weapon, the longbow. Although it is somewhat unclear how much Edward I actually employed English archers in his battles against the Scots and Welsh during the late 1200s and early 1300s, he encouraged his English subjects to practice archery while employing Welsh archers. Although Edward's son and successor, Edward II (r. 1307-1327), eschewed the longbow, his grandson, Edward III (1327-1377), though a champion of chivalric ideals, realized the potential of the missile weapon early in his 50-year reign.

Attempting to reverse a humiliating peace treaty signed with the Scots during the minority years of his reign, Edward III won decisive victories against numerically superior forces of Scots at Dupplin Moor (1332) and Halidon Hill (1333). Although Edward III did not participate personally in either battle, contemporaries often viewed victory in war as a sign of divine approval. If they were correct, God approved of Edward III for most of his long reign, when England fought a much larger and wealthier French crown during a conflict known as the Hundred Years War (1337-1453). The English successfully integrated the longbow into a repeatable system of warfare at the battles of Crecy (1346), Poitiers (1356), and Agincourt (1415).

This system involved the placement of the longbow on the edges of a crescent-shaped formation, preferably protected from cavalry charges by terrain. As the French had experienced in the marshes near Courtrai, knowledge of terrain could determine the outcome of a battle. At Crecy, the English were in a fairly desperate situation. They were woefully short of supplies while their Flemish allies started fighting among themselves and then failed to reach the English host. Other reinforcements from England also failed to materialize. Edward III, commanding the troops in person, situated them on one of the many hillsides that dotted the countryside in Normandy. The chosen terrain prevented the French from attacking from the rear or the flanks. They had to face the English head on.

Although the French had hired a large contingent of Genoese mercenaries as crossbowmen, they were no match for the longbow because of the differences in the rate of fire. The Genoese retreated just as the French cavalry began its charge. The horses trampled the mercenaries before facing a barrage of enfilading fire from the archers on the crescents as they tried to ride to the top of the hillside. Those who made it up the hill faced standing men-at-arms with pikes, halberds, and swords. The English had established a very strong defensive position that the cavalry charges could not penetrate. As the French losses mounted, they began to retreat. However, Edward III had held a cavalry charge in reserve, and as the French retreated, the English knights hunted down many of the would-be survivors.
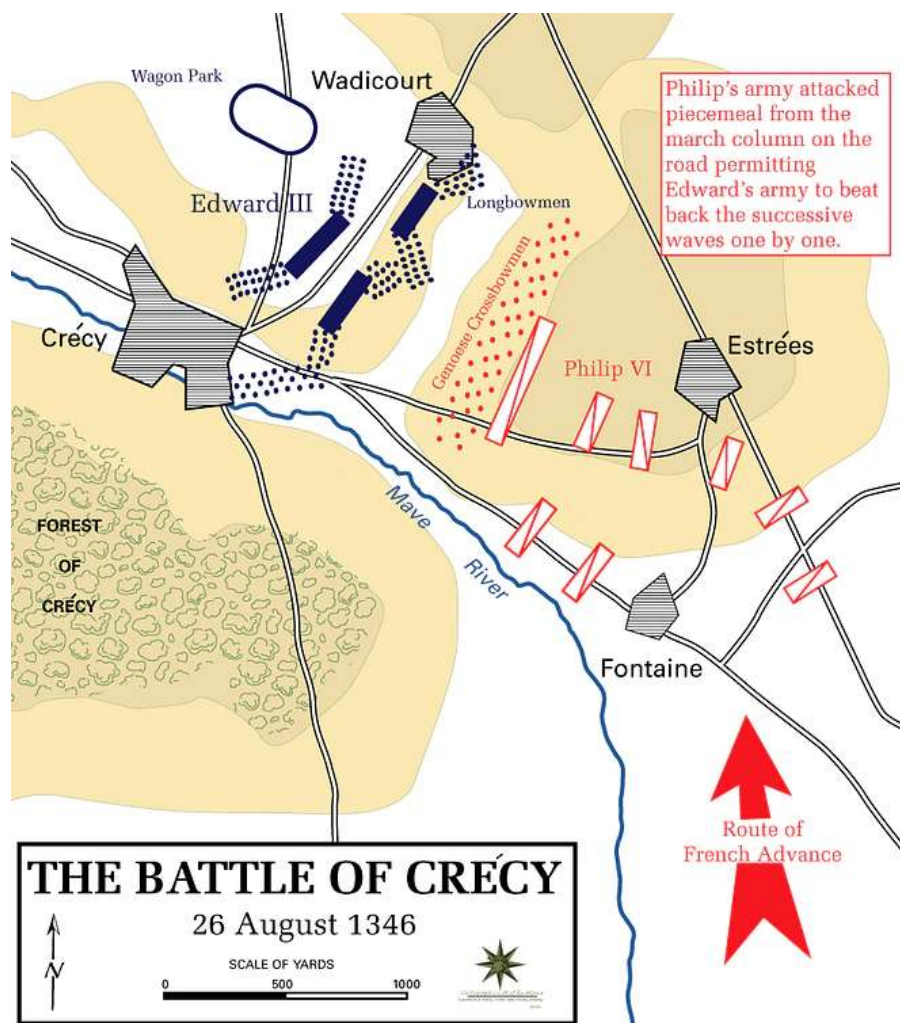
The Battle of Crecy in 1346 represented a significant victory for English army against the much larger French forces. Instead of relying on the cavalry charges to disrupt the enemy, the English utilized the longbow to create chaos and to narrow the columns of the advancing French attack.

Ten years later, the longbow proved equally effective at the Battle of Poitiers (1356). Although this battle differed substantially from the Battle of Crecy, the English once again used a combination of well-positioned longbows, carefully selected terrain, and standing men-at-arms. The French sought to reduce the impact of the longbow by wearing stronger plate armour and by dismounting some of their cavalry because horses were highly susceptible to injury from the arrows. These alterations proved somewhat effective but insufficient. The English captured the French king, John I, and by 1360 the two sides negotiated a peace treaty (known as both the Treaty of Brétigny and the Treaty of Calais) so favorable to the English that the French eventually broke the agreement and resumed the war. The treaty included enormous payments of silver to Edward III and ceded sovereignty over much of southern France, Aquitaine, to Edward. In return, the French king returned briefly to France, and Edward III promised to give up his claim to the French crown.

Because the longbow and the English system of war had proven so effective in these encounters, the French essentially avoided full-scale battles over the coming decades. Instead, they periodically harried invading English armies intent on terrorizing the local French peasants in a tactic known as the

chevauchée, a burning and looting of the countryside. These English invasions of France were both costly and ineffective. Almost as unpopular in England as they were in France, the English campaigns of the 1370s depleted the royal treasury with no territorial gains to show for it. Despite the success of the middle-class archers in the 1340s and 1350s, Edward III's reign ended with the English divided and all but incapable of mounting effective military actions in France.

Despite the fading taste for war, the English commoners celebrated the longbowmen in ballads, songs, and legends. The archers mostly consisted of members of the middle class, known as yeomen. The longbow was the preferred weapon of the outlaw hero, Robin Hood. Although its origins are somewhat obscure, the legend became a popular folktale by the 1370s. Similar to the legend of William Tell in Switzerland, Robin stood against the tyranny of those in positions of power. The emergence of these commoners as heroes in folktales coincided with the growing success of middle-class warriors in battles across Europe. It also coincided with the growing power of the middle class in the economy and in politics as we will see in the following sections.

An illustration of Joan of Arc from 1505, approximately 75 years after the English burned her at the stake in Rouen, France.

Ironically, it was not in England but in France where the most celebrated commoner won the most important victories of the Hundred Years' War. Generally referred to as Joan of Arc (1412-1431) in the English world and Jeanne d'Arc in France, the young peasant girl who led French troops into battle in 1429 was not known for her warrior prowess. Instead, she maintained an unwavering conviction that

God had sent her to save France from the English. The quick succession of victories that the French forces secured with her in a visible position of leadership resuscitated the morale of French troops. Joan participated in strategy sessions and battlefield encounters throughout 1429 and 1430. Although English allies had captured, tried, and burned her by 1431, her successes became the stuff of legend. Her ability to remain undaunted by her humble origins and the prejudices against women that were particularly pronounced in the military made her one of the most impressive non-noble warrior heroes of the period.

Historians have sometimes characterized the increased effectiveness of non-nobles in the wars of the 1300s and 1400s as revolutionary. While the size of armies grew and the tactics involved became more varied and sophisticated, the changes occurred gradually and incrementally. Innovative kings, such as Edward III, realized that they did not have the knights and customary resources to compete in chivalric contests with the French crown. Consequently, they recruited outlaws and sometimes conscripted commoners, including imprisoned felons, to field large, effective fighting forces at a lower cost. Although the older, chivalric custom of knights holding other knights captured in battle for ransom continued, longbowmen and pikemen fought to kill. They were not looking to hold a knight for ransom. The casualties at Courtrai in 1302 and Crecy in 1346 were in the thousands. And while warfare was becoming more deadly as organized bands of commoners became more integral to military tactics in the 1300s, other factors were at work that caused the population of Europe to drop in the millions during the 1300s.

# Famine, Plague, and Assaults on Authority

Throughout history warfare has often been a vector for outbreaks of famine and disease. Invading armies routinely destroyed crops while spreading diseases, such as dysentery, that often erupted in military encampments. However, other causes were at work when the Great Famine arose across most of northern Europe from 1315-1317. Such a widespread crop failure had more general causes than even the largest of armies of the period could spread.

Even before widespread famine engulfed much of Europe north of the Alps in 1315, grain harvests were beginning to falter in the late 1200s and early 1300s. The increased population that had characterized the High Middle Ages necessitated more intensive cultivation of the land. Parts of France, for example, were more populous in the early 1300s than they were in the twentieth century. Consequently, crop yields declined as the average size of peasant holdings decreased. These smaller plots of land necessitated more intensive farming, which depleted nutrients in the soil. Exacerbating this situation, average temperatures dropped, growing seasons shortened, and rainfall increased. Not only were the yields smaller, but because of reduced exposure to sunlight, the crops were also less nutritious when consumed.

Writing in the early 1300s, an English monk, Johannes Trokelow, recognized the impact of the increased rainfall and the cooler weather on the price of grain. Although he was only familiar with rising grain prices in England, the pattern held across much of Europe where a 300% increase in grain prices was common. Without the ability to afford grain in the markets, peasants ate their seed corn, traditionally used to plant the next year's crop, and slaughtered their livestock. According to rumors, some commoners hungrily eyed their pets and perhaps even their children. Even the English royal family experienced shortfalls with its provisions; King Edward II was facing his own problems including a civil war led by his cousin, Thomas of Lancaster. But these battles and their armies were fairly small. The impact of war on the English peasants working the land was relatively local and contained. Consequently, the Great Famine of 1315 was likely the result of a combination of soil exhaustion and non-anthropogenic climate change; volcanic eruptions may have filled the atmosphere with enough particles to reflect the sun's warmth. In any case, poor harvests were widespread, and Europe lost an estimated 5-10 million people.

