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World History: Cultures, States, and Societies to 1500

Eugene Berger  
*Georgia Gwinnett College*, eberger@ggc.edu

George Israel  
*Middle Georgia State University*, larry.israel@mga.edu

Charlotte Miller  
*Middle Georgia State University*, charlotte.miller@mga.edu

Brian Parkinson  
*Georgia Southwestern State University*, brian.parkinson@gsw.edu

Andrew Reeves  
*Middle Georgia State University*, andrew.reeves1@mga.edu

See next page for additional authors

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1.1 CHRONOLOGY

- **8 – 6 million years ago**: Bi-pedal hominids in Africa
- **2.6 million years ago**: *Homo habilis* begin to use tools
- **43,000 BCE**: *Homo sapiens* expand out of Africa
- **50,000 – 10,000 BCE**: *Homo sapiens* complete their migration to all continents
- **22,000 – 14,000 BCE**: Last Glacial Maximum
- **c. 9,000 BCE**: Younger Dryas event
- **c. 9,000 BCE**: Jericho reaches its height
- **c. 7,000 BCE**: Çatalhöyük reaches several thousand inhabitants
- **2,000 BCE**: Paleo-Eskimos appear in the Arctic
- **2,000 BCE**: Humans begin to make pottery

1.2 INTRODUCTION

In 1952, at the age of 77 and suffering with an abdominal hernia long overdue for surgery, Sellards returned to Vero to collect charcoal or bone suitable for the newly invented technique of radiocarbon dating. ... His longtime field assistant Glen Evans accompanied him, having left Texas with careful instructions from Sellard’s physician about what to do if the hernia suddenly bulged. It did, and Sellards collapsed unconscious at the excavation. ... But the moment Sellards regained consciousness he insisted on continuing to excavate.¹

The above case of Florida State Geologist Elias Sellards demonstrates that the study of “human antiquity” or man’s earliest origins is one surrounded by passion, controversy, and a deep well of curiosity. Our curiosity about our earliest origins has not only given birth to fictional characters like Indiana Jones and Captain Kirk, but also is largely responsible for the growth of archaeology in the early twentieth century. Western scholars and explorers were

not content with simply reaching remote places; they were curious about their earliest human inhabitants. While the motives of early excavators may have been quite simple (Well-known paleoanthropologist Richard Leakey got his start collecting stones as a child), archaeologists and paleoanthropologists eventually created an entirely new field of historical investigation: prehistory. Multiple pioneers have hacked through underbrush or spent months excavating Paleolithic sites. Not until recently, however, have scientific advances, local knowledge, and anthropological theory merged with the curiosity of western explorers to craft a more accurate version of human origins and evolution.

Written texts are the primary sources most historians are trained to work with and are those they are most comfortable using. However, if we are to understand humanity’s origins, we have to recognize that written language is a relatively recent invention (around 5,000 years old); therefore, much of what we know about human beginnings must be borrowed from the findings of colleagues in other disciplines like geology, botany, and archaeology. In all of the regions mentioned below, archaeologists have excavated and analyzed physical evidence relating to our pre-historic ancestors. Up until recent times, though, it was difficult to understand migration patterns and chronology without a method to determine the age of anything from a human skull to a cutting tool. Archaeologists in the 1930s and 40s used imprecise terms like “stone bowl cultures,” a nomenclature that referred more to the details of the articles unearthed than their historical context. This began to change with the advent of radiocarbon dating or C14 dating in the 1940s. Through this method, we were able to place thousands of organic archaeological materials in their proper historical context even without textual evidence. For artifacts over 40,000 years old, the amount of radioactive carbon we can recover doesn’t permit accurate measurement. However, we do have a number of techniques to trace human origins even further back, including aerial photography, side-scanning radar, and potassium-argon dating. All these techniques get around the lack of radioactive carbon in that they don’t date the organic material, but instead the terrain in which they were found, allowing us to trace human origins back millions of years to the beginnings of bipedalism.

The goal of this chapter, though, is not to trace human evolution from its beginnings, but to set the scene for the beginnings of civilization. In this chapter we will explore why hominids moved, how they survived, and how they came to develop agriculture. We also hope to lay out why humans in far flung parts of the world responded similarly to changing conditions around them and hence developed civilizations at roughly the same time.

This chapter begins at the origins of bipedalism some eight million years ago and brings us up to eight thousand years ago with the the Neolithic Era or “new stone age.” Bipedal hominids would develop during the Pliocene era and our closest ancestors during the more recent Pleistocene. Finally, modern Homo sapiens would appear during the Holocene. During the Holocene humans would perfect tool usage during the Paleolithic Era, and would usher in agriculture during the Neolithic. Our chapter ends as humans prepare to enter the Bronze and Iron Ages.

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1.3 QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING

1. What were some factors that led to hominid bipedalism?
2. How did climate affect hominid development?
3. How and why did *Homo sapiens* expand out of Africa?
4. How and when did *Homo sapiens* populate the Americas?
5. What was a hunter-gatherer existence like?
6. Why did *Homo sapiens* start to prefer agriculture?
7. How did agriculture start to change human relationships?

1.4 KEY TERMS

- Abu Hureya
- Beringia
- Çatalhüyük
- Dolni Vétonice
- Holocene
- *Homo erectus*
- *Homo habilis*
- *Homo sapiens*
- Ice Age
- Jericho
- Natufians
- Neanderthals
- Neolithic
- Oldowan Industry
- Paleolithic
- Pleistocene

1.5 HUMAN BEGINNINGS IN AFRICA

The fossil record in Africa clearly establishes that a human lineage diverged there from African apes sometime between eight to six million years ago. Beginning as far back as eight million years ago, various species of hominids (the ancestors of modern humans or *Homo sapiens*) began to walk upright. This bipedalism would allow these hominids to use their hands to develop, craft, and use tools. Bipedalism would also eventually contribute to a move out of forests into the savanna and turn hominids into big game hunters and gatherers. Paleoanthropologists once theorized that hominids became bipedal to adapt to life in the grasslands. However, the fact that fossils of bipedal hominids were found alongside fossil remains of wood, seeds, and other forest dwellers has cast some doubt on that theory. In fact, bipedal hominids may have lived in the forest for
some time. While some bipedal hominids may have stayed in the forest, climate changes did drive others to move into new areas within Africa and beyond it.

1.5.1 Climate, Hominin in Evolution, and Migrations

As far as thirty million years ago hominids were reacting to changes in their environment. (“Hominids” refers to all Great Apes including humans and their ancestors. “Hominins” is often used when speaking more specifically about modern humans and their more recently extinct ancestors. We will use “hominids” here because it covers all of the groups we will reference including modern humans). The earth cooled, producing more fragmented environments. As already mentioned, some hominids may have stayed in the trees, but those that left the forest began to thrive in grasslands. These savannas and prairies expanded during the Miocene, the geologic era lasting from 24 – 2 million years ago. This grassland expansion prompted baboons and hominids to move out of the forest.

During the Pliocene epoch (5 – 1.6 million years ago), another series of environmental changes made these grasslands even more prevalent, leading to a transformation that geologists call the “turnover-pulse hypothesis.” Animals with adaptations such as angled knee joints and arched feet survived on the grasslands, while those with longer arms or curved fingers who were better suited to the woodlands did not. For hominids, this favorable grassland environment meant the “development of several closely related species. Large-toothed hominids known as robust australopithecines appeared in Southern and Eastern Africa.”

Towards the end of the Pliocene, around 2.4 million years ago, the first members of our genus—*homo* (*Homo habilis*)—appeared, the first hominid to make stone tools.

The Pleistocene epoch (1.6 million – 10,000 years ago) saw at least twenty-five periods of glaciation and warming. Glaciation resulted from dips in global temperature which had two

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major effects on hominid development. First, with sea levels dropping due to glaciation, hominids migrated to Australia and the Americas for the first time. Second, while many migrated out of colder climates, those that remained developed physical adaptations. *Homo neanderthalensis* (Neanderthals), a hominid that disappeared 28,000 years ago, became stockier and more powerful to deal with the difficulties of this icy climate.

While not as dramatic as previous developments, the current **Holocene** period has seen its share of significant climatic events. The Younger Dryas event (c. 12,000 BCE) was a drop in global temperatures accompanied by a corresponding change in vegetation distribution. Reduced rainfall from 2200 – 1900 BCE made conditions very difficult for civilizations in the Eastern Mediterranean. Finally, the Medieval Warm Period represents “one of the most recent periods of climate change.”

Like *neanderthalensis*, *Homo sapiens, Homo erectus, Homo habilis*, and other hominins all reacted to changing climate conditions. *Homo erectus and Homo habilis* migrated, hunted, and used fire, while *neanderthalensis* had some use of language and tools and buried their dead. For millions of years, in fact, hominids had been using slivers of volcanic stone and cutters probably to hack through animal skin. The cutters were often found close together, suggesting that early hominids even had a division of labor between hunters who would have to pursue their prey and butchers who could wait nearby at the butchering site. There is even evidence of task division by gender among *neanderthalensis*. Multiple sites in Europe show different patterns of wear on male and female teeth, indicating a gendered task division in tasks where teeth were used to hold, break, or strip objects.

However, by 25,000 years ago all other hominins were extinct; only *Homo sapiens sapiens*, our species, survived. Paleoanthropologists attribute this survival to larger brains, durability, and ability to adapt to changing environmental conditions. Based on migration patterns and archaeological evidence, *Homo sapiens sapiens* appear to have been the only hominids to build sea-worthy boats, create art, have organized religion, and live in any climate.

### 1.5.2 Homo sapiens Migration

While *Homo sapiens* were decidedly more advanced than other hominids, when they first moved out of Africa some 45,000 years ago, they were only equipped with stone tools for hunting and cutting. Despite those initial limitations, 30,000 years later *Homo sapiens* would inhabit almost every environment on earth and had a presence in every continent except Antarctica. *Homo sapiens* in fact moved further and faster than all other hominids. While it is hard to attribute a single factor to all *Homo sapiens* migration, we do see that multiple human societies required migration to arrive at a more sophisticated level of development. *Homo sapien* migration accelerated close to 40,000 years ago, where humans reached continental Eurasia.

Modern humans (50,000 – 10,000 years ago) completed the migration to all the continents except Antarctica, moving first into Australia, Eastern Siberia, the Pacific margins, Japan, and the

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4 Ibid., 3-5.
Americas. Then from 10,000 years ago to 1,500 CE, humans arrived in the Arctic, the Indian Ocean, the deep Pacific, and tropical rain forests. Migration occurred in a “staccato” pattern with “easiest” areas colonized quickly, while more “difficult” areas remained uninhabited for thousands of years. A region’s “easiness” is calculated from estimates about available plant and animal biomass and net productivity—that is, how quickly it returns—in each habitat. For example, tropical savannas and grasslands of East Africa were colonized first as the biomass there sustained the first bipedal hominids.

Hominids first left “sub-Saharan Africa ... through the northern savannahs, up the Nile corridor or across the straits of Bab el Mandeb to the Arabian Peninsula.” Evidence exists of Homo erectus in Morocco, Chad, and Algeria, and it appears that they eventually left Africa via the Arabian Peninsula. After leaving Africa about 1.5 million years ago, choppers, handaxes, and spheroids found at sites like Ubeidiya in Israel put Homo erectus in the Levant. Some scholars argue for the existence of a second migration out of Africa and into the Jordan Valley 500 to 600 thousand years ago.

Asia

Some evidence suggests the presence of Homo ergaster and Homo erectus as having occurred in Java over a million years ago. Chinese Homo erectus fossils date between 800,000 to 400,000 years ago. Homo sapiens began to leave Africa around 40,000 years ago, and hunter gatherers appeared in China by the end of the last Ice Age (36,000 to 16,000 BCE) as continental ice in central Asia began to melt.

Europe

Animal bones and pebble tools place hominids near Rome just before the beginning of the Middle Pleistocene (730,000 years ago). This seems to be the first hominid incursion into Europe. Hominid remains in Spain suggest colonization in Iberia up to two million years ago, but there are not nearly enough remains (no more than twenty inhabitants in any given site) to provide any certainty in terms of which hominids they correspond to or when they lived there. Either way, colonization of Europe can be considered “late.” This tardiness may have been related to a lack of animal food sources. Not until around 500,000 years ago did “new species of deer, bovid, rhino, and horse appear” in Europe. Around the same time, the cheetah, saber-tooth tiger, and dirk-tooth cat declined in the region, making more carcasses from the aforementioned species available to hominid foragers.

Australia, Papua New Guinea, Sahul

Evidence of tools from 30,000 years ago exists in Australia, and from even longer in New Guinea. The lack of “a dry land crossing to Sahul” (the land mass that once connected New Guinea and Australia) meant that an ocean journey of somewhere between sixty-five and 100 kilometers was required from mainland Asia. This made Australians and New Guineans the first sea-going colonizers. Once in Sahul, how humans populated Australia is still the subject of some debate between those who support the “coastal hugger” theory and those who support the idea of population by “overlanders.” The more difficult of the two means of populating Australia is overland, as it is more arid than the coasts, and the evidence for tools overland is not as advanced as that for the coast.

Peopling the New World

North and South America were the last continents to be settled by humans. Most scholars think that the Americas were populated from Beringia over land. Around 12,000 years ago, mammoth hunting became more common and supported larger populations on both the Asian and American sides of Beringia, a landmass (now divided by the Bering Strait) which at that time connected North America and Asia. On the Asian side, outlines of houses with stone-lined hearths have been found, remnants indicating permanent settlement that didn’t necessarily have colonization as an end goal. But colonize they did, one group pushing southward between 10,000 and 3,000 years ago and establishing settlements that would become the origins of modern Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and Inuit populations. Another group migrated southeastward through Alaska, their descendants making it as far as Chile and Argentina.

While we know about when American colonization began, the pace and means of colonization are still debated. Complicating the discussion of timing is the fact that the Late Wisconsin Ice sheet blocked the overland route from about 30,000 years ago, when two sheets merged, up until about 12,000 years ago, when they opened after a thaw. At this point in time, only a handful of sites support possible pre-10,000 BCE occupation: Monte Verde in Chile, Meadowcraft near Pittsburgh, and Page-Ladson in Florida. As recently as 2015, excavations at Monte Verde and

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8 Ibid., 135.
Chinchihuapi have strengthened the “possibility of an earlier human presence on the continent” to as far back as 17,000 BCE. This date has continued to move back in time as archeologists consider evidence of more mobile humans who did not leave large artifact clusters because of their ephemeral nature, but nonetheless may have been present before more sedentary groups.

For now, however, the clearest evidence for when the Americas were widely populated comes through the Clovis point, a specific arrowhead shape that was unique in its ubiquity and sophistication. The Clovis point was also found in mammoths that had grown extinct by 10,500 years ago, this discovery meaning that humans were common in North America by then. From Beringia, humans moved at a rate of roughly 10 miles a year until they reached Tierra del Fuego and fully populated the Americas (with the exception of some tropical areas mentioned above).9

The Arctic

The first Paleo-Eskimo populations appeared around 4,000 years ago after arriving from Eastern Siberia, populations that were left behind by the American colonists already mentioned. The Arctic climate is harsh, to say the least, and these populations needed sophisticated weapons and tools to be able to survive it, which explains their late arrival.

The Arctic colonists expanded rapidly across Alaska, through Canada, and into Greenland, assisted by their arctic “small tool kits” that included the important toggle headed harpoons to kill walrus and seal.

Polynesian origins

The origins of Polynesian humans are still very much in doubt. Groups of Polynesian mariners had existed 50,000 years ago, but they were not colonizers. In fact, many scholars argue that eventual colonization actually began as exploration. Around 2,500 years ago, we see more permanent settlements in Fiji, Tonga, and other areas of the “remote” Pacific, as remnants of pottery

have been found there. Based on linguistic and technological similarities among Polynesian cultures, some scholars argue that Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga were a crucible of sorts where Polynesians were “made” from groups from throughout Asia. Once these cultural groups had a certain identity, they began to colonize Easter Island, Hawaii, and New Zealand about and beyond 1,000 CE.

We can’t use land migration patterns to understand oversea migration. The Pacific was somewhat of a highway, where currents and winds were well-known and frequently used by mariners. Migrating humans were much more likely to wander aimlessly on land than they were to let currents take them to unknown parts of the ocean. Pacific mariners tacked to use the winds in their favor and, despite population pressures, Pacific mariners were too adept at seafaring to suggest a simple casting out of people into the Pacific in hopes of finding something. Once Pacific colonization did commence, settlers were very deliberate about it, taking with them families, and plants, and animals. It seems that they had every intention of recreating “home.” In sum, the exploration was neither extremely heroic nor extremely risky but instead was calculated and not left to chance.

1.5.3 Hunter-gatherers

Chapter Two explores the importance of farming to the creation and expansion of early civilizations. However, farming was only invented 13,000 years ago, meaning that for most of human history, our food has come through foraging. Early hominids like australopithecines, *Homo habilis*, and *Homo erectus* ate mostly plant food. *Homo sapiens* became more sophisticated foragers as they began to fish with hooks and, more recently, nets, and as they used stone grinding tools to produce flour.

As food gathering techniques evolved for these Paleolithic foragers, so did their behavior as organized groups. Modern humans became mobile to prevent resource depletion; they controlled population through dispersion or infanticide, and they began to “live and work cooperatively.” Modern foragers also began to divide tasks and share food with others, a feature that distinguishes them from other animals like chimpanzees that live in communities but feed individually.
Sharing food is, of course, much easier to do when there is a surplus, and, with increasing tool use, Paleolithic humans became even more adept at foraging, leading to the higher likelihood of food surpluses.

Tool use not only helped humans live cooperatively, but it also may have helped hominids develop abstract thought—evidence of tool use may give us a clue as to when this development began. We know that other animals use tools, but even as long as 2.6 million years ago, we see evidence of the creative thinking required to make more effective tools. *Homo habilis* in fact takes its name (“handy man”) from the fact that they were the first known hominid tool-makers. Soon after individual tools appeared, the **Oldowan** Industry became the first widely used toolset, “consisting of flaked and smashed quartz riverside pebbles made into poorly formed choppers and sharp stone flakes, [and] lasted for 1 million years with little change [from 2.6 to 1.5 million years ago].” 10 The Oldowan were followed about 1.5 million years ago by hand axes that remained unchanged for more than a million years. Many scholars argue that these smaller-brained hominids like *Homo habilis*, *homo ergaster*, and *Australopithecus* were both unable and unwilling to innovate much beyond their simple but effective tools, especially considering how harsh their environment could become. Fire was another important tool, first used by *Homo erectus* about 1.6 million years ago. Fire would become important to migrants to colder climes in Europe and Asia and to foragers who could now eat foods that were poisonous if ingested raw. *Homo erectus* also cooked foods they had previously eaten raw, thereby expanding their lifespan by eliminating toxins found in raw meats.

*Homo sapiens* would add more meat to their diet when advances in tool-making led to an increase in big game hunting during the late Pleistocene. For example, excavations near **Dolni Vetonice** in the Czech Republic have helped reveal a society that “used mammoth remains not only for meat, but for fuel, construction, jewelry, and portable art.” The inhabitants of Dolni Vetonice also made thousands of ceramic figurines, bird bone flutes, and ivory carvings of human heads. The cave paintings of Lascaux also reflect this increased skill as hunters and painters both. The colors and types of paint they used were vibrant and durable, and the scenes they depicted demonstrated their use of diverse hunting techniques. There we see depictions of humans hunting not only deer, but also woolly rhinoceros and mammoths.

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10 Ristvet, 17-22.
Also at Lascaux, we see evidence that hunter-gatherers had both religious beliefs and gender specific tasks, reflecting a sophistication that we usually only attribute to sedentary humans. The fact the humans and animals were depicted together so often at Lascaux may be evidence of a belief that man descended from these animals. Or perhaps the bison, rhinoceri, and birds were painted on the walls to produce “hunting magic” designed to make expeditions more successful. Finally, it was mostly men depicted in these higher-risk hunting activities, suggesting that women were the artists, participated less in the hunt, or both.

Closer to the Neolithic era, societies began to experience a growing role for women reflected through their representation in “Venus” statuettes. (See Figure 1.5) As we get closer to the Neolithic era, we see the relative role of women increasing; their place in ritual increases, their stature increases, their economic importance increases, and their childbearing uniqueness becomes more greatly emphasized.

Increased sophistication was not limited to big game hunters, however. Campsites, rock art, and burial sites near Lake Mungo in Australia reveal how these early humans used pottery for cooking and had a diverse diet of birds, fish, and shellfish, a diet that seems to have kept them well-nourished. Australia was a society of hunter-gatherers until European colonization. Mobility was essential, with the continent’s lack of widespread rainfall and rich soil. As a result, aboriginal Australians needed an extensive knowledge of their terrain and where to move when. Tasmanians would ambush wallabies at their seasonal grazing territory, while aborigines in the central deserts had to know when water holes would go dry. We also learn from the remains of Australian aborigines that foragers could be quite complex if they continued to hunt and gather for thousands of years. Aborigines painted, developed advanced weapons like the boomerang, warred against one another, developed creation myths, passed down oral histories, and played musical instruments.

**Figure 1.2 | Bull, Bird, and Human from Lascaux Cave**

Author: User “Peter80”
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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11 Ibid., 27-30.
1.6 AGRICULTURE AND THE "NEOLITHIC REVOLUTION"

Historian Lauren Ristvet defines agriculture as the “‘domestication’ of plants... causing it to change genetically from its wild ancestor in ways [that make] it more useful to human consumers.” She and hundreds of other scholars from Hobbes to Marx have pointed to the Neolithic Revolution, that is, the move from a hunter-gatherer world to an agricultural one, as the root of what we today refer to as civilization. Without agriculture we don’t have empires, written language, factories, universities, or railroads. Despite its importance, much remains unclear about why and where agriculture began. Instead, scholars hold a handful of well-regarded theories about the roots (pun intended) of agriculture.

Most scholars agree that the Ice Age played a fundamental role in the rise of agriculture, in the sense that it was impossible during the much colder and often tundra-covered period of the Pleistocene, but inevitable during the Holocene thawing. Only 4,000 years before the origins of agriculture, the planting of anything would have been an exercise in futility. During the Last Glacial Maximum (24,000 – 16,000 years ago), average temperatures dropped “by as much as 57˚ F near the great ice sheets...” This glaciation meant not only that today’s fertile farmlands of Spain or the North American Great Plains were increasingly covered in ice, but also that other areas around the world could not depend on constant temperatures or rainfall from year to year. Pleistocene foragers had to be flexible. The warming trend of the Holocene, by contrast, resulted in consistent rainfall amounts and more predictable temperatures. The warming also altered the habitats of the megafauna that humans hunted, alterations that in some cases contributed to their extinction. Therefore, as animal populations declined, humans were further encouraged to plant and cultivate seeds in newly-thawed soil.

When we start to examine other factors that allowed humans to transition to agriculture, we find that the climate factor looms even larger. For example, agriculture was usually accompanied by sedentarism, but we see communal living and permanent settlements among multiple groups of hunter-gatherers. Homo sapiens had also begun to domesticate animals and plants alike during the Pleistocene. Humans were already being buried alongside dogs as early as 14,000 years ago. As we’ll see below, gatherers were developing an increasing taste for grains long before they would abandon a foraging lifestyle. Essentially, humans were ready for agriculture when climate permitted it.

We discuss elsewhere the timing of agriculture’s appearance in all of the continents, but generally speaking by about 8,000 years ago, farmers in West Asia were growing rye, barley, and wheat. In northern China, millet was common 8,500 years ago. In the Americas, the domestication of maize began around 8,000 years ago in Mesoamerica, while at about the same time, Andean residents began cultivating potatoes. Once all of these areas realized agriculture’s potential as a permanent food source, they began to adapt their societies to increase their crop consistency and crop yields. We’ll discuss how agriculture affected societal development below.

12 Ibid., 36.
13 Ibid., 36–37.
1.6.1 First farmers of West Asia [or the Fertile Crescent]

In later chapters we will discuss Mesopotamia, the area between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers that agriculture would make the “cradle of civilization.” (See Map 2.1). However, the incubator of Mesopotamian and Fertile Crescent agriculture and cultural patterns dated back to the foragers of the nearby Eastern Mediterranean, thousands of years before. The rye, barley, and wheat in West Asia were first harvested by late Pleistocene foragers called the Kebarans who ground wild wheat and barley into a porridge. Kebarans consumed the porridge as part of their broad spectrum diet that also included land mammals, birds, and fish. Advancing into the Holocene we see the “Natufian Adaptation,” where residents of this same area began to see the benefits of sedentary living in a precursor to the advent of agriculture. The Natufians consumed the same rye, barley, and wheat that their Kebaran predecessors had, but because their teeth were well-worn it appears they ate relatively more of it. Having a constant source of these grains enabled their eschewing long hunting or gathering soujourns; instead, the Natufians drew more of their meat from in and around Lake Huleh in modern Israel. Near Lake Huleh was Ain Mallaha, one of the earliest examples of year-round human settlement and an important precursor to sedentary agriculture.

Another permanent settlement in Southwest Asia seems to have been more directly responsible for the decision to actually domesticate grain, rather than simply cultivate wild varieties. Abu Hureya in Syria was deeply affected by the Younger Dryas event of 11,000 years ago, an event which caused many of their wild food staples to disappear. Rather than migrating out of the area, the Abu Hureyrans cultivated rye. Soon afterward, other sites in the Levant began to see the planting of barley, while wheat was cultivated in both the Levant and Anatolia.

1.6.2 First Permanent Settlements in West Asia [of the Fertile Crescent]

The transition from foraging, to collecting to cultivating took place over several centuries, but these gradual changes did serve to mark a very distinct era of permanent settlement during the Neolithic Period. Increased rainfall around 9600 BCE meant that the Jordan River would swell

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15 Ristvet, 41.
16 Ristvet, 41-42.
yearly, in the process depositing layers of fertile soil along its banks. This fertile soil allowed locals to rely on agriculture for survival. Soon after they founded Jericho just north of the Dead Sea: “perhaps the very first time in human history that a completely viable population was living in the same place at the same time.”\(^{17}\) By Jericho’s height, around 9000 BCE, the settlements population reached the hundreds. This increase cannot be considered an urban boom of course, and the transition away from foraging occurred gradually. For example, excavations from this area have unearthed no separation of tasks or dwellings by gender or skill. However, by the end of Jericho’s development, maintaining large populations in one place would prove to produce other extensive adjustments.\(^{18}\)

Jericho’s residents did distinguish themselves from their hunter-gatherer predecessors, however, through their relatively extensive construction projects. They used mud bricks to build a wall that encircled the settlement probably for flood control, a tower, and separate buildings for grain storage.

The former foragers now living at Jericho could rely on fish or other aquatic creatures for meat as they experimented with permanent settlement, but those foragers living further away from large bodies of water would need another source of meat. This need increasingly was met by animal domestication. Domestication would prove to be a slow process, as humans learned the hard way that zebras bite, impalas are claustrophobic, and bighorn sheep do not obey orders. In other words, some animals cannot be domesticated, but this is information only understood through trial and error. By about 7,500 BCE, however, humans in the Taurus and Zagros mountains employed selective breeding to eventually domesticate mountain sheep and goats. The temperament and size of pigs and cows delayed their domestication until the 6,000s BCE, but this process proved equally, if not more important, than that of sheep and goats.

As agriculture and animal domestication progressed, settlements around the Mediterranean became larger and more sophisticated. By 7,000 BCE on the Anatolian plateau, Çatalhüyük reached several thousands of inhabitants. The residents at Çatalhüyük buried their dead, constructed uniform adjacent houses with elaborate designs painted on their interior walls, and had multiple workshops where (among other activities) they wove baskets, and made obsidian mirrors as well as daggers with “carved bone handles.”\(^{19}\)


\(^{19}\) Mithen, 94.
cloth; developed a varied diet of peas, nuts, vegetable oil, apples, honey, and the usual grains; and improved weapons technology with sharper arrows added to their use of daggers and lances. These gains may seem modest by our standards, but the legacy of communal living and, ultimately, political centralization that they introduced was extraordinary.

Figure 1.3 | Çatalhüyük at the Time of the First Excavations
Author: Omar Hoftun
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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Jericho and Çatalhüyük were surely some of the most notable early settlements, but they were not alone. The appearance of these two settlements was accompanied by the increasing presence of village life across the world. Most early agricultural villages in Southwest Asia and around the world were very similar in appearance; they had around twenty residents and were organized around grain cultivation and storage. Small huts were organized in a “loose circle,” and grain silos were placed between each hut. Labor was a communal activity, and village members all spent time hoeing the fields or hunting. The most valuable asset to a community was the grain itself, but neither it nor the land where it grew it belonged to one individual.

This model existed for hundreds and even thousands of years in some areas, until the villages stopped hunting and domesticated animals. For many scholars, the abandonment of hunting represents the “real” Neolithic Revolution. As communities completely abandoned hunting and
gathering, they dedicated more energy to warfare, religion, and construction; in consequence, dwellings and settlements grew, along with a concomitant focus on tool and weapon making.  

1.6.3 Leaving Paleolithic Culture Behind

While the Neolithic Era is described in greater detail elsewhere, it is important to understand Paleolithic and Neolithic differences in order to convey a sense of just how revolutionary the shift to agriculture was for humanity. For example, agriculture contributed to (along with religion and trade) the development of class. Before agriculture, hunter-gatherers divided tasks like seed gathering, grinding, or tool-making. However, without large scale building projects like aqueducts or canals required for agriculture, hierarchies were much less pronounced. The intensification of agriculture during the Neolithic required irrigation, plowing, and terracing, all of which were labor intensive. The amount of labor required could not be met through simple task division; someone had to be in charge. This meant the establishment of ruling elites, a societal grouping that had not existed during the Paleolithic.

While violence certainly existed during the Paleolithic period, organized warfare was an invention of the Neolithic. Agriculture meant larger populations and settlements that were more tightly packed and closer to one another. These closer quarters created new social and economic pressures that could produce organized violence. Agricultural intensification produced stores of food and valuables that could be seized by neighbors. During the 9,000s BCE, settlements like Jericho began to build defensive walls, while skeletons unearthed in the area reveal wounds from new types of projectiles (like the Khiam Point) developed during the era.

Family life also changed significantly during the Neolithic. Sedentary communities invested more time and resources into the construction of permanent homes housing nuclear families. People spent less time with the community as a whole and within homes it became easier to accumulate wealth and keep secrets.

The shift in gender roles after agriculture seems to be even more pronounced, as the role of women became more important as humans moved out of the Paleolithic and into the Neolithic era.

20  Ristvet, 66.
21  Scarre, 192, 215.
During the Paleolithic Era, and until recently in fact, a child would be breastfed until he or she was three or four years old, a necessity preventing mothers from joining long-distance hunting expeditions without their toddlers. However, a breastfeeding woman could complete tasks that “don’t require rapt concentration, are relatively dull and repetitive; they are easily interrupted, don’t place the child in danger, and don’t require the participant to stray far from home.” Spinning, weaving, and sewing were some of these tasks. Also, the essential tasks of preparing food and clothing could be accomplished with a nursing toddler nearby. These tasks that may be consigned as “women’s work” today are among the most important tasks (and very time consuming ones before the industrial revolution) that a human could perform. In fact, they were so time consuming that women would spend most of their day on them, often being assisted by men.

Over time, Paleolithic women gathered new species of berries as well as bird eggs, and learned which mushrooms were nontoxic. Women also were the principal gatherers of mosses for sleeping mats and other plants for shelter. When men returned with a kill, the women then began an involved process of dressing and butchering it. Sinews from animals and fibers from plants became rope to tie or fasten the hides as well as baskets. Women thus were essential to any kind of productivity or progress associated with hunting. Women used sinews and fibers to create netting for transport and for hunting and fishing. In hunting societies with elements of horticulture, women were responsible for, and could provide, such food as legumes, eggs, and grains. Food gathering and weaving, especially in the dry Mediterranean, was an outdoor and community activity that also served as a preschool and apprentice system for children. So women were also community educators.

**Neolithic Women**

While Paleolithic women certainly had important responsibilities, the added tasks of herding and animal domestication expanded their roles tremendously in the Neolithic era. Neolithic
survival required not only effective food storage, but also increased production. Children on a farm can be more helpful and put in less danger than those on a hunt. Neolithic women increasingly bore more children, either because of increased food production or to help augment it. This increase in child bearing may also have offset an increase in mortality due, for example, to disease. Because dangers from disease grew in new villages due to the ease with which deadly diseases spread in close quarters, and nearby domesticated animals whose diseases spread from animal to humans, more children would be necessary to replace those who had succumbed to illness.

While Neolithic women carried an increased child-bearing responsibility, their other responsibilities did not necessarily wane. Though women may not have fired pottery when it began to appear some 6,000 years ago, they appeared on it in decorative symbols of female fertility. Around 4,000 BCE, gendered tasks shifted again with the domestication of draft animals. Food production once again became men’s domain, as herding was incompatible with childrearing. Later, in Neolithic herding societies, women were often responsible for the actual domestication of feral babies, nursing them and raising them. Men would shear sheep, help weave, market the textiles, and cultivate the food that was prepared in the home.

We should say that this was not the case with all agricultural societies, as many horticulturalists who were able to cultivate crops closer to home were able to remain matrilineal. For example, we have the case of Minoan women on the Mediterranean island of Crete that we discuss in more detail in Chapter Five. On Crete’s hilly terrain, women were able to cultivate terraced horticulture and keep herds of sheep and goats nearby. Therefore, as women lost power and influence elsewhere due to more intensive agriculture, Minoan women actually expanded their control over Crete’s economic and cultural life and would help give rise to Classical Greece.

1.6.4 Toward First Civilizations

We will discuss the Bronze Age elsewhere, but we should mention here that new pursuits like mining added to the domestic burden on women. The advent of the Bronze Age led to far-spread searching and mining for copper and other metals like arsenic or tin to harden it and create the bronze alloy. Mining consequently became a male pursuit. Between 9,000 and 4,000 BCE, as metal become a source for wealth and subsistence, men’s roles shifted from being secondary to being both the food collectors and the economic backbone of individual families and societies.

These Neolithic developments in sedentary agriculture and village life would be the foundation for an explosion of cultural development three thousand years later in Egypt and Mesopotamia (addressed later in this text). By the Age of Exploration in the 1500s CE, most of the world had adopted agriculture as a primary means of subsistence, and the foundation of great civilizations.

1.7 SUMMARY

The story of world civilizations really begins six to eight million years ago when ancestors of modern humans began to walk upright. Millions of years of evolutionary response to changing climates and environment led to the existence of our species, *Homo sapiens*. While other
hominids migrated out of Africa, had language, and made fire and tools, it was *Homo sapiens* who were able to navigate open oceans and eventually populate the entire planet. Over the last 50,000 years or so, *Homo sapiens* became modern humans by improving their hunting, their building techniques, their community living, and their food gathering and storage. About 10,000 years ago, the Neolithic Era began. Humans began to live in larger, permanent settlements where a permanent food source needed to be nearby. These were the beginnings of agriculture. This “agricultural revolution” deeply affected gender relationships, class distinctions, and economic priorities as most humans left their foraging days behind them, the importance of which will be discussed in later chapters.

### 1.8 WORKS CONSULTED AND FURTHER READING


1.9 LINKS TO PRIMARY SOURCES

Bering Land Bridge National Preserve
  https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/cultural_diversity/Bering_Land_Bridge_National_Preserve.html

Oldowan & Acheulean Stone Tools
  https://anthromuseum.missouri.edu/minigalleries/handaxes/intro.shtml

Dolni Vestionce
  http://australianmuseum.net.au/dolni-vstonice-archaeological-site

Natufian site of Eyan/Ain Mallaha
  http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/eyna/hd_eyna.htm

Çatalhöyük
  http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1405
2 Early Middle Eastern and Northeast African Civilizations

Charlotte Miller

2.1 CHRONOLOGY

**Ancient Mesopotamia**
- **c. 10,000 BCE** Beginnings of the Agricultural Revolution
- **c. 3500 BCE** Appearance of Sumerian city-states in lower Mesopotamia
- **c. 3200 BCE** Early use of cuneiform
- **c. 2900 BCE** Production of bronze
- **2334 – 2100 BCE** Akkadian Empire
- **c. 2000 BCE** Gilgamesh first recorded in cuneiform
- **1792 – 1595 BCE** Babylonian Empire
- **1792 – 1750 BCE** Reign of Hammurabi
- **900 – 612 BCE** Assyrian Empire
- **626 – 539 BCE** New Babylonian Empire
- **605 – 562 BCE** Reign of Nebuchadnezzar

**Ancient Israel**
- **c. 1300 – 1200 BCE** Israelites leave Egypt (following Moses)
- **c. 1050 – 1010 BCE** Israelites establish a kingdom
- **c. 1000 – 970 BCE** Reign of King David
- **c. 979 – 930 BCE** Reign of King Solomon
- **931 BCE** Israel divides into two kingdoms
- **586 – 539 BCE** Babylonian captivity of Israelites

**Northeast Africa (Egypt and Nubia)**
- **c. 7000 BCE** Beginnings of Agricultural Revolution in Northeast Africa
- **c. 6000 – 3500 BCE** Desiccation of the Sahara Desert pushed people towards Nile River Valley
c. 4000 BCE Towns and villages grew along the Nile River

3100 BCE Unification of Egypt

3100 – 2600 BCE Egyptian Archaic Period

2660 – 2160 BCE Egyptian Old Kingdom

2400 – 1450 BCE The Kingdom of Kerma

2040 – 1640 BCE Egyptian Middle Kingdom

1640 – 1570 BCE Egypt’s Second Intermediate Period (Egypt under Hyksos Rule)

1530 – 1070 BCE Egyptian New Kingdom

1350 – 1325 BCE Amarna Period (under Pharaoh Akhenaten)

1040 – 332 BCE Egyptian Late Period

750 – 656 BCE The Kingdom of Kush ruled Egypt, creating the “Ethiopian Dynasty”

750 – 593 BCE Kingdom of Kush (with capital at Napata)

593 BCE Egyptian army sacked Napata, the capital of Kush

593 BCE The Kingdom of Kerma moved its capital to Meroe

525 BCE Persian conquest of Egypt

323 BCE Alexander the Great conquered Egypt/Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt

30 BCE Roman conquest of Egypt

2.2 INTRODUCTION: DEFINING CIVILIZATION

The term civilization often elicits mostly idealized images of ancient empires, monumental architecture, and the luxurious lives of ruling classes. Civilization, however, is a tricky term. In the United States, students of history studied Western Civilization, almost exclusively, through the 1950s. In their studies, civilizations were advanced societies with urban centers, rooted in European or Middle Eastern culture. America’s origins in these western civilizations was used to explain our own high level of development. However, more recent scholars have definitely broadened the geographical focus by recognizing that worldwide from 3500 to 1000 BCE at least seven independent civilizations emerged in different regions. These recent scholars also continue to debate the definition of civilization, and the current compromise amongst World Historians is to recognize characteristics that civilizations tended to share. Common characteristics of civilizations included food surpluses, higher population densities, social stratification, systems of taxation, labor specialization, regular trade, and accumulated learning (or knowledge passed down from generation to generation). The list here is not all-inclusive by any means, but it indicates the complexity of the societies that scholars have labeled civilizations.

In addition to heated debates about its exact definition, civilization is a loaded term, meaning that it can contain a value judgment. If we use the term carelessly, it seems to indicate that some societies are deemed civilized and worthy of inclusion, while others are uncivilized and thus not worth our study. In part, our sensitivity to this issue is a response to the tendency of past historians, including many of those working in Europe in the 1800s, to assume that there was a
natural progression from an uncivilized state to civilization. These historians viewed people who had values, ways of living, and religious beliefs different than theirs as uncivilized. They further believed that these allegedly uncivilized peoples were behind or needed to catch up with those who were civilized. Today, World Historians try to appreciate the great diversity of human experiences and consciously remove these sorts of value judgments. World Historians avoid assumptions that some societies in the past were better or further along than others. Therefore, many World Historians remain wary of the uncritical use of the term civilization.

For our purposes, let us leave aside any value judgments. Societies labeled as civilizations were not inherently better than any others. In fact, as we will see, civilizations demonstrated various vulnerabilities. Considering things like war, slavery, and the spread of diseases, there were sometimes advantages to living outside the nexus of civilizations. For example, in comparing societies, scholars have found that in many instances people residing in decentralized states were healthier and lived longer than did their counterparts in early civilizations. However, people living in societies with social stratification, labor specialization, and trade usually left more written records and archeological evidence, which historians can analyze to narrate our past. The available resources mean that civilizations tend to be better represented in the written historical records. As you read about past civilizations, keep in mind that historians are currently enhancing our understanding of societies that perhaps remained mobile, rejected hierarchies, or preserved their histories orally. These societies were also part of our shared past, even if they are harder to study or have received less scholarly attention.

This chapter focuses on early civilizations in the Fertile Crescent and Northeast Africa. The civilizations in these regions left written records. They also all initially had economies based on farming and developed alongside rivers. Their locations alongside rivers allowed populations in the Fertile Crescent and Northeast Africa to grow the surplus food that they used to support urbanization, social stratification, labor specialization, and trade.

2.3 QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING

1. Explain why the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers were significant for ancient Mesopotamians.

2. Describe the characteristics of civilizations that were found in ancient Mesopotamia.

3. What does the *Epic of Gilgamesh* tell scholars about Mesopotamian values, views of the environment, and conceptions of the afterlife?

4. How did the rulers of ancient Mesopotamian empires attempt to bring together and control the people within their realms?

5. Describe the legacies of the civilization in ancient Mesopotamia.

6. Explain the central beliefs of Judaism that are evident in the early written tradition.
7. How did the United Kingdom of Israel develop and who were its key leaders?

8. Describe how the Israelites and their traditions have been influential.

9. How did the Nile River and the region’s climate and geography influence the development of Egyptian civilization?

10. Which characteristics of civilizations were seen in Ancient Egypt?

11. What major continuities were evident throughout Dynastic Egypt?

12. Describe Egypt’s intermediate periods.

13. Explain the significance of pyramids.

14. Describe the major innovations of the New Kingdom.

15. What are the legacies of Ancient Egypt?

16. Compare the civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt.

17. What were the defining features of Nubian civilization?


### 2.4 KEY TERMS

- Amarna Period
- Assyrian Empire
- Aten
- Cataract
- City-states
- Civilization
- Covenant
- Cuneiform
- Desiccation
- Divine kingships
- Empire
- Exodus
- Hammurabi’s Code
- Hieroglyphics
- Kerma
- Kush
- Levant
- Meroe
- Meroitic
- Mesopotamia
- Middle Kingdom
- Monotheism
- Nebuchadnezzar II
- New Kingdom
- Nile River
- Nubia
CHAPTER 2: EARLY MIDDLE EASTERN AND NORTHEAST AFRICAN CIVILIZATIONS

- Old Kingdom
- Ostraca
- Palette of Narmer
- Polytheistic
- Prophets
- Pyramids
- Sargon of Akkad
- Sumerian King List
- The Ten Commandments
- Valley of Kings
- Western Deffufa
- Ziggurat

2.5 ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

Mesopotamia is located in an area known as the Fertile Crescent. Archeologists have found some of the earliest known sites of agricultural production in the Fertile Crescent. Although much of this region received little or irregular rainfall, the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers provided large amounts of freshwater, facilitating agricultural production and the development of early civilizations. The Greeks later recognized the significance of the river systems to these ancient societies and referred to the region as “the Land between the Rivers” or Mesopotamia.

The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers both originate in the Taurus Mountains of eastern Anatolia and flow southward to empty into the Persian Gulf. The rivers carry and deposit silt downstream, enriching the soil. In general, the richer soils and availability of water in areas that in the north otherwise had little rain, or else towards the south had concentrated months of rainfall followed by long, dry spells, encouraged settlement near the rivers. The areas closer to the Persian Gulf, known as Lower Mesopotamia, in particular, were attractive to early settlers because they had extremely fertile soils. People built some of the earliest cities, including Uruk, Eridu, and Ur, in Lower Mesopotamia.

While the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers did provide water to the region, their floods were unpredictable and could even be catastrophic when they washed away entire settlements. In response, the

Map 2.1 | The Fertile Crescent
Author: User "Ras67"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: CC BY-SA 3.0
The region’s residents created irrigation canals and drainage ditches to control the flow of water. They also stored water in reservoirs to use during the dry months of the year. Additionally, in parts of Lower Mesopotamia, the courses of the rivers and their tributaries changed frequently, so people either had to move to follow the water’s new path or divert a river to continue supplying water for their settlement. As regular access to water supported agricultural surpluses and population growth, people tended to fare better against the unpredictability of the floods, seasonal changes, and the rivers’ changing courses when they lived in settlements capable of maintaining irrigation canals, drainage ditches, and water reservoirs.

The rivers offered another benefit to ancient Mesopotamians. Just as the rivers were definitely important to meet people’s everyday needs for water and for agricultural production, so they also facilitated trade. While people made use of local resources, like mud to build their homes, in general, Lower Mesopotamia lacked other desired resources, including wood, stone, and precious metals. Traders were able to use the rivers to bring in these resources from Assyria, Anatolia, the Levant, and areas adjacent to the Persian Gulf. Early Mesopotamians also obtained goods from as far away as what today are northern Pakistan and India. Merchants used overland routes that crossed the Iranian Plateau and sea routes, exchanging Mesopotamian products like grains and textiles for luxury goods from the east. Royal cemeteries show that by 2500 BCE Mesopotamian elites were buried with a variety of imports, including beads brought from the Indus River Valley. The rivers and the overland trade routes also facilitated communication and, with it, the sharing of ideas and technologies.

### 2.6 SUMERIAN CITY-STATES

Lower Mesopotamia, or the southern areas of Mesopotamia towards the Persian Gulf, drew settlers, who moved to take advantage of rich soils and the availability of water in the area commonly known as Sumer. The people who lived in Sumer are generally referred to as
Sumerians. Prior to 3,000 BCE, Sumerians, whose origins remain a subject of debate, founded a number of independent cities in Lower Mesopotamia. In these cities, Sumerians had organized religions, centralized governments, social hierarchies, and access to trade networks. As these cities expanded, their leaders claimed control over adjacent territories, forming at least a dozen city-states, which became the basic organizational structure of Sumerian civilization in the third millennium BCE. By incorporating the surrounding territories into city-states, urban centers were able to draw on more resources.

Sumerian cities had certain characteristics in common. First, a temple complex or a ziggurat was usually the visual focus of the urban landscape. Sumerians believed that their entire city belonged to its main deity, and built a massive temple, the most important building in the city, to be the dwelling place of their city’s main god or goddess. A complex that comfortably housed many of the priests and priestesses who served the city’s deity surrounded each temple. In addition to attending to the religious needs of the community, temples complexes also owned land, managed industries, were involved in trade, and acted as banks. Their wide-ranging roles meant that temples often had additional outbuildings, like granaries and storage sheds, in the surrounding countryside. Sumerians were polytheistic, meaning they worshipped multiple gods and goddesses. Because Sumerians believed each god had a family, they also built smaller shrines and temples dedicated to these divine family members. Therefore, each city would have a number of temples while many Sumerian homes had small altars dedicated to other gods. Sometimes, urban temples or ritual spaces were built atop a ziggurat, a solid rectangular tower made of sun-dried mud bricks. Archaeological evidence shows that temple complexes were expanded and rebuilt over time and, by the late third millennium BCE, temples in many of the Sumerian city-states were raised on platforms or else situated on a ziggurat. The towering architecture of the ziggurat stressed the significance of the temple to the surrounding community. The best-preserved ziggurat, the Great Ziggurat of Ur, was constructed with an estimated 720,000 baked bricks and rose to a height of about 100 feet. The people of Ur constructed this ziggurat for their patron deity, the moon goddess Nanna. They likely brought regular offerings to Nanna and also received food rations from the Great Ziggurat of Ur.

Viewing nature as unpredictable, people brought offerings to their city’s temple complexes or ziggurat, hoping to...
please the gods who controlled the natural forces of their world. Priests and priestesses collected and redistributed the offerings, demonstrating the vital roles they played in Sumerian society. The relatively privileged position of priests and priestesses at the temple complex also shows Sumerian social stratification (the development of a hierarchy) and how agricultural surpluses supported the specialization of labor. Some of the early leaders of Sumerian cities may have been “priest-kings,” who attained elevated positions through their association with the temples. The later rulers of city-states definitely supported the temples, claiming to be acting on behalf of the gods who brought divine favor to their followers.

Sumerian city-states had local rulers, who lived in large palaces, but most of these local rulers were not considered kings. So far, archeologists have dated the earliest known royal palaces to c. 2600 BCE and conclude that Sumerian city-states had centralized governments with secular rulers by at least that timeframe. While there does seem to have been a sense of inhabiting a shared space in Southern Mesopotamia, referred to as “the Land” in written records, city-states had distinctive identities. In part, their distinctive identities revolved around their main deity. The rulers of city-states alternately supported, competed with, and fought against one another. The Sumerian King List (Figure 2.2), a manuscript that listed early kings and described their reigns (with some presumably fictive and exaggerated elements), provides evidence of these alliances, competition, and war. For example, it describes En-mebarages as the second to last king of the 1st Dynasty of Kish, “…who carried away as spoil the weapons of the land of Elam, became king, and reigned 900 years…” 1 Local rulers often came to power after proving themselves militarily.

Furthermore, the Sumerian King List recognized only rulers who had established control over multiple city-states as kings (with the title of *lugal* in the Sumerian language) belonging to distinct dynasties. While it lasted, a dynasty generally passed down the kingship through the male line. According to the Sumerian King List, the seat of power, held by hereditary kings, shifted from city-state to city-state with the rise and fall of dynasties through the third millennium BCE. Significantly, the Sumerian King List began its recorded history “when kingship came down from heaven,” legitimizing secular kings through their association with gods. 2 Sumerian kings, often along with more local rulers, led armies, collected taxes, organized labor for state projects, and meted out justice. At the top of the hierarchy and with control over

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2 Ibid.
multiple city-states, kings expected obedience from local rulers and their subjects, and support from the priests and priestesses of the temples.

Kings, local rulers, priests, and priestesses held influential positions in Sumerian societies. However, farmers, taken as a whole, made up an estimated 90% of the population. Other skilled people included animal-breeders, merchants, craftspeople, fishermen, doctors, soldiers, architects, and scribes. Surplus agricultural production collected as tribute as well as wealth generated by trade supported such labor specialization. One important outcome of labor specialization was innovation in metalworking. In approximately 2900 BCE, metalworkers began producing bronze, which was stronger than copper. Stronger weapons and farming tools gave Sumerians advantages when it came to combat and agricultural production.

Social stratification is further evident as some Sumerians and even institutions, including temples, owned slaves. Slaves performed a variety of tasks like construction, weaving, agricultural and domestic labor, tending animals, and even administrative work as scribes. Some slaves were chattel slaves, meaning that society treated them as property with no rights. Usually, chattel slaves were prisoners of war or slaves bought from outside communities. They were branded by barbers or tattoo artists and forced to work at the will of their masters. If they tried to run away, the law required slaves to be returned. The more widespread type of servitude in most Sumerian societies, which was generally temporary until a debtor paid off a loan and its interest, was debt slavery. Over the past century or so, archaeologists have added a great deal to our understanding of Sumerian social distinctions through their work at numerous excavation sites, but many gaps in our knowledge still exist.

The archaeological discovery of cuneiform tablets at these excavation sites has aided efforts to learn about this civilization. Sumerians developed cuneiform, a written script of wedge-shaped marks, around 3200 BCE. Cuneiform was one of the earliest, if not the very first, written script in the world. The Sumerian King List, discussed above, was recorded in cuneiform. Merchants, scribes, administrators, priests, and others kept written records describing financial transactions, court proceedings, administrative decisions, and architectural plans. They also wrote legends, epic poems, chants, and prayers. Most people were not literate, so scribes—who had been specially trained in scribal schools—generated many of the records. While in school, in addition to copying written passages, scribes learned arithmetic. The Sumerians
system of arithmetic was based on the number 60, which we still use to divide time into hours, minutes, and seconds. Scribes used styluses made of reed to write on clay tablets that were dried and could be stored. The discovery of cuneiform tablets has greatly aided archaeologists, but only a small percentage of the tablets found to date have been translated.

Using archaeological and written evidence, scholars have pieced together what they can about everyday life for Sumerians, though some questions remain. For instance, it has been a challenge to determine the layout of urban spaces beyond the prominence of the temples and the relative grandeur of palaces. From archaeological finds, scholars suspect that Sumerian cities were divided into neighborhoods by occupation and according to kinship groups, but uncertainties about specifics linger. Legal documents and tax records show that people owned property in both the cities and the countryside. Also, evidence suggests social stratification, as some Sumerians owned fairly large chunks of land, while others had much smaller plots or presumably no land at all. Wills, court proceedings, and temple documents show that land and temple offices were usually bought or else acquired through military or other service to the state. A man inherited land, property, offices, and their attendant obligations to the state (like reoccurring military service) from his father. The eldest son seems to have frequently inherited a larger share than younger brothers and have been given control over the family home. He was tasked with performing regular rituals to honor dead ancestors, who were usually buried underneath the home. From the written documents, we also get glimpses into other aspects of Sumerian life, like marriage and divorce.

Sumerians viewed marriage as a contract between two families and, as a result, the male heads of the two families arranged a couple’s marriage. Documents show that both families contributed resources to seal the union or complete the marriage contract. The man’s family gave gifts or money and hosted a feast, while the woman’s family amassed a dowry. Although a woman did not automatically receive an inheritance upon the death of her father, she could expect (and use the court system to make sure she got) to receive a dowry, even if it came from her father’s estate after his death. Divorce was possible but sometimes led to social ostracism or even punishment if there were accusations of misconduct, such consequences being especially the case for the woman. Records indicate that polygamy was not common, but wealthier men did keep slave-girls as concubines. Overall, Sumerians considered marriage an essential institution in that it brought families together and ensured the continuation of the family lineage.

Legends, myths, poems, and literary texts tell us about Sumerians, too. For example, we can explore their values and views of the afterlife through reading the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* relates the adventures of Gilgamesh, a legendary king, who may have lived around 2700 BCE. The epic has multiple versions and was told orally before it was first written down in cuneiform in about 2000 BCE. The epic follows the heroic exploits of Gilgamesh and his companion, Enkidu, to emphasize the importance of values such as loyalty and humility. In one section, the epic describes a very gloomy afterlife where “people see no light, they sit in darkness,” reflecting Mesopotamian beliefs that the afterlife was miserable for all, even those who had lived virtuously. Additionally, it portrays the environment as potentially violent and hostile as in its
flood story, which in some ways resembles the account of Noah and the flood found in Genesis. Ultimately, Gilgamesh fails at his quest to find eternal life but learns to work for the glory of the gods and for worthwhile human achievements.

Other archaeological finds and the written documents also give some hint of the wider popular culture and artistic conventions in ancient Mesopotamia. For example, cuneiform tablets with pictures of dancers and singers, as well as instruments found in graves, suggest that Sumerians placed importance on music, using it for entertainment and ritual purposes. Trying to learn more about Sumerian music, scholars and other enthusiasts have replicated these instruments and presented their best estimation of Sumerian scales and tuning. The documentary evidence suggests that hymns from the ancient Sumerian city-states were shared with later Mesopotamian empires and even spread into the Mediterranean world.

2.7 MESOPOTAMIAN EMPIRES

In the second half of the third millennium BCE, Sumerian city-states fought each other, and dynasties rose and fell. Kings consolidated power over multiple city-states in the region. Then, King Sargon of Akkad enlarged the scale by conquering the Sumerian city-states and parts of Syria, Anatolia, and Elam. In doing so, he created one of the world’s first empires in approximately 2334 BCE. For generations, Mesopotamian literature celebrated the Akkadian Empire (c. 2334 – 2100 BCE) that King Sargon founded. Like the Akkadian Empire, three subsequent empires, the Babylonian Empire (c. 1792 – 1595 BCE), the Assyrian Empire (c. 900 – 612 BCE), and the Neo-Babylonian Empire (c. 605 – 539 BCE), also ruled large parts of Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent.

2.7.1 The Akkadian Empire (c. 2334 – 2100 BCE)

Sargon of Akkad founded the first empire in Mesopotamia. Legends about Sargon of Akkad stress that he rose from obscurity to become a famous, powerful king. While the legends all tend to describe him as coming from humble origins and rising to the top using his own wits, there are many variations. One much later Babylonian tablet, from the seventh century BCE, describes his background as descendent of a high priestess and an anonymous father. His mother hid her pregnancy and the birth of Sargon, secreting him away in a wicker basket on a river, where he was
rescued and then raised by Aqqi, a water-drawer. This version of the legend links Sargon with a more elite family through his birth-mother, a high priestess, but also shows how he had to advance himself up to king after being adopted by the rather more humble figure of a water-drawer.

From his allegedly humble origins, Sargon of Akkad conquered Sumerian city-states one by one, creating an empire, or a large territory, encompassing numerous states, ruled by a single authority. It’s quite possible that Sargon of Akkad’s predecessor, who claimed to rule over the large region stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf, began the process of building the empire, but Sargon is remembered for accomplishing the task. One of the reasons we attribute the empire to him is his use of public monuments. He had statues, stellae (tall, upright pillars), and other monuments built throughout his realm to celebrate his military victories and to build a sense of unity within his empire. Archaeologists have not found the empire’s capital city, Akkad. However, from the available information, archaeologists have estimated its location, placing it to the north of the early Mesopotamian city-states, including Ur and Sumer. It is clear that Sargon of Akkad turned the empire’s capital at Akkad into one of the wealthiest and most powerful cities in the world. According to documentary sources, the city’s splendor stood as another symbol of Sargon’s greatness. The city grew into a cosmopolitan center especially because of its role in trade. Akkadian rulers seized and taxed trade goods, with trade routes extending as far as India. Sargon ruled the empire for over fifty years. His sons, grandson, and great grandson attempted to hold the empire.
together. After about 200 years, attacks from neighboring peoples caused the empire to fall. After the fall of the Akkadian Empire, Hammurabi founded the next empire in the region in 1792 BCE.

### 2.7.2 The Babylonian Empire (1792 – 1595 BCE)

Hammurabi, who aspired to follow Sargon’s example, created the next empire in the region, the Babylonian Empire. With well-disciplined foot soldiers armed with copper and bronze weapons, he conquered Mesopotamian city-states, including Akkad and Sumer, to create an empire with its capital at Babylon. Although he had other achievements, Hammurabi is most famous for the law code etched into a stele that bears his name, the Stele of Hammurabi.