The decreased supply of grain had a devastating effect on Europe's livestock. Desperate for food, peasants slaughtered draft animals. Without grain or necessary fodder, many livestock starved; some drowned due to the increased rainfall. With immune systems compromised by lack of nutrition, sheep and cattle contracted diseases such as murrain and anthrax. It is likely that humans acquired some of these diseases through zoonotic transmission, where a pathogen, such as a virus or parasite, jumps from an animal to a human. Zoonotic transmission has been linked to the various coronaviruses in the twenty-first century, most recently from bats to humans. Although anthrax spores have been uncovered in some mass graves from the 1340s, the most likely explanation for the particular outbreak of plague, known as the Black Death, is that it arose from a combination of zoonotic and human-to-human transmission of the *Yersinia pestis* bacterium.

Historians still debate as to exactly which disease or diseases the Black Death consisted of, but the prevailing theory is that it was a combination of bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic plague. Fleas transmitted bubonic plague, whereas pneumonic and septicemic plague occurred as pathogens traveled from human to human either airborne or through bodily fluids. In the unsanitary conditions of medieval Europe, both rats and fleas were common pests. In turn, many victims of plague developed flu-like symptoms and transmitted the sickness by coughing or sneezing.   Once infected, a person could also expect swelling, called buboes, near the groin or joints. Eventually, the buboes turned dark, ruptured, and emitted unpleasant odors.
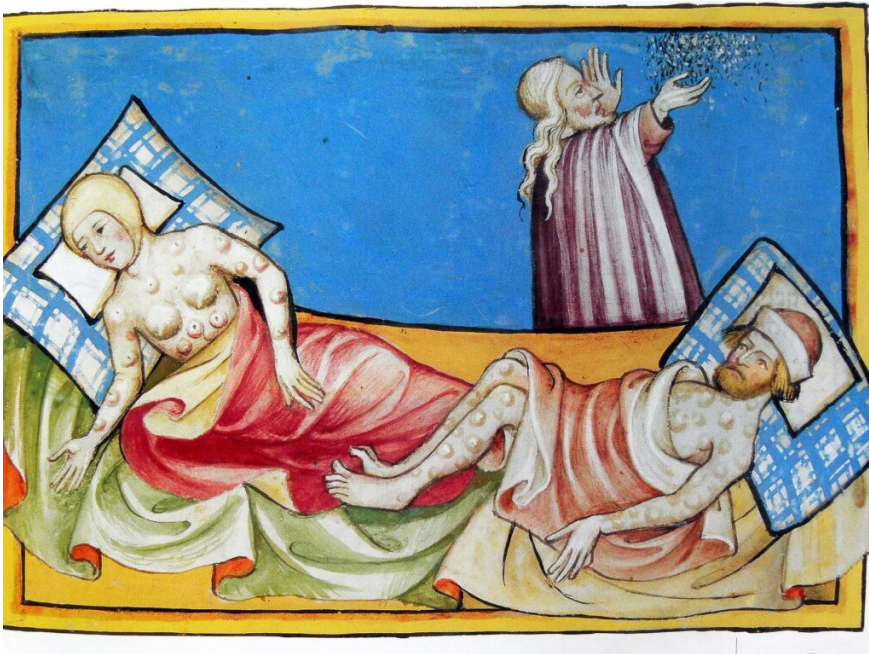
Victims of plague often displayed swollen lymph nodes called buboes.
This image from the Toggenburg Bible (1411) depicts the biblical plague
of boils as described in Exodus, but this early fifteenth-century
illustration likely reflects the artist's observations of plague in Europe.

These were the commonly reported symptoms of the pandemic that swept across Europe in the mid-1300s. The Black Death refers to this specific outbreak of plague that Europeans faced between 1347 and 1351. During this period entire villages died of the disease while other localities suffered relatively few deaths. The uneven distribution of mortality rates was likely due to poor harvests, compromised immune systems, and the lack of efficacious medical treatments. Although research into the etiology of the Black Death is ongoing, the most widely accepted explanation is that this deadliest of pandemics in medieval and early modern history began in the Mongol khanates and spread west.

As the disease entered Europe in the late 1340s it generally spread from south to north. Some of the earliest epidemics were in Constantinople, Athens, and Sicily. A common narrative claims that Genoese merchants contracted the plague at the siege of Kaffa in the Crimean peninsula in 1346 and brought it back to Italy by 1347. Within five years it had reached Scandinavia, Scotland, and Ireland. Some cities lost over half of their population, and somewhere between 20 and 40 million Europeans likely perished during the Black Death as the overall population dwindled to approximately 60-80 million. Further outbreaks of plague occurred in 1361-2 and in 1369. They continued to erupt periodically and locally for the next 350 years.

One relatively effective response to the plague was the implementation of quarantines. The word came from the Italian practice of isolating the infected for forty days, *quarantina* in Italian. City governments locked those who had plague symptoms in their homes, and they sometimes placed whole neighborhoods or districts under quarantine. In the countryside, people refused to travel to larger cities and towns out of fear of infection. Cities tended to be incubators of disease even in healthier times.

Less effective responses were more common. Some communities engaged in prayer, practiced mortification of the flesh, or searched for scapegoats. Groups of penitents, called Flagellants, roamed the countryside, villages, and towns, whipping themselves and begging God for forgiveness. They operated on the belief that the sins of humanity were the root cause for the scourge of plague that God had sent. Their numbers sometimes swelled into the thousands, and they forced observers to join them. By 1349, Pope Clement VI (r. 1342-1352) condemned them. His exact reasons were somewhat mysterious, but the Church typically took a dim view of Flagellants. The authorities issued a second rebuke against them in the early fifteenth century as well. Despite these attempts at suppression, Flagellants continued to appear periodically, and those who did not share their concerns, especially Jewish communities.

Flagellants were not the only ones to blame Jews for the plague. Building on the murderous anti-Semitism that had begun in earnest during the period of the crusades, Jews were often victims of the intensified religious enthusiasm that followed the outbreaks of plague. A frequent accusation leveled against Jews was that they had poisoned wells. Locals massacred tens of thousands of Jews in the Iberian peninsula during the second half of the 1300s. Generally, these pogroms coincided with the appearance of plague in 1355, 1360, 1365, and especially 1391.

Gradually, plague epidemics became more local and less frequent, but the disease became endemic to Europe and, therefore, kept the population low for generations. It was not until the mid-fifteenth century that the overall population started to rise again. Even then, plague persisted throughout Europe with outbreaks in London between 1665 and 1666 and in Marseilles between 1720 and 1723. In both cases, the loss of life was substantial with 100,000 deaths in both places. The mortality rates for plague were very high, twenty to forty times higher than the rates for COVID-19.

The sustained decline in population during the 1300s and 1400s had profound effects on the distribution of wealth in Europe in terms of food prices, rents, and wages. Although food prices initially rose as the widespread loss of life disrupted markets, by the 1360s grain production rebounded, and markets stabilized. With fewer mouths to feed, grain prices declined throughout most of Europe. The decline in population also affected wages. Since there were fewer people to work the land, wages rose rapidly for those who had survived the plague. There was a labor shortage. Desperate for laborers, some landlords offered attractive (low) rents and high wages with no servile dues to work their estates. Some peasants and serfs fled their existing holdings for more beneficial offers. Consequently, this combination of lower food prices and rents, on one hand, and higher wages, on the other, provided unprecedented but generally modest opportunities for upward social mobility among the laboring classes.

Similarly, the labor shortage benefited lower and middle-class women. For roughly a century after the plague, women had more legal rights in terms of property and land ownership, as well as the right to participate in commerce. In England and the Low Countries some women lobbied for and received the status of *femme sole*, which gave them the right to have the courts treat them as independent legal entities, instead of the legal dependents of their husbands or deceased husbands. However, this status

did not always work to their advantage, as the courts tended to treat them with prejudice. Some women were able to join craft guilds for a time, something that was almost unheard of prior to the Black Death. The reason for this temporary improvement in the legal and economic status of women was precisely the same as that of their male counterparts: the labor shortage.

Meanwhile, the literature of the period reflected the aristocracy's fears of losing their privileges. During the labor shortage, they paid more for labor, but they collected less as tenants sought the most beneficial terms for work and rent. Without knowing economic theory, surviving commoners took advantage of the slackening demand for land due to the dwindling population. With lower rents and higher wages, the Black Death ushered in powerful forces for social change, including increased social mobility (the ability to improve one's socioeconomic position) and the decline of serfdom (more legal freedom).

The Black Death accelerated social changes apart from the improvement of economic conditions for commoners. Challenges to traditional authorities, the Church and the nobility, were already underway when Giovanni Boccaccio penned his masterpiece, *The Decameron*, while plague was ravaging his native Florence between 1347 and 1350. The 100 stories in his work mocked members of the Church and the nobility, in addition to questioning longstanding practices related to religious intolerance and even patriarchy. Although the commoners' defiance of the French nobility at Courtrai four decades before the Black Death indicated a willingness to defy aristocratic dominance, this lack of social deference and obedience became more pronounced by the second half of the 1300s. The rigid hierarchy that had characterized Europe prior to the Late Middle Ages was under attack.

Boccaccio's depiction of the unruliness of common folk was not unique to southern Europe or the Italian peninsula. By the 1370s, Geoffrey Chaucer had started writing his *Canterbury Tales*. Likely inspired by Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's poem about pilgrims on their way to Canterbury mostly consisted of eclectic tales that echoed many of the sentiments Boccaccio expressed a generation earlier. Both men drew attention to corruption within the Church; Boccaccio focused on the lechery of religious figures and Chaucer, their greed. Both works also included the account of the Marquis of Montferrat, Gualtieri or Walter (in English), a childish and depraved man, who demanded unconditional obedience from his previously impoverished wife, the noble peasant, Griselda. While neither work went so far as to preach against the deeply entrenched patriarchy that afflicted European society and culture, both writers broached the sensitive subjects of gender and marriage relations, especially the authority that husbands had over their wives. By depicting the mentally tormented wife, Griselda, whose husband claimed to kill her children, as the moral superior of her warped, aristocratic husband, Boccaccio and Chaucer opened up discussions related to the superiority of men and nobles.

The *Danse Macabre* or Dance of Death was circulating in Europe for decades before the Black Death, but its depiction became more frequent afterwards. In this illustration, the highest members of society (pope, emperor, empress, etc...) were dancing to their graves, as did commoners. The message was clear: everyone shared a similar fate at the end of their lives.

This questioning of the privileges enjoyed by a male-dominated aristocracy was part of a more general levelling trend that arose in the 1300s. Sometimes this sentiment was more subtle and implied, as in the depictions of the *Danse Macabre*. The Dance of Death was a relatively common artistic trope that featured skeletons of all walks of life, often leading a hierarchical procession of society toward a common fate: the grave. And sometimes the leveling trend manifested in violent attacks on the nobility. In 1358, the peasants in areas surrounding Paris joined with members of the middle class, and even the Mayor of Paris himself, to attack the manors and families of the French nobility. Accounts of this bloody uprising, known as the *Jacquerie*, struck fear into the minds of the nobility. Similarly, the commoners surrounding London executed the archbishop of Canterbury and the followers of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, in an uprising that left hundreds dead in the city in 1381. Chaucer was likely in the city to witness this event; however, Boccaccio was dead by the time the lower classes of Florence, known as the *ciompi*, rebelled between 1378 and 1382.