The Stele of Hammurabi records a comprehensive set of laws. Codes of law existed prior to Hammurabi’s famous stele, but Hammurabi’s Code gets a lot of attention because it is still intact and has proven very influential. As seen in Figure 2.5, the upper part of the stele depicts Hammurabi standing in front of the Babylonian god of justice, from whom Hammurabi derives his power and legitimacy. The lower portion of the stele contains the collection of 282 laws. One particularly influential principle in the code is the law of retaliation, which demands “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” The code listed offenses and their punishments, which often varied by social class. While symbolizing the power of the King Hammurabi and associating him with justice, the code of law also attempted to unify people within the empire and establish common standards for acceptable behavior. An excerpt of Hammurabi’s Code appears below:

6. If anyone steal the property of a temple or of the court, he shall be put to death, and also the one who receives the stolen thing from him shall be put to death.

8. If any one steal cattle or sheep, or an ass, or a pig or a goat, if it belong to a god or to the court, the thief shall pay thirtyfold therefore; if they belonged to a freed man of the king he shall pay tenfold; if the thief has nothing with which to pay he shall be put to death.
15. If any one receive into his house a runaway male or female slave of the court, or of a freedman, and does not bring it out at the public proclamation of the major domus, the master of the house shall be put to death.

53. If any one be too lazy to keep his dam in proper condition, and does not so keep it; if then the dam break and all the fields be flooded, then shall he in whose dam the break occurred be sold for money, and the money shall replace the corn which he has caused to be ruined.

108. If a tavern-keeper (feminine) does not accept corn according to gross weight in payment of drink, but takes money, and the price of the drink is less than that of the corn, she shall be convicted and thrown into the water.

110. If a “sister of god” open a tavern, or enter a tavern to drink, then shall this woman be burned to death.

127. If any one “point the finger” (slander) at a sister of a god or the wife of any one, and can not prove it, this man shall be taken before the judges and his brow shall be marked. (by cutting the skin or perhaps hair)

129. If a man’s wife be surprised (in flagrante delicto) with another man, both shall be tied and thrown into the water, but the husband may pardon his wife and the king his slaves.

137. If a man wish to separate from a woman who has borne him children, or from his wife who has borne him children: then he shall give that wife her dowry, and a part of the usufruct of field, garden, and property, so that she can rear her children. When she has brought up her children, a portion of all that is given to the children, equal as that of one son, shall be given to her. She may then marry the man of her heart.

195. If a son strike his father, his hands shall be hewn off.

196. If a man put out the eye of another man his eye shall be put out. (An eye for an eye)

197. If he break another man’s bone, his bone shall be broken.

198. If he put out the eye of a freed man, or break the bone of a freed man, he shall pay one gold mina.

199. If he put out the eye of a man’s slave, or break the bone of a man’s slave, he shall pay one-half of its value.
202. If any one strike the body of a man higher in rank than he, he shall receive sixty blows with an ox-whip in public.

203. If a free-born man strike the body of another free-born man or equal rank, he shall pay one gold mina.

205. If the slave of a freed man strike the body of a freed man, his ear shall be cut off.

Hammurabi also improved infrastructure, promoted trade, employed effective administrative practices, and supported productive agriculture. For example, he sponsored the building of roads and the creation of a postal service. He also maintained irrigation canals and facilitated trade all along the Persian Gulf. After Hammurabi’s death, his successors lost territory. The empire declined, shrinking in size. The Hittites, from Anatolia, eventually sacked the city of Babylon in 1595 BCE, bringing about the official end of the Babylonian Empire.

2.7.3 The Assyrian Empire (c. 900 – 612 BCE)

The Assyrian Empire, which saw its height of power at the end of the first millennium to the seventh century BCE, was larger than any empire that preceded it.

Dominating the region, its well-equipped soldiers used their stronger iron weapons to extend the empire’s control through Mesopotamia, Syria, parts of Anatolia, Palestine, and up the Nile into Egypt. They used siege warfare, along with battering rams, tunnels, and moveable towers, to get past the defenses of cities. The Assyrians had a large army (with perhaps as many as 150,000 soldiers) that utilized a core of infantry, a cavalry, as well as chariots. As part of their military strategy, the Assyrians purposefully tried to inspire fear in their enemies; they decapitated conquered kings, burnt cities to the ground, destroyed crops, and dismembered defeated enemy soldiers. One Assyrian soldier claimed:

In strife and conflict I besieged [and] conquered the city. I felled 3,000 of their fighting men with the sword...I captured many troops alive: I cut off of some of their arms [and] hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears, [and] extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living [and] one of heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city.

The Assyrians expected these methods to deter potential rebellions and used their spoils of war, like precious metals and livestock, to finance further military campaigns. After conquering an area, they conscripted men into their army, and employed resettlement and deportation as techniques to get laborers where they wanted them and deal with communities who opposed

their regime. They also collected annual tributes that were apparently high enough to, at least occasionally, spur rebellions despite the Assyrians’ reputation for violent retribution.

In addition to its military strength, the Assyrian empire also stands out for the size of its cities and its administrative developments. The empire’s biggest cities, such as Nineveh and Assur, each had several million people living within them. Administratively, kings ruled Assyria, appointing governors to oversee provinces and delegates to keep tabs on the leaders of allied states. There were between 100 and 150 governors, delegates, and top officials entrusted by the king with ruling in his place and helping him maintain the empire. In the later centuries of the Assyrian Empire, kings chose these officials on the basis of merit and loyalty. Kings met with large groups of officials for rituals, festivals, and military campaigns. Evidence of such meetings has led some scholars to propose the possibility that the king and his officials might have worked together in something resembling a parliamentary system, though there is no scholarly consensus on the point. Ultimately, the Assyrian Empire became too large to control; rebellions occurred with more frequency and were difficult for its overextended military to quell. The empire fell after the conquest of Nineveh in 612 BCE.
2.7.4 The New Babylonian Empire (c. 626 – 539 BCE)

With the weakening of the Assyrian Empire, the New Babylonian Empire began to dominate Mesopotamia. Lasting for less than 100 years, the New Babylonian Empire is best known for its ruler, Nebuchadnezzar II, and its great architectural projects. As described in the Hebrew Scriptures (also known as the Old Testament), Nebuchadnezzar II, who ruled from 605 – 562 BCE, was a ruthless leader. He gained notoriety for destroying the city of Jerusalem and deporting many of the city’s Jews to Babylon. The captive Jews suffered in exile, as they were not allowed to return to their homeland. Nebuchadnezzar II also rebuilt Babylon with fortresses, temples, and enormous palaces. He associated the New Babylonian Empire with the glory of ancient Babylonia by reviving elements of Sumerian and Akkadian culture. For example, he had artists restore ancient artwork and celebrated the kings of old, like Hammurabi. Nebuchadnezzar is often also credited with rebuilding the city’s ziggurat, Etemanaki, or the “Temple of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth.” When completed, the ziggurat rose several stories above the city and seemed to reach to the heavens. Some scholars claim that the Babylonian ziggurat was the famous Tower of Babel described in the Old Testament. Another one of Nebuchadnezzar’s purported projects, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, was considered by the later Greek historian Herodotus to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World. According to legend, Nebuchadnezzar had the hanging gardens built for his wife. He made the desert bloom to remind her of her distant homeland; the elaborate gardens planted on rooftops and terraces were designed so that the plants’ leaves would spill down high walls. Since definitive archaeological evidence of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon has not been found, scholars continue to debate its most likely location and even its very existence. After the death of Nebuchadnezzar II, outside military pressures as well as internal conflict weakened the empire until the much larger Persian Empire conquered the New Babylonian Empire in 539 BCE.

2.8 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MESOPOTAMIA FOR WORLD HISTORY

Mesopotamia saw the emergence of some of the first cities and the world’s first empires. The city-states of the region flourished from about 3000 to 2300 BCE. Then, Sargon of Akkad and subsequent rulers built empires, expanding their control and influence over even larger territories. There were cultural links and commonalities found in the Sumerian city-states of the third millennium BCE. With agricultural production dependent on access to water, cities initially grew in Southern Mesopotamia near rivers, namely the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and their tributaries. Sumerians tried to control their environment using irrigation, drainage ditches, water reserves, and other methods. With unpredictable floods and other environmental challenges, the Sumerians viewed nature as hostile and their expectations of the afterlife tended to be pessimistic. Their understanding of nature as unpredictable also spurred engineering innovations as Sumerians prepared for floods, water shortages, and other natural events. While farming was the mainstay of their economies, city-states were also involved in robust long-distance trade networks, which allowed them to garner the many resources not available in their region. These city-states alternately allied with, competed...
against, and waged war on one another, with kingship emerging as rulers dominated multiple city-states. As evidenced by the centrality of temples and the belief that kingship came from heaven, religion was of fundamental importance to these societies. Archaeologists have also uncovered ample evidence of social stratification and labor specialization in these ancient city-states. Archeologists have been able to recognize Sumerian developments, in part, because the Sumerians left behind a wealth of information documented in cuneiform, one of the world’s first written scripts. Scholars have begun to describe life in ancient Sumerian societies and appreciate the many Sumerian achievements, like those in math, where they introduced a computation system based on 60 (which we still use to divide time and in geometry as a circle has 360°). Overall, Sumerians were innovators, with some of the first cities, one of the first systems of writing, notable achievements in engineering and architecture, the creation of larger political entities, and more.

Starting with the Akkadian Empire, four empires controlled vast territories in Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent. Over a period of almost 1800 years, these empires brought together diverse communities, often by military conquest and force. The empires facilitated trade, and spread ideas and culture. Their rulers developed administrative, military, and other techniques to try to ensure compliance and recognition of their authority. As intended, the rulers and the cities they built live on in legends, even though their empires eventually withered and fell.

### 2.9 THE ISRAELITES AND ANCIENT ISRAEL

The Israelites, “or children of Israel,” were Semetic-speakers who lived in Canaan and traced their descent back to Abraham through his grandson Israel. Hebrew tradition begins their history with Abraham’s departure from Ur in southern Mesopotamia (see Map 2.1). Therefore, Abraham is important in Jewish tradition, as he has been recognized as the first Jew, the patriarch from whom all Jews trace their descent, and a role model. As described in the Hebrew Scriptures, known to Christians as the Old Testament, Abraham also made a covenant with God, which blessed his descendants. Jews, Christians, and Muslims of today all recognize Abraham as a significant figure, though these major monotheistic religions view him a little differently. Respect for Abraham by believers in all three of these religions is just one indication that the world’s three major monotheistic religions are connected. Examining these connections reveals the extraordinary contributions that the Israelites made to World History. The Israelites were highly influential in developing the idea of **monotheism**, or belief in one god. Furthermore, they recorded their history orally at first, until their tradition was written down in the Hebrew Scriptures (alternatively referred to as the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament of the Christian Bible). The Hebrew Scriptures has been one of the most important texts ever written.

Eventually, by the end of the second millennium BCE (likely between 1200 and 1000 BCE), the Israelites established small kingdoms in the **Levant**. The Levant refers to areas adjacent to the eastern Mediterranean; in the ancient world, it comprised roughly the area from southern Anatolia through coastal areas of the eastern Mediterranean south and westward to the Egyptian delta. The Israelite kingdoms were concentrated along the Mediterranean coast in what are today Israel and the contested territory of the West Bank/Palestine.
Much debate exists amongst scholars about the sources used to reconstruct the history of the Israelites with much of the debate revolving around the use and interpretation of religious texts, particularly the Hebrew Scriptures. Right now, scholars rely fairly heavily on the Hebrew Scriptures to discuss periods before about 1200 BCE because other sources just do not exist. Some main points of contention have centered on dates, the purpose of religious texts, the reality that the Hebrew Scriptures were written centuries after the events they described, and the relationship between the scriptures and historical fact. Additionally, there has been back and forth discussion about whether archaeological finds confirm or disprove the narrative in the religious texts. These heated debates have led some scholars to question whether it is even possible to write a history of the ancient Israelites. For our purposes, this section will give an overview of Hebrew tradition and, using archaeological and collaborating evidence when possible, describe the development of the Israelite civilization.

2.10 EARLY ISRAELITES

By leading people out of Ur, his homeland in Southern Mesopotamia, to eventually settle in Canaan, later called Palestine, Abraham began the traditional history of the Israelites. According to Hebrew tradition, even before leaving Ur, Abraham taught his followers about the existence of a single, creator god and rejected the idol-worship and sin of Ur. The narrative continues to explain how when Abraham agreed to God’s directive to leave his homeland, God blessed him and all of his descendants. God entered into a covenant with Abraham, saying, “...And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great...and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.” Jews recognize this covenant as indicating their special relationship with God, and it remains one of the most important aspects of the Jewish faith.

Tradition recounts how several generations later Abraham’s grandson, Israel (also called Jacob), had twelve sons, who became the ancestors of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. One of these twelve sons, Joseph, led followers from Canaan during a famine to settle in Egypt. As the biblical text describes, the Israelites were prosperous at first and were becoming powerful, leading the Egyptian pharaoh to fear their influence. To try to stem the Israelite influence, the pharaoh put restrictions on births and forced them into slave labor. Then, Moses, whose mother had secreted him away in a waterproof basket on the Nile River, played an important role in delivering his people from subjugation. According to Hebrew tradition, God tasked Moses with leading his people out of Egypt, a flight to freedom called Exodus. Moses led “the children of Israel” into Sinai, where they entered into the Sinai Covenant. This covenant bound all Israelites into a pact with God. Israelites agreed to worship God alone and obey his law, while God confirmed the place of the Israelites as his “Chosen People,” whom he would protect. As part of the covenant, Israelites agreed to follow the Ten Commandments. According to Hebrew tradition, God gave the Ten Commandments to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, instructing the Israelites to worship only him, keep the Sabbath, and honor their parents. The Ten Commandments also prohibit idolatry, blasphemy, murder, adultery, theft, dishonesty, and coveting.

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These written traditions established important elements of the Jewish faith. For example, the Hebrew Scriptures trace Jewish descent from the Hebrew patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Israel (alternatively known as Jacob), and the twelve sons of Israel. They also describe the transition to monotheism and the covenant relationship between God and “the children of Israel.” Israelites believed in one god, Yahweh, who created and ruled over everything in the universe, and overall, they perceived Yahweh as being just and merciful. The ideas that there is a single, universal god and that his laws apply to everyone have been defining tenets of other monotheistic religions. Subsequent written and oral traditions, like the Talmud, reflect further development of Jewish beliefs, ethics, laws, and practice.

2.11 THE UNITED KINGDOM OF ISRAEL

After Exodus, the Israelites resettled in Canaan and in time began to unify. They formed kingdoms in the Levant just prior to 1000 BCE. King Saul (c. 1030 – 1009 BCE), a member of one of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, established the first Israelite monarchy, but ruled over a fairly limited territory and died in battle with the Philistines. He was crowned king and began the process of unification, but did not completely defeat his enemies and finish unification before he died. His son, King David, (d. 969 BCE), is often portrayed as Israel’s greatest ruler or a model king. He established the United Kingdom of Israel, with its capital at Jerusalem. King David’s successor, his son Solomon, further shaped the kingdom.

In popular memory, King David is probably most remembered for defeating Goliath. Historical traditions also celebrate him for expanding the borders of a newly unified Israel, contributing to the Book of Psalms, and, in Christian tradition, for being a forbear of Jesus. David was a “warrior king,” who defeated both internal and external enemies to unite Israel. He maintained a large standing army that helped extend his influence and create neighboring tributary states. With control of trade routes and tribute coming in from neighboring territories, Israel became a wealthy state under David. With this wealth, David began to build Jerusalem into the capital city of the Israelites, with further plans to build a temple to house the Ark of the Covenant (which according to Hebrew tradition held the Ten Commandments). David died before building this temple, but tradition credits him with other achievements, including composing many of the hymns and prayers in the Book of Psalms. Like Abraham, David is considered an important figure by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

King Solomon, David’s son, ruled a mostly peaceful realm. He accomplished his father’s goal of building the first Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The temple exemplified monumental architecture and became a focal point for the Jews of Jerusalem. Its ruins, known as the Western Wall or the Wailing Wall, are still a site of Jewish prayer and pilgrimage. Solomon also directed the building of a royal palace, a defensive wall around the city of Jerusalem, and fortresses along the kingdom’s frontier. Administratively, Solomon set up twelve districts, overseen by purveyors, who collected tribute in kind (usually as crops or foodstuffs). Each of the twelve districts was charged with supplying the king and the court for one month a year. Finally, Solomon used treaties and reciprocal trade agreements to maintain relatively peaceful relationships with Israel’s neighbors. He also forged
diplomatic relations through marriage; according to scripture, he had 700 wives! After Solomon’s death, what had been the United Kingdom of Israel split into two pieces: Israel and Judah. Over the long term, some of Solomon’s policies, including forced labor and tributary payments, likely contributed to the divide.

After the decline of the United Kingdom of Israel, Hebrew tradition describes the significance of great **prophets** or teachers, who spoke on behalf of God and set moral and ethical standards for the whole community. Yahweh sent these prophets to warn the Israelites that they were not abiding by their covenant. The prophets during this later period, especially Jeremiah and Second Isaiah, cultivated a new conceptualization of the covenant, which was much more personal as it was a relationship between Yahweh and each individual.

The Assyrians and later the Greeks and then the Romans brought parts of the former United Kingdom of Israel under their rule. These conquests and persecution forced members of the Jewish population into exile. This conceptualization of being members of a **diaspora**, that is, a scattered people who desire to return to their homeland, has played an important part in the formation of a Jewish identity. Also, in part, due to this history, preservation of cultural and religious heritage has become an enduring objective of Jews.

### 2.12 THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ISRAELITES AND ANCIENT ISRAEL

The Israelites left an extraordinary religious and ethical legacy. They were some of the first monotheists, worshipping a single god, whom they referred to as Yahweh. Their religious texts from the ancient world, including the Hebrew Scriptures, served as the foundational texts of Judaism. The Hebrew Scriptures were also the basis of the Christian Old Testament, and Islam...
recognizes parts of the scriptures as divine revelations. There were other, widespread religious influences as well. For example, Christians and Muslims consider many of the figures, including Abraham, Moses, and David, and teachings, like the Ten Commandments, from the Hebrew Scriptures to be very important. Furthermore, the Hebrew Scriptures contained the idea that everyone, regardless of status, was bound to obey the law.

The United Kingdom of Israel was a “golden age,” associated with the creation of a unified, wealthy state with its new capital in Jerusalem. This civilization had well-developed religious traditions, political power vested in a king, monumental architecture, and administrative innovations. It also maintained a strong military, multiple tributary states, long-distance trade networks, and well-established diplomatic relationships with foreign states.

2.13 ANCIENT EGYPT

In our study of World History, ancient Egypt serves as an excellent example of a complex society with cross-cultural connections, adaption to and control over changing environments, and sophisticated political and religious developments. All of these themes are evident in an examination of the origins of Egypt. Egyptian leaders unified Upper and Lower Egypt around 3100 BCE, creating a powerful ancient state. Developments in the millennia preceding unification, including the sharing of innovations and responses to environmental change, set the stage for the emergence of the Egyptian civilization.

Cross-cultural connections introduced the people of Northeast Africa to domesticated wheat and barley, two of the crops that they grew and whose surpluses supported the process of social differentiation and eventually the pharaonic, elite, and skilled classes of ancient Egypt. People in Northeast Africa had likely been gathering wild barley since before 10,000 BCE. However, sharing in the knowledge spreading from the Fertile Crescent around 7,000 BCE, they began cultivating wheat and barley and also keeping domesticated animals, including sheep and goats. At that time, agricultural production and herding were possible in areas that are today part of the Sahara Desert. The period was much wetter than now. People in the region settled into small communities, and archaeological evidence of hearths, grinding stones, and storage silos show the growth of settlements in areas that today are not well watered enough for agricultural production. The presence of crocodile bones, along with similar pottery styles, also suggest a history of contact between communities emerging along the Nile River and these settlements farther west. However, environmental change was leading to the desiccation or drying out of areas not adjacent to the Nile River, and by about 5,000 BCE, it was no longer possible to farm much beyond the floodplain of the Nile River. Many people adapted by moving towards the Nile River, and the Nile River became increasingly important to Egypt’s populations.

The Nile River flows south to north, fed by two main river systems: the White Nile and the Blue Nile. The White Nile flows steadily throughout the year and has its origins in the Great Lakes Region of East Africa. The Blue Nile originates in the Ethiopian highlands, and brings floodwaters up past the first cataract in the summers. (The first cataract lies roughly at Aswan on the map in Map 2.6.) Cataracts are generally considered impassable by boat due to their shallows,
rocks, and rapids. Comparatively, the flood plain of the Nile River is narrow, leading, especially with the desiccation of the surrounding areas, to high population densities close to the river. The winds also blow north to south, in the opposite direction of the river flow, thus facilitating trade and contact between Upper Egypt (to the south) and Lower Egypt (to the north). Upper and Lower Egypt lie north of the first cataract, usually allowing river traffic to proceed uninterrupted throughout the territory. Egyptian views of the Nile generally recognized the river’s centrality to life as demonstrated in the “Hymn to the Nile,” dated to approximately 2100 BCE. The praise-filled ode to the Nile River begins, “Hail to thee, O Nile! Who manifests thyself over this land, and comes to give life to Egypt.” The course of the Nile River definitely impacted settlement patterns, while the river also allowed for trade and the development of larger agricultural communities.

At the tail end of that era of desiccation, from about 3600 to 3300 BCE, complex societies formed in areas adjacent to the Nile River. These communities exerted increased influence over their environments, exhibited social differentiation, and showed evidence of labor specialization. For example, people in the settlements of Naganda and Hierakonpolis in Upper Egypt cleared trees and built dykes, canals, and early irrigation systems. By about 3500 BCE, they used these methods to quadruple the amount of cleared, arable land and could support population densities of up to one thousand people per square mile. Just as one example, recent archaeological finds at Hierakonpolis also show evidence of both social differential and specialization with separate burials for the settlement’s elite, the oldest known painted tomb, and the remnants of a large-scale brewery, capable of producing up to 300 gallons of beer a day. It is believed that early leaders in Naganda, Hierakonpolis, and similar communities cemented their roles by claiming control over the environment as rainmakers or commanders of the floods. Over time, some of these leaders created divine kingships, asserting their right to even more power and access to resources, power that they legitimized by claiming

Map 2.6 | The Path of the Nile
The White Nile originates near Lake Victoria, in the Great Lakes region of East Africa. The Blue Nile flows from the Ethiopian Highlands. Both rivers merge at Khartoum, in present day Sudan, and flow northward to empty into the Mediterranean Sea.

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special relationships with, or even descent from, gods. Once Egypt was unified, pharaohs ruled as divine kings, as the personification of the gods. They promised order in the universe. When things went well, the pharaohs were credited with agricultural productivity and the success of the state. There was no separation between religion and the state in ancient Egypt.

The **Palette of Narmer** (see Figure 2.6 and Figure 2.7), which is used to date the unification of Egypt, shows signs that King Narmer legitimized his rule, in part, by claiming a special relationship with the gods. King Narmer, who is referred to in some text as Menes, is commonly recognized as the first unifier of Upper (to the south) and Lower (to the north) Egypt in approximately 3100 BCE (see Map 2.7). Unification brought together Egypt from the first cataract at Aswan to the Nile Delta. The Palette of Narmer, which was found in Hierakonpolis, shows King Narmer’s conquest of both regions. The right side in Figure 2.6 shows him slaying an enemy of Upper Egypt. The largest figure, Narmer is wearing the crown of Upper Egypt and beheading a rival king, while standing atop conquered enemies. The left side also shows him as a conqueror, wearing the crown of Lower Egypt and directing flag bearers to mark his victory. Religious imagery appears in the inclusion of the goddess Hathor at the top of the palette as well as the falcon, a reference to Horus, the patron god of Hierakonpolis, who later in dynastic Egypt became the god of sun and kingship.

Both sides of the Palette of Narmer also have some of the earliest known hieroglyphs. **Hieroglyphics** emerged as written text, combining pictograms (a pictorial symbol for a word or phrase) and phonograms (a symbol representing a sound), during the period of unification. Tax assessment and collection likely necessitated the initial development of Hieroglyphics. Ancient Egyptians eventually used three different scripts: Hieroglyphic, Hieratic, and Demotic. Hieroglyphics remained the script of choice for ritual texts. Students of Egyptian history are most familiar with hieroglyphics as
they were usually what artists used to record the history of Egypt’s elite. For example, skilled artisans used hieroglyphs to chronicle glorified accounts of their patrons’ lives on the sides of their tombs. The Egyptians developed Hieratic and Demotic, the two other scripts, slightly later and used them for administrative, commercial, and many other purposes. The Egyptian administration tended to use ink and papyrus to maintain its official records. On the other hand, literate people used ostraca, pieces of broken pottery and chips of limestone, for less formal notes and communications. Over the past decades, archaeologists have uncovered a treasure trove of ostraca that start to tell us about the lives of the literate elite and skilled craftsmen. Just like Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt had one of the oldest written scripts found anywhere in the world.

In addition to one of the earliest writing systems and Egyptian paper (papyrus), archaeologists have credited ancient Egyptians with a number of other innovations. For construction purposes, ancient Egyptians invented the ramp and lever. They also developed a 12-month calendar with 365 days, glassmaking skills, arithmetic (including one of the earliest decimal systems) and geometry, and medical procedures to heal broken bones and relieve fevers. Finally, Egyptians used stone-carving techniques and other crafting skills and tools that were shared throughout the Mediterranean.

**2.14 DYNASTIC EGYPT**

Scholars break the 1500 years following unification, a time known as dynastic Egypt, into three main periods: the Old Kingdom (c. 2660–2160 BCE), the Middle Kingdom (c. 2040 – 1640 BCE), and the New Kingdom (c. 1530–1070 BCE). There is some disagreement about the exact dates of the periods, but, in general, these spans denote more centralized control over a unified Egypt. During dynastic Egypt, pharaohs ruled a united Upper and Lower Egypt. In between these periods of centralized control were intermediate periods, during which the Egyptian pharaohs had less authority. The intermediate periods were characterized by political upheaval and military violence, the latter often at least partially resulting from foreign invasions.

Striking continuities existed in Egypt throughout the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom. Egypt had stable population numbers, consistent social stratification, pharaohs—who exercised significant power—and a unifying religious ideology, which linked the pharaohs to the gods. As Egypt transitioned from the period of unification under King Narmer to the Old Kingdom, the pharaohs and the elite became increasingly wealthy and powerful. They further developed earlier systems of tax collection, expanded the religious doctrine, and built a huge state bureaucracy.

Social distinctions and hierarchies remained fairly consistent through all of dynastic Egypt. Most people were rural peasant farmers. They lived in small mud huts just above the flood plain and turned over surplus agricultural produce to the state as taxes. When they weren’t farming, they were expected to perform rotating service for the state, by, for example, working on a pharaoh’s tomb, reinforcing dykes, and helping in the construction of temples. The labor of the majority of the population supported the more elite and skilled classes, from the pharaoh down through the governing bureaucrats, priests, nobles, soldiers, and skilled craftspeople, especially those who
worked on pyramids and tombs. (Visit the following link for a diagram of the Egyptian social hierarchy: http://dgh.wikispaces.com/file/view/wh06fs_co4000006a.jpg/76595189/385x235/wh06fs_co4000006a.jpg.)

Another continuity in dynastic Egypt was the relative equality of women to men. At least compared to women in other ancient societies, women in ancient Egypt had considerable legal rights and freedoms. Men and women did generally have different roles; Egyptian society charged men with providing for the family and women with managing the home and children. Society's ascribed gender roles meant that women were usually defined primarily by their husbands and children, while men were defined by their occupations. This difference could leave women more economically vulnerable than men. For example, in the village of craftspeople who worked on the pharaoh’s tomb at Deir el Medina, houses were allocated to the men who were actively employed. This system of assigning housing meant that women whose husbands had died would be kicked out of their homes as replacement workers were brought in. Despite some vulnerability, Egyptian law was pretty equal between the sexes when it came to many other issues. Egyptian women could own property, and tax records show that they did. Egyptian women could also take cases to court, enter into legally binding agreements, and serve actively as priestesses. There were also female pharaohs, most famously Hatshepsut.
who ruled for twenty years in the fifteenth century BCE. One last, perhaps surprising, legal entitlement of ancient Egyptian women was their right to one-third of the property that a couple accumulated over the course of their marriage. Married women had some financial independence, which gave them options to dispose of their own property or divorce. Therefore, while women did face constraints in terms of their expected roles and had their status tied to the men in their families, they nevertheless enjoyed economic freedoms and legal rights not commonly seen in the ancient world.