Still, the trend was clear. The middle class was becoming more powerful as common people became warrior heroes, enjoyed more opportunities for economic prosperity, and figured prominently as the moral equivalents or even superiors of aristocrats in artwork, such as the
Danse Macabre, or in literature, such as the story of Griselda and the repugnant Gualtieri. Sometimes, commoners exercised their growing power through the emergence of representative institutions, such as the assemblies of Italian republics, the Estates General in France, and the House of Commons in England. However, these institutions lacked the inclusion of the large numbers of lower middle class and poor in society. Consequently, violence erupted as the deference to traditional authorities waned and frustration with exploitative policies and governments and the aristocrats who controlled them persisted. This class tension was a persistent feature of European society well into the Modern (1800-present) period.

The Decline of Papal Prestige

Contributing to this decline in deference to authority was the erosion of ecclesiastical prestige in general and papal power in particular. Given the influence of the Church on the establishment of hierarchy and the transformation of Europe toward a civilization, it is not surprising that its declining prestige incited broader attacks on privileged members of society. The Church had been instrumental in the growth of literacy, the centralization of political power, the perpetuation of hierarchical forms of social organization, and the exploitation of commoners for centuries. Its decline started gradually in the 1200s and picked up speed during the 1300s and 1400s.

The papacy reached the high point of its power and influence during the pontificate of Pope Innocent III (r. 1198-1216). Soon after his ascent to the papal See, Innocent launched the Fourth Crusade, which not only reduced the power of the pope's chief rival, the Patriarch of Constantinople, but also enriched Italian merchants. As we saw in the previous chapter, this pope used his power to weaken the Holy Roman Emperor in the Italian peninsula and to force King John of England to recognize him as his feudal overlord. Innocent was trained in canon law and was an able administrator. In 1215, he assembled the Fourth Lateran Council, which defined rituals known as the seven sacraments of the Latin Church and issued a number of other proclamations, known as canons, that strengthened the power of the papacy and the prestige of the clergy in general.

Although the papacy remained very powerful during the thirteenth century, it engaged in practices that gradually eroded its power. The proclamation of crusades for clearly political purposes against the Holy Roman Emperors in addition to the introduction of the sale of indulgences to fund these crusades around 1200 promoted cynicism toward the leadership of the Church. The rise of the Spiritual Franciscans (described in the previous chapter) was one of the most telling signs that criticism of the popes was gaining organized adherents from the most religiously devout members of Christendom. In addition, popes, cardinals, and bishops engaged in an increasingly open effort to profit from their positions of power by selling offices in the Church. This practice, known as simony, weakened claims to moral authority that were instrumental for Church power.

The competition for power between the popes and secular rulers (described in the previous chapter) which had intensified during the Investiture Conflict, became even more intense in the 1300s. By the late 1200s secular rulers were openly willing to defy the popes' authority to tax and to administer justice in kingdoms, such as France, England, and the Holy Roman Empire. In 1296 Pope Boniface VIII (r. 1294-1303) reacted to initiatives undertaken by the King of France, Philip the Fair (r. 1285-1314), to remove all clergy from the administration of justice in his realm and to impose a tax on the clergy. Boniface issued a papal bull that threatened the king with excommunication if he appropriated Church property without the pope's permission. Reflecting the growing power of the monarchy vis-à-vis the Church, Philip responded by forbidding the exportation of any goods or currency from France to the Papal States, and he halted the pope's attempt to raise money in France for a crusade. Although the conflict subsided for a couple of years, by 1301, Philip arrested the pope's representative at the French

court and tried him in royal courts. The pope was outraged and prepared to excommunicate the king. Philip responded by sending troops to the pope's palace at Anagni, southeast of Rome. Philip's soldiers and their Italian allies roughed up the seventy-three-year-old pope. Although often referred to as "a slap," the assault on the pope likely led to his death a month later and was more than a slap.

Subsequent popes heeded the growing power of the French crown. Pope Clement VI (r. 1305-1314) sought to placate Philip, first by enabling Philip's seizure of the property of the Knights Templar in 1307 and then in 1309 by moving the papacy itself from Rome to Avignon, located more fully within the French king's sphere of influence. The removal of the papacy from its historical home in Rome significantly weakened the prestige of the papacy. With its imperial lineage, Rome had long signified power and legitimacy even to those Europeans who had little knowledge of the past. In addition to this loss of prestige, the move also cost the popes their control over territory and revenue in the Papal States as the aristocratic families of central Italy took advantage of the departure to enrich themselves. Increasingly, Philip's rivals, such as the King of England and the Holy Roman Emperor, viewed the papacy as an instrument of the French crown. Avignon itself became synonymous with corruption, and devout Christians lamented the Babylonish Captivity (1309-1377), a reference to the enslavement of the ancient Hebrews in Babylon during the 500s BCE. The implication was that the papacy had become a tool of the King of France just as the Jews became servants of the Babylonian Emperor.

As the French kings leveraged their influence over the papacy by packing the Church with cardinals loyal to the French crown, other European rulers chipped away at the theological foundations of that power. Louis of Bavaria (r. 1328-1347) did not receive recognition as Holy Roman Emperor by the pope until 1328 although he had been King of the Germans since 1314. Angered by this rejection from the pope in Avignon, Louis gave protection and support to Marsilius of Padua (1275-1342), who wrote a persuasive attack on the authority of the popes. Entitled *Defensor Pacis* ("Defender of the Peace"), Marsilius's work established a strong theological and historical argument against the popes' claims to unchallenged authority. While his patron, Louis, invaded Italy in 1326, Marsilius remained in Germany where he persecuted members of the clergy who remained loyal to the reigning French pope, John XXII. The alliance between Louis and Marsilius became part of a pattern of alliance between secular rulers and theologians who collaborated to attack the papacy. This pattern included other theologians, including John Wyclif in the 1370s and 1380s, Jan Hus in the early 1400s, and eventually Martin Luther in the 1500s. These critics both of the papacy in particular and of the corrupt practices of the Church more generally allied themselves with secular leaders who sought to undermine Church power.

In England King Edward III relied less on theologians and more on Parliament to curtail the power of the papacy. In the early phases of the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453), emboldened by his victory against the French at Crecy (1346), Edward prompted Parliament to pass the Statute of Provisors (1351) to prohibit the papacy from installing foreigners and especially French clergy to positions of power and wealth in the monasteries and bishoprics of England. Edward's grandfather, Edward I, had initiated a similar statute in 1306, but given the escalating conflict in France, Edward III deemed it necessary to reinforce the prohibition of such appointments. He and his subjects understood that the

popes supported the Valois kings of France, and the English feared that Church revenues harvested in England filled the coffers of their French adversaries. To ensure that the King of England had the ultimate say about any disputes over such appointments, Parliament passed the Statute of Praemunire in 1353 in order to reinforce the king's jurisdiction over disputed Church appointments.

Tensions between secular and ecclesiastical leaders remained high in England during the 1370s when Edward's son, John of Gaunt (1340-1399), Duke of Lancaster, took aim at powerful English clergy. As the patron of the Church reformer, John Wyclif, and as the acting head of the monarchy from 1370 to 1377, Lancaster sought to justify the confiscation of ecclesiastical estates in order to fund the war against France. By 1376 Wyclif published a lengthy treatise, De *Civili Dominio* (*On Civil Dominion*), that advocated for the confiscation of Church property because of the sinful nature of the clergy. In late 1376 Lancaster seized the estates of the wealthiest bishop in England. As the Church employed its enormous influence on popular opinion, much as it had during the reign of King John in the early 1200s, the duke relented and returned the property in early 1377. More than 150 years later, his descendant, Henry VIII, proceeded with a more ambitious plan and seized the estates of monasteries across England. But the power and prestige of the Church and the papacy were still too deeply entrenched in 1377 for the success of such an ambitious undertaking.

That same year Pope Gregory XI (r. 1371-1378) moved the papacy, along with its secretaries, scribes, and administrators, from Avignon back to Rome in order to salvage the reputation of the office. It was a risky move for a French pope. The crowd in Rome turned ugly, and the pope had to flee to the safety of the papal palace at Anagni, outside of Rome. Within a year he was dead, and the Roman people demanded the election of an Italian pope. Upon the election of Pope the Italian Urban VI (r. 1378-1389), the French cardinals returned to Avignon, where they elected a French pope. For the next four decades Europe had two popes, a development known as the Great Schism (1378-1418), sometimes called "the Western Schism" to differentiate it from the one between the Latin and Byzantine Churches that had occurred in 1054. For the last nine years of this later schism there were even three popes as plans to unify under a single pope backfired.

As rival popes excommunicated the followers of the other pope, so that all of Europe was essentially excommunicated, fears of ecclesiastical censure and of the clergy in general waned. Some took advantage of the divisions within the Church leadership and some of the foundations of its claims to power. One of those critics was John Wyclif in England, who published his critique of the doctrine of transubstantiation, which claimed that the clergy had miraculous powers. In 1382 the English clergy brought Wyclif to trial. They stopped short of proclaiming him a heretic and merely condemned his teachings. Two years later he died, but his critiques of the Church gained powerful adherents after his death. His followers, called Lollards, found protection and support at the court of Richard II (r. 1377-1399) and his queen, Anne of Bohemia (r. 1382-1394).

Upon the death of Anne of Bohemia, her attendants and courtiers carried Wyclif's ideas to Anne's native lands in Bohemia, where Jan Hus embraced some ideas and modified others. Like Wyclif, Hus preached in the vernacular against the corruption of the clergy and in support of the ultimate power of monarchs.

Unlike Wyclif, he claimed that lay people should be allowed to consume the Eucharist in both forms: the bread as the body of Jesus and the wine as His blood, the latter of which was traditionally limited only to the clergy. This practice, known as *utraquism*, constituted an attack on clerical privilege and reflected the leveling spirit of the age. At first, Hus's ideas gained support from the Bohemian monarch, Wenceslas IV (1378-1419), partly because Hussites had widespread popular support in Prague. However, when Hus agreed in late 1414 to travel to a Church council at Constance in modern-day Germany, the emperor had him arrested, despite having assured Hus of his protection. On July 6, 1415, Hus suffered death by burning after being condemned for his heretical teachings.

The burning of Hus coincided with a low point in the prestige of the Church. Divided by three rival popes, Church leaders became desperate to find a solution. In 1409, they had elected the third pope, whose headquarters was in Pisa, about 200 miles north of Rome, in an attempt to withdraw support from the other two popes. It did not work. When the Pisan pope died in 1410, an enterprising cleric, Baldassarre Cossa, borrowed money from the Medici family of Florence to bribe cardinals to elect him as pope. Despite his experience both as a military commander and as an employer of outlaw gangs, Cossa became Pope John XXIII. England, France, Bohemia, and Portugal recognized his claim to the title. However, in 1418, a general council of the Church convicted him on charges of piracy, murder, rape, incest, and other crimes that the Church did not want to mention. Shortly after Cossa's conviction, secular rulers pressured the other two popes to resign. The council elected a new pope, Martin V (r. 1417-1431), a member of the central Italian nobility. He worked for a decade under the guidance of a Church council, focused on rehabilitating the papacy. However, this rehabilitation was not particularly successful, and by the late 1400s and early 1500s, the corruption of the papacy was more blatant than ever. This deterioration of the papacy was one of the factors that emboldened Martin Luther to challenge the authority of the papacy in 1517.