While scholars working over the past several decades have used artwork, archeology, and the surviving legal documents to draw conclusions about women’s roles in ancient Egypt, there is much ongoing debate about the prevalence of slavery within this society. Part of the disagreement stems from how various scholars define slavery. There is also great uncertainty about the number of slaves within the Egyptian population. The emerging consensus suggests that Egyptians increasingly used slaves from the Middle Kingdom onward. The majority of the slaves in these later dynasties were either prisoners of war or slaves brought from Asia. Slaves performed many tasks. For example, they labored in agricultural fields, served in the army, worked in construction, helped their merchant owners in shops, and were domestic servants for the Egyptian elite. Slaves were branded and, if possible, would be captured and returned to their masters if they tried to escape. Some masters undoubtedly abused their slaves, though the image of thousands of slaves sacrificed to be buried with pharaohs incorrectly depicts dynastic Egypt. Manumission (freeing a slave) was seemingly not very common, but if they were freed, former slaves were not stigmatized; instead, they were considered part of the general free population. These new scholarly conclusions about the relatively small numbers of slaves in Egypt, especially during the Old Kingdom, have impacted our understanding of how pyramids, tombs, and temples were constructed during dynastic Egypt.

The Old Kingdom saw pharaohs harness their influence to build pyramids to emphasize their relationship to the divine and facilitate their ascent to the gods after their earthly deaths. Pyramids, with their distinctive shape, which you can see in Figure 2.9, contained tombs for the pharaohs and their wives. They were marvels of engineering, built on a massive scale to honor the pharaohs and usher them into the afterlife. Pharaohs were mumified to preserve their bodies and
were buried with everything considered necessary for the afterlife, including furniture, jewelry, makeup, pottery, food, wine, clothing, and sometimes even pets. The most recognizable pyramids from the Old Kingdom are the three pyramids at the Giza complex, which were built for a father (Egyptian pharaoh Khufu), and his son and grandson, who all ruled during the fourth dynasty.

The Great Pyramid of Giza, built for Pharaoh Khufu, is the largest of the three pyramids. Still largely intact today, it was the largest building in the world until the twentieth century. Over 500 feet high, it covered an area of 200 square yards, and was built with over 600 tons of limestone. Recent studies on the construction of the pyramids have put much more emphasis on the roles of skilled craftsmen—who might work at multiple pyramid sites over the course of their lifetimes—and rotating groups of unskilled workers than on slaves. These studies suggest that skilled craftsmen and local labor forces of Egyptians were the primary builders of the pyramids, including the Great Pyramid of Giza. The Great Pyramid of Giza took an estimated 20 years to construct and employed skilled stonemasons, architects, artists, and craftsmen, in addition to the thousands of unskilled laborers who did the heavy moving and lifting. The construction of the Great Pyramid of Giza was an enormous, expensive feat. The pyramid stands as testimony to the
increased social differentiation, the great power and wealth of the Egyptian pharaohs, and the
significance of beliefs in the afterlife during the Old Kingdom.

In addition to the construction of pyramids, the Old Kingdom saw increased trade and
remained a relatively peaceful period. The pharaoh’s government controlled trade, with Egypt
exporting grain and gold (the latter from Nubia to the south) and importing timber, spices, ivory,
and other luxury goods. During the Old Kingdom, Egypt did not have a standing army and faced
few foreign military threats. Lasting almost 400 years, the Old Kingdom saw the extension of the
pharaoh’s power, especially through the government’s ability to harness labor and control trade.

However, the power of the pharaohs began to wane in the fifth dynasty of the Old Kingdom.
Continuing environmental change that led to droughts and famine, coupled with the huge expense
of building pyramids likely impoverished pharaohs in the last centuries of the Old Kingdom.
Additionally, the governors known as nomes, who administered Egypt’s 42 provinces from the fifth
dynasty onward, became more independent and took over functions that had been overseen by the
state. As an added blow, the pharaohs lost control of trade. While dynastic leaders still referred to
themselves as pharaohs, they lacked central authority over a unified Egypt by 2180 BCE.

Following the decentralized First Intermediate Period of roughly 150 years, Pharaoh
Mentohotep II reunified Egypt to found the Middle Kingdom. The Middle Kingdom saw the
reorganization of the state’s bureaucratic apparatus to control the nomes. To further strengthen
their authority, the pharaohs also moved their capital from the Old Kingdom capital of Thebes
south to Lisht, halfway between Upper and Lower Egypt. With military expeditions, they extended
the boundaries of the state north to Lebanon and south to the second cataract of the Nile into a
region known as Nubia. With this extension of territory, Egypt had access to more trade goods, and
the organization of trade shifted so that professional merchants took a leading role in developing
new trade routes. These professional merchants paid taxes to the state, supporting further
consolidation of power by the pharaohs and also infrastructural improvements like irrigation.
During the Middle Kingdom, the pharaohs focused less on the building of massive pyramids and
more on administrative reorganization, military expeditions, and the state’s infrastructural repair.

Disputes over succession and ineffectual rulers led into the Second Intermediate Period. Most
notably, Egypt was invaded from both the north and the south during this period. The Hyksos
invaded from the north in 1670 BCE. They brought bronze and horse-drawn chariots, which
allowed them to conquer parts of Lower Egypt and establish their own kingdom, one lasting about
100 years in the Nile Delta region. From the south, the Kingdom of Kush, based in Nubia, invaded
and temporarily established control over Upper Egypt to Aswan. Thus, foreign rulers dominated
much of Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period.

The New Kingdom of reunified Egypt that began in 1530 BCE saw an era of Egyptian
imperialism, changes in the burial practices of pharaohs, and the emergence of a brief period
of state-sponsored monotheism under the Pharaoh Akhenaten. In 1530 BCE, the pharaoh who
became known as Ahmose the Liberator (Ahmose I) defeated the Hyksos and continued sweeping
up along the Eastern Mediterranean. By 1500 BCE, the Egyptian army had also pushed into Nubia,
taking Kush southward to the fourth cataract of the Nile River (see Map 2.8). As pharaohs following
Ahmose I continued Egypt’s expansion, the Imperial Egyptian army ran successful campaigns in
Palestine and Syria, along the Eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, by expanding into Kush, Egypt controlled trade routes into Sub-Saharan Africa. Adopting the Hyksos’ chariot military and metal technologies contributed to the Egyptian ability to strengthen its military. Egypt maintained a large standing army and built an expansive empire during the New Kingdom.

Egypt saw many other developments during the New Kingdom, especially when it came to burial practices and religion. During the New Kingdom, pharaohs and Egyptian elites used the Valley of Kings, located across the Nile River from Thebes, as their preferred burial site. They desired tombs that were hidden away and safe from tomb robbers. Therefore, instead of pyramids, they favored huge stone tombs built into the mountains of the Valley of the Kings. Nearly all of the tombs in the Valley of Kings were raided, so the fears of the pharaohs were well founded. Tomb raiding was even common during dynastic Egypt. King Tutankhamen’s tomb has become one familiar exception. His tomb fared unusually well over the millennia, and King Tutankhamen’s image is well known to us because his tomb was found mostly intact in 1922.

Throughout dynastic Egypt, much continuity existed in religious beliefs, causing scholars to characterize Egyptian society as conservative, meaning that Egyptians shied away from change. In general, Egyptian religious beliefs emphasized unity and harmony. Throughout the dynastic period, Egyptians thought that the soul contained distinct parts. They believed that one part, the ka, was a person’s lifeforce and that it separated from the body after death. The Egyptians carried out their elaborate preservation of mummies and made small tomb statues to house their ka after death. The ba, another part of the soul, was the unique character of the individual, which could move between the worlds of the living and the dead. They believed that after death, if rituals were carried out correctly, their ka and ba would reunite to reanimate their akh, or spirit. If they observed the proper rituals and successfully passed through Final Judgment (where they recited the 42 “Negative Confessions” and the god Osiris weighed their hearts against a feather), Egyptians believed that their resurrected spirit, their akh, would enter the afterlife. In contrast to Mesopotamian society,
Egyptians conceptualized the afterlife as pleasant. In the afterlife, they expected to find a place with blue skies, agreeable weather, and familiar objects and people. They also expected to complete many of the everyday tasks, such as farming, and enjoy many of the same recognizable pastimes. Throughout the centuries, the Egyptians conceptualized the afterlife as a comfortable mirror image of life.

One change that occurred over time was the “democratization of the afterlife.” As time progressed through the Middle Kingdom and into the New Kingdom, more and more people aspired to an afterlife. No longer was an afterlife seen as possible for only the pharaoh and the elite of society. Instead, just about all sectors of society expected access, as evident in the increased use of funeral texts, like the *Book of the Dead*. People of varying means would slip papyrus with spells or prayers from the *Book of the Dead* (or a similar text) into coffins and burial chambers. They intended these spells to help their deceased loved ones make it safely through the underworld into the pleasant afterlife. Conceptualizations of the afterlife consistently emphasized its familiarity and beauty, while more people looked forward to this continued existence after their earthly deaths.

As they developed religious doctrine and came into contact with new deities, Egyptians integrated new gods and goddesses into their religious beliefs. Like ancient Mesopotamians, Egyptians were polytheistic. Some of the roles and back-stories of the deities did change over time; nevertheless, over the millennia they remained quite consistent. For example, Re, Osiris, Horus, and Isis, just to name a few deities in the Egyptian pantheon, stayed significant throughout dynastic Egypt. Re was the
sun god, Osiris was the god of the afterworld, who also controlled nature’s cycles (like the all important flooding of the Nile), Horus became a god of war and protection, and Isis was a goddess associated with healing and motherhood. During the Middle Kingdom, Amun, initially a patron saint of the city of Thebes and later recognized as the father of the pharaoh, was combined with Re, the sun god, to become Amun-Re the supreme god of the Egyptian pantheon. Amun-Re retained this place at the top of the Egyptian pantheon through most of the New Kingdom. One major exception occurred during the reign of Pharaoh Akhenaten.

Pharaoh Akhenaten started what is known as the Amarna Period. The Amarna Period, which lasted from approximately 1350 to 1325 BCE, stands out for its state-sponsored monotheism. Akhenaten introduced radical changes to Egyptian society, moving the capital to Tell el Amarna, a new settlement in the middle of the desert that was devoted to the worship of Aten and the recognition of the pharaoh’s superiority over everyone else. Aten, who had been one of many deities worshipped during the Middle Kingdom, was elevated to the creator god associated with sunlight, the foundation of all life. The “Great Hymn to Aten” explains the god Aten’s association with the sun as, like the sun, his “rays embraced the lands” of Egypt.8 Akhenaten had the Great Temple of Aten built in the middle of the new capital, and, unlike previous temples, this one had no roof and was open to sunlight. Akhenaten further modified Egyptian religious doctrine to identify himself as the son of Aten. According to the new religious ideology, Akhenaten alone was able to ensure access to the afterlife and communicate with Aten, the sole god. To reinforce Aten’s singularity, Akhenaten withdrew financial support from temples dedicated to other deities and defaced the temples dedicated to Amun, who had previously been the most dominant Egyptian deity. The prominence of Aten and Akhenaten’s exclusive access to him define the Amarna Period.

Why did Akhenaten introduce these radical changes? At least in part, Akhenaten wanted to break with the priests in Thebes who controlled the temples dedicated to Amun because he believed that these priests had become too powerful. Additionally, by taking on the role of the son of Aten and regulating entry into the afterlife, Akhenaten certainly attempted to reformulate beliefs to emphasize his own importance.

Akhenaten’s radical changes were likely troubling for most of the Egyptian population. They had previously found comfort in their access to deities and their regular religious rituals. The worship of Aten as the only Egyptian god did not last more than a couple of decades, floundering after the death of Akhenaten. Pharaohs who ruled from 1323 BCE onward tried not only to erase the religious legacies of the Amarna Period, but also to destroy the capital at Tell el Amarna and remove Akhenaten from the historical record. Archaeologists have not found Akhenaten’s tomb or burial place. Scholars continue a long-standing debate about how this brief period of Egyptian monotheism relates (if at all) to the monotheism of the Israelites. Despite such uncertainties, study of the Amarna period does indicate that Egyptians in the fourteenth century BCE saw the fleeting appearance of religious ideology that identified Aten as the singular god.

Some of the strongest rulers of the New Kingdom, including Ramses I and Ramses II, came to power after the Amarna Period. These pharaohs expanded Egypt’s centralized administration and its

control over foreign territories. However, by the twelfth century BCE, weaker rulers, foreign invasions, and the loss of territory in Nubia and Palestine indicated the imminent collapse of the New Kingdom. In the Late Period that followed (c. 1040 to 332 BCE), the Kingdom of Kush, based in Nubia, invaded and briefly ruled Egypt until the Assyrians conquered Thebes, establishing their own rule over Lower Egypt. Egyptian internal revolts and the conquest by Nubia and the Assyrian Empire left Egypt susceptible to invasion by the Persians and then eventually the 332 BCE invasion of Alexander the Great.

The ancient Egyptians made numerous contributions to World History. We remember them for mummification, their pharaohs, and the pyramids. Certainly, in this era, Egypt stands out for its ability to produce agricultural surpluses that supported the elites, priests, and skilled craftspeople. While we tend to focus on the bureaucratic, religious, and artistic contributions of these classes, all Egyptians played crucial roles in creating and maintaining this sophisticated civilization. Additionally, the innovations of Egyptians, such as their stone-carving techniques, hieroglyphics, the use of papyrus, their knowledge of the length of a solar year, and their construction methods, influenced the ancient world and still inspire awe. Overall, the ancient Egyptians created a vibrant civilization, while they also found comfort in the familiar and traditional.

2.15 NUBIA: THE KINGDOMS OF KERMA AND KUSH

The region south of Aswan, at the first cataract of the Nile River, is commonly called Nubia. Nubia is notable for its long-term, dynamic relationship with ancient Egypt. Just as importantly, Nubia was also the site of an early civilization. The kingdoms of Kerma (c. 2400 BCE to 1500 BCE) and Kush (c. 1000 BCE to 300 CE) emerged along the Nile River. These kingdoms prospered especially due to their productive agriculture and the region’s copious natural resources. At certain points, both Kerma and Kush were strong enough to successfully invade Egypt. These
Kingdoms in Nubia also developed their own religious and cultural traditions, including a written script, Meroitic. While the people of this region, known collectively as Nubians, borrowed heavily from the Egyptians, Nubians also had distinctive practices that set their civilization apart from that of their northern neighbors.

Scholars generally link the origins of ancient Kerma (in present-day Sudan) back to the desiccation of the Sahara Desert and the rise of dynastic Egypt. Similarly to ancient Egypt, the drying out of the region encouraged people to move closer to the Nile River in the years between 5,000 and 4,000 BCE. Rock paintings, showing cattle in areas that have been desert for thousands of years, attest to the environmental changes in Nubia and also the development of a cattle culture that dates back to at least the fourth millennium BCE. Just as in Egypt, the desiccation of the Sahara desert drew together people from all directions. As people settled closer to the Nile River in Nubia, they brought their cattle, their agricultural traditions, and their languages, building settlements with higher population densities.

Additionally, Egyptian elites desired ivory, animal skins, incense, and other luxury goods prompting trade between Nubia and Egypt that pre-dated the unification of Egypt. With increased demand for luxury goods as social stratification grew, the Egyptians even ran military forays into Nubia. After unification, the Egyptians continued to invade Nubia to trade and raid for slaves and cattle. Likely, Nubian desires to control trade and protect themselves from Egyptian raids further compelled state formation in Nubia. Without Nubian records from the third millennium BCE, it is difficult to identify additional reasons why the state arose. However, archeological evidence does clearly indicate that by about 2400 BCE, Nubians had formed the Kingdom of Kerma between the third and fourth cataracts of the Nile River.

2.15.1 Kerma (c. 2400 BCE to c. 1500 BCE)

Kerma endured in Upper Nubia for almost a thousand years. The kingdom is named after its capital city at Kerma at the third cataract, but excavations at other sites (where similar pottery styles and burial sites have been found) suggest that at its height Kerma’s reach may
have extended more than 200 miles southward past the fifth cataract of the Nile River. So far, archaeological evidence indicates that, with the exception of the capital and perhaps one or two other cities, most of the people in Kerma lived in smaller villages. They grew crops like barley, and kept goats, sheep, and cattle, sending tribute to their capital. The people of Kerma also developed industries, especially in mining, metalworking, and pottery. Kerma was linked inter-regionally through trade to its tributary villages, to dynastic Egypt, and to sub-Saharan Africa. Egyptian pharaohs and elites wanted the gold, copper, slaves, ivory, exotic animals, and more that they obtained from Kerma.

The people of Kerma also made use of their location on the Nile and proximity to Egypt as they imported textiles, jewelry, and other manufactured goods. Presumably, one reason that Nubian leaders built their ancient capital at Kerma was to oversee river trade. At the impassable cataract, boat owners unloaded their cargo and took it overland past the shallows and rocks before again proceeding on the water. This location at the cataract gave the leaders at Kerma the chance to tax, divert, and register goods being transported between Kerma and Egypt.

Agricultural surpluses and other tributary payments supported the rulers and elites of the capital. Archaeologists have shown that the capital had defenses, including ditches, ramparts, and massive walls with towers. There were also palaces within the city and on its outskirts. However, the most famous structure is the Western Deffufa (Figure 2.13) made of mud-bricks, which likely served as a temple. Two other deffufa, large mud-brick structures with spaces for rituals on top, have been at least partially excavated within the vicinity of Kerma. Another notable archaeological find is the Eastern Cemetery, which lies a couple of miles to the east of the city. It served as the burial site for Kerma’s rulers for almost a thousand years and contains over 30,000 tombs. Some of the tombs were covered with large mounds. Demonstrating the cattle culture of the region, dozens of cattle skulls encircle a number of the tombs. Tombs also contain the remains of human sacrifices and other symbols of wealth and status, like jewelry made of gold and silver. The largest tomb found to date is 300 feet in diameter and covered with black granite, white quartz pebbles, and a marble top. Its interior burial suite contains semi-precious stones, bronze weapons, and lavish furniture. In the corridor leading into the underground burial site,
archaeologists unearthed the remains of horses, dogs, and about 400 human sacrificial victims. The cattle skulls, mounds, and the remains of human sacrifices have led scholars to suggest that the Kerma elite had their own styles for monumental structures like the Western Deffufa and their tombs, even though they sometimes employed Egyptian artisans to complete the construction of these grand projects.

It appears that Kerma was strongest when neighboring Egypt was weak. As a case in point, during Egypt’s Second Intermediate Period, Kerma, at the height of its power, successfully invaded parts of Upper Egypt and established diplomatic relations with the occupying Hyksos. Once reunified during the New Kingdom, Egypt retaliated by conquering Kerma to the fourth cataract. Then, Egypt occupied Kerma for the next 500 years. During the Egyptian occupation, the elite classes of Kerma adopted many elements of Egyptian culture, including Egyptian gods, styles of dress, Hieroglyphics, and the Egyptian language. However, scholars believe that the Nubian masses retained their own distinctive identity with their local language and customs.

2.15.2 The Kingdom of Kush

As Egypt entered its Third Intermediate Period, Nubians gradually established their independence, eventually creating a new state, the Kingdom of Kush in the eighth century BCE. The initial capital of the Kingdom of Kush was Napata (c. 750 BCE to 593 BCE). From Napata, the Nubians took control of Upper Egypt, establishing the “Ethiopian Dynasty,” which ruled for 60 years from Thebes. Assyrian invasions destabilized the Nubian rulers in Thebes, causing the last pharaoh of the Ethiopian Dynasty to flee to Napata. Then, once strengthened, the Egyptians pushed back. The Egyptian army sacked Napata in 593 BCE and, in response, the Nubian rulers moved their capital farther south to Meroe. (See Map 2.9.) At this southern location, they further developed their civilization, which lasted until the fourth century CE.

With the new capital at Meroe, a location with well-watered farmland and some distance between it and Egypt, the Kingdom of Kush flourished. Meroe got more rainfall than Napata and was not as dependent on the Nile floods. Nubians were able to extend the areas under cultivation and grow a wider variety of crops, like cotton, sorghum, and millet. They were also able to easily graze their livestock and, as a result, during this period cattle became even more important as a symbol of their culture and wealth.

After moving the capital to Meroe, the culture of Kush showed more independence from Egypt as well. Particularly as Egypt’s power declined, the people of Kush put more emphasis on their own deities and pushed Egyptian gods to the background. For example, temples devoted to a Nubian war god, Apedamak, “the Lion of the South,” received more support and even used live lions for rituals. Gold had long been mined in the region and remained important while the people of Kush continued to develop additional industries. The area was rich in iron ore and the hardwoods used to make charcoal, which encouraged the growth of a booming iron industry. They made iron weapons and tools that they used for defense and to increase their crop yields. They were able to trade their agricultural surpluses, iron, cattle, and exotic things like elephants from sub-Saharan Africa, with Egypt, Greece, Rome, and India, bringing great wealth and
prestige to Meroe. Also, the rulers of Meroe commissioned pyramids but had them built in a local style. As evident in Figure 2.14, their pyramids were smaller and had a unique shape. Kush burial practices were different than those used in dynastic Egypt, as corpses were not always mummified and were buried in the fetal position. Finally, a new locally-created written script, Meroitic, replaced the use of Egyptian Hieroglyphics by 300 BCE. Modern scholars have not yet translated Meroitic, and students of their culture will surely learn even more about the Kingdom of Kush once scholars have done so. As for now, we know that very productive agriculture, local rituals and burial practices, the growth of industries, social stratification facilitated by Meroe’s wealth and extensive trade networks, and the written script Meroitic, were some of the distinctive elements of the civilization at Kush.

While the Greeks and Romans occasionally sent raiding parties into Nubia, for a while, Meroe’s southern location helped isolate it from conquest. Legends also emphasize the strength of Meroe’s army and the physical prowess of its soldiers. Environmental changes, internal rivalries, and the rise of Axum (a new state to the East) likely all contributed to the fairly abrupt collapse of Meroe in the fourth century CE.

Egyptian sources were generally very derogatory in their portrayal of Nubians and even a few early twentieth century archaeologists carelessly (and incorrectly) identified these Nubian kingdoms as slave colonies of the Egyptians. However, the kingdoms of Kerma and Kush were known in the ancient world for their wealth and industries. The wealth garnered through productive agriculture and trade supported a ruling class, great artists, and monumental architecture. Egyptian culture was influential, but Nubians adapted Egyptian practices to meet their own needs and sensibilities. Often entangled with Egypt and sometimes defending themselves from other invaders as well, these two kingdoms persisted for hundreds of years, creating an independent civilization along the southern stretches of the Nile River.

### 2.16 SUMMARY

Between about 4000 and 3000 BCE, civilizations emerged in the fertile river valleys of Mesopotamia and Northeast Africa. These civilizations had common elements, including
food surpluses, higher population densities, social stratification, systems of taxation, labor specialization, regular trade, and written scripts.

In areas adjacent to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, Mesopotamians built city-states by 3500 BCE. While Sumerian traditions influenced developments throughout the region, other cities emerged and refined their own institutions and beliefs. Archaeological finds and records in the cuneiform script show the significance of the temple complex and religious leaders throughout Mesopotamia. Kingship, with hereditary rulers who claimed control over multiple city-states and special relationships with the gods, was just one significant political innovation in the region. History credits Sargon of Akkad with founding the first empire in Mesopotamia. Thereafter, a succession of empires rose and fell, demonstrating the dynamic nature of Mesopotamian societies.

According to Hebrew Tradition, Abraham led his followers from the city of Ur in Mesopotamia and they eventually settled in the Levant. Several generations later, according to Hebrew Tradition, the Israelites went to Egypt where they suffered persecution and enslavement, until Moses liberated them. Upon their return to Canaan, the Israelites built kingdoms just prior to 1000 BCE. Their kingdoms formed complex administrations and were unified by powerful kings, such as the well-known King Solomon. Historians also recognize countless other contributions made by the Israelites, especially as regards monotheistic religious traditions and western understandings of justice.

The unification of Egypt in approximately 3100 BCE evidenced the emergence of one civilization in Northeast Africa. In Nubia to the south of Egypt, Africans built another civilization with the kingdoms of Kerma and Kush. The people in each of these civilizations made good use of the agriculturally productive floodplains of the Nile River. Egypt and the kingdoms in Nubia influenced one another; they traded and intermittently claimed control over each other’s territory. While we may be more familiar with the pharaohs, pyramids, and religious beliefs of ancient Egypt, Nubians made their own contributions, like the Merotic script and unique architectural styles, to World History.

2.17 WORKS CONSULTED AND FURTHER READING

Civilizations

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Mesopotamia

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The Israelites and Ancient Israel


Ancient Egypt


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Ancient Nubia


2.18 LINKS TO PRIMARY SOURCES

“The Sumerian King List.”
http://www.csun.edu/~hcfl004/sumking.html


https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/hamcode.asp#text

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http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/hymn-nile.asp

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https://d628e93a87508d390763-57cef68fda4fc1e410ceee0edd485c4.ssl.cf5.rackcdn.com/42_confessions.pdf

“The Great Hymn to Aten.” 
3.1 CHRONOLOGY

2600 – 1700 BCE  Harappan/Indus Valley Civilization
1700 – 600 BCE  Vedic Age
1700 – 1000 BCE  Early Vedic Age
1000 – 600 BCE  Later Vedic Age
321 – 184 BCE  Mauryan Empire
c. 2nd century BCE to 3rd century CE  Kushan Kingdom
c. 320 – 550 CE  Gupta Empire
600 – 1300 CE  Early Medieval India
1206 – 1526 CE  Delhi Sultanate

3.2 INTRODUCTION: A POLITICAL OVERVIEW

Our knowledge of the ancient world has been radically altered by impressive archaeological discoveries over the last two centuries. Prior to the twentieth century, for instance, historians believed that India’s history began in the second millennium BCE, when a people known as Indo-Aryans migrated into the Indian subcontinent and created a new civilization. Yet, even during the nineteenth century British explorers and officials were curious about brick mounds dotting the landscape of northwest India, where Pakistan is today. A large one was located in a village named Harappa (see Figure 3.1). A British army engineer, Sir Alexander Cunningham, sensed its importance because he also found other artifacts among the bricks, such as a seal with an inscription. He was, therefore, quite dismayed that railway contractors were pilfering these bricks for ballast. When he became the director of Great Britain’s Archaeological Survey in 1872, he ordered protection for these ruins. But the excavation of Harappa did not begin until 1920, and neither the Archaeological Survey nor Indian archaeologists understood their significance until this time. Harap-
It turned out, was an ancient city dating back to the third millennium BCE, and only one part of a much larger civilization sprawling over northwest India. With the discovery of this lost civilization, the timeline for India’s history was pushed back over one thousand years.

The Indus Valley civilization (2600 – 1700 BCE) now stands at the beginning of India’s long history. Much like the states of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, the foundations for that history were established by Paleolithic foragers who migrated to and populated the region, and then Neolithic agriculturalists who settled into villages. During the third millennium BCE, building on these foundations, urban centers emerged along the Indus River, along with other elements that contribute to making a civilization.

This civilization, however, faded away by 1700 BCE, and was followed by a new stage in India’s history. While it declined, India saw waves of migration from the mountainous northwest, by a people who referred to themselves as Aryans. The Aryans brought a distinctive language and way of life to the northern half of India and, after first migrating into the Punjab and Indus Valley, pushed east along the Ganges River and settled down into a life of farming and pastoralism. As they interacted with indigenous peoples, a new period in India’s history took shape. That period is known as the Vedic Age (1700 – 600 BCE).

During the long course of the Vedic Age, states formed in northern India. The surplus from farming and pastoralism allowed people to engage in a multitude of other occupations and made for a lively trade. Villages thus grew in number and some became towns. Consequently, there was a need for greater leadership, something that was provided by chieftains of the many Aryan clans. Over time, higher levels of political organization developed, and these chieftains became kings or the leaders of clan assemblies. By the end of the Vedic Age, northern India was divided up by sixteen major kingdoms and oligarchies.

The ensuing three centuries (c. 600 – 321 BCE) were a time of transition. These states fought with each other over territory. The most successful state was the one that could most effectively administer its land, mobilize its resources and, by so doing, field the largest armies. That state
was the kingdom of Magadha which, by the fourth century BCE, had gained control of much of northern India along the Ganges River.

In 321 BCE, the last king of Magadha was overthrown by one of his subjects, Chandragupta Maurya, and a new period in India’s history began. Through war and diplomacy, he and his two successors established control over most of India, forging the first major empire in the history of South Asia: the Mauryan Empire (321 – 184 BCE). Chandragupta’s grandson, King Ashoka, ended the military conquests and sought to rule his land through Buddhist principles of non-violence and tolerance. But after his time, the empire rapidly declined, and India entered a new stage in its history.

After the Mauryan Empire fell, no one major power held control over a substantial part of India for five hundred years. Rather, from c. 200 BCE to 300 CE, India saw a fairly rapid turnover of numerous, regional kingdoms. Some of these were located in northern India, along the Ganges River, but others grew up in the south—the Indian Peninsula—for the first time. Also, some kingdoms emerged through foreign conquest. Outsiders in Central Asia and the Middle East saw India as a place of much wealth, and sought to plunder or rule it. Thus, throughout its history, India was repeatedly invaded by conquerors coming through mountain passes in the northwest. Many of these, like King Kanishka of the Kushan Empire (c. 100 CE), established notable kingdoms that extended from India into these neighboring regions from which they came.

Even after 300 CE and up to the fifteenth century, India was never again unified for any length of time by one large empire. For that reason, historians highlight those kingdoms that became substantial regional powers and contributed in other important ways to India’s civilization. The period 300 – 600 CE, for instance, is often referred to as the Gupta Period and Classical Age. The Guptas (c. 320 – 550) were rulers who forged an impressive empire in northern India. As their empire flourished, Indian intellectuals were also setting standards for excellence in the fields of art, architecture, literature, and science, in part because of Gupta patronage. But important kingdoms also developed in south India.