The Intensification of Religious Devotion

Despite the declining prestige of the leadership of the Church, religious devotion in Europe strengthened as it became more institutionally entrenched throughout secular society and as Europeans became more literate and able to engage with religious texts. The Church had provided non-literate avenues for religious devotion since the Early Middle Ages. Rituals, storytelling, artwork, prayers, processions, and pilgrimages had been staples of the Latin Church since Roman imperial times (c. 300s). Europeans recounted the lives of saints at social gatherings and prayed to these holy figures to intercede on their behalf with the Almighty. They sought cures at the burial sites of saints for the maladies that ailed them. Thus, Christianity had a variety of cultural practices that addressed the spiritual and psychic needs of the population. These practices continued to find favor among large segments of the European population while more literate forms of devotion, such as reading scripture and the lives of saints, increasingly gained traction.

Although the Church leadership claimed authority to define doctrines and beliefs, Christianity proved too malleable for them to control. Various communities, such as Beguines, Lollards, and Hussites, challenged the authorities' interpretation of religious dogma and practices. In the countryside, peasants found a modicum of freedom to adapt religious practices to their specialized needs. They believed that some saints were adept at controlling the weather, the harvest, and the health of families, especially when the proper rituals were in place to solicit their help. In a later age, the villagers increasingly consulted doctors or almanacs, instead of saints, to guide their practices.

Occasionally, Church leaders traveled to rural communities and expressed shock and consternation at what they found; such was the case when members of the inquisition visited a village near Villeneuve in southeastern France during the thirteenth century. The local women there recognized a dog, Guinefort, as a saint and savior for their unwanted children. Infanticide was likely common throughout the Middle Ages as families struggled to support themselves even with completely healthy children when they had little or no access to effective birth control; although it was emotionally trying, some people with no other recourse resorted to this method of eliminating children they could not support. The local women near Villeneuve brought their infants to a grove in the woods, placed them on a bed of straw, lit a candle, and prayed to Guinefort for relief from their burden. The inquisitors and those who recorded their actions mocked these practices as foolish superstitions. But the local women had adapted their religion and in particular the custom of relying on saints to solve problems to meet the stress and trauma associated with infanticide.

More accepted beliefs found avenues for strong institutional support. The doctrines of transubstantiation, the virginity of Mary (Jesus's mother), and the nature of the Holy Spirit were just some of the most common beliefs that attracted associations of men, known as confraternities, from across the social spectrum in late medieval Europe. Although there was typically a pronounced religious component to most guilds, their principal focus tended to be on the manufacture and the distribution of commercial goods. By contrast, confraternities had a more religious and social focus. These brotherhoods feasted while they discussed elements of the faith. For example, most large cities across Europe were home to a confraternity of Corpus Christi, devoted to the doctrine of transubstantiation. They sometimes planned processions, engaged in civic activities, and provided various forms of charity. Other confraternities planned public events, such as the production of a cycle of plays depicting the life of Jesus during the week leading up to Easter. In all of the confraternities, laymen heard mass together, listened to sermons, and studied the complexities of the faith.

A book of hours from the fifteenth century portrayed the patron of the book praying to the Virgin Mary on the left. On the right is Joachim, the husband of Mary's mother, St. Anne. According to tradition, she too gave birth as a virgin. Therefore, Joachim was a holy man, but not Mary's father.

This deepening of the Christian education often started at a young age. In wealthier families, mothers taught children the prayers and stories of the Christian faith by reading them passages from the books of hours. Although the majority of these manuscripts were in Latin and therefore not immediately intelligible to children, they increasingly appeared in the vernacular during the 1300s and 1400s. They typically contained a calendar of Church feast days (of which there were dozens), passages from both the Old and New Testaments of the Vulgate Bible, a selection of psalms from the Old Testament, passages from the Gospels that often accompanied the lives of saints, and prayers, such as *Ave Maria* ("Hail Mary") and *Pater Noster* ("Our Father"). Prior to the first use of the printing press in Europe (see below) in 1450, the ownership of a book of hours was a status symbol for medieval families. Aristocratic families commissioned ornate volumes with gold leaf and elaborate imagery, while less wealthy families were satisfied with fewer costly images. In general, these books contributed to an increase in literacy across much of Europe, especially among the more prosperous members of society.

The proliferation of mystical tracts during the 1300s and 1400 constituted another element of Christian piety that stimulated literacy. Mystics recounted their spiritual journeys in order to cultivate a direct, personal relationship with God. Numerous mystical tracts emerged as the declining prestige of the clergy encouraged Europeans to look after their own salvation rather than to rely on the corrupting influence of Church leaders. This trend accompanied the publication of works by Dante, Boccaccio, and

Chaucer, all popular authors who wrote in the language of commoners and who ridiculed the leadership of the Church. Although one of the most popular mystical works of the early 1400s, the *Imitation of Christ*, initially appeared in Latin, translators soon rendered it into English, Dutch, French, and German. Because the subject matter of these works often bordered on heresy by minimizing the importance of sacraments, priests, and rituals for salvation, several of them, such as the *Imitation of Christ* and the *Cloud of Unknowing* were written anonymously, although later generations have been able to identify the authors with varying degrees of certainty.

Julian of Norwich was a female mystic who lived in England during the late 1300s and early 1400s. Although she wrote about topics that contradicted Church authorities, her near celebrity status likely protected her from facing prosecution for heresy.

One of the most fascinating mystics of the late 1300s and early 1400s was Julian of Norwich. After a near miss with death in the 1370s, Julian described her divine encounter in her *Revelations of Divine*

Love, which depicted God as more feminine than masculine. The God that Julian had encountered possessed a motherly nature. Such ideas were contrary to the patriarchal vision of God that the Church authorities portrayed. Afraid to attach her name to her writings, she wrote them anonymously in her cell, a small room in a church in Norwich England. Later, local nuns collected and preserved her manuscripts. She became such a celebrity and revered religious figure that the Church leaders never interrogated her about her beliefs.

As the trends toward literacy, mysticism, and associations of pious lay people converged, the growing middle class of Europe formed movements that took advantage of the Church's declining ability to control religious beliefs. During the 1320s, a movement known as the Brethren of the Free Spirit shocked Church authorities because of the diversity of their beliefs, which included autotheism, the merging of the soul of a person with the soul of God, and an erotic union of the individual with Christ. These ideas were fairly common in mystical tracts and in the beliefs of the beguines and their male counterparts, the Beghards. The movement spread widely from Bohemia and the Holy Roman Empire to France, the Low Countries and the northern Italian peninsula. A decade later in Bavaria, Switzerland, and along the upper Rhine River, a group of mystics, who called themselves the Friends of God, included both lay people and clergy devoted to the reading and writing of mystical works. Perhaps the largest of these movements arose in the Low Countries on the Lower Rhine and then spread into the northern Empire. Known as the *Devotio Moderna*, this group initially consisted of lay people but soon became mostly members of the clergy. They called for Church reforms and for members of the clergy to return to monastic values of celibacy, hard work, and obedience. Led by a well-educated son of a civil servant from the Low Countries, Gerard Groote (1340-1384), they formed segregated but mutually supportive devotional communities of men and women, including many beguines. These communities read Christian texts and sometimes preached without permission from Church authorities in urban areas. They eventually influenced the likely author of the *Imitation of Christ*, Thomas à Kempis, who also refrained from attaching his name to a mystical tract. Although they faced some hostility from the Latin Church, their oppression was relatively mild compared to other groups, such as the Brethren of the Free Spirit earlier in the 1300s.

The vigor of Christian devotion during the Late Middle Ages was pronounced. Although some expressions of high medieval enthusiasm, such as cathedral building, processions, pilgrimages, pogroms, and the attachment to saints, not only persisted but also strengthened, other forms of religiosity, such as crusading, withered. Still practiced by a subset of nobles, by the 1300s crusading had little of the popular appeal that was evident during the First Crusade. Nevertheless, the expression of popular piety continued to evolve in civic rituals, loosely knit religious communities of *beguines* and *beghards*, formal institutions such as confraternities, and private gatherings. Mothers who could afford books of hours read stories of female and male saints to their children. *Beguines* and *beghards* read and interpreted the Bible, often in seclusion, lest their Bible reading provoke the authorities. While it might seem strange to imagine Bible reading as a subversive activity, the Church considered it as such when conducted by laypeople without supervision during the early 1400s. The breadth and depth of piety expanded, especially literate piety, oftentimes outside of the control of the Church authorities.

This combination of the decline of the prestige of religious authorities and of intense religious devotion provided the context for the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. By then, popes such as Alexander IV, Julius II, and Leo X openly bribed their way into positions of leadership in order to advance their families' dynastic ambitions. They lacked moral authority, and the papacy lost much of the prestige that it gained during the High Middle Ages. Meanwhile, pious believers chafed at the visible corruption associated with these dynastic wars, the sale of Church offices, and the sale of indulgences. As we will see below, the introduction of the printing press proved to be a catalyst for the revolutionary potential of these two trends: the declining prestige of the Church hierarchy and the intensifying religious devotion. In the meantime, let us turn to another catalyst for revolutionary change.

The Development of Gunpowder Technology

Beyond its chemical properties, gunpowder proved to be an explosive element of European social and political development as it became part of the transformation of warfare that had emerged during the early 1300s. Unlike the printing press, which was relatively simple, visible, and easy to comprehend as a form of technology, gunpowder involved a combination of invisible chemical processes and complex metallurgical skills that were not well understood during the Late Middle Ages. The ingredients of gunpowder were only part of the problem. The presence of saltpeter in a mixture of charcoal and sulfur attracted moisture, and the concoction was rendered unreliable when damp. In addition, the forging of accurate and reliable cannons was a tricky business. The length of the cannon and the size of the bore, where the cannonball exited, had a profound impact on the accuracy of the weapon. The casting of iron was difficult to perfect for cannon production, and wrought iron was inferior (too weak) for this purpose of containing an explosion. Alternatively, bronze was too expensive to mass produce. All of these factors hindered the development of gunpowder technology for several centuries.
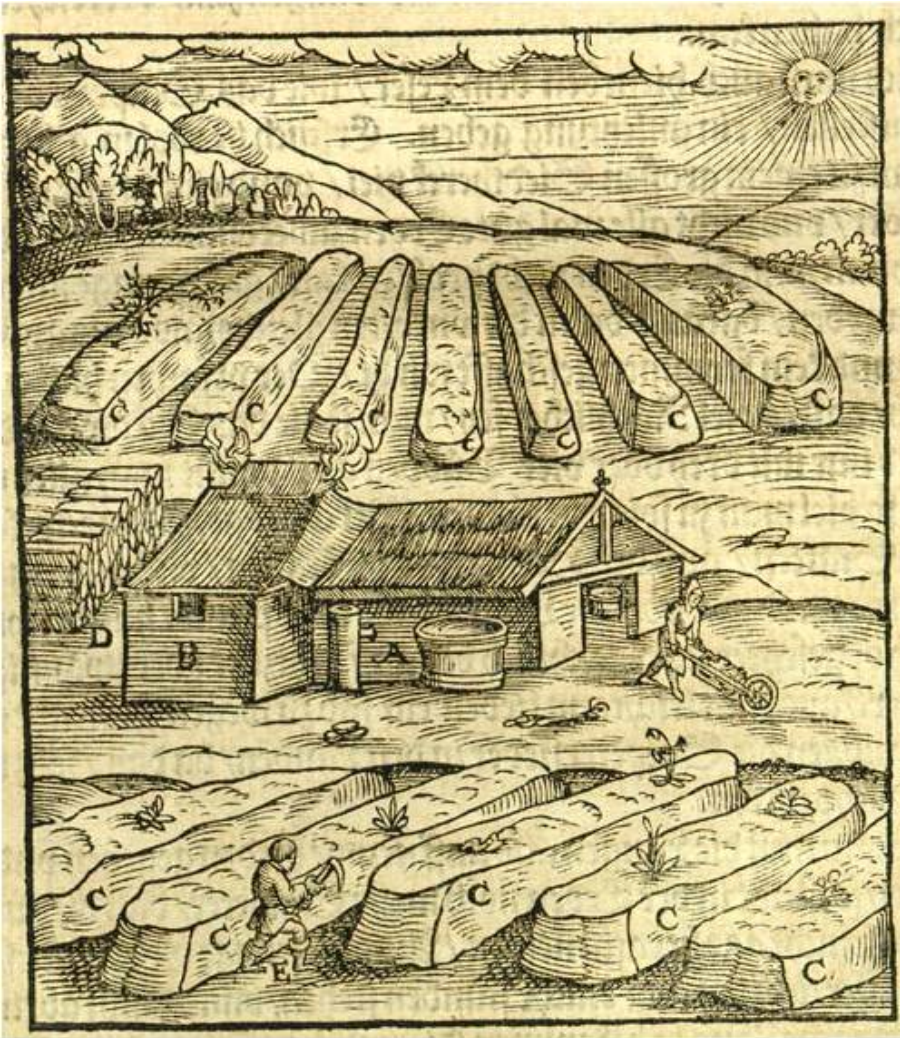
Saltpeter plantations were nasty places, and the first ones in Europe did not appear until the late 1300s. They mixed manure with urine, oyster shells, ash, rotting leaves, and other ingredients to produce the nitrates necessary for making saltpeter, an essential component of gunpowder.

The first European to document the ingredients of gunpowder was a Franciscan friar, Roger Bacon (1220-1292), whose findings were buried in a voluminous work that he sent to Pope Clement VI in 1267 He described something akin to a firecracker and identified the ingredients of gunpowder as charcoal, sulfur and saltpeter. Although charcoal and sulfur were common enough in Europe, saltpeter had to come from India or China. The cost of saltpeter was also a significant obstacle to widespread experimentation, that is, until Europeans began manufacturing their own saltpeter from soil heavy in human and animal excrement in the late fourteenth century. Prior to that period, there were few documented instances of the use of gunpowder used in Europe. For example, Edward III may well have had a rudimentary cannon or two at the Battle of Crecy in 1346, and the Flemish likely used smaller, portable firearms called *ribauldequins* at the Battle of Beverhoutsveld in 1382. Neither of these episodes proved to be a turning point in the technology, partly because of the cost and partly because gunpowder in its simplest form, called serpentine powder, tended to absorb moisture, which caused its ignition to fail.

By the early 1400s the cost of gunpowder began to fall, but problems persisted with weapon design and construction. In 1415 the English employed very large cannons in the siege of Harfleur as they revived their efforts to conquer France. Equipped with approximately a dozen large cannons, bearing the names of "London," "Messenger," and "The King's Daughter," Henry V (r. 1413-1422), battered the walls of Harfleur, and despite excellent defensive measures, the city capitulated within five weeks. The bronze cannons were so heavy that Henry could not bring them with him on the rest of his overland campaign. Still, the cannons radically reduced the amount of time needed to besiege a well-fortified port city.

During the following decade the Bohemian opponents of the papacy and of the Holy Roman Empire, called Hussites, after the martyred Jan Hus (described above), figured out a solution to this problem. Unlike Henry V, they were not so much interested in siege warfare as they were in field warfare. Led by the blind and brilliant military commander, Jan Žižka (1360-1424), the Hussites consisted of a collection of peasants and middle-class Czechs who sought more religious freedom. Žižka improvised a highly mobile and effective fighting formation by adapting wagons commonly possessed by peasants into
Wagenburge (wagon fortresses). Equipped with a combination of crossbows, hand cannons, medium caliber cannons, and a few large cannons, all of which they packed very closely together in a powerful formation, the Hussites won a series of victories against the imperial forces before the papacy relented and granted the more moderate faction of Hussites the right to consume the Eurcharist in both forms in 1434.

The Hussites represented the combined revolutionary potential of the growing power of the lower classes, the introduction of gunpowder weapons, intense religious devotion, and the declining prestige of the papacy. Pictured here is a Wagenburg with hand cannons and crossbows. They fought under the banner the chalice, emphasizing their devotion to utraquism.

The Hussites' success with small and medium caliber artillery, which had the advantages of mobility and accuracy, also proved effective in siege warfare. During the 1440s and early 1450s, the French crown developed the first siege trains. Consisting of approximately 30 smaller cannons, called culverines, which horses could easily maneuver into position, the French recaptured fortresses that the English had taken from them between 1415 and 1435. Well supplied and highly organized, the French forces found the culverines much more accurate than the large cannons of a generation earlier. With longer barrels and smaller bores, the culverines shot cannon balls instead of stones. Rather than relying on one large boulder hurtling somewhat haphazardly toward a target, the French situated their siege weapons where they would be most effective. Then, they battered a chosen target with more precise and repeated fire. The results were so effective that within a decade they recaptured virtually all of the conquered dominions of the French crown between 1445 and 1453.

By 1494 the French demonstrated their expertise with siege weapons. They marched and rode into the

Italian peninsula with a siege train of some 50 cannons. No Italian city-state was prepared to repel such an invading force, and the French king, Charles VIII (r. 1484-1498), seemed to achieve what so many German emperors had not. His conquest of Naples in 1494 sent shockwaves across the Italian peninsula and much of Europe. For a time it seemed as if gunpowder had rendered castles and city walls obsolete. For centuries defensive positions and defensive tactics had been more reliably effective than offensive weapons. Gunpowder reversed that relationship increasingly during the 1400s and into the early 1500. By 1550, expensive fortification programs made many cities difficult to besiege and the advantages of defensive positions reemerged by the late 1500s.

Still, gunpowder certainly proved revolutionary in the sense that it ultimately rendered mounted shock combat virtually useless. The introduction of corned powder (so called because the size of the grain was similar to that of a kernel of corn) in the late 1400s and early 1500s improved the effectiveness of small arms, called arquebuses and muskets. By 1525 Spanish musketeers gunned down French cavalry charges with deadly accuracy. In addition, more reliable firing mechanisms appeared by the 1520s; the wheel-lock firing mechanism replaced the match lock ignition, and pistol manufacturers in the guilds took advantage of the innovation. These changes further strengthened the trend toward large armies, dominated by infantry formations that persisted into the modern period. Similar to the longbow and the pike, the musket further entrenched the growth of large armies, manned by non-elites. Although rulers continued to depict warfare as a noble and chivalrous affair, muskets, culverins, pistols, and cannons contributed to the increasingly bloody nature of conflicts in European warfare. And as Europeans gradually fought more wars overseas, the effectiveness of these weapons facilitated their domination and exploitation of foreign lands.

Humanism, the Italian Renaissance, and Innovation

The horrors of famine, war, and plague accompanied one of the most innovative periods in European history. Although some historians have viewed the Italian Renaissance as more of a modern than a medieval phenomenon, innovations in literature, sculpture, painting, architecture, and engineering, which we often associate with the Renaissance, were well underway by the time the Hussites fought under the twin banners of the goose and the chalice. Unlike earlier renaissances, such as the Northumbrian or Carolingian Renaissance of the 700s and 800s, the Italian Renaissance of the 1300s and 1400s occurred outside of the monasteries. Although members of the clergy participated, the influence of the merchant class in the period's greatest achievements distinguished it from early periods of intellectual vigor. The prosperity that the Italian city-states had enjoyed since the time of the crusades increased the size of the middle class and provided the necessary capital and educational opportunities that enabled the renaissance of the 1300s and 1400s.
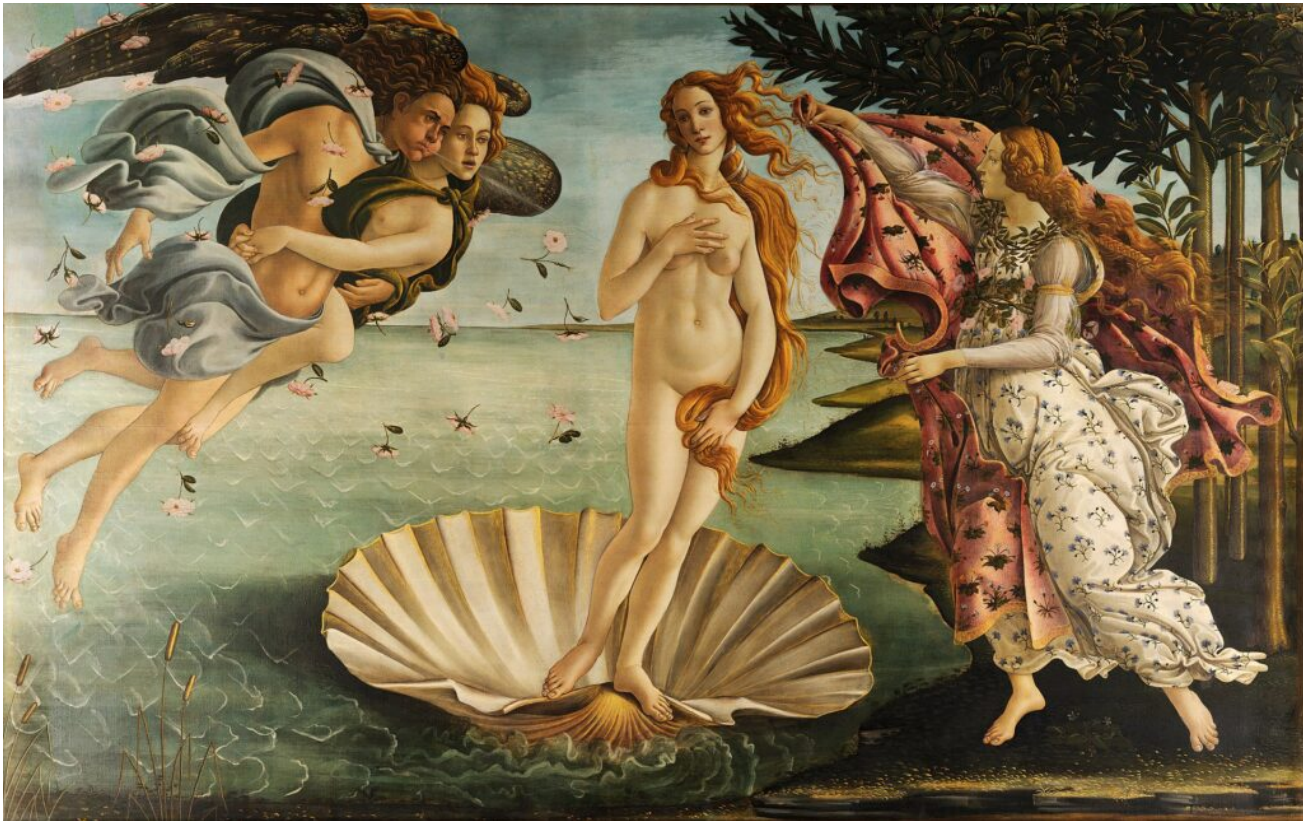
Sandro Botticelli's Birth of Venus (1485) reflected the humanist and Renaissance interest in Roman, pagan culture, which contrasted starkly with the ascetic nature of Christianity.