The last period covered in this chapter is early medieval India (c. 600 – 1300 CE). After the Gupta Empire, and during the following seven centuries, the pattern of fragmentation intensified, as numerous regional kingdoms large and small frequently turned over. Confronting such an unstable and fluid political scene, medieval kings granted land to loyal subordinate rulers and high officers of their courts. The resulting political and economic pattern is referred to as Indian feudalism. Also, kings put their greatness on display by waging war and building magnificent Hindu temples in their capital cities. And, during the medieval period, a new political and religious force entered the Indian scene, when Muslim Arab and Turkic traders and conquerors arrived on the subcontinent.

This overview briefly summarizes major periods in India’s political history. But the history of a civilization consists of more than just rulers and states, which is why historians also pay close attention to social, cultural, and economic life every step of the way. This attention is especially important for India. Although the Asian subcontinent sees a long succession of kingdoms and empires and was usually divided up by several at any particular point in its history, peoples over time came to share some things in common. Socially, the peoples of India were largely organized by the caste system. Culturally, the peoples of India shared in the development of Hinduism and Buddhism, two major religious traditions that shaped people’s understanding of the world and their
place in it. Finally, throughout the ancient and medieval periods, India flourished as a civilization because of its dynamic economy. The peoples of India shared in that too, and that meant they were linked in networks of trade and exchange not only with other parts of South Asia but also with neighboring regions of the Afro-Eurasian world.

3.3 QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING

1. How did the geography of South Asia (India) impact its history?
2. What are the limits of our knowledge of Harappan Civilization?
3. How did kingdoms form during the Vedic Age?
4. Describe the *varna* and caste systems.
5. Explain the early historical origins and basic beliefs of Hinduism and Buddhism. How do these religious traditions change over time?
6. How was the Mauryan Empire governed?
7. How was India impacted by other regions of Afro-Eurasia, and how did it impact them?
8. Why is the Gupta period sometimes described as a classical age?
9. What are the characteristics of early medieval India?
10. Explain the history of the formation of Muslim states in India.

3.4 KEY TERMS

- *Arthashastra*
- Aryabhata
- Ashoka (Mauryan Empire)
- *Atman*
- Ayurveda
- Bay of Bengal
- *Bhagavad-Gita*
- *Brahman*
- Brahmanism
- Caste and *Varna*
- Chandragupta I (Gupta Empire)
- Chandragupta Maurya
- Chola Kingdom
- Coromandel Coast
- Deccan Plateau
- Delhi Sultanate
- Dharma (Buddhist and Hindu)
- Dharma Scriptures
- Four Noble Truths
- Ganges River
- Guilds
- Gupta Empire
India’s dynamic history, then, alternated between periods when the subcontinent was partially unified by empires and periods when it was composed of a shifting mosaic of regional states. This history was also impacted by influxes of migrants and invaders. In thinking about the reasons for these patterns, historians highlight the size of India and its diverse geography and peoples.

It is important to remember that “India” can mean different things. Today, India usually designates the nation-state of India (see Map 3.1). But modern India only formed in 1947 and includes much less territory than India did in ancient times. As a term, India was first invented by the ancient Greeks to refer to the Indus River and the lands and people beyond it. When used in this sense, India also includes today’s nation of Pakistan. In fact, for the purpose of studying earlier history, India can be thought of as the territory that includes at least seven countries today: India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. This territory is also referred to as South Asia or the Indian subcontinent.

The Indian subcontinent is where Indian civilization took shape. But that civilization was not created by one people, race, or ethnic group, and it doesn’t make sense to see India’s history as the history of one Indian people. Rather, the history of this region was shaped by a multitude of ethnic groups who spoke many different languages and lived and moved about on a diverse terrain suited to many different kinds of livelihood.

3.5 WHAT IS INDIA? THE GEOGRAPHY OF SOUTH ASIA

Harappan/Indus Valley Civilization
Hindu Kush
India
Indian Feudalism
Indo-Europeans
Indus River
Indo-Gangetic Plain
Kalidasa
Kanishka
Karma
Kushan Kingdom
Magadha
Mahayana Buddhism
Malabar Coast
Mahmud of Ghazna
Mehrgarh
Mohenjo-Daro
Pataliputra
Punjab
Ramayana
Samudragupta
Satavahana Kingdom
Seals (Harappan/Indus Valley Civilization)
Siddhartha Gautama/Buddha
Sindh
South Asia
Sri Lanka
Theravada Buddhism
Transmigration
Tributary Overlordship
Upanishads
Vedic Age

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Large natural boundaries define the subcontinent. Mountain ranges ring the north, and bodies of water surround the rest. To the east lies the **Bay of Bengal**, to the south the Indian Ocean, and to the west the Arabian Sea. The largest mountain range is the Himalaya, which defines India’s northern and northeastern boundary. A subrange of the Himalaya—the **Hindu Kush**—sits at its western end, while a ridge running from north to south defines the eastern end, dividing India from China and mainland Southeast Asia. To the northwest, the Suleiman Range and Kirthar Range complete what might seem like impassable barriers. Yet, these ranges are punctuated by a few narrow passes that connect India to Central Asia and West Asia.

To the south of the mountain ranges lie the **Indo-Gangetic Plain** and the two great rivers of northern India that comprise it: the Indus River and the **Ganges River**. These rivers originate in the Himalaya and are regularly fed by snow melt and monsoon rains. The Indus River, which is located in the northwest and drains into the Arabian Sea, can be divided into an upper and lower region. The region comprising the upper Indus and its many tributary rivers is called the **Punjab**, while the region surrounding the lower Indus is referred to as the **Sindh**. The Ganges River begins in the western Himalaya and flows southeast across northern India before draining into the Bay of Bengal. Because they could support large populations, the plains surrounding these river systems served as the heartland for India’s first major states and empires.

Peninsular India is also an important part of the story because over time great regional kingdoms will also emerge in the south. The peninsula is divided from northern India by the Vindhya Mountains, to the south of which lies the **Deccan Plateau**. This arid plateau is bordered by two coastal ranges—the Western Ghats and Eastern Ghats, beyond which are narrow coastal plains, the **Malabar Coast** and the **Coromandel Coast**. This nearly 4600 miles of coastline is important to India’s history because it linked fishing and trading communities to the Indian Ocean and, therefore, the rest of Afro-Eurasia. **Sri Lanka** is an island located about thirty kilometers southeast of the southernmost tip of India, and also served as an important conduit for trade and cultural contacts beyond India.
3.6 INDIA’S FIRST MAJOR CIVILIZATION: THE INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION (2600 BCE – 1700 BCE)

A century of archaeological work in India that began in 1920 not only revealed a lost civilization but also a massive one, surpassing in size other major early riverine civilizations of Afro-Eurasia, such as ancient Egypt and the Mesopotamian states. In an area spanning roughly a half million square miles, archaeologists have excavated thousands of settlements (see Map 3.2). These can be envisioned in a hierarchy based on size and sophistication. The top consists of five major cities of roughly 250 acres each. One of those is Harappa, and because it was excavated first the entire civilization was named Harappan Civilization. The bottom of the hierarchy consists of fifteen thousand smaller agricultural and craft villages of about 2.5 acres each, while between the top and bottom lie two tiers with several dozen towns ranging in size from 15 to 150 acres. Because the

Map 3.2 | Indus Valley (Harappan) Civilization | Map of important Indus Valley (Harappan) Civilization cities and towns during its most developed period.
Author: User “Avantiputra7”
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: CC BY-SA 3.0
majority of these settlements were situated near the Indus River in the northwestern region of the subcontinent, this civilization is also called the Indus Valley Civilization.

As with ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, archaeologists have been able to sketch out how this civilization evolved out of the simpler agricultural villages of the Neolithic period. On the subcontinent, farming and the domestication of animals began c. 7000 BCE, about two thousand years after they did in the Fertile Crescent. To the west of the Indus River, along the foothills of Baluchistan, the remains of numerous small villages have been found that date back to this time (see Map 3.3). One of these is Mehrgarh. Here, villagers lived in simple mud-brick structures, grew barley and wheat, and raised cattle, sheep, and goats.

Over the course of the next three thousand years, similar Neolithic communities sprang up not only in northwest India but also in many other locations on the subcontinent. But it was to the

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**Map 3.3 | Archaeological sites dating to northwest India’s Neolithic period and the Indus Valley Civilization**

Agricultural village societies first emerged to the west of the Indus and then spread to the Indus River and its many tributaries, as well as the Ghaggar-Hakra River (running parallel to and east of the Indus), which has since dried up. These provided the foundation for the emergence of towns and cities.

Author: User “Avantiputra7”

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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west of the Indus River and then throughout neighboring fertile plains and valleys of the Punjab and Sindh that we see the transition to a more complex, urban-based civilization. Excavations throughout this region show a pattern of development whereby settlements start looking more like towns than villages: ground plans become larger, include the foundations of houses and streets, and are conveniently located by the most fertile land or places for trade. Similar artifacts spread over larger areas show that the local communities building these towns were becoming linked together in trade networks. Archaeologists date this transitional period when India was on the verge of its first civilization from 5000 to 2600 BCE. The mature phase, with its full-blown cities, begins from 2600 BCE, roughly four centuries after the Sumerian city-states blossomed and Egypt was unified under one kingdom.

The ruins of **Mohenjo-Daro** and other Indus cities dating to this mature phase suggest a vibrant society thriving in competently planned and managed urban areas. Some of the principal purposes of these urban settlements included coordinating the distribution of local surplus resources, obtaining desired goods from more distant places, and turning raw materials into commodities for trade. Mohenjo-Daro, for instance, was located along the lower reaches of the Indus (see Figure 3.2). That meant it was conveniently built amidst an abundance of resources: fertile flood plains for agriculture, pasture for grazing domesticated animals, and waters for fishing and fowling. The city itself consisted of several mounds—elevated areas upon which structures and roads were built. A larger mound served as a core, fortified area where public functions likely took place. It contained a wall and large buildings, including what archaeologists call a Great Bath and Great Hall. Other mounds were the location of the residential and commercial sectors of the city. Major avenues laid out on a grid created city blocks. Within a block, multistory dwellings opening up to interior courtyards were constructed out of mudbricks or bricks baked in

![Figure 3.2 | Great Bath at Mohenjo-Daro](image-url) View of the Great Bath at Mohenjo-Daro, an Indus Valley city located along the lower reaches of the Indus River. This section was part of the largest mound at the site. The higher structure in the rear is a Buddhist stupa dating to a later period in India's history.

Author: Saqib Qayyum
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: CC BY-SA 3.0
kilns. Particular attention was paid to public sanitation. Residences not only had private wells and baths, but also toilets drained by earthenware pipes that ushered the sewage into covered drains located under the streets.

Artifacts tell of city life. Farmers and pastoralists brought their grain and stock to the city for trade or to place it in warehouses managed by the authorities. Laborers dug the wells and collected trash from rectangular bins sitting beneath rubbish chutes. Craftsmen worked copper and tin into bronze tools, fired ceramics, and manufactured jewelry and beads out of gold, copper, semi-precious stones, and ivory. Merchants travelling near and far carried raw materials and finished goods by bullock carts or boats to the dozens of towns and cities throughout the region.

Some goods also went to foreign lands. Harappan cities located along the coast of the Arabian Sea engaged in coastal shipping that brought goods as far as the Persian Gulf and the delta of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. In Mesopotamian city-states, Harappan seals and beads have been found, and Mesopotamian sources speak of a certain place called “Meluhha,” a land with ivory, gold, and lapis lazuli. That was the Indus Valley Civilization. Cities like Mohenjo-Daro were linked in networks of exchange extending in every direction.

But unlike ancient Egypt and Sumer, this civilization has not yet provided sources we can read, and this poses major problems of interpretation. True, over four thousand inscribed objects with at least four hundred different signs recurring in various frequencies have been found on clay, copper tablets, and small, square seals excavated primarily at the major cities (see Figure 3.3). But the heroic efforts of philologists to decipher...
the language have failed to yield results. Thus, some historians call this civilization proto-historic, distinguishing it from both prehistoric cultures that have no writing and historic ones with written sources that we can read.

This proto-historical state of the evidence leaves many questions concerning Harappan people’s political organization and beliefs unanswered. On the one hand, much uniformity in the archaeological record across the region suggests coordination in planning—cities and towns were similarly designed, fired bricks had the same dimensions, and weights were standardized. On the other hand, the ruins lack structures that can be clearly identified as palaces, temples, or large tombs. In other words, there is little evidence for either a central political authority ruling over an empire or for independent city-states. One intriguing artifact found in Mohenjo-Daro is a small sculpture of a bearded man made of soapstone (see Figure 3.4). The dignified appearance suggests he may have been a priest or king, or even both. Perhaps he and other priests purified themselves in the Great Bath for ritual purposes. Yet, this is purely speculation, as the sculpture is unique. He may also have been a powerful landowner or wealthy merchant who met with others of a similar status in assemblies convened in the Great Hall of the citadel. Perhaps local assemblies of just such elites governed each city.

Religious beliefs are also difficult to determine. Again, some of the principal evidence consists of
small artifacts such as figurines and the square seals. The seals were carved out of a soft stone called steatite and then fired so they would harden. They contain images of animals and humans, typically with writing above. Mostly, they were used to imprint the identity of a merchant or authorities on goods. However, some of the images may have had religious significance. For example, hundreds of “unicorn seals” display images of a mythical animal that resembles a species of cattle (see Figure 3.5). These cattle are usually placed over an object variously interpreted as a trough or altar. Perhaps these were symbols of deities or animals used for sacrificial rituals. Equally as interesting are the numerous female clay figurines. These may have been used for fertility rituals or to pay homage to a goddess (see Figure 3.6).

The decline of Harappan civilization set in from 1900 BCE and was complete two hundred years later. Stated simply, the towns and cities and their lively trade networks faded away, and the region reverted to rural conditions. Likely causes include geologic, climatic, and environmental factors. Movement by tectonic plates may have led to earthquakes, flooding, and shifts in the course of the Indus. Less rainfall and deforestation may have degraded the environment’s suitability for farming. All of these factors would have impacted the food supply. Consequently, urban areas and the civilization they supported were slowly starved out of existence.

3.7 THE LONG VEDIC AGE (1700 – 600 BCE)

By 1700 BCE, Harappan Civilization had collapsed. In northwest India, scattered village communities engaging in agriculture and pastoralism replaced the dense and more highly populated network of cities, towns, and villages of the third millennium. The rest of northern India too (including the Ganges River), as well as the entire subcontinent, were similarly dotted with Neolithic communities of farmers and herders. That is what the archaeological record demonstrates.

The next stage in India’s history is the Vedic Age (1700 – 600 BCE). This period is named after a set of religious texts composed during these centuries called the Vedas. The people who composed them are known as the Vedic peoples and Indo-Aryans. They were not originally from India, and rather came as migrants travelling to the subcontinent via mountain passes located in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Aryans first settled in the Punjab, but then they pushed east along the Ganges, eventually impressing their way of life, language, and religious beliefs upon much of northern India. The course of India’s history was completely changed during this period. By the end of the Vedic Age, numerous states had emerged and Hinduism and the varna social system were beginning to take shape.

3.7.1 The Early Aryan Settlement of Northern India (1700 – 1000 BCE)

The early history of the Vedic Age offers the historian little primary source material. For example, for the first half of the Vedic Age (1700 – 1000 BCE), we are largely limited to archaeological sites and one major text called the Rig Veda. This is the first of four Vedas. It consists of 1028 hymns addressed to the Vedic peoples’ pantheon of gods. But it wasn’t actually written down until after 500 BCE. Rather, from as early as the beginning of the second millennium BCE, these hymns were
orally composed and transmitted by Aryan poet-seers, eventually becoming the preserve of a few priestly clans who utilized them for the specific religious function of pleasing higher powers. Thus, these hymns only offer certain kinds of information. Yet, despite these limits, historians have been able to sketch out the Aryan’s way of life in these early centuries, as well as to make solid arguments about how they came to India.

The Indo-Aryans were pastoralists who migrated to India in waves beginning c. 1700 BCE (see Map 3.4). They referred to themselves as Aryans, a term meaning “noble” or “respectable.” They spoke Sanskrit, and used it to transmit their sacred hymns. At first, in search of land, they settled along the hills and plains of the upper reaches of the Indus River and its tributaries, bringing with them their pastoral and farming way of life. In their hymns, the Aryans beseech the gods to bless them with cattle, bounteous harvests, rain, friends, wealth, fame, and sons. From these, it is clear that herding was the principal occupation and cows were especially prized. But the Aryans also farmed, as apparent in hymns that speak of plough teams and the cutting and threshing of grain.

Map 3.4 | Early Vedic Culture (1700-1000 BCE) | The early Vedic Age, showing the Aryan’s migration routes and the areas where they first resided in the Punjab.

Author: User “Avantiputra7”
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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During these early centuries, led by their pastoral chiefs, some Aryans retained a semi-nomadic way of life, living in temporary dwellings and then moving about with their herds or migrating further. Others settled down in villages. In both cases, kinship was especially valued. At the simplest level, society consisted of extended families of three generations. Fathers were expected to lead the family as patriarchal heads, while sons were expected to care for the herds, bring honor through success in battle, and sacrifice for the well-being of their fathers’ souls after death. They also inherited the property and family name. This suggests that, as is so often the case for ancient societies, men were dominant and women were subordinate. Yet, women’s roles weren’t as rigidly defined as they would be in later times, and they had some choice in marriage and could remarry.

Several extended families, in turn, made up clans, and the members of a clan shared land and herds. Groups of larger clans also constituted tribes. The Vedas speak of rajas who, at this point, are best understood as clan or tribal chieftains. These men protected their people and led in times of battle, for the clans and tribes fought with each other and with the indigenous villagers living in the northwest prior to the Aryan migrations. In times of war, these chiefs would rely on priests who ensured the support of the gods by reciting hymns and sacrificing to them. At assemblies of kinsmen and other wealthy and worthy men from the clan, the rajas distributed war booty. Sudas, for example, was the chief of the Bharata clan. After settling in the Punjab, the Bharatas were attacked by neighboring clan confederacies, but drawing on his skills in chariot warfare and the support of priests, Sudas successfully fought them off.

More than anything else, the Rig Veda reveals the Aryan’s religious ideas. For them, the universe was composed of the sky, earth, and netherworld. These realms were populated by a host of divinities and demons responsible for the good and evil and order and disorder blessing and afflicting the human world. Although one Vedic hymn gives a total of thirty-three gods, many more are mentioned. That means early Vedic religion was polytheistic. These human-like powers lying behind all those natural phenomena so close to a people living out on the plains were associated with the forces of light, good, and order. By chanting hymns to them and sacrificing in the correct way, the Aryan priests might secure blessings for the people or prevent the demons and spirits on earth from causing sickness and death. They might also ensure that the souls of the dead would successfully reach the netherworld, where the spirits of righteous Fathers feasted with King Yama, the first man to die.

Approaching the gods required neither temples nor images. Rather, a fire was lit in a specially prepared sacrificial altar. This might take place in a home when the family patriarch was hoping for a son or on an open plot of land when the clan chieftain wished to secure the welfare of his people. Priests were called in to perform the ceremony. They would imbibe a hallucinogenic beverage squeezed from a plant of uncertain identity and chant hymns while oblations of butter, fruit, and meat were placed in the fire. The gods, it was believed, would descend onto grass strewn about for them and could partake of the offerings once they were transmuted by the fire.

Indra was among the most beloved of the Vedic gods. As a god of war and the storm, and as king of the gods, Indra exemplified traits men sought to embody in their lives. He is a great warrior who smites demons and enemies but who also provides generously for the weak. Agni,
another favorite, was god of fire and the household hearth. Agni summons the gods to the sacrifice and, as intermediary between gods and humans, brings the sacrificial offering to them.

### 3.7.2 The Origins of the Aryan People and the Indo-European Hypothesis

Because the Aryans came to India as migrating pastoralists from mountainous regions to the northwest of the Indian subcontinent, historians have sought to understand their origins. Sanskrit has provided important clues because it contains features similar to languages spoken at some point in Europe, Iran, and Central Asia. For example, although they are vastly different languages, Latin, Persian, and Sanskrit share similar sounds, vocabulary, and grammar.

On the basis of these shared traits, linguists have constructed a kind of family tree that shows the historical relationship between these languages (see Figure 3.7). Sanskrit belongs to a group of languages used in northern India called Indo-Aryan. These languages are closely related to languages used throughout history in neighboring Iran. Together, all of these are called the Indo-

![Figure 3.7 | Proto-Indo-European Family](https://example.com/figure3.7.png)

**Figure 3.7 | Proto-Indo-European Family** | Chart showing the relationship between some languages in the Indo-European Family. Note the location of Sanskrit.

*Author: Jack Lynch*

*Source: Rutgers*

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Iranian language group. This language group is in turn one of nine branches of related language groups comprising the **Indo-European language family**.

Linguists assume these distantly-related languages share a common ancestor. They label that ancestral language proto-Indo-European and the people who spoke it Indo-Europeans. They posit a scenario whereby, in stages and over time, groups of these peoples migrated from their homeland to neighboring areas and settled down. Since this process happened over the course of many centuries and involved much interaction with other peoples along the way, the ancestral language evolved into many different ones while retaining some of the original features.

One question, then, is the location of this homeland and the history of the peoples who spoke these languages as they changed. Many places have been proposed, but at present the most widely accepted scenario puts this homeland in the steppe lands of southern Russia, just to the north of the Black Sea and Caspian Sea (see Map 3.5).

Evidence from archaeological sites suggests that during the third millennium an Indo-European people lived in this region as semi-nomadic pastoralists. They were likely the first to domesticate the horse and also improved the chariot by adding lighter, spoked wheels. They lived in tribes made up of extended families and worshipped numerous sky gods by offering sacrifices in fire altars.

At some point during this millennium and over the course of several centuries, groups of these peoples left their homeland and migrated south to the Iranian Plateau. By 2000 BCE, Indo-Iranian speaking pastoralists were living on the Iranian Plateau and in Afghanistan. Some among these evolved into the Indo-Aryan speakers living to the northwest of the Indus. It is these peoples that began to arrive in the Punjab from c. 1700 BCE, with their Vedic religion, kinship-based social order, and pastoral and farming way of life.

### 3.7.3 The Later Vedic Age (1000 – 600 BCE)

During the early centuries of the Vedic Age, the world of the Aryan tribes was the rural setting of the Punjab. Some settlers, however, migrated east to the upper reaches of the Ganges River, setting
the stage for the next period in India’s history, the later Vedic Age. The later Vedic Age differs from the early Vedic Age in that during these centuries lands along the Ganges River were colonized by the Aryans and their political, economic, social, and religious life became more complex.

Over the course of these four centuries, Aryan tribes, with horses harnessed to chariots and wagons drawn by oxen, drove their herds east, migrating along and colonizing the plains surrounding the Ganges. Historians debate whether this happened through conquest and warfare or intermittent migration led by traders and people seeking land and opportunity. Regardless, by 600 BCE the Aryans had reached the lower reaches of the Ganges and as far south as the Vindhya Range and the Deccan Plateau. Most of northern India would therefore be shaped by the Aryan way of life. But in addition, as they moved into these areas, the Aryans encountered indigenous peoples and interacted with them, eventually imposing their way of life on them but also adopting many elements of their languages and customs.

During this time, agriculture became more important and occupations more diverse. As the lands were cleared, village communities formed. Two new resources made farming more productive: iron tools and rice. Implements such as iron axes and ploughs made clearing wilderness and sowing fields easier, and rice paddy agriculture produced more calories per unit of land. Consequently, population began to grow and people could more easily engage in other occupations. By the end of this period, the earliest towns had started to form.

Political changes accompanied economic developments. Looking ahead at sixth-century northern India, the landscape was dominated by kingdoms and oligarchies. That raises the question of the origins of these two different kinds of states, where different types of central authority formally governed a defined territory. Clearly, these states began to emerge during the later Vedic Age, especially after the eighth century.

Prior to this state formation, chiefs (rajas) and their assemblies, with the assistance of priests, saw to the well-being of their clans. This clan-based method of governing persisted and evolved into oligarchies. As the Aryans colonized new territory, clans or confederacies of clan would claim it as their possession, and name it after the ruling family. The heads of clan families or chiefs of each clan in a confederacy then jointly governed the territory by convening periodically in assembly halls. A smaller group of leaders managed the deliberations and voting, and carried out the tasks of day-to-day governing. These kinds of states have been called oligarchies because the heads of the most powerful families governed. They have also been called republics because these elites governed by assembly.

But in other territories clan chiefs became kings. These kings elevated themselves over kinsmen and the assemblies and served as the pivot of an embryonic administrative system. Their chief priests conducted grand rituals that demonstrated the king’s special relation with the gods, putting the people in awe of him and giving them the sense that they would be protected. Treasurers managed the obligatory gifts kings expected in return. Most importantly, kingship became hereditary, and dynasties started to rule (see Map 3.6).

Society changed too. In earlier times, Aryan society was organized as a fluid three-class social structure consisting of priests, warriors, and commoners. But during the later Vedic Age, this social structure became more hierarchical and rigid. A system for classifying people based on
broad occupational categories was developed by the religious and political leaders in society. These categories are known as *varnas*, and there were four of them: Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. The Brahmins were the priests, whose duty was to memorize and orally transmit the *Vedas* and perform sacrifices so as to maintain good relations with the gods. The Kshatriya were the chiefs and warriors, whose duty was to govern well and fight. The Vaishya were commoners who traded and farmed. They were responsible for society’s material prosperity. The Shudras were servants who labored for others, usually as artisans or by performing menial tasks.

*Varnas* became hereditary social classes. That means a person was born into one of these and usually remained there for life, pursuing an occupation included in and marrying someone belonging to that *varna*. *Varna* has also been translated as ritual status. Your *varna* determined how pure or polluted you were, and thus what level of participation in rituals you would be allowed...
and also who you could associate with. Varna thus defined a social hierarchy. The Brahmins were the purest and most honored. Warriors were respected for their leadership and supported the Brahmins, who affirmed their authority by carrying out royal ceremonies. Together, they dominated society. The Shudras (servants) were the most polluted and could not participate in any sacrifice or speak freely to members of other varnas. Over time, this way of organizing society came to be viewed as normal and natural.

During the later Vedic Age, the religion of the Aryans also developed in new directions. As one of the world's major religious traditions, Hinduism is multi-faceted and contains many layers of historical development. The earliest layer is called Brahmanism. Brahmanism begins with the Rig Veda, which presents a universe controlled by a host of divinities. During the early Vedic Age, the Aryans explained the world through myths about these higher powers, and their priests sought to influence them through sacrificial ceremonies. These priests become the Brahmin varna.

This early layer persisted and became even more elaborate. Three new Vedas were added to the Rig Veda, as well as two sets of texts called Brahmanas and Upanishads. Combined, this literature, which was composed in Sanskrit, constituted the full Vedic corpus, and became the preserve of the Brahmins.

The Brahmins weren’t content with the 1028 hymns of the Rig Veda. Later Vedas set the hymns to music, added prose formulas that were to be uttered in the course of sacrificing to the divinities, and offered spells and incantations for achieving such goals as warding off disease and winning a battle. The Brahmanas were primarily handbooks of ritual for the Brahmins. They explained the meaning of the sacrifices and how to carry them out. Clearly, the Brahmins were becoming ever more conscious of their role in keeping the universe in good working order by pleasing and assisting the gods and consecrating kings. Their sacrificial observances became all the more elaborate, and an essential component of good kingship.

The Upanishads, however, added an entirely new set of ideas. The title means “sitting near” and points to a setting where sages conveyed spiritual insights to students through dialogue, stories, and analogies. The Upanishads are records of what was taught and discussed, the earliest dating to the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. These sages were likely hermits and wanderers who felt spiritually dissatisfied with the mythological and ritualistic approach of Brahmanism. Rather, they sought deeper insight into the nature of reality, the origins of the universe, and the human condition. The concepts that appear throughout these records of the outcome of their search are brahman (not to be confused with Brahmins), atman, transmigration, and karma.

According to these sages, human beings face a predicament. The universe they live in is created and destroyed repeatedly over the course of immense cycles of time, and humans wander through it in an endless succession of deaths and rebirths. This wandering is known as transmigration, a process that isn’t random, but rather determined by the law of karma. According to this law, good acts bring a better rebirth, and bad acts a worse one. It may not happen in this lifetime, but one day virtue will be rewarded and evil punished.

Ultimately, however, the goal is to be liberated from the cycle of death and rebirth. According to Hindu traditions, the Upanishads reflect spiritual knowledge that was revealed to sages who undertook an inward journey through withdrawal from the world and meditation. What they
discovered is that one divine reality underlies the universe. They called this ultimate reality *brahman*. They also discovered that deep within the heart of each person lies the eternal soul. They called this soul *atman*. Through quieting the mind and inquiry, the individual can discover *atman* and its identity with *brahman*: the soul is the divine reality. That is how a person is liberated from the illusion of endless wandering.

In conclusion, by the end of the Vedic Age, northern India had undergone immense changes. An Aryan civilization emerged and spread across the Indo-Gangetic Plains. This civilization was characterized by the Brahmin’s religion (Brahmanism), the use of Sanskrit, and the *varna* social system. The simpler rural life of the clans of earlier times was giving way to the formation of states, and new religious ideas were being added to the evolving tradition known today as Hinduism.