By the onset of the Black Death in the mid-1300s one of the principal intellectual trends behind the Italian Renaissance was well underway: humanism. Inspired by Dante's encyclopedic understanding both of Greco-Roman and of Judaeo-Christian textual traditions in the
Divine Comedy, scholars increasingly sought to uncover, portray, and understand the cultures of the ancients. In part, they were motivated by the belief that ancient writers had access to lost secrets and knowledge that had fallen out of circulation since the fall of Rome. They were also interested in developing a form of education that met the needs of the middle class. Lawyers, notaries, bankers, merchants, doctors, and bureaucrats found the scholastic methods that dominated the medieval universities poorly suited to their needs to write contracts, letters, and practical documents. They sought more advanced literacy to improve the precision and nuance in their communication. Since the early 1300s, Italian scholars had increasingly undertaken the time consuming processes of transcribing, translating, and interpreting Greek and especially Latin texts, not only to improve their understanding of the past, but also to enhance their skills in writing and public speaking.

The widespread mercantile and commercial interests of republics, such as Florence, Venice, Siena, Lucca, and Genoa, created a market for tutors who could teach these language skills. All of these republics had assemblies where public speaking was a valuable asset. Speaking to assemblies and senates, merchants sought to shape tax and trade policies; more privately, they needed to read and write effective contracts. Similar to the sophists in ancient Athens, humanist scholars were experts in language, and wealthy merchants hired them as administrators for their businesses and tutors for their

children. They taught poetry, history, rhetoric, and grammar. Humanists also understood the intricacies of word choices, syntax, and punctuation, and some could examine an ancient text and determine with precision the century of its creation based on this knowledge. Others became obsessed with the ancient writings of Cicero, the ancient Roman statesman and advocate of cultivating knowledge in the humanities. Most of them developed a passion for understanding the language and culture of the Roman Empire.

Among the most accomplished and influential of the early Italian humanist scholars in the 1300s were Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375). Sometimes referred to as the "father of humanism," Petrarch was an accomplished poet who traveled around Europe collecting manuscripts in order to study the culture of the ancients. By the 1340s he had become an international celebrity who received recognition and honors from wealthy patrons. Convinced that Europe had undergone a dark age since the fall of Rome, he advocated for improvements in literacy and learning. By 1350 he had formed a close bond with Boccaccio, who was in the employ of the republic of Florence just as the city was recovering from the Black Death. The meeting occurred when Boccaccio was also just completing his influential collection of 100 short stories, *The Decameron*. Heavily influenced by Dante's Divine Comedy, the Decameron was also one of the great works of fourteenth-century vernacular literature. Petrarch was partly responsible for encouraging Boccaccio to shift his emphasis to mastering ancient Greek and Latin. This encouragement eventually led Boccaccio to write *Genealogia deorum gentilium* (*The Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*), a work that inspired later efforts to explore the intricacies of Greco-Roman religions.

Boccaccio and Petrarch were literary humanists, meaning their primary interests were in language and literature. Like most humanists, they were involved in both the active and contemplative spheres of life. Similar to Chaucer a generation later, they both worked as diplomats. This interest in both intellectual and practical matters was characteristic of humanist endeavors, and it promoted the growth of humanist administrators both in public and private capacities. The papacy, the Kingdom of Naples, and the northern Italian city-states, especially Florence, sought humanist scholars to administer their governments. One such administrator was Poggio Bracciolini who spent the better part of five decades working for various popes. When he was not actively employed in Rome, he was following in the footsteps of Petrarch by searching monasteries for lost or forgotten manuscripts that documented the histories of the Greeks and Romans.

Built in the first century CE, the Roman Pantheon featured a large domed structure that fascinated and perplexed Renaissance builders, who sought to imitate elements of Greco-Roman architecture.

The humanists' influence extended to non-literary spheres as well. By the late 1300s, the republic of Florence was becoming the epicenter of the humanist movement. Its city leaders sought to build a cathedral that reflected Italian and especially ancient Roman heritage. A Gothic cathedral, which reflected the culture of the Franks, was out of the question. The French, from such a perspective, were barbarians in comparison to their Roman cultural superiors. Florence's cathedral was to be as ambitious and impressive as the pantheon in Rome and the domed basilica of Constantinople, Hagia Sophia. However, 100 years into the construction of the Florentine cathedral, which began in the late 1200s, it became clear that no one had experience with constructing such an edifice. So, in 1418 the city held a competition; architects and engineers alike submitted models. Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446), the son of a goldsmith, had studied Roman architecture and the pantheon in particular for the better part of two decades. He won the competition and set about overseeing the construction of the largest domed cathedral in Christendom. The feat was all the more impressive because the workers did not rely on scaffolding to support the dome while it was under construction.

Designed by Filippo Brunelleschi and completed in 1436, Il Duomo, the dome of the Florence Cathedral, was built in the early 1400s without the aid of scaffolding..

In addition to being an architect, Brunelleschi was an artist and engineer. His interest in architecture required that he study geometry, which helped him to arrive at a scientific approach to linear perspective, the portrayal of three dimensional scenes on a two dimensional surface, such as a canvas or a piece of wood. Although he was not a man of letters, he wrote his calculations and plans for the cathedral in code so that no one would steal his design, and he developed several inventions to facilitate the construction of the cathedral. One of his most successful contrivances was a very large hoist that lifted building materials to the construction workers who were hundreds of feet above, on top of the cathedral. One of his least successful inventions was a paddle-wheel boat that he designed to transport marble and other building supplies up the Arno River to Florence. After receiving one of the first patents in history for the boat's design in 1421, Brunelleschi completed its construction in 1427. It sank with a valuable load of marble, bound for the cathedral, on its maiden voyage that year.

A significant influence on Brunelleschi's ability to weather such challenges was his ability to attract wealthy patrons, in particular Cosimo de Medici (1389-1464). The Medici family had become wealthy during the late 1300s and early 1400s, when the Medici Bank was one of the principal sources of finance for the Roman papacy. Although Cosimo was very involved in the running of the operation, he also committed a large portion of his substantial wealth to patronizing painters, sculptors, architects, and humanist scholars. He went on several manuscript hunting expeditions and assembled the first public library in Florence. For centuries intellectuals and artists had been dependent on patronage to

sustain their work, and the Medici family could boast some of the most prolific patrons in European history. They commissioned scores of churches and monasteries, not only in Florence, but also in cities across Europe. Cosimo's grandson, Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449-1492), was every bit his equal in this regard. He commissioned works by Leonardo da Vinci, Michaelangelo, Botticelli, and many others. Medici patronage, therefore, funded many of the great works of art and architecture that we associate with the Italian Renaissance.

Despite its benefits, patronage certainly had its drawbacks. Artists and intellectuals needed to avoid angering their patrons. Failure to do so could mean loss of funding or exclusion from the communities of artists and intellectuals. One humanist scholar, Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457), displayed such an uneven temperament and a propensity to argue that he spent most of life traveling between various universities and patrons, even though his father and many of his acquaintances worked in his native Rome for the papal curia. Around 1440 Valla wrote his most famous piece, *De falso credita et ementita Constantini Donatione declamatio*, which declared that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery. He penned this broadside against papal power while in the employ of Alfonso V of Aragon, who was in the midst of a territorial dispute with the pope. Valla employed his formidable skills as a master of Latin to demonstrate that the work could not possibly be what it claimed. For centuries, various popes had claimed that the document hailed from the fourth century when the Emperor Constantine left Rome and placed the western half of the Roman Empire in the hands of the bishop of Rome. Valla's analysis refuted these assertions by pointing out the poor Latin grammar and the use of the term "satrap," which was not in use in Latin in the 300s, when it was allegedly composed. The messy Latin made the donation look like a poor piece of writing rather than an official document. Other humanists agreed with Valla's assessment. Within a decade of Valla's argument, despite his difficult personality, he found employment in the papal curia under the papacy of Pope Nicholas V, an advocate of humanist endeavors.
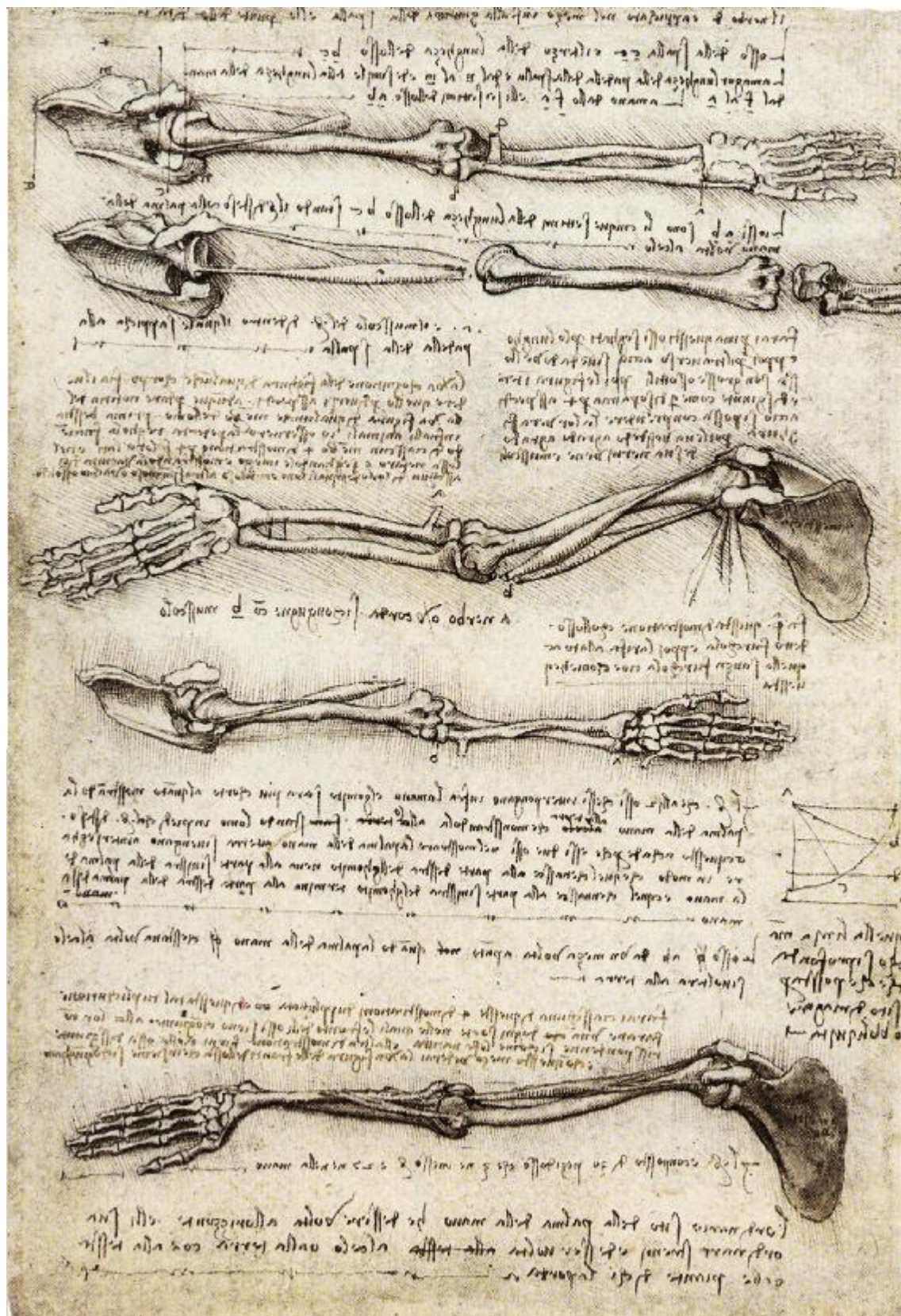
This anatomical sketch by Leonardo da Vinci reflected his scientific as well as artistic interests. First drawn to anatomy by his determination to paint humans in lifelike poses, he eventually dissected at least thirty cadavers.