### 3.8 TRANSITION TO EMPIRE: STATES, CITIES, AND NEW RELIGIONS (600 TO 321 BCE)

The sixth century begins a transitional period in India’s history marked by important developments. Some of these bring to fruition processes that gained momentum during the late Vedic Age. Out of the hazy formative stage of state development, sixteen powerful kingdoms and oligarchies emerged. By the end of this period, one will dominate. Accompanying their emergence, India entered a second stage of urbanization, as towns and cities become a prominent feature of northern India. Other developments were newer. The caste system took shape as an institution, giving Indian society one of its most distinctive traits. Lastly, new religious ideas were put forward that challenged the dominance of Brahmanism.

#### 3.8.1 States and Cities

The kingdom of *Magadha* became the most powerful among the sixteen states that dominated this transitional period, but only over time. At the outset, it was just one of eleven located up and down the Ganges River (see Map 3.7). The rest were established in the older northwest or central India. In general, larger kingdoms dominated the Ganges basin while smaller clan-based states thrived on the periphery. They all fought with each other over land and resources, making this a time of war and shifting alliances.

The victors were the states that could field the largest armies. To do so, rulers had to mobilize the resources of their realms. The Magadhan kings did this most effectively. Expansion began in 545 BCE under King Bimbisara. His kingdom was small, but its location to the south of the lower reaches of the Ganges River gave it access to fertile plains, iron ore, timber, and elephants. Governing from his inland fortress at *Rajagriha*, Bimbisara built an administration to extract these resources and used them to form a powerful military. After concluding marriage alliances with states to the north and west, he attacked and defeated the kingdom of Anga to the east. His son Ajatashatru, after killing his father, broke those alliances and waged war on the Kosala Kingdom and the Vrijji Confederacy. Succeeding kings of this and two more Magadhan dynasties continued to conquer neighboring states down to 321 BCE, thus forging an empire. But its reach was largely limited to the middle and lower reaches of the Ganges River.
To the northwest, external powers gained control. As we have seen, the mountain ranges defining that boundary contain passes permitting the movement of peoples. This made the northwest a crossroads, and, at times, the peoples crossing through were the armies of rulers who sought to control the riches of India. Outside powers located in Afghanistan, Iran, or beyond might extend political control into the subcontinent, making part of it a component in a larger empire.

One example is the Persian Empire (see Chapter 5). During the sixth century, two kings, Cyrus the Great and Darius I, made this empire the largest in its time. From their capitals on the Iranian Plateau, they extended control as far as the Indus River, incorporating parts of northwest India as provinces of the Persian Empire (see Map 3.8). Another example is Alexander the Great (also see Chapter 5). Alexander was the king of Macedon, a Greek state. After compelling other Greeks to follow him, he attacked the Persian Empire, defeating it in 331 BCE. That campaign took his forces all the way to mountain ranges bordering India. Desiring to find the end of the known world and informed of the riches of India, Alexander took his army through the Khyber Pass and overran a number of small states and cities located in the Punjab. But to Alexander’s dismay, his soldiers refused to go any further, forcing him to turn back. They were exhausted from years of campaigning far from home and discouraged by news of powerful Indian states to the east. One of those was the kingdom of Magadha (see Map 3.9).
Map 3.8 | Afro-Eurasia in 500 BCE | Note how India is divided up among numerous polities, and how a large Persian Empire is reaching from the Middle East into northwest India.
Author: Thomas Lessman
Source: Talessman’s Atlas of World History
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Map 3.9 | Afro-Eurasia in 323 BCE | By this time, Alexander the Great had defeated the Persian Empire and entered northwest India. The Nanda Dynasty (located along the Ganges River) was the last to rule Magadha.
Author: Thomas Lessman
Source: Talessman’s Atlas of World History
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Magadha’s first capital—Rajagriha—is one of many cities and towns with ruins dating back to this transitional period. Urban centers were sparse during the Vedic Age but now blossomed, much like they did during the mature phase of the Harappan Civilization. Similar processes were at work. As more forests were cleared and marshes drained, the agricultural economy of the Ganges basin produced ever more surplus food. Population grew, enabling more people to move into towns and engage in other occupations as craftsmen, artisans, and traders. Kings encouraged this economic growth as its revenue enriched their treasuries. Caravans of ox-drawn carts or boats laden with goods travelling from state to state could expect to encounter the king’s customs officials and pay tolls. So important were rivers to accessing these trade networks that the Magadhan kings moved their capital to Pataliputra, a port town located on the Ganges (see Map 3.7). Thus, it developed as a hub of both political power and economic exchange. Most towns and cities began as one or the other, or as places of pilgrimage.

### 3.8.2 The Caste System

As the population of northern India rose and the landscape was dotted with more villages, towns, and cities, society became more complex. The social life of a Brahmin priest who served the king differed from that of a blacksmith who belonged to a town guild, a rich businessman residing in style in a city, a wealthy property owner, or a poor agricultural laborer living in a village. Thus, the social identity of each member of society differed.

In ancient India, one measure of identity and the way people imagined their social life and how they fit together with others was the *varna* system of four social classes. Another was *caste*. Like the *varnas*, castes were hereditary social classifications; unlike them, they were far more distinct social groups. The four-fold *varna* system was more theoretical and important for establishing clearly who the powerful spiritual and political elites in society were: the Brahmins and Kshatriya. But others were more conscious of their caste. There were thousands of these, and each was defined by occupation, residence, marriage, customs, and language. In other words, because “I” was born into such-and-such a caste, my role in society is to perform this kind of work. “I” will be largely confined to interacting with and marrying members of this same group. Our caste members reside in this area, speak this language, hold these beliefs, and are governed by this assembly of elders. “I” will also be well aware of who belongs to other castes, and whether or not “I” am of a higher or lower status in relation to them, or more or less pure. On that basis, “I” may or may not be able, for instance, to dine with them. That is how caste defined an individual’s life.

The lowest castes were the untouchables. These were peoples who engaged in occupations considered highly impure, usually because they were associated with taking life; such occupations include corpse removers, cremators, and sweepers. So those who practiced such occupations were despised and pushed to the margins of society. Because members of higher castes believed touching or seeing them was polluting, untouchables were forced to live outside villages and towns, in separate settlements.
3.8.3 The Challenge to Brahmanism: Buddhism

During this time of transition, some individuals became dissatisfied with life and chose to leave the everyday world behind. Much like the sages of the Upanishads, these renunciants, as they were known, were people who chose to renounce social life and material things in order that they might gain deeper insight into the meaning of life. Some of them altogether rejected Brahmanism and established their own belief systems. The most renowned example is Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563 – 480 BCE), who is otherwise known as the Buddha.

Buddha means “Enlightened One” or “Awakened One,” implying that the Buddha was at one time spiritually asleep but at some point woke up and attained insight into the truth regarding the human condition. His life story is therefore very important to Buddhists, people who follow the teachings of the Buddha.

Siddhartha was born a prince, son to the chieftain of Shakya, a clan-based state located at the foothills of the Himalaya in northern India. His father wished for him to be a ruler like himself, but Siddhartha went in a different direction. At twenty-nine, after marrying and having a son, he left home. Legends attribute this departure to his having encountered an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a wandering renunciant while out on an excursion. Aging, sickness, and death posed the question of suffering for Siddhartha, leading him to pursue spiritual insight. For years, he sought instruction from other wanderers and experimented with their techniques for liberating the self from suffering through meditation and asceticism. But he failed to obtain the answers he sought.

Then, one day, while seated beneath a tree meditating for an extended period of time, a deepening calm descended upon Siddhartha, and he experienced nirvana. He also obtained insight into the reasons for human suffering and what was needful to end it. This insight was at the heart of his teachings for the remaining forty-five years of his life. During that time, he travelled around northern India teaching his dharma—his religious ideas and practices—and gained a following of students.

The principal teaching of the Buddha, presented at his first sermon, is called the Four Noble Truths. The first is the noble truth of suffering. Based on his own experiences, the Buddha concluded that life is characterized by suffering not only in an obvious physical and mental sense, but also because everything that promises pleasure and happiness is ultimately unsatisfactory and impermanent. The second noble truth states that the origin of suffering is an unquenchable thirst. People are always thirsting for something more, making for a life of restlessness with no end in sight. The third noble truth is that there is a cure for this thirst and the suffering it brings: nirvana. Nirvana means “blowing out,” implying extinction of the thirst and the end of suffering. No longer striving to quell the restlessness with temporary enjoyments, people can awaken to “the city of nirvana, the place of highest happiness, peaceful, lovely, without suffering, without fear, without sickness, free from old age and death.” The fourth noble truth is the Eight-Fold Path, a set of practices that leads the individual to this liberating knowledge. The Buddha taught that through a program of study of Buddhist teachings (right understanding, right attitude), moral conduct (right speech, right action, right livelihood), and meditation (right effort, right

concentration, right mindfulness), anyone could become a Buddha. Everyone has the potential to awaken, but each must rely on his or her own determination.

After the Buddha died c. 480 BCE, his students established monastic communities known as the Buddhist sangha. Regardless of their varna or caste, both men and women could choose to leave home and enter a monastery as a monk or nun. They would shave their heads, wear ochre-colored robes, and vow to take refuge in the Buddha, dharma, and sangha. Doing so meant following the example of the Buddha and his teachings on morality and meditation, as well as living a simple life with like-minded others in pursuit of nirvana and an end to suffering.

3.9 THE MAURYAN EMPIRE (321 – 184 BCE)

The kingdom of Magadha was the most powerful state in India when the Nanda Dynasty came to power in 364 BCE. Nine Nanda kings made it even greater, by improving methods of tax collection and administration, funding irrigation projects and canal building, and maintaining an impressive army of infantry, cavalry, elephants, and chariots.

But Nanda aspirations were cut short when they were overthrown by Chandragupta Maurya (r. 321 – 297 BCE), who began a new period in India’s history. He and his son Bindusara (r. 287 – 273 BCE) and grandson Ashoka (r. 268 – 232 BCE) were destined to forge the first large empire in India’s history, one that would inspire the imagination of later empire builders in South Asia. The Mauryan Empire included most of the subcontinent and lasted for 140 years (see Map 3.10).

Conflicting accounts make it difficult to say anything definitive about the first two kings. Chandragupta may have come from a Kshatriya (warrior) clan, or a Vaishya (commoner) clan of peacock-tamers. In his youth, he spent time in the northwest, where he encountered Alexander the Great. With the assistance of Kautilya, a disloyal
Brahmin of the Nanda court, Chandragupta formed alliances with Nanda enemies, overthrowing them in 321 BCE. Thereafter, through diplomacy and war, he secured control over central and northern India.

Kautilya, whose advice may have been critical to Chandragupta’s success, is viewed as the author of the *Arthashastra*, a treatise on statecraft. This handbook for kings covered in detail the arts of governing, diplomacy, and warfare. To help ensure centralization of power in the ruler’s hands, it provided a blueprint of rules and regulations necessary to maintain an efficient bureaucracy, a detailed penal code, and advice on how to deploy spies and informants.

Chandragupta’s campaigns ended when he concluded a treaty with Seleucus Nicator in 301 BCE. After Alexander the Great retreated from India and then died, a struggle for his empire broke out among his generals. Seleucus was one of them. He gained control of the eastern half and sought to reclaim northwest India. But he was confronted by Chandragupta, defeated, and forced to surrender the Indus Basin and much of Afghanistan, giving the Mauryan Empire control over trade routes to West Asia. The treaty, however, established friendly relations between the two rulers, for in exchange for hundreds of elephants, Seleucus gave Chandragupta a daughter in marriage and dispatched an envoy to his court. Hellenistic kings (see Chapter 5) maintained commercial and diplomatic ties with India.

Military expansion continued under Bindusara and Ashoka until all but the tip of the subcontinent came under the empire’s control. With King Ashoka, however, warfare came to an end. We know far more about him because he left behind a fascinating record telling much about his ideas on governing. He had edicts inscribed on rocks throughout the realm and on sandstone pillars erected in the Ganges heartland (see Map 3.11).
He then placed them in populous areas where people usually gathered, so that his officials could read them to his largely illiterate subjects.

One rock edict speaks to why King Ashoka decided to renounce violence. While waging war against a small state located along the east coast, he was deeply disturbed by the amount of suffering and dislocation the war heaped upon innocent people’s lives. This realization caused him to redouble his faith in the Buddha. Ashoka, it turns out, was a lay follower of Buddhism.

In his edicts, he proclaimed to his subjects that the sound of the drum would be replaced by the sound of the dharma. In ancient India, dharma meant universal law. For the Brahmin priests, for example, dharma meant a society and religious order founded on Vedic principles and the caste system. For Buddhists, dharma consisted of the truths taught by the Buddha. For kings, dharma was enlightened governing and just rule. Thus, Ashoka was proclaiming that he would now rule by virtue, not force.

Ashoka’s kingly dharma was shaped by his personal practice of Buddhism. This dharma consisted of laws of ethical behavior and right conduct fashioned from Indian traditions of kingship and his understanding of Buddhist principles. To gain his subject’s willing obedience, he sought to inspire a sense of gratitude by presenting himself in the role of a father looking out for his children. He told his subjects that he was appointing officers to tour his realm and attend to the welfare and happiness of all. Justice was to be impartially administered and medical treatment provided for animals and humans. A principle of non-injury to all beings was to be observed. Following this principle meant not only renouncing state violence, but also forbidding slaughtering certain animals for sacrifices or for cooking in the royal kitchen. Ashoka also proclaimed that he would replace his pleasure and hunting tours with dharma tours. During these, he promised to give gifts to Brahmins and the aged and to visit people in the countryside.

In return, Ashoka asked his subjects to observe certain principles. He knew his empire was pluralistic, consisting of many peoples with different cultures and beliefs. He believed that if he instilled certain values in these peoples, then his realm might be knit together in peace and harmony. Thus, in addition to non-injury, Ashoka taught forbearance. He exhorted his subjects to respect parents, show courtesy to servants, and, more generally, be liberal, compassionate, and truthful in their treatment of others. These values were also to be embraced by religious communities, since Ashoka did not want people fighting over matters of faith.

The king’s writ shaped the government because kings were the heart of it. They were advised by a council of ministers and served by high officials who oversaw the major functions of the state. The Mauryans were particularly concerned with efficient revenue collection and uniform administration of justice. To that end, they divided the empire into a hierarchy of provinces and districts and appointed officials to manage matters at each level. But given such an immense empire spread over a geographically and ethnically diverse territory, the level of Mauryan control varied. Historians recognize three broad zones. The first was the metropolitan region—with its capital Pataliputra—located on the Ganges Plain. This heartland was tightly governed. The second zone consisted of conquered regions of strategic and economic importance. These provinces were placed under the control of members of the royal family and senior officials, but state formation was slower. That is, the tentacles of bureaucracy did not reach as deeply into local communities. Lastly, the third zone
consisted of hinterlands sparsely populated by tribes of foragers and nomads. Here, state control was minimal, amounting to little more than establishing workable relations with chieftains.

After King Ashoka’s reign, the Mauryan Empire declined. The precise reasons for this decline are unknown. Kings enjoyed only brief reigns during the final fifty years of the empire’s existence, so they may have been weak. Since loyalty to the ruler was one element of the glue that held the centralized bureaucracy together, weak kings may explain why the political leaders of provinces pulled away and the empire fragmented into smaller states. Furthermore, the Mauryan court’s demand for revenue sufficient to sustain the government and a large standing army may have contributed to discontent. In 184 BCE, the last king was assassinated by his own Brahmin military commander, and India’s first major imperial power came to an end.

3.10 REGIONAL STATES, TRADE, AND DEVOTIONAL RELIGION: INDIA 200 BCE – 300 CE

After the Mauryan Empire fell, no one major power held control over a substantial part of India until the rise of the Gupta Empire in the fourth century CE. Thus, for five hundred years, from c. 200 BCE to 300 CE, India saw a fairly rapid turnover of numerous, competing regional monarchies. Most of these were small, while the larger ones were only loosely integrated. Some developed along the Ganges. Others were of Central Asian origins, the product of invasions from the northwest. Also, for the first time, states formed in southern India. Yet, in spite of the political instability, India was economically dynamic, as trade within and without the subcontinent flourished, and India was increasingly linked to other parts of the world in networks of exchange. And new trends appeared in India’s major religious traditions. A popular, devotional form of worship was added to Buddhism and also became a defining element of Hinduism.

3.10.1 Regional States

The general who brought the Mauryan Empire to a close by a military coup established the Shunga Dynasty (c. 185 – 73 BCE). Like its predecessor, this kingdom was centered on the middle Ganges, the heartland of India’s history since the late Vedic Age. But unlike it, the Shunga Kingdom rapidly dwindled in size.
Shunga rulers were constantly warring with neighboring kingdoms, and the last fell to an internal coup in 73 CE. Subsequently, during the ensuing half millennium, other regions of India played equally prominent roles.

The northwest remained a source of dynamism, as different peoples living beyond the Hindu Kush invaded India and established one kingdom after another. Most of this movement was caused by instability on the steppe lands of Central Asia, where competing confederations of nomadic pastoralists fought for control over territory.

The most powerful among this succession of states was the **Kushan Kingdom**, whose origins take us far away to the north of China. There, in the second century CE, nomadic groups struggling with scarcity moved west, displacing another group and forcing them into northern Afghanistan. Those peoples are known as the Yuezhi (yew-eh-jer), and they were made up of several tribes. In the first century CE, a warrior chieftain from one Yuezhi tribe, the Kushans, united them, invaded northwest India, and assumed exalted titles befitting a king. His successor, ruling from Afghanistan, gained control over the Punjab and reached into the plains of the upper Ganges River.

The greatest Kushan ruler, **King Kanishka**, furthered what these first two kings began, forging an empire extending from Central Asia across the mountain ranges of Afghanistan into much of northern India (see Map 3.12). Ruling the many peoples of such a sprawling territory required more than the periodic plundering campaigns of nomad chieftains. One sculpture of King Kanishka puts these Central Asian roots on display (see Figure 3.8). In it, he is wearing a...
belted tunic, coat, and felt boots, and carrying a sword and mace. Kushan gold coins, however, cast him and his two predecessors in another light: as universal monarchs (see Figure 3.9). On one side, the crowned kings are displayed along with inscriptions bearing titles used by the most powerful Indian, Persian, Chinese, and Roman emperors of that time. The obverse side contains images of both Indian and foreign deities. The Kushan rulers, it appears, solved the problem of ruling an extensive, culturally diverse realm by patronizing the many different gods beloved by the peoples living within it. Buddhists, for instance, saw King Kanishka as a great Buddhist ruler, much like they did King Ashoka. In fact, Kanishka supported Buddhist scholarship and encouraged missionaries to take this faith from India to Central Asia and China. But his coins also depict Greek, Persian, and Hindu deities, suggesting that he was open-minded, and perhaps strategic, in matters of religion.

After Kanishka’s reign, from the mid-second century CE onwards, the empire declined. Like the other, larger Indian states during this time, only a core area was ruled directly by the king’s servants. The other areas were governed indirectly by establishing tributary relations with local rulers. As Kushan power waned, numerous smaller polities emerged, turning northern and central India into a mosaic of states.

The Indian peninsula—the territory south of the Indo-Gangetic Plain and the Vindhya Mountain Range—also features more prominently after the fall of the Mauryan Empire. In the south, kingdoms emerged for the first time. The largest was the Satavahana Kingdom, which included most of the Deccan Plateau and lasted about three centuries. The first rulers were former Mauryan officials who capitalized on its dissolution, established their own state, and expanded to the north (see Map 3.13). To establish their legitimacy, Satavahana kings embraced Aryan civilization by allowing Brahmins to perform sacrifices at the court and by upholding the varna social order. They also prospered from a rich agricultural base and trade. However, like so many of the larger states during these centuries, this kingdom was only loosely integrated, consisting of small provinces governed by civil and military officers and allied, subordinate chieftains and kings.
3.10.2 Economic Growth and Flourishing Trade Networks

Gold coins discovered in Kushan territory provide much information about the rulers who issued them. The Satavahanas also minted coins. Additionally, Roman gold coins have been found at over 130 sites in south India. These were issued by Roman emperors at the turn of the Christian era, during the first century CE. These coins serve as a sign of the times. Indian monarchs issued coins because trade was growing and intensifying all around them and they wished to support and profit from it. Expanding the money supply facilitated trade and was one way to achieve that goal. Both Indian kingdoms were also geographically well positioned to take advantage of emerging global trade networks linking the subcontinent to other regions of Afro-Eurasia. This advantage provides one reason why they flourished.

The expansion of trade both within and without India is a major theme of these five centuries. Put simply, South Asia was a crossroads with much to offer. In market towns and cities across the subcontinent, artisans and merchants organized to produce and distribute a wide variety of goods. Guilds were their principal method of organization. A guild was a professional association made up of members with a particular trade. Artisan guilds—such as weavers and goldsmiths—set the prices and ensured the quality of goods. Operating like and sometimes overlapping with castes, guilds also set rules for members and policed their behavior. They acted collectively as proud participants of urban communities, displaying their banners in festive processions and donating money to religious institutions. Merchant guilds then saw to it that their artisan products were transported along routes traversing the subcontinent or leading beyond to foreign lands.

The lands and peoples surrounding India, and the many empires they lived under, are the topic of later chapters, but we can take a snapshot of the scene here (see Map 3.14). In the first century CE, India sat amidst trade networks connecting the Roman Empire, Persian Empire (Parthian), Chinese Empire, and a host of smaller kingdoms and states in Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. The major trade networks were the Silk Roads and the Indian Ocean maritime trade routes. Thus, for example, Greco-Roman traders plied the waters of the Arabian Sea, bringing ships filled with amphorae and gold coins to ports located along the west coast of India, and returning with spices, textiles, and gems. Indian traders sailed the waters of the Bay of Bengal, bringing cloth
and beads from the Coromandel Coast to Southeast Asia and returning with cinnamon cloves and sandalwood. In the northwest, a similar trade in a variety of goods took place along the Silk Roads. Indian traders, for instance, took advantage of the excellent position of the Kushan Empire to bring silk from Central Asia to the ports of northwest India, from where it could then be sent on to Rome. In sum, this vibrant international trade constituted an early stage of globalization. Combined with regional trade across the subcontinent, India saw an increase in travel in all directions, even as it remained divided among many regional kingdoms.

3.10.3 Religious Transformations: Buddhism and Hinduism into the Common Era

Aside from expanding trade, another theme during these centuries of political division is transformations in two of India’s major religions traditions: Buddhism and Hinduism. In both cases, new religious ideas and practices were added that emphasized the importance of devotion and appealed to broader groups of people.

Buddhism thrived after the Buddha died in c. 480 BCE, all the more so during this period of regional states and the early centuries of the Common Era, at the very moment Christianity was spreading through the Roman Empire. In fact, it would not be exaggeration to say that Buddhism was the dominant public religion. The communities of monks and nuns (sangha) that formed after Buddha’s time lived in monasteries built along trade routes, near towns, or in caves. To build these and survive, the sangha needed much support, which often came in the form of royal patronage. Kings such as Ashoka and Kanishka, for example, offered lavish support for Buddhist institutions. But over time, the contributions of merchants, women, and people from lower varnas became just as important. Unlike Vedic Brahmanism, which privileges the Brahmin varna, Buddhism was more inclusive and less concerned with birth and social class. After all, in theory, anyone could become a Buddha.

Buddhism also emphasized the importance of attaining good karma for better rebirths and a future enlightenment; one didn’t need to be a monk to work at this. Rather, any ordinary layperson, regardless of their religious beliefs, could also take Buddhist vows and practice Buddhist ways. That meant not only leading a moral life but also supporting the sangha. By so doing, the good karma of the monks and nuns would be transferred to the community and oneself. This practice served to not only make the world a better place and to ensure a better future, but also to allow opportunities for publicly displaying one’s piety. That is why kings, rich merchants, and ordinary people donated to the sangha and gave monks food.

With so much support and participation, Buddhism also changed. Every major world religion has different branches. Christianity, for example, has three major ones: the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant churches. These branches share a common root but diverge in some matters of belief and practice. Buddhism has two major branches: Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism is early Buddhism, the Buddhism of the early sangha, and is based on the earliest records of the Buddha’s teaching of the Four Noble Truths. A practitioner of this form of Buddhism sought to end suffering and attain nirvana by engaging the Eight-Fold
Path, a program of study, moral conduct, and meditation. Ideally, the practitioner pursued this program as a monk or nun in a monastic setting, and eventually became an “arhat,” that is, a perfected person who is nearly or fully enlightened.

**Mahayana Buddhism** came later, during the early centuries of the Common Era. Mahayana means “Great Vehicle,” pointing to the fact that this form of Buddhism offers multiple paths to enlightenment for people from all walks of life. This branch has no single founder and consists of a set of ideas elaborated upon in new Buddhist scriptures dating to this time. In one of these new paths, the Buddha becomes a god who can be worshipped, and by anyone. A monk or lay follower is welcome to make an offering before an image of the Buddha placed in a shrine. By so doing, they demonstrate their desire to end suffering and seek salvation through faith in the Buddha.

Furthermore, with the “Great Vehicle,” the universe becomes populated with numerous Buddhas. Practitioners developed the idea that if anyone can become a Buddha over the course of many lifetimes of practice, then other Buddhas must exist. Also, the belief arose that some individuals had tread the path to Buddhahood but chose to forego a final enlightenment where they would leave the world behind so that they could, out of great compassion for all suffering people, work for their deliverance. These holy beings are known as Bodhisattvas, that is, enlightened persons who seek nirvana solely out of their desire to benefit all humanity. Buddhists also believed that the universe consisted of multiple worlds with multiple heavenly realms. Some of these Buddhas and Bodhisattvas created their own heavenly realms and, from there, offer grace to those seeking salvation through them. Through veneration and worship, the follower hopes to be reborn in that heavenly realm, where they can then finish the path to liberation. Seeking to become a Bodhisattva through a path of devotion was one of the new paths outlined by Mahayana scriptures.

Buddhism traveled out of India and had an impact on other parts of the world, making it a major world religion. This expansion resulted from the efforts of Buddhist missionaries and merchants, as well as kings who supported its propagation. Theravada Buddhism was carried to Sri Lanka and parts of Southeast Asia, where it remains a dominant religious tradition. Mahayana Buddhism spread to Central and East Asia, a process that was facilitated by the Silk Road and the support of kings like Kanishka of the Kushan Empire (see Map 3.15). However, Buddhism eventually declined in India, especially after the first millennium BCE. From that time, Hinduism and Islam increasingly won over the religious imagination of the peoples of India, with royal patronage and lay support following.

Hinduism also saw new developments during this period and throughout the first millennium CE. In fact, many scholars see these centuries as the time during which Hinduism first took shape and prefer using the term Vedic Brahmanism for the prior history of this religious tradition. Vedic Brahmanism was the sacrifice-centered religion of the Vedas where, in exchange for gifts, Brahmans performed rituals for kings and householders in order to ensure the favor of the gods. It also included the speculative world of the Upanishads, where renunciants went out in search of spiritual liberation.

But something important happened during these later centuries. An additional religious literature was compiled and shrines and temples with images of deities were constructed, pointing
to the emergence of new, popular forms of devotion and an effort to define a good life and society according to the idea of dharma. With this transition, we can speak more formally of Hinduism.

One important set of texts is the Dharma Scriptures, ethical and legal works whose authority derived from their attribution to ancient sages. Dharma means “duty” or proper human conduct and so, true to their title, these scriptures define the rules each person must follow in order to lead a righteous and devout life and contribute to a good society. Most importantly,
these rules were determined by the role assigned to an individual by the varna system of social classes, the caste system, and gender. For example, for a male, dharma meant following the rules for their caste and varna while passing through four stages in life: student, householder, hermit, and renunciant. In his youth, a man must study to prepare for his occupation and, as a householder, he must support his family and contribute to society. Late in life, after achieving these goals, he should renounce material desires and withdraw from society, first living as a hermit on the margins of society and then as a wandering renunciant whose sole devotion is to god.

A woman’s roles, on the other hand, were defined as obedience to her father in youth and faithful service to her husband as an adult. For this reason, historians see a trend in ancient Indian history whereby women became increasingly subservient and subordinate. Although women were to be honored and supported, the ideal society and family were defined in patriarchal terms. That meant men dominated public life, were the authority figures at home, and usually inherited the property. Also, women were increasingly expected to marry at a very young age—even prior to puberty—and to remain celibate as widows. In later centuries, some widows even observed the practice of burning themselves upon the funeral pyre of the deceased husband.

Famous Indian epics also illustrated the theme of duty. The Ramayana (“Rama’s Journey”) tells the story of Prince Rama and his wife Sita. Rama’s parents—the king and queen—wished for him to take the throne, but a second queen plotted against him and forced him into exile for years. Sita accompanied him, but was abducted by a demon-king, leading to a battle in consequence. With the help of a loyal monkey god, Rama defeated the demon, recovered his wife, and returned with her to his father’s kingdom, where they were crowned king and queen. In brief, throughout this long story, Rama exemplified the virtues of a king and Sita exemplified the virtues of a daughter and wife. They both followed their dharma.

A similar theme dominates the Bhagavad-Gita (“Song of the Lord”). This classic of Hindu scripture is included as a chapter in another Indian epic, the Mahabharata (The Great Bharata). It tells of wars between cousins who are fighting over the title to their kingdom’s throne. As a battle was poised to commence, one of these cousins—Prince Arjuna—threw down his weapons and refused to fight because he did not wish to harm his kinsmen. But Krishna, his mentor and charioteer, delivered a speech on the nature of duty for a warrior like himself, one that illustrated
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the religious basis for observing dharma. Arjuna was thus moved to action.

Religious texts and temples also signal the rise of a powerful devotional Hinduism centered upon a few supreme deities. Stone temples were erected for the purpose of housing representations of a god or goddess (see Figure 3.10). Peoples of all classes could go to the temple to view the deity, pray, and offer fruits and flowers. By so doing, they showed their love for this lord and their desire to be saved by his or her grace. The most popular deities were Shiva and Vishnu.

Growing up, devotees of these supreme deities would hear countless myths and legends about their origins, exploits, and powers from Brahmins at the temples or story-tellers in their hometown. Vishnu preserves the universe and watches over it; in times of unbridled evil, he assumes the form of an avatar to remove it and return the world to righteousness. King Rama of the Ramayana and Krishna of the Bhagavad-Gita are in fact two such incarnations of Vishnu. Shiva is both benevolent and protective but also destroys all things. Whereas Vishnu preserves the universe, Shiva destroys it at the end of a cycle. A third deity, Brahma, then recreates it. Combined, this Hindu trinity—Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer—represent different facets of the one divine reality behind the great cosmic cycles and also life and death. They each have female counterparts. Shiva’s wife Parvati, for instance, is a goddess of love and devotion (see Figure 3.11).

In sum, during this period and the first millennium CE, several elements come together to make up the religion outsiders later labeled Hinduism. These elements include the sacrificial religion of the Brahmins, the renunciants’ spiritual pursuit of Self and divine reality (atman and brahman), a social order shaped by the varna and caste system, notions of law and duty embodied in each individual’s dharma, and devotion to supreme deities and their avatars. Hinduism thus thoroughly shaped the social and spiritual life of the peoples of India and of Indian society. Therefore, the rulers of ancient India supported the Brahmins, built temples, upheld the varna system, and assumed titles declaring their devotion to the supreme deities. Hinduism became part of the king’s dharma, and fulfilling that dharma brought the approval of his subjects.
3.11 THE GUPTA EMPIRE AND INDIA’S CLASSICAL AGE (300 – 600 CE)

The pattern of regional states characteristic of post-Mauryan times and the early centuries of the Common Era will persist in India until the sixteenth century. At any one time, India had many kings. But on occasion, one king might forge a substantial regional power and assume grand titles that elevated him over others. The political scene, therefore, consisted of not only a mosaic of royal powers but also a political hierarchy. Some rulers held power over others, making for a pattern of paramountcy and subordination among kings and princes of many different dynasties across the land. These paramount powers could then take advantage of the stability they established and the wealth they accrued to patronize the arts and promote a cultural renaissance. The Gupta Empire is the pre-eminent example of such a power during the period 300 – 600 CE; indeed, some historians see the time during which they dominated northern India as a classical age.

As is the case for so much of India’s ancient political history, details concerning Gupta rulers have been reconstructed largely from coins, inscriptions, and seals. The dynasty begins in obscurity with two kings of a minor state located along the Ganges River, but then explodes on the scene with the next two kings: Chandragupta I (c. 320 – 335) and his son Samudragupta (c. 335 – 375). Through conquest and marital alliances, Chandragupta I forged a larger empire in the old Ganges heartland (see Map 3.16). A gold coin provides some of the evidence detailing the Gupta Empire. This coin displays Chandragupta standing next to a certain Queen Kumaradevi. He has taken the title “Great King of Kings,” which signifies imperial power, while she is identified as the princess of a powerful neighboring kingdom (see Figure 3.12).

During his forty-year reign, Samudragupta made the empire great, a feat most forcefully evidenced by a royal eulogy inscribed on one of the old edict pillars of King Ashoka. This eulogy, which describes Samudragupta as “conqueror of the four corners of the earth,” tells of how he subdued dozens of kings across the subcontinent. Closer to home, along the Ganges, many
rulers were slain and their territory was annexed, while farther out across northern India and to the southeast, others were “captured and liberated.” These captured and liberated kings were recognized as “servants,” which meant they could continue to rule their own lands as subordinates, on the condition that they paid tribute and homage. Gupta rulers thus directly administered a core territory along the Ganges River while adopting a model of **tributary overlordship** for the rest. The Gupta imperial court in effect presided over a society of tributary rulers.

After Samudragupta’s time, two more Gupta rulers enjoyed long reigns of forty years, with the empire reaching a peak of power and prosperity. But in the sixth century, decline set in. A series of weaker rulers faced internal dissension at home and foreign invasion from abroad. A great nomadic power known as the Huns emerged out of Central Asia and invaded the northwest, destabilizing Gupta rule. Subordinate rulers then began to break away, and smaller kingdoms replaced the empire. After the sixth century, India entered a new stage in its history.

But there is more to these centuries than high politics. Again, the Gupta era is often labeled as a classical age for India. A period in the history of a civilization’s being labeled as classical generally means it was a time of artistic and intellectual excellence, with its having attained standard-setting achievements in a number of fields. Classical also suggests a certain level of maturation for a civilization. It should be noted, however, that some scholars question the use of this term.
because all ages produce great works, and sometimes choosing one period as classical simply represents the biased judgment of a later time.

Yet, during the Gupta era, India did produce important scientific discoveries and works of art and literature. The exquisite sculptures of the Buddha portraying his serene enlightenment and teaching were the epitome of the classical achievement in art (see Figure 3.13). India also saw an outpouring of literary masterpieces. Kalidasa is one of India’s greatest Sanskrit poets and playwrights. His play *The Recognition of Shakuntala*, a world masterpiece, tells the story of a girl who lived in a hermitage in the countryside after being abandoned by her parents. One day, a king was out hunting and chanced upon her. They fell in love and married. But then he hurried back to his palace and when she later came to him he no longer knew her because he had been cursed. The only solution for her dilemma was for her to present a ring he had left her. Unfortunately, it had slipped off her finger. The play tells of how this love story concluded, along with the involvement of many higher powers.

In the field of medicine, Ayurveda matured as more complete editions of ancient medical texts were compiled. Ayurveda (meaning “knowledge for longevity”) is India’s ancient medical science. It provides a systematic effort to explain the origins of diseases in dislocations of bodily humors (substances) and to prescribe cures for them. India also saw advancements in the fields of astronomy and mathematics. Aryabhata (476 – 550 CE), for instance, was the first astronomer to propose that the earth rotated on an axis and a scientific explanation for eclipses. He calculated $\pi$ to 3.1416 and the solar year to 364.3586805 days. His work demonstrates the contemporary use of a sophisticated system of decimal notation, which was also an ancient Indian discovery.

### 3.12 India’s Early Medieval Age and the Development of Islamic States in India, 600 – 1300

The history of ancient India concludes with the decline of the Gupta Empire. The next major period, which lasts for roughly seven centuries (c. 600 – 1300), is the early medieval age. During these centuries, kingdoms in both the north and south proliferated and regularly turned over. Therefore, at any one time, India was fragmented by numerous regional kingdoms. As the rulers of these warred and formed alliances, they employed the system of paramountcy and subordination begun during the Gupta era, with some rulers being overlords and others vassals. Also, successful rulers demonstrated their power by granting land to officers, Brahmins, and temples. The outcome was a political pattern labeled Indian feudalism.

These rulers also demonstrated their power—and enhanced it—by patronizing Hindu institutions and developing local traditions in the regions where their courts resided. They adopted titles showing their devotion to the great Hindu deities, declared their intent to uphold dharma, built fabulous Hindu temples in urban centers, and charged Brahmins with attending to them and serving at their courts. One outstanding example of a feudal kingdom is the Chola Kingdom of southern India.

Lastly, at the end of this age, a new force appeared on the Indian scene. Muslim Arab and Turkic rulers of West and Central Asia made incursions into the subcontinent. Along with Arab
traders arriving on India’s west coast for trade, they brought a new religion and type of rule to the landscape of early medieval India and forged new connections between the subcontinent and the rest of Afro-Eurasia.

3.12.1 Indian Feudalism

Feudalism is a term historians first used to describe the political, social, and economic system of the European Middle Ages (see Chapter Twelve). That system was the world of lords, vassal knights, and serfs characteristic of Europe from the tenth to thirteenth centuries. In exchange for homage and military service, vassals received land from their lords. These lands became their manors, and serfs worked them. The lords and their vassals constituted a privileged nobility, while the serfs lived in a state of servitude.

Historians also use feudalism to describe India during the early medieval age. But the usefulness of this term is much debated, because conditions on the ground varied from place to place, not only in Europe but also in India. Therefore, historians now only use the term in a general sense while also describing specific variations. In general, feudalism designates a political and economic scene characterized by fragmented authority, a set of obligations between lords and vassals, and grants of land (including those who work it) by rulers in exchange for some kind of service.

Authority on the early medieval Indian subcontinent was indeed fragmented, not only by the many regional kingdoms that existed at any one time but also, more importantly, within kingdoms. Because kingdoms incessantly warred with one another, their boundaries were fluid. Rulers usually closely administered a core area near the capital with a civil administration, while granting feudatories on the periphery. Having defeated the ruling lineage of a powerful neighboring state—such as a king, prince, or chief, victorious kings might allow them to retain noble titles and their lands, on the condition that they demonstrate allegiance to him and even supply tribute and military service. The overlord could then wield the title “Great King of Kings,” while the lesser rulers bore titles signifying their status as subordinate rulers who do obeisance.

Additionally, aside from granting these feudatories, medieval rulers also issued land grants to important persons and institutions in their realms, such as Brahmins, high officials, or temples. As opposed to receiving a cash salary, these recipients were permitted to retain revenue from villages on this land, as well as to exercise some level of judicial authority. Brahmins were so important to kings because they aided him in upholding the king’s dharma. The king’s duty was to protect the people, uphold the varna social order, sacrifice to the traditional Vedic deities, and show devotion to Shiva or Vishnu. As the religious leaders and intellectuals in the community, and the most prestigious varna, Brahmins could craft genealogies proving a king’s illustrious origins in the heroic lineages of the epic stories of ancient times, perform the sacrifices, and maintain temples. So rulers often generously gifted land to them or to the magnificent temple complexes rulers built.

Medieval India, then, consisted of a multitude of kingdoms, each of which governed a part of their realms through feudal arrangements, by granting feudatories and issuing land grants to nobility or prestigious religious and political leaders, in exchange for allegiance and assisting the
ruler in demonstrating his being worthy of his sacred role. In most instances, given that society was patriarchal, rulers were male, but in many cases queens inherited the throne. Rudramadevi, for instance, was chosen by her father to accede to the throne of a kingdom in central India, likely because he had no sons or living brothers. Inscriptions refer to her as a king; indeed, she is said to have donned male attire while leading soldiers into battle. She is also portrayed seated on a lion, with a dagger and shield in hand. Thus, she was conformed to the expected role of a warrior, male king. Clearly, preserving the dynastic line was more important than biological sex.

3.12.2 The Chola Dynasty

The Chola Kingdom illustrates well the grandeur of powerful regional states during the early medieval period. South India first came to prominence with the rise of the Satavahana Kingdom in the Deccan Plateau (c. the second century BCE). But even at that time, in the fertile hinterlands and along the seaboard of the southern tip of the subcontinent, Tamil states were forming. Tamil refers to the regional language spoken and written by Indian peoples of the far south, as well as to their local customs and culture. Powerful Tamil lineages divided up Tamil land among chiefdoms, and, over time, some evolved into small but impressive kingdoms. These Tamil states also adopted elements of the Aryan culture of the north, including the use of Sanskrit, the varna social system, Vedic Brahmanism, and the Hindu cults of Shiva and Vishnu.

The Cholas, for instance, date back to Satavahana times, but they don’t become significant for India’s political history until the ninth century CE, when they show up as a feudatory of a neighboring Tamil kingdom. Beginning with King Aditya I (r. 871 – 907), the Cholas began a process of expansion that would eventually make it the most powerful kingdom of the south up until the thirteenth century (see Map 3.17). Two of the most powerful Chola rulers were Rajaraja I (r. 985 – 1012) and his son Rajendra I (1012 – 1044). During their reigns, most of south India was conquered, including Sri Lanka, and a royal administration was built. Chola kings directly administered a core area of provinces and districts with royal officials, but also granted feudatories to allegiant...
chieftains and land grants to Brahmins. At the local level, these authorities worked with village assemblies and town associations, both of which were remarkable for the level of freedom they had to manage local affairs.

The Chola kings proved their greatness through not only the success of their imperial ambitions but also the temples they built. These temples, some of the most impressive structures in India, testify to the kings' piety. Eulogies to Chola kings describe them not only as great warriors and conquerors but also as protectors of the dharma, destroyers of evil, and generous givers of gifts. Because they were built in honor of the great Hindu deities, temples put those latter qualities on display. In 1010 CE, Rajaraja I completed the Brihadeshwara Temple in Tanjavur, the Chola capital and ceremonial center (see Figure 3.14). Atop the main sanctuary stands a sixty-two meter tall tower carved out of a block of granite weighing eighty-one tons. Numerous representations portray the supreme lord Shiva in his various manifestations, including one located in the inner sanctuary. On the profusely ornamented tower, Shiva appears repeatedly in his form as destroyer of the cities of demons. Clearly, Rajaraja I wished to raise the cult of Shiva to a pre-eminent position in his kingdom, and built this temple to project Chola power.

Like other great regional powers with their unique histories and architectural traditions during the early medieval period, the Chola kingdom peaked for about two centuries and then declined. In the thirteenth century, neighboring kingdoms nibbled away at its power and it came to an end.

3.12.3 The Rise of Islamic States in North India

One of the most important developments during India’s early medieval age is the arrival of Muslim Arab and Turkic traders and conquerors and the eventual establishment of Islamic states and communities in India. This story begins with the life of Muhammad (570 – 632 CE), the Prophet of Islam, whose revelations were recorded in the Quran (see Chapter 8). During his lifetime and after, an Arab community and state governed by the principles of Islam were founded in Arabia. Over the course of the seventh and eighth centuries, this Arab Islamic state grew into
an empire that included much of West Asia and North Africa. This size meant that many different ethnic groups—Egyptians, Persians, and Turks, for instance—fell under its governing umbrella.

The ruler of this empire was the caliph, a man designated political successor to Muhammad, as the leader of the Islamic community. The caliph’s government is called the caliphate. The first caliphs were friends and relatives of Muhammad, but eventually long-lasting dynasties formed that made the position hereditary. The first was the Umayyad Dynasty (661 – 750 CE) and the second the Abbasid Dynasty (750 – 1258 CE). It was during these caliphates that Islam and Islamic rule made their way into India.

During the Umayyad Caliphate, systematic reconnaissance of the northwest coast of India was undertaken because conquests brought the empire just to the west of the Indian subcontinent. When pirates plundered an Arab vessel at the mouth of the Indus River, the caliph authorized punitive measures, and Umayyad rulers sent an invasion force. In 711, the Sindh (the lower Indus) was seized from a Hindu ruler and incorporated into the Islamic Empire. An Islamic community then began to set roots in this part of India.
The Umayyad Caliphate ruled from 661 – 750 CE. Note the inclusion of part of northwest India, near the Indus River. The next major event didn’t transpire until the tenth century, at a time when Turkic peoples had become important to the history of Islamic states in India. By this time, the Abbasid Dynasty had replaced the Umayyad as the caliphs of the Islamic Empire. One method Abbasid rulers used to govern their large realm was to employ enslaved Turks as soldiers and administrators. Today, the word Turkic might normally be associated with the country of Turkey, but in fact Turkic peoples and their language family—Turkish—originated in Central Asia. That is where the expanding Islamic empire first encountered and began incorporating Turks into their governing.

The significance of these Turkic slave soldiers for India is that the Abbasids employed them as governors of the eastern end of their empire. This end included parts of Afghanistan, the neighbor to northwest India. In the tenth century, however, the caliphate was falling apart, and Turkic military governors took advantage of this dissolution by establishing an independent state in Afghanistan. The family that did so was the Ghaznavids. Ruling from a fortress in Ghazna, the Ghaznavids forged an empire that included much of Iran and northwest India (see Map 3.19).
The Ghaznavid ruler who first made forays into India was **Mahmud of Ghazna** (971 – 1030). In some historical writing, Mahmud has been portrayed as a brutal plunderer who descended on India seventeen times with hordes of Turkic cavalry, shocking wealthy cities of the north with the sword of Islam by destroying their Hindu temples and returning to his capital with their stolen wealth.

But the reality may have been otherwise. Recent work suggests that Mahmud was neither interested in spreading Islam nor caused massive destruction. Rather, northwestern India had always been closely linked to Central Asia, as well as being the location of both repeated invasions and kingdoms that crossed over into the mountains. Furthermore, by the tenth century, Muslim communities had already become a part of the Indian scene, along the west coast and in this region. Therefore, Mahmud’s incursions were hardly something new. Nor were his motives. In medieval India, kings often waged war not only for revenue but also because such was their custom. Mahmud was likely no different. His empire was experiencing instability; he therefore sought to prove his mettle as a warrior ruler and to secure his legacy by using Indian wealth to build palaces and mosques in Ghazna.

Ghaznavid control over India didn’t extend much beyond the Punjab, lasting less than two centuries. In 1186, Muhammad of Ghur—chieftain of a minor hill state in Afghanistan that was subordinate to the Ghaznavids—overthrew his overlords in Ghazna and proceeded to forge his own empire. Desiring to extend it across northern India, he found that his greatest foes were the Rajputs. The Rajputs were clans located in northern and central India that claimed descent from renowned Kshatriya (warrior) lineages of ancient times. While Muhammad of Ghuri was planning his military expeditions, the Rajputs were governing several regional Hindu kingdoms from large fortresses they had built. In 1192, Muhammad’s forces defeated a confederation of Rajput rulers at the Battle of Tarain. His slave general and commander-in-chief, Qutb-ud-din Aybak, then achieved a string of victories across northern India, making it a part of the Ghurid Empire.

Muhammad of Ghur returned to his Afghan homeland, leaving northern India to Aybak, who then proceeded to set up his headquarters in Delhi, one of the most important cities in South Asia, and also the capital of today’s nation of India. When Muhammad died in 1206, Aybak took control of these Indian possessions and established a state of his own called the **Delhi Sultanate** (see map 3.20). A sultanate is the government of a sultan, and a sultan is an Islamic ruler who governs a country largely independently of the caliphs, but without claiming their title. The Delhi sultans, then, were the sovereign rulers of the first major Muslim state in India, one that would last for three hundred years.

Looking ahead to our own time, the nation of India today is both culturally and religiously diverse. Approximately 80% of the population practices Hinduism while 15% practices Islam, making these the two largest religious traditions in India today. For this reason, relations between peoples adhering to these two different faiths have been an important issue in the history of South Asia. As we have seen, the history of Islam and Islamic communities in the subcontinent begins during the early medieval period. Therefore, historians pay close attention to how Delhi sultans governed an overwhelmingly Hindu population, as well as how Islamic communities fit into it.

Ruling as they were over an ancient and vast agrarian civilization, the Turkic sultans worked out an accommodation with India, adapting to the pattern of Indian feudalism. Outside the highest
levels of government, Hindu society and its traditional leaders were largely left in place, so long as tax revenue was submitted. With a long history of conquest behind them, Islamic rulers had learned the benefits of adopting a pragmatic approach to non-Muslims, and these sultans were no exception. They had little interest in forcibly converting people to the faith, and rather adopted a principle from the Quran whereby non-Muslim peoples with a scriptural tradition of their own can live amidst the Islamic community and state so long as they pay a higher tax. At the highest levels, however, sultans placed Turkic military nobility and educated Persians in charge, often compensating them with land grants. In fact, because Persians became so important to Sultanate administration, Persian was adopted as the language of government.

This Muslim ruling elite attempted to retain their Turkic and Persian traditions, but also slowly adopted Indian customs in what was generally a tolerant atmosphere. At the lower levels of society, Muslim traders and artisans became an important presence in Indian towns and cities, as did Indian converts who saw an advantage to converting to this faith. Thus, Hindu and Muslim communities increasingly interacted with each other during the early medieval age, adopting elements of each other’s way of life. For that reason, historians speak of a fusion of Islamic and Indian culture.

3.13 CONCLUSION

We have now passed through the long course of India’s ancient and early medieval history. We began with the onset of India’s Neolithic period in the seventh millennium BCE and saw how
India’s first civilization—the Harappan Civilization (2600 – 1700 BCE)—emerged from it in the northwestern region of the subcontinent during the third millennium BCE.

We then examined the long course of the Vedic Age (1700 – 600 BCE). As Harappan Civilization declined, Indo-Aryans migrated from Central Asia into northern India, bringing with them their Vedic religion, Sanskrit language, and pastoral and farming way of life. As they settled down on the Indo-Gangetic Plains and interacted with indigenous peoples, new political, social, and religious institutions formed. Over the course of several centuries, Aryan clan and tribal organization developed into kingdoms and oligarchies. Also, a simpler society composed of priests, warriors, and commoners evolved into a more complex society organized by varnas, the system of four hereditary social classes. Finally, the Vedic religion of the Brahmin priests evolved into Brahmanism, the earliest stage in the development of Hinduism.

Next, we surveyed a transitional period in India’s history that began in the sixth century and lasted until 321 BCE. Sixteen major kingdoms and oligarchies with roots in the late Vedic Age fought for control over territory in northern India. The kingdom of Magadha dominated. Accompanying this time of warring states, India entered a second stage of urbanization, as towns and cities became a prominent feature of the north. Alongside the varnas, the caste system began to form, organizing Indian society into a much larger number of social groups based on occupation, residence, language, and religious beliefs. Lastly, new religious ideas were put forward by the Buddha (c. 563 – 480 BCE) to challenge the dominance of Brahmanism, and Buddhist monastic communities began to form.

This transitional period ended when Chandragupta Maurya overthrew the last Magadhan dynasty in 321 BCE and established the Mauryan Empire (321 – 184 BCE). He and his successors built the first Indian state that included most of the subcontinent. Chandragupta’s grandson, King Ashoka (r. 268 – 232), is famed for having tried to rule this large realm according to Buddhist principles.

We then saw how, for five centuries after the fall of the Mauryan Empire (c. 200 BCE – 300 CE), no one major power ruled India. The entire subcontinent saw instead a fairly rapid turnover of regional monarchies. Some developed along the Ganges River, while others, such as the Kushan Kingdom, were of Central Asian origins. Also, states such as the Satavahana Kingdom formed in southern India. Yet, in spite of the political instability, India was economically dynamic, as trade within and without the subcontinent flourished, and India was increasingly linked to other parts of the world in such networks of exchange as the Silk Road and Indian Ocean maritime trade. Lastly, new trends appeared in Buddhism and Hinduism, most notably a popular, devotional form of worship.

Although India remained a mosaic of states during the period 300 – 600 BCE, historians recognize this time as distinct because the Gupta Empire (320 – 550 CE) included much of northern India and facets of Gupta period society and culture suggest that Indian civilization had matured and entered a classical age. One facet was individual achievements in literature, the arts, and sciences. But equally as important, the lives of all members of society were now being shaped and given meaning by a political pattern, social institutions, religious traditions, and a culture with a deep history. That political pattern included, for example, notions of kingship and the
king’s dharma, as well as political hierarchy. Social institutions included the patriarchal family, varna and caste, and commercial associations in cities and towns. As for religious traditions, we have focused on the development of Hinduism and Buddhism and how they shaped the religious landscape with their long literary and scriptural traditions, notions of dharma, and monastic and temple life.

We ended this chapter by introducing early medieval India (c. 600 – 1300 BCE). The political scene remained one of powerful regional states, each with their unique local histories and traditions. The methods by which kings established relations with neighboring rulers and within their own lands has been described as Indian feudalism. Some kings, like the Cholas, buttressed their power by claiming to rule according to Hindu notions of dharma, by, for instance, building large Hindu temples and patronizing the Brahmans. Finally, during these centuries, Islamic rule, communities, and religion entered the South Asian landscape, changing the course of India’s history.

3.14 WORKS CONSULTED AND FURTHER READING


3.15 LINKS TO PRIMARY SOURCES

Websites with Collections of Documents
http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/india/indiasbook.asp
http://www.sacred-texts.com/

Ashoka’s Edicts
http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/ashoka.html

Bhagavad Gita
http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/#gita

Buddha’s Early Teachings: “The Four Noble Truths”
http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts/bud-ser1.html

Dharma Scriptures (Dharmashastra): The Laws of Manu
http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/manu.htm

Harappan Civilization Seals and other Artifacts
http://www.harappa.com/

Kalidasa’s poems and plays, including The Story of Shakuntala
http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16659/16659-h/16659-h.htm

Ramayana
http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/#rama

Samudragupta, stone pillar inscription eulogizing
http://www.sdstate.edu/projectsouthasia/upload/Allahabad-Posthumous.pdf

Upanishads
http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/#upan
http://vivekananda.net/PDFBooks/The_Upanishads.pdf

Vedas
http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/#vedas
### 4.1 CHRONOLOGY

#### China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>5000 – 3000 BCE</td>
<td>Yangshao Culture</td>
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<td>3000 – 1900 BCE</td>
<td>Longshan Culture</td>
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<td>1900 – 1600 BCE</td>
<td>Xia Dynasty</td>
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<td>221 – 210 BCE</td>
<td>Qin Dynasty</td>
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<td>202 BCE – 220 CE</td>
<td>Han Dynasty</td>
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<td>141 – 87 BCE</td>
<td>Emperor Wu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>220 – 589 CE</td>
<td>Period of Division</td>
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<td>220 – 280 CE</td>
<td>Three Kingdoms Period</td>
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<td>Cao Cao</td>
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<td>265 – 317 CE</td>
<td>Western Jin</td>
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<td>Northern and Southern Dynasties</td>
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### Japan

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<td>500 BCE – 250 CE</td>
<td>Yayoi Period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>250 – 600 CE</td>
<td>Mounded Tomb Period</td>
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<tr>
<td>600 – 800 CE</td>
<td>Asuka-Nara Period</td>
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### 4.2 INTRODUCTION

In 1974, farmers digging a well in a field located in northwest China uncovered fragments of a clay figurine. Little did they know, they had chanced upon what has turned out to be one of the most fascinating archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century. Subsequent excavation revealed that beneath the fragment lay a massive underground pit filled with over seven thousand terracotta figurines modeling archers, infantrymen, and charioteers. Another pit contained terracotta cavalry and infantry units that likely composed a military guard, while a third one contained high ranking officers and war chariots in what was perhaps a command post. These three pits are part of a much larger complex of underground vaults spread across twenty-two square miles. Most importantly, a large, forested burial mound towers over the neighboring fields containing these underground armies. This is where the First Emperor of Qin [cheen] was buried after he died in 210 BCE. Although it hasn’t yet been excavated, experts believe the tomb is a microcosm of the emperor’s palace, capital city, and empire. The pits, then, contained the...
army protecting his realm in the afterlife. With this discovery, our understanding of how China was unified under one empire after a long period of warfare was advanced immeasurably.

East Asia can be defined in two different ways. Geographically speaking, it can be defined as the eastern region of the Asian continent and the countries located there, principally China, North and South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. But historians also define East Asia as a broader cultural realm, and include countries that both shared close historical relations with China and were impacted by China’s political and legal institutions, and Confucian and Buddhist traditions. When defined in this way, Vietnam is also included. This chapter, however, as an introduction to the early history of East Asia, will focus on China, Korea, and Japan.