In the case of the Medici, their proclivities for humanist studies and the revival of elements of Greco-

Roman architecture were well-known to the artists and intellectuals seeking patronage during the period. However, some artists were less enthusiastic about the humanist project of recovering lost ancient knowledge. One of these artists was Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). He certainly admired and studied the engineering drawings of Brunelleschi, who died six years before he was born; however, Leonardo's interests were even more varied than Brunellischi's. He pioneered the study of anatomy, when the Church forbade dissections of human cadavers. He engaged in the study of botany, engineering, and astronomy in addition to his well-known success in art. Although he completed some work in Florence, many of his most innovative accomplishments occurred under the patronage of the Duke of Milan and the King of France. His genius inspired his contemporaries, as well as future generations.

By 1494 the Medici position as the *de facto* power brokers and patrons of Florence became precarious as religious enthusiasts sought to cleanse the city of sinful influences, including depictions of pagan culture. On the day before Lent in 1497, the city authorities hosted a bonfire of vanities where authorities encouraged citizens to burn books, sculptures, paintings, clothing, mirrors, cosmetics, and anything else deemed sinful. The Medici had fled the city three years earlier as Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498) and a group of zealots enforced an austere set of mandates on the Florentines. Without the protection of a patron, artists such as Michaelangelo, who had grown up at the home of Lorenzo the Magnificent, left Florence for safer havens. Although many artists and the Medici themselves returned to Florence in the sixteenth century, Florence never regained its position as the epicenter of the Renaissance. Venice, Rome, Milan, and several other cities became new centers for intellectual and artistic achievement.

The innovative spirit that characterized the Italian Renaissance was not confined to the Italian Peninsula. By the early 1400s, Prince Henry (1394-1460) of Portugal, later known as Henry the Navigator, became the patron of an institute devoted to the improvement of navigation technology. He gathered the most accurate maps of the era, funded the design of ships that could sail into the wind, and sponsored voyages that charted the coast of Africa for the purpose of converting the native population to Latin Christianity. However, conversion for Henry and his disciples meant enslavement and the brutal treatment of dark-skinned people. The achievements of Henry the Navigator underscored the racism that found expression in European discourse during the Renaissance. The quest for domination of new lands unleashed an exploitative strain of European culture that was very much at odds with some of the high-minded ideals of the humanists to view humanity with reverence and respect.

The humanist movement continued well into the modern period and established the foundation for studies in the humanities. Generally, humanism functioned as an intellectual engine for the achievements of the Italian Renaissance. As its adherents traveled north of the Alps, where interest in ancient Rome had shallower historical roots, scholars applied what they termed "the new learning" to matters of religion. Armed with a mastery of Latin and eventually Greek, so-called Christian humanists encouraged Europeans to think of their religion in terms of its moral and ethical principles rather than a

series of dogmatic doctrines, such as transubstantiation and the virgin birth of Jesus. It would be a mistake to conflate Christian humanism with Protestantism, because many Christian humanists remained faithful to the Church of Rome, while many of the founders of Protestantism were educated in traditional scholastic thinking. Nevertheless, the close textual analysis that was part of the humanist movement facilitated the turn toward more intensive Bible reading that characterized Protestantism in the 1500s.

Print and the Dawn of Modernity

Although the Tang dynasty of the Chinese Empire had printed books by the ninth century CE, the impact of Gutenberg's press in the mid-fifteenth century had a more profound impact in Europe partly because of a pent-up demand for books. During the Late Middle Ages demand for books increased significantly as more Europeans cultivated enhanced literacy. This skill enabled the reading and interpretation of lengthy and complex works, such as the Bible, saints' lives, mystical literature, and the writings of Cicero and other ancient authors. The combination of the growth of pious reading and the rise of humanist studies induced the production of more books well before Johannes Gutenburg (1400-1468) began printing bibles around 1450.

This page from the Gutenburg Bible resembled the look of the hand-copied bibles produced by monks in monastic scriptoria for centuries.

Prior to the invention of Gutenberg's press, the scriptoria located in monasteries and the lay copyists who worked in medieval guilds, such as the stationers guild, tried to meet demand by hiring more scribes. However, the time-consuming and error-prone process of copying books by hand resulted in the production of fewer books than the market demanded. In addition, the propensity of Europeans to eschew paper, which was inexpensive, in favor of animal skin (vellum), which was costly, hindered the use of woodcuts for block printing and increased the cost of book production. Patrons were partly responsible for this rising demand for books as they bestowed volumes to their clients as a sign of their magnificence.   They commissioned multiple copies of ancient texts, sometimes recovered from humanist expeditions, while the demand for bibles continued to grow despite Church prohibitions against unsupervised lay Bible reading.

Gutenberg's invention of moveable type around 1448 came after more than a decade of experimentation with other forms of printing. Wood blocks of letters had proven too prone to wear and tear in addition to printing unevenly on vellum. Individualized wooden letters lacked uniformity as workers had to carve each letter separately. Trained as a goldsmith, Gutenberg's knowledge of metallurgy constituted an important asset as he cast dies to produce standardized letters, placed them in a frame, called a composing stick, and inked and pressed them against either vellum or paper. An alloy of lead, antimony, and tin rendered the necessary strength and durability for the letters while allowing for relatively straightforward casting. Although the process required a refined knowledge of metallurgy, craftsmen across Europe generally possessed the necessary skills for approximately 1000 presses to appear by 1500.

In debt for the cost of experimenting and perfecting the process of the printing press with movable type for over a decade, Gutenberg decided to produce volumes that had a well established market: the Bible. He designed the letters to resemble the script common in medieval monasteries so that buyers of his bibles felt as though they were obtaining works that resembled the hand-copied bibles, but at a much lower cost. Gutenberg even included ornate rubrics and marginalia in his forty-two-line Bible (each page had 42 lines of text in two columns). These touches imparted a handmade feel to the mass-produced bibles. When his business partner, Johan Fust, sold these identical copies in Paris, legend has it that Fust went to jail briefly on charges of witchcraft. Apparently the Parisian bookmakers could not imagine that someone could produce so many identical bibles at such a low cost without the help of magic.

The story may well be apocryphal, but the printing press certainly posed a threat to traditional copyists. Print was approximately 100 times more efficient than hand copying by 1500, and the efficiencies could be even greater when the edition included many printings. In fact, the entire concept of an edition arose with the printing press. Unlike hand copying, each book in an edition was virtually identical, with precisely the same words and images on each page. The efficiencies associated with the press allowed publishers more time to produce standardized page numbering, tables of contents, indices, and errata pages, all relatively novel innovations that improved the quality, usability, and reliability of printed materials. When book owners found an error in their copy of a book, they could contact the publisher,

who could immediately update the list of known errors (the errata), and eventually publish a corrected edition. Thus, in contrast to the introduction of errors that commonly occurred with the tedious process of hand copying, print introduced a process of continuous improvements.

Publishers applied this process to a wide variety of disciplines over the years. As humanists gathered manuscripts from the monastic archives across Europe, printers hired scholars to compare the different documents in order to produce authoritative editions of works by a number of ancient Greek and Roman sources. The second and third books printed reflected this desire to address the demand for classical writings. A fourth-century work on grammar (*Ars Minor*) may not seem like a bestseller, but it was the second book published in Europe, and Cicero's *De Officiis* was the third. As these books went to market, scholars across Europe compared their manuscripts to the printed editions, and as they contacted printers about anomalies, an even more accurate version of the printed texts gradually emerged through the process of continuous improvement.
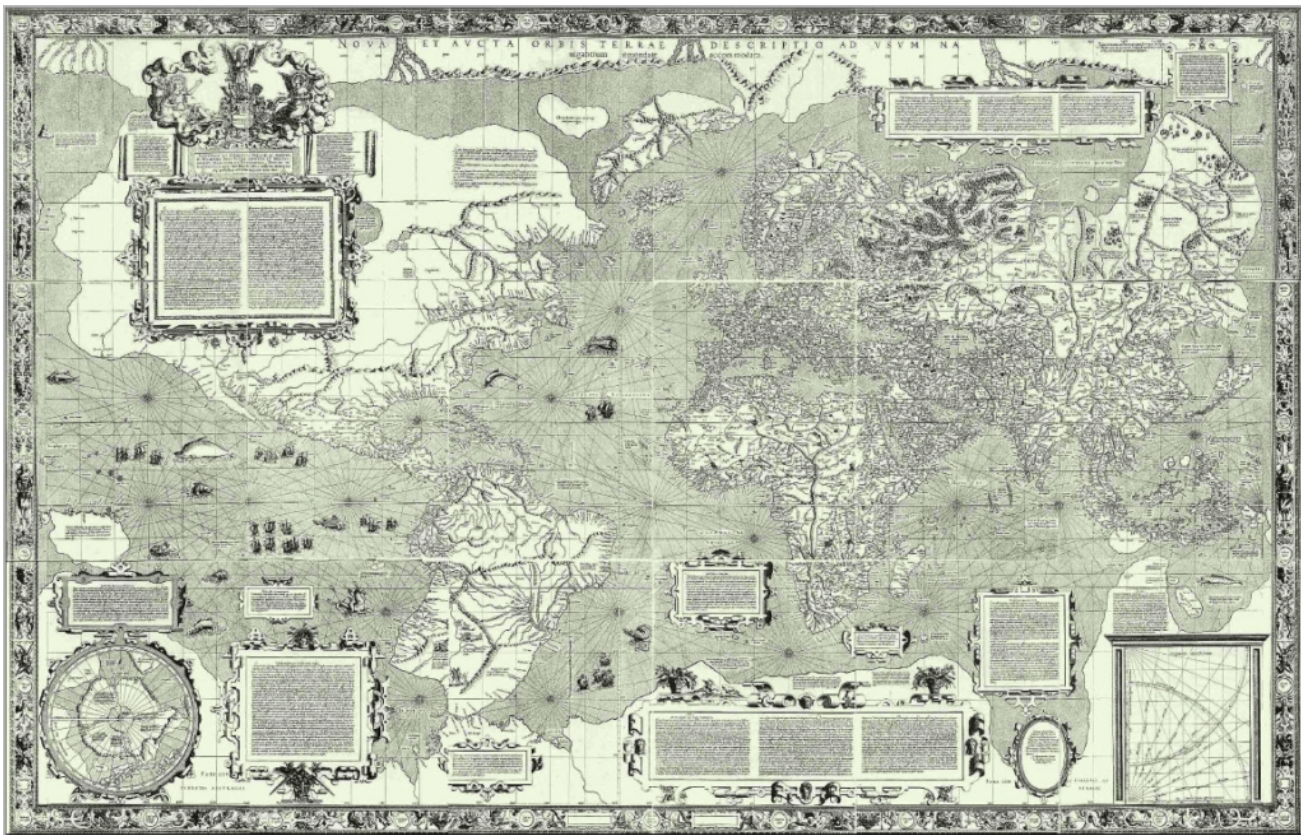
Gerard Mercator's atlas of the world went through dozens of editions as knowledge of geography proliferated during the sixteenth century.

The impact of reliable editions was profound. The tendency to treat books as the ultimate authority on subjects strengthened the cultural propensity, inherited from Christian scholars, to revere the Holy Book, the Bible. Martin Luther took this approach in the sixteenth century when he stated that the Bible, rather than the pope, was the ultimate authority in determining the fundamental beliefs and practices of Christianity. Similarly, Henry Hudson believed in the accuracy of the *Mercator Atlas* so much that it led to his death at sea in the early 1600s. The atlas contained a depiction of rivers running through the Arctic Ocean. Convinced that the discovery of one of these rivers would lead to a northwest

passage to the Far East and its lucrative trade in luxury goods, Hudson became obsessed with the idea depicted in the book until his crew mutinied and left him to die in the northern waters off modern-day Canada.
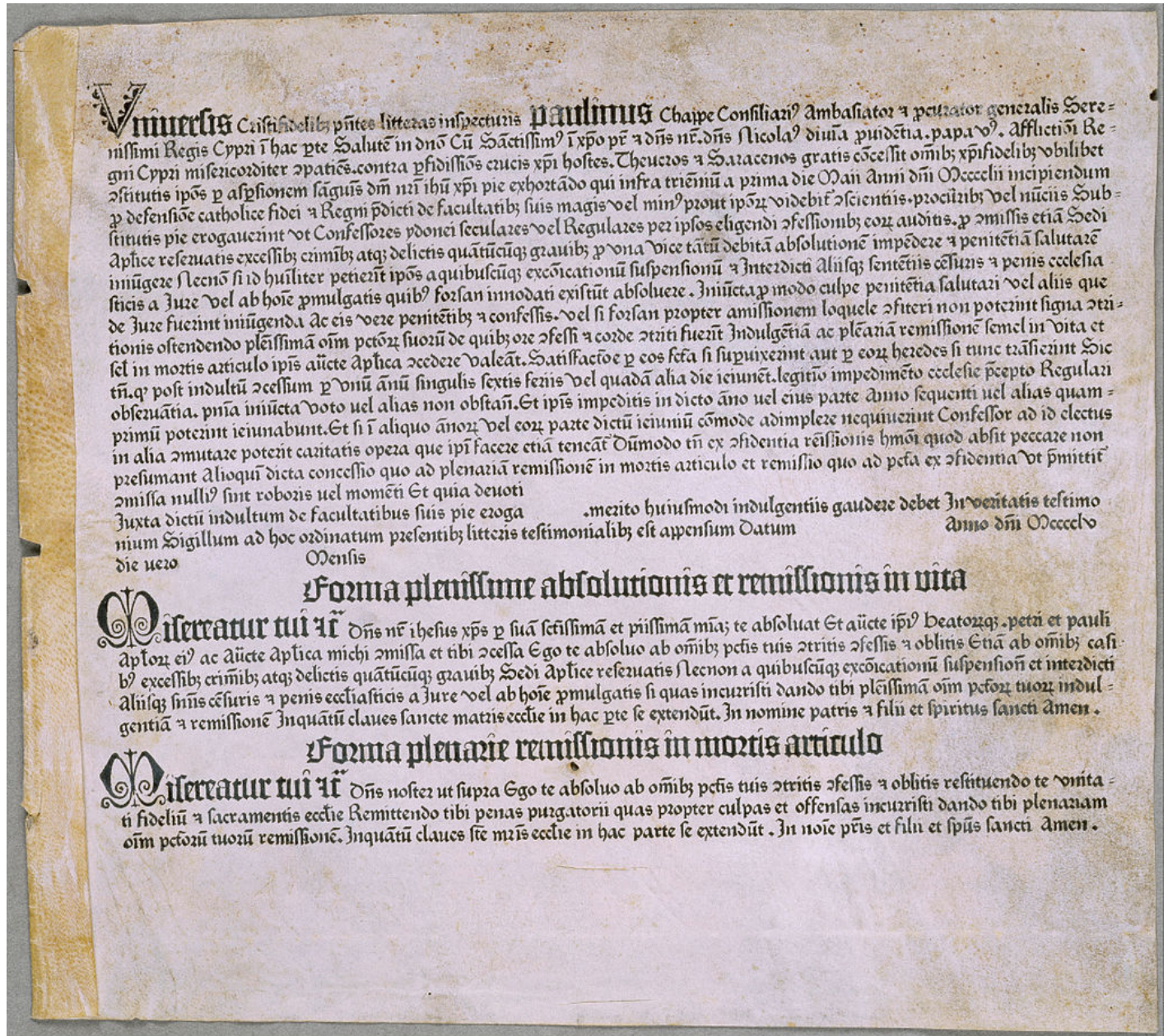
The Church started selling indulgences in the thirteenth century. The printing press enabled mass production of these items, which had been suspect in the eyes of many devout Christians for centuries, thereby eroding the prestige of the papacy even further.

The Church and monarchs did not initially recognize the threat that print posed to their authority. Contrary to the story about the Parisien booksellers who feared that Satan had produced the early printed bibles, the initial reaction by the Church was that the press was divinely inspired. From the very beginning in Gutenberg's workshop, the clergy employed the press to mass produce indulgences much more rapidly and much less expensively. As they sold these pieces of paper *en masse*, skepticism about the efficacy of indulgences increased. In other words, some products of the printing press were less reliable and trusted than others. However, un-trustworthiness did not necessarily preclude

publication. Scurrilous stories, ballads, and broadsides circulated, and the monarchs and the Church teamed up to censor unapproved books. Both bodies produced indices of forbidden books by the sixteenth century. The vernacular literature of Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer, which had always enjoyed popularity for mocking the corruption of ecclesiastical and secular authorities, found its way onto these lists perennially.

Meanwhile, other works, which had originally circulated among a relatively small number of readers found a much larger market. Lorenzo Valla's critique of the Donation of Constantine was one of these pieces. The first printed edition appeared in Latin in Germany during 1517, the same year that Luther penned his 95 Theses, and within the next few decades translated copies of it appeared in most every vernacular of northern Europe, where it was popular among Protestants. Similarly, the *Malleus Malificarum* (*Hammer of Witches*), initially printed in the 1480s, underwent almost thirty editions by 1600. Initially opposed by Church leaders, the book provided a textual justification for the torture and burning of thousands of women and some men convicted of witchcraft. As both of these examples demonstrated, print had the ability to raise public awareness of a variety of issues from well-established practices of corruption to completely unfounded narratives regarding black magic.

Attempts to control the new technology met with varying levels of success. In addition to publishing indices of

In an effort to control print, governments required their publications to have a printer's mark, such as this one from William Caxton in the late 1400s. Printers also wanted to include the marks as a form of advertising for their work.

forbidden books, governments required printers to join guilds and to purchase licenses. Legally required in most of Europe, a printer's mark helped to identify the origin of printed materials. However, these measures eventually proved ineffective as portable hand presses appeared in the seventeenth century, and unlicensed printers evaded detection. Unable to track the location of the presses, censors struggled to control the media in circulation. Some governments attempted to print their own accounts of events, while others eventually recognized the freedom of the press.

Conclusion

Many structural changes that occurred during the Late Middle Ages persisted into the modern period. In particular, Europeans maintained a vigorous middle class, which took advantage of representative institutions that had arisen during the Late Middle Ages in most territories in Europe. This feature of European civilization later became one of Europe's most significant legacies to the rest of the world as republican and democratic forms of governance became synonymous with fair and equitable politics. Simultaneously, Europeans increasingly dominated foreign lands. As the population began expanding again, colonization and conquest became more feasible. Empowered by late medieval inventions, such as gunpowder weapons, the printing press, and improved navigation technology, increasingly literate and educated Europeans found opportunities for enrichment and power overseas.

Back home the rigid hierarchies that had characterized "the continent" during the High Middle Ages and the associated habits of obedience to hierarchical authorities increasingly came under attack. Perhaps the most significant of these trends that started in the Late Middle Ages was the declining power of the papacy and the success of organized heresies, such as the Hussites. Because religious authority had been a pillar of the monarchical powers that dominated much of Europe during the Middle Ages, the weakening of the papacy during the Late Middle Ages had implications for a realignment of political authority in the early modern period. James I of England (r. 1603-1625) understood this fundamental connection between religious hierarchy and monarchical power when he noted "No bishop, no king." The Latin Church had consciously developed influential rituals, sermons, and stories to fortify Europe's monarchies. When the Latin Church struggled to maintain its prestige during the 1500s, the monarchs sensed their privileges were in jeopardy.

The impact of crumbling hierarchy was pervasive. Increasingly willing to disobey Church strictures, such as the ban on dissecting cadavers, Europeans became increasingly capable of innovation. With less fear of angering the authorities, intellectuals and commoners alike circulated ideas more freely. Some thinkers, such as Giodono Bruno (1548-1600), who was burned alive in Rome in 1600, or the miller Domenico Scandella, burned the previous year, misjudged the freedom of expression that they had. Others, such as Copernicus (1473-1543), waited until they were near death to publish their ideas. Still others, such as Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), published evidence that undermined the ideological

foundations for hierarchical power. Although the kings, nobles, popes, and bishops sometimes reinvigorated hierarchical rule, the overall trend for most of Europe west of the Elbe River in Germany was toward a more egalitarian and less hierarchical forms of political and social organization. East of the Elbe serfdom and autocratic rule not only persisted but strengthened; consequently, exploitation of large swaths of a quasi-servile population were starkly visible well into the twentieth century.

Exploitation was more subtle and hidden in western Europe. Wealth disparity, patriarchy, antisemitism, and racism based on skin color became the hallmarks of exploitation in the much wealthier and more populous states of western Europe. The loosening of hierarchies that fundamentally transformed the political and religious structure of Europe in public forums, such as politics, did not alter more private spheres as quickly or as completely. Patriarchy persisted, racism became more entrenched, and antisemitism reemerged as more Jews moved back into the western European states. The enormous wealth generated as Europe eventually entered the industrial age rendered these inequities and injustices less problematic to some. European civilization still confronted the paradox that had arisen with the first civilization in Sumeria: the desire for greater material comfort induced the more powerful members of society to excuse or to ignore the exploitation of large segments of the population, both at home and abroad.

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