4.3 QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING

1. During China’s Neolithic Age, how did Longshan culture differ from Yangshao culture?
2. What kinds of evidence do we have to reconstruct the first dynasties in Chinese history—the Xia and Shang Dynasties? What can we learn from this evidence?
3. During the Western Zhou Dynasty, how did Zhou kings justify overthrowing the Shang Dynasty, and how did they govern newly-conquered lands?
4. During the Warring States Period, how did the nature of warfare change, and how did the demands of that changing warfare reshape Zhou feudal states?
5. Explain the major ideas of Confucius.
6. Explain the major ideas and practices of Daoism.
7. Why was the Qin Dynasty so important to the history of China? What did the First Emperor of Qin accomplish?
8. Describe prominent features of Han Dynasty society and governing.
9. How did Buddhism become a major religious tradition in China?
10. How was state development in Korea and Japan differently impacted by China?
11. What were the foundations of Tang Dynasty power in East Asia?
12. During the Song Dynasty, China was one of the most developed countries in the world. What features of that dynasty provide evidence supporting that judgment?
13. Describe the status of women during the Song Dynasty.
14. Explain the origins of the Yuan Dynasty and assess its impact on China.
4.4 KEY TERMS

- Anyang
- Asuka-Nara Period
- Cao Cao
- China proper
- Civil service examinations
- Commercialization
- Confucius and Confucianism
- Daoism
- East Asia
- Emperor Wu (Han Dynasty)
- Empress Suiko
- Equal fields system
- Footbinding
- Goguryeo Kingdom
- Imperial Confucianism
- Kublai Khan
- King Wu (Zhou Dynasty)
- Korean Peninsula
- Legalism
- Liu Bang
- Longshan culture
- Mandate of Heaven
- Mounded Tomb Period
- Neo-Confucianism
- North China Plain
- Northern and Southern Dynasties
- Oracle Bones
- Prince Shōtoku
- Qin Dynasty
- Scholar-officials
- Secondary state formation
- Shang Dynasty
- Shang Yang
- Shinto
- Silk Roads
- Silla Dynasty
- Tang Law Code
- Three Kingdoms period
- Xia Dynasty
- Yangshao culture
- Yangzi River
- Yayoi Period
- Yellow River
- Yellow Turbans
- Yuan Dynasty
- Zhao Kuangyin (Song Emperor Taizu)
- Zhou Dynasty and Western Zhou Dynasty
- Zhu Xi

4.5 GEOGRAPHY OF EAST ASIA

China’s early historical development long predated Japan’s and Korea’s, which is why a chapter on East Asian history logically begins in the second millennium BCE with China’s first dynasty. However, today’s nation of China is much larger than China was in ancient times. In earlier times, the bulk of the Chinese population lived in **China proper**, by which we mean the historical heartland of ancient China (see Map 4.1). To the east, China proper is bounded by the Yellow Sea,
East China Sea, and South China Sea. To the south, it is bordered by the mountainous jungles of Southeast Asia. To the west and north, China is rimmed by a transitional frontier zone where land suited to agriculture gives way to mountains and plateau or vast expanses of steppe grasslands and desert. At times, the dynasties of China became actively involved in all of these neighboring areas, incorporating them directly into their expanding empires or indirectly as subordinate, tribute-paying states. Those areas include parts of the Korean Peninsula, Northeast China, Mongolia, Central Asia, and Vietnam.

Within China proper, two rivers were particularly important to the formation of agricultural communities that served as the building blocks of Chinese civilization. Those were the Yellow River and Yangzi River. The Yellow River meanders through the northern half of China, where a cool, dry climate is well-suited to wheat and millet farming. Beginning far to the west, this river meanders over dusty plateau, becomes muddied with silt, and then deposits this sediment along its middle and lower reaches. The plains surrounding these reaches are collectively referred to as the North China Plain. Historically, this was the heartland of Chinese civilization. However, the Yangzi River was just as important. Located in south China where the weather is relatively warmer and wetter, its long basin provided fertile soil for rice-paddy agriculture. Over time, the early dynasties expanded into and included the settled agricultural communities in this region.

Japan is an island country consisting of four main islands and many smaller ones located off the Pacific coast of the Asian continent. At 400,000 square kilometers, Japan is slightly smaller than California, although the terrain is more rugged. Because Japan is covered by mountains and traversed by numerous rivers, only fifteen percent of the land is suited to agriculture. Much of that was concentrated in two plains—the Kinai Plain and Kanto Plain—making them particularly important to Japan’s early history. Japan is also located along the Pacific Ring of Fire, where tectonic plates composing the earth’s crust frequently move and collide. That is why earthquakes and volcanic activity have been a constant threat to populations living on these islands.

The Korean Peninsula is the location of North and South Korea today. Prior to the twentieth century, however, it saw a long succession of Korean kingdoms. Extending roughly 1100 kilometers
southward from the Asian landmass, the peninsula is bounded by seas to the east, west, and south, and defined by the Yalu River to the north. Beyond that lies Northeast China which was only periodically included in the territory of Chinese empires. Consequently, because the peninsula lies between China to the north and west and Japan to the east, Korean dynasties have been deeply impacted by these states’ histories and cultures. Like Japan, Korea is also mountainous, although coastal areas and plains located to the west and south were well-suited to agriculture.

The countries of East Asia share in the region’s temperate climate and summer monsoon season. During the summer months, warm and moist air originating from the Pacific flows from southeast to northwest, while during the winter months cold and dry air originating from Central Asia moves in the opposite direction. Thus, those areas of East Asia located further to the east and south are generally warmer and wetter, and for longer periods of time. That made them well-suited to rice-paddy agriculture, and rice consequently became the primary cereal crop in southern China, the Korean peninsula, and the islands of Japan. While growing rice is labor intensive, this grain also offers high yields per unit of land, so it has supported population growth in these countries and, therefore, the formation of vibrant civilizations.

4.6 CHINA FROM NEOLITHIC VILLAGE SETTLEMENTS TO THE SHANG KINGDOM

Chapters Two and Three covered the development of the first major civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and India. In each case, rivers were particularly important to that process because they offered a stable supply of water for agriculture. Similarly, in China, the first major states emerged along China’s second longest river—the Yellow River. These states are the Xia [shee-ah] Dynasty (c. 1900 – 1600 BCE), Shang [shawng] Dynasty (1600 – 1046 BCE), and Zhou [joe] Dynasty (1045 – 256 BCE). Each of these kingdoms was ruled by a line of hereditary monarchs hailing from one lineage, which is why they are also referred to as dynasties.

Because written sources don’t become available until the Shang
Dynasty, historians have relied heavily on the archaeological record to reconstruct the process by which these states arose. Looking back at the end of the Paleolithic era (c. 10,000 BCE), East Asia was sparsely populated by bands of foragers living in temporary settlements. During the eighth millennium BCE, in China, some of these hunter-gatherers turned to domesticated cereals for a stable food supply and settled into villages so they could cultivate them. Thus, the Neolithic Age (8000 – 2000 BCE) commenced.

Over the course of those six millennia leading up to the Xia Dynasty, Neolithic communities became more diverse and complex. For instance, for the period 5000 – 3000 BCE, archaeologists have identified at least eight major regional Neolithic cultures located along rivers and coasts (see Map 4.2). They did so by examining pottery styles and village settlement patterns. One example is Yangshao culture, which was concentrated along the middle reaches of the Yellow River. Over one thousand sites left behind by millet-farming village communities have been discovered. Jiangzhai (c. 4000 BCE), for instance, was a moated village settlement that occupied roughly thirteen acres (see Figure 4.2). It was composed of related lineages and tribal in organization.

During the third millennium BCE, Yangshao culture was gradually supplanted by Longshan culture (c. 3000 – 1900 BCE), which emerged further to the east, along the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River. In 1928, when archaeologists excavated a site near the town after which Longshan was named, they found evidence for a culture that had laid the foundations for the kingdoms that emerged in the second millennium BCE, including the ruins of numerous walled towns with cemeteries outside (see Map 4.3). Their rammed-earth walls protected urban areas with public buildings, roads, and drainage systems. The cemetery’s arrangement suggests that people living in the towns were buried alongside clan members, but also that some members were wealthier and more powerful: while most graves had nothing but a skeleton, others contained numerous artifacts, such as pottery and jade.

Based on this evidence, archaeologists have concluded that, during the third millennium BCE, population grew and some of it shifted from villages to walled towns. These walled towns developed into political and economic centers exercising control over and serving as protection for surrounding communities. Individuals with more elaborate graves were likely political and
Ancient Chinese histories identify the first major kingdom as the **Xia Dynasty** (c. 1900 – 1600 BCE). However, these were written many centuries after the kingdom about which they speak and, lacking written evidence from the dynasty itself, specialists have been unable to definitively establish its location. Nevertheless, most agree that the Xia capital was located along the Yellow River at Erlitou [are-lee-toe] (see Map 4.3). At its peak of activity from 1900 – 1600 BCE, this town looks like something more complex than a chiefdom. Erlitou included a central, walled palace complex (see Figure 4.3), workshops for the production of bronze and pottery, and elite burials containing bronze weapons and jade, suggesting a socially stratified, Bronze Age civilization and kingdom. That is why many historians identify it as the capital of the Xia Dynasty.

With the **Shang Dynasty** (1600 – 1046 BCE), we formally step into China’s historical period. In 1899, in an apothecary, a Chinese scholar came across mysterious bones that were being ground up for use as medicine. He immediately recognized that the Chinese characters inscribed on them were very ancient. Subsequently, the origin of these bones was traced to fields in Anyang [anne-yawng], China where, beginning in 1928, excavations were carried out.
Similar to the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization, a lost civilization was revealed on the North China Plain, the one difference being that traditional histories of a later time had documented this one (see Map 4.4).

The findings were substantial. A diverse array of settlements with a royal capital at the center covered nearly thirty square kilometers (see Map 4.5). Archaeologists have identified 53 pounded earth foundations as the floors of royal palace-temples and the ruins in their vicinity as residential areas for elites and commoners; sacrificial pits; and workshops for the production of bronze, pottery, and stone. Also, a royal cemetery with eight large tombs and dozens of smaller ones lies to the northwest. The larger graves were roughly half the size of a football field, each accessible through four ramps whose orientation to the cardinal directions gives them the appearance of crosses. Deep down at the bottom of each tomb’s central shaft, wooden chambers were built to house the dead bodies of Shang kings. Shockingly to us, dozens of human skeletons were placed above and below these, presumably as servants to accompany rulers in the afterlife (view reconstruction of a Xia Dynasty palace at Erlitou at the following link: http://www.waa.ox.ac.uk/XDB/images/world/tours/china-erlitou2.jpg).

**Anyang**, we now know, served as the last capital of the Shang Dynasty, from 1200 to 1046 BCE. It was at the center of a loosely governed territorial state located...
on the North China Plain. Shang kings directly governed the capital and its vicinity, but likely controlled areas farther out by building confederations with locally powerful lineage chieftains, and regularly hunting, warring, and carrying out rituals with them. Some of those leaders were directly related to the Shang kings, and some were allies by marriage.

The bones are the most important source for understanding this kingdom. Most of the two hundred thousand fragments found so far are either turtle plastrons or scapula from cows. Interestingly, these were used for divination, which is why they are called oracle bones (see...
When Shang kings or his diviners sought to know the future, they would proceed to a temple erected in honor of a Shang deity or the spirits of deceased ancestors in the royal line. Before a stone tablet, they would make a statement about what might happen (for example, “It will rain,” or “If we attack the Mafang [high god], Di will confer assistance on us”), and then apply heat to a hole bored into a bone until it cracked. The crack was viewed as the response from the god or spirit. The king would then determine whether or not it was auspicious, and a record would be inscribed on the bone, sometimes including the actual outcome (see Figure 4.6). From these, we know that Shang elites believed that a high god Di, nature gods, and the spirits of deceased kings controlled the future. That is why Shang kings had massive bronzes cast and carried out sacrifices for them. The bronzes were filled with food and placed at the temples, literally to feed the spirits. Likewise, the sacrificial pits show that a substantial shedding of blood for these higher powers was a regular occurrence. Shang elites worshipped their ancestors and frequently divined to determine their will.

4.7 THE LONG ZHOU DYNASTY (1046 – 256 BCE)

After the Xia and Shang, the next major dynasty in Chinese history is the Zhou Dynasty (1045 – 256 BCE). In 1046 BCE, a Zhou king overthrew the last Shang ruler and established control over much of north China. In the early centuries of Zhou rule, during the Western Zhou (1046 – 771 BCE), Zhou kings dispatched kinsmen to territories he granted to them (see Map 4.6). These nobles were allowed to rule their own lands hereditarily, so long as they observed certain obligations to their king.
But over time, Zhou kings lost their ability to control these lords, and the lords became increasingly independent. In 771 BCE, in what became a telling sign of weakness, the Zhou king was murdered and his young successor was compelled to relocate farther east, to a capital closer to the heart of the North China Plain. This move marked the beginning of the Eastern Zhou (770 – 256 BCE). Over the long course of this half millennium, Zhou nobility engaged in escalating warfare with each other over matters small and large. As they did so, their lands evolved into powerful states (see Map 4.7). Eventually, the noble lords of the most powerful states also declared themselves kings, and fought to gain control over all of China. During the third century BCE, the Zhou Kingdom was destroyed and one of these warring states, the Qin Dynasty, prevailed over the rest.

But these centuries were not only marked by the growth of states and accelerating warfare between them. Burgeoning turmoil also inspired much thinking about what was needful to restore order and create a good society, as well as what defined the good life. Two major philosophical traditions emerged to address these issues: Confucianism and Daoism.

4.7.1 The Western Zhou Dynasty (1046 – 771 BCE)

In the eleventh century BCE, the Zhou state was a minor power on the western periphery of the Shang realm, located along the Wei River. In 1059, upon witnessing five planets align, the Zhou ruler declared himself king and proceeded to engage in military conquests that made his kingdom a regional power to be reckoned with. This was King Wen (“Cultured King”), a ruler revered as the founder of the Zhou dynasty. But it was his son King Wu (“Martial King”) who brought down the Shang Dynasty. He assumed the throne upon his father’s death and, in 1046, led three-hundred chariots and 45,000 foot soldiers equipped with bronze armor and pole-mounted dagger-axes to a location just outside the Shang capital, where he met with and decisively defeated the last Shang king and his army.

King Wu then returned to his capital in the Wei River Valley, where he passed away in 1043 BCE. His young son took the throne, but was placed under the regency of Wu’s capable brother, the Duke of Zhou. Now, the Zhou royal court was faced with the task of governing newly conquered territory, including the former lands of the Shang Dynasty. The king and his regent did so by implementing three policies. First, they established a secondary capital farther east at Luoyang, closer to the North China Plain. Second, they issued proclamations explaining to conquered peoples why they should accept Zhou rule. According to the Duke of Zhou, Heaven had decreed that Shang kings must fall and Zhou rulers should replace them. The Shang dynasty had begun with wise and benevolent rulers, but later kings were cruel and incompetent, and failed to see to the well-being of their subjects. Thus, a dynasty once sanctioned by Heaven had lost this sanction; now, Heaven had called upon Zhou rulers to overthrow the Shang dynasty and initiate a new era of just rule. This political theory, which is known as the Mandate of Heaven, would also be used by founders of later dynasties to justify their actions, as well as by theorists to explain the rise and fall of dynasties.

The third policy the Zhou court adopted was to dispatch royal kinsmen to strategically critical locations for the purpose of establishing colonies. At their royal palaces, Zhou kings conducted
ceremonies of investiture during which they sacrificed to Heaven and the spirits of deceased ancestors, held banquets, and then bestowed noble titles and grants of land upon members of the royal family and relatives by marriage. Large bronzes were cast to commemorate these occasions (see Figure 4.7). These lords—dukes, marquis, earls, and barons—then took their families, contingents of soldiers, and emblems of nobility to the granted territory and set up palaces and ancestral temples in walled towns. From there, these illustrious lineages governed a predominantly rural population of farmers living in villages where life was not easy. Living in hovels and with little opportunity to leave their lord’s manors, these farmers were required to work his lands and also to submit a portion of the harvest from their own small farms.

Historians call this method of governing Zhou kinship feudalism. Feudalism generally describes a political and economic system characterized by fragmented authority, a set of obligations (usually of a military nature) between lords and vassals, and grants of land (“fiefs”) by rulers in exchange for some type of service (see Chapters Three and Twelve). Indeed, Zhou kings granted land and noble titles to kinsmen in exchange for obedience, periodic visits to the king’s palace, tribute, and military support. However, aside from the presence of royal overseers, a hereditary lord enjoyed relative sovereignty in his own domain. The glue that held the Zhou feudal order together was deference to the king and his Mandate and reverence for their shared history—including, most importantly, the deceased spirits of their related ancestors.

Over time, however, Zhou kinship feudalism failed to function as intended by the founding rulers. In brief, Zhou kings’ ability to control the noble lords diminished over time, and their prestige suffered accordingly. There were two principal reasons for this. First, ties of kinship so crucial to the founding of Zhou lost their meaning over time. In later generations, lords simply became more interested in and identified with their own territories, and they had little sense of solidarity with what were at best distant cousins ruling neighboring feudal states. Hence, it is hardly surprising that histories inform us that the many lords ceased to pay visits to the king's
court. Second, Zhou kings were unable to impose their will on feuding feudal lords and were even defeated by them in several military campaigns. In 771 BCE, for instance, King You [yo] was attacked by the allied forces of the lord of Shen and tribal peoples residing out west. The capital was sacked, and he was killed. Other states came to the rescue, relocating the king’s son, Prince Ping, to the eastern capital at Luoyang. Zhou kings remained there for the next five hundred years, during the period called the Eastern Zhou.

4.7.2 The Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770 – 256 BCE) and the Warring States Period (c. 475 – 221 BCE)

When King Ping was relocated to Luoyang, he ruled from a much smaller royal domain surrounded by approximately 150 feudal states and their lords. His and his successors’ power was, however, much reduced. No longer able to impose their will on unruly noble lineages, Zhou kings failed to maintain a semblance of peace and order throughout the realm. Instead, this warrior nobility engaged in an escalating contest for power and prestige. By 475 BCE, in the wake of 540 wars fought over the course of two centuries, only fifteen states remained (see Map 4.7). But they fought even more fiercely. Over the next 250 years, during what is referred to as the Warring
**States Period** (475 – 221 BCE), these states averaged one major battle per year until, at the very end, only one remained standing. That was the state of Qin [cheen]. The Warring States period ended in 221 BCE when the Qin ruler defeated the remaining states and unified the former Zhou realm, initiating a new period in China’s history. The line of Zhou kings had, however, already been extinguished in 256 BCE, so that date marks the end of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty.

As the frequency and scale of warfare escalated, and states gradually gobbled each other up, the way feudal lords governed their states and conducted military campaigns changed. Prior to the Warring States Period, Zhou kings were still accorded a level of respect, at least as symbols of unity and nominal heads of the Zhou feudal order. At this point, the many lords had no intention of toppling the king; rather, seeing his military weakness, the most powerful ones stepped in to enforce order. The first was Duke Huan of Qi [who-an of chee]. He held this title (“duke”) and fief (Qi) because his distant ancestor had served as a commander under King Wu during the Zhou founding. Now, many generations later, his state was a formidable power on the east coast.
651 BCE, he convened an interstate meeting with other lords to discuss matters of order and security. Upon being elected as their leader, the Zhou king conferred the title of **hegemon**. In this capacity, Duke Huan had the authority to resolve disputes between nobles on behalf of the king.

Over the next two centuries, this title changed hands several times, going to the lord of the most powerful state. These hegemons periodically convened interstate meetings to manage such matters as misbehaving states or foreign invasions. Attending lords cemented their agreements by swearing oaths and drinking the blood of sacrificed animals. Yet, although hegemons maintained a semblance of order, warfare remained constant because it was a way of life for the illustrious lineages of the Zhou realm. Noble lords loved to demonstrate their prowess and raise their prestige through success in hunting and battling. A noble looked for a pretext to engage in a vendetta with another lord, at which point a battle was arranged and then carried out according to the protocols of chivalry. After announcing the impending campaign at the ancestral temple, a lord and his kinsmen, accompanied by farmer foot soldiers, would proceed in their chariots to a prearranged location and engage in a skirmish. In victory, a noble redressed matters of honor and brought glory to his ancestors, something symbolized by the mound of dead enemies placed by his ancestral temple.

However, with the onset of the Warring States Period in the fifth century BCE, the level of violence was no longer contained by the hegemon system and codes of chivalry. Both the purpose and conduct of warfare changed. Lords of the seven most powerful states lost respect for the Zhou kings and even assumed the same title, thus claiming the right to unify all of China under their rule. As opposed to serving a lesson to and resolving some dispute with another lord, these self-declared kings waged war to destroy them and take their land.

Hence, battles became increasingly bloody and bitter, and victory went to those kings who could field the most effective killing machines. Chariot-riding kinsmen and a few thousand foot soldiers no longer met that requirement. During the Warring States, rulers introduced large armies composed of mass infantry and cavalry. Soldiers were equipped with armor, crossbows, halberds, dagger-axes, and swords manufactured from bronze, iron, leather, and wood in royal workshops located at capital cities. (View the image of a Warring States Period soldier at the following link: http://brandonqindynasty.weebly.com/uploads/1/0/3/9/10391259/8580061.jpeg. One description of an elite soldier states that he wears heavy armor, shoulders a large crossbow and fifty arrows, straps a halberd to his back, buckles a helmet to his head, and places a sword to his side.) Kings also militarized their kingdoms’ landscapes by building forts at strategically critical passes, walls to mark off boundaries, and watch towers to signal the enemy’s approach. Finally, these rulers no longer relied solely on close kinsmen to wage war alongside them. Rather, they created a class of military commanders and specialists whose promotion was based on their ability to produce victories in the field. It is therefore not surprising that during this time some of China’s greatest military treatises were written, most notably the *Art of War* by Master Sun [sue-in]. Master Sun was a military commander and strategist who served the lords of the state of Wu just prior to the onset of the Warring States period (c. fifth century BCE). The manual of military strategy and tactics attributed to him stresses the importance of formulating a strategy that insures victory prior to any campaigning. Stratagem is critical. “All warfare is deception,” Master Sun states. “Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we
must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near.”

To mobilize large numbers of men for war and supply them with weapons and grain, kings devised ways to make their realms more productive and compliant with their will. Prior to the Warring States Period, it was the norm for nobility to hand out land in their states to kinsmen, just as it had been for the king during the Western Zhou. This practice meant that lesser but related aristocratic lineages lived in estates across each noble’s territory, while also serving as ministers at his court. For a king, however, these men might become an obstacle or pose a threat because they held this land hereditarily. Therefore, they devised better ways to control land in their realms. Whenever new territory was added or a noble line was extinguished, kings created counties and appointed magistrates to manage the villages and towns in that area. The magistrate’s job would then be to register the population, maintain law and order, collect tax revenue, and conscript people for labor projects and military campaigns. And rather than give those posts to kinsmen, kings appointed men from the lower ranks of the nobility or commoners based on their loyalty and merit. Stated more simply, Warring States Period rulers created administrative units and a civil service. Their embryonic bureaucracies included such features as a system of official posts, salaries paid in grain and gifts, administrative codes, and methods for measuring a servant’s performance. Thus, by the end of this period, largely owing to the demands of warfare, the Zhou feudal order had been supplanted by a small number of powerful territorial states with centralized monarchies. Among them, the most successful was the state of Qin, which eventually conquered all of China and became an empire. We return to that topic after reviewing the ideas put forward by philosophers in the context of these centuries of turmoil.

4.7.3 Philosophy in a Time of Turmoil: Confucianism and Daoism

China’s three major pre-modern philosophical and religious traditions are Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. The first two had their origins in the later centuries of the Eastern Zhou, while Buddhism only began to arrive from South Asia in the first century C.E. Confucianism and Daoism were both responses to the crisis presented by the breakdown of the Zhou feudal order and escalating warfare in China.

4.7.3.1: Confucius and Confucianism

Confucius lived just prior to the Warring States Period (551-479 BCE). What little we know about his life comes primarily from the Analects, a record of conversations Confucius held with his students compiled after he died. In later centuries, in China, Confucius was revered as a sage and teacher, and even today outside of China some people might think of him as a stern pedant, perhaps calling to mind sayings beginning with “The Master said.” However, in the context of his time, Confucius was anything but stiff and rather a dynamic individual who believed he was mandated by Heaven to return the world to a more socially and politically harmonious time. The Analects not only shows a serious and learned man, but also someone capable in archery and horsemanship, who loved music and ritual, and who untiringly travelled the feudal states in the
hopes of serving in a lord’s retinue (see Figure 4.8). According to one passage, a lord once asked one of Confucius’s students about his master, but the student fell silent. Later, Confucius asked him, “Why did you not say: As a man, when agitated in thought he forgets to eat, joyfully forgetting his cares, not realizing that old age is near at hand?”

Confucius was born to a family of minor nobility and modest means in the feudal state of Lu. His father died about the time Confucius was born, and he was raised by his mother, who also passed away when Confucius was young. Like other young men of similar background, he had access to an education and could aspire to serve in some capacity in a feudal state, perhaps at the lord’s court, or as an official or soldier. Confucius chose to become learned and seek office. To his mind, he was living at a time when civilization was collapsing and society was decaying. He believed that, during the early Zhou, the nobility was honorable, observed moral codes, and upheld social standards. He believed that a golden age existed in the past and wished to transmit the ethical values of that time. However, in the course of doing so, he reinterpreted the past and imbued the virtues he stressed with rich, new meanings. Here are a few of the important statements Confucius made, and what they meant:

1. “The noble person is concerned with rightness, the small person is concerned with profit.” (4.16) Confucius redefined the meaning of nobility. For him, nobility was defined not by birth but rather by character and conduct. A truly noble person is one who puts what is right before personal gain and the desire for wealth and fame.

2. “Young men should be filial at home and respectful to their elders when away from home.” (1.6) Filial piety is central to Confucius’s thought. He taught how a person becomes moral because a good society only develops when composed of and led by virtuous people. He saw the practice of morality in the family as the root. Should a young man learn to be respectful and reverent towards parents and elders, he will become a humane person, and humane people are far more likely to contribute in a positive way to society.

3. “The noble man does not abandon humaneness for so much as the space of a meal.” (4.5) For Confucius, the highest virtue is humanity, and many of his conversations center upon defining what it is that makes a person humane. A person of humanity is, for instance, one who is capable of empathy and unselfish concern for the welfare of others. They know the golden rule: “what you would not want for yourself,” he taught,
“do not do to others.” (15.23) Confucius emphasized that a society cannot function if people are incapable of taking other’s perspectives and doing their best for them. In addition, he insisted that such virtues as humanity are most fully demonstrated when individuals observe good etiquette. Decorum was important to Confucius.

4. “Heaven has given birth to the virtue that is in me.” (7.22) Interpreters of Confucius have rightly noted that he is quite silent about the supernatural and what happens after death, rather emphasizing the life we have and serving others. Yet, it would be wrong to conclude that he wasn’t religious in any sense, because he frequently spoke of Heaven. He believed that Heaven ordains a certain course of life for each individual, including becoming a moral person. This Heaven, however, is less a deity than a higher moral order, a kind of beneficent presence.

5. “To govern is to rectify. If you lead the people by being rectified yourself, who will dare not be rectified?” (12.17) Confucius believed that good governing flows from good men. The first qualification for a ruler or one who serves is moral rectitude. If those who lead do so by virtue and conduct themselves according to rules of propriety, people will learn from them and develop a sense of honor and shame. Consequently, society will become more orderly.

The noble person, filial piety, humaneness, etiquette, Heaven, and government by men of virtue are just some of the ideas Confucius discussed as he traveled the feudal states seeking to advise their lords. However, he only managed to hold some minor offices in Lu and generally failed in his political aspirations. Instead, he gained an avid following of 70 students, whom he accepted regardless of their social status. After he died, they passed on his teachings, and a school of thought emerged from his teachings known as Confucianism. Those who belonged to it are Confucians—individuals distinguished by their commitment to the ideas articulated by Confucius, classical learning, and the value they place on character and conduct as the key to a good society and political order.

4.7.3.2: Philosophical and Institutional Daoism

During the turmoil of the Warring States period, however, other individuals developed a philosophy very different from Confucianism called Daoism. These Daoists largely rejected Confucian ideas about human moral development and social order as artificial constructs. Rather, they pointed to a natural condition that both individuals and society can recover, one that existed before desires trapped people in a world of strife. Their central concept is the Dao (“Way”). The Dao is mysterious: it is beyond sense perception and yet the source of life and the universe, the ultimate truth transcending the polarities that make up life and yet pervades them, empty and yet the mother of all things.

Paradoxically, although the Dao is indescribable and can’t be seen or heard, the goal of the Daoist is to accord with and follow it. But this goal won’t be accomplished through more seeking and

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1 These selections from the Analects are translated in De Bary and Bloom, ed., Sources of Chinese Tradition, Vol. 1: From Earliest Times to the Present, 44-63.
more knowledge. Rather, the mind must be emptied out, calmed, and purified, until desires are absent and a primordial, natural condition is restored. At that point, when the individual is in accord with the ineffable Way, life becomes spontaneous, natural, and effortless.

The two most important early books belonging to this tradition are named after their putative authors: the *Laozi* (“Old Master”) and *Zhuangzi* (“Master Zhuang”). Historians believe the “Old Master” was a fictional sage invented by Warring States Period philosophers who compiled the book attributed to him. Master Zhuang, however, lived during the fourth century BCE.

In later centuries, the Daoism of these early philosophers was taken in new directions. The definition of the Way was broadened to include the idea that individuals have a spiritual essence in need of harmonizing and liberation. By so doing, it was believed, one’s health would be preserved and life prolonged. Daoists even entertained the idea that one could become immortal. To achieve these goals, techniques were developed, including special dietary regimens, yoga, Chinese boxing, meditation, and alchemy.

Over the course of the first millennium CE, Daoism also became a popular and institutionalized religion. Daoist masters, claiming divine inspiration, composed esoteric texts for their followers. These texts explained how the natural world originated from a primordial ether (qi) and its division into two polar forces: the *yin* and *yang* (see Figure 4.9). They presented a universe with multiple heavenly and hellish realms populated with divinities and demons. The principal purpose of these Daoists was to attend to a person’s physical and psychological well-being. That involved not only teaching individual techniques for preserving the life spirit, but also the use of exorcism and faith healing to remove malevolent influences. Daoists also developed communal prayers and rituals that could cure illness, free souls from hell, win blessings from heaven, and eliminate sins from the community. Eventually, a Daoist church developed, with its own ordained priesthood, temples, and monasteries.

### 4.8 THE QIN DYNASTY AND THE TRANSITION FROM ANCIENT TO IMPERIAL CHINA

In 219 BCE, while touring his realm, the First Emperor of Qin [cheen] (259 – 210 BCE) erected a stone tablet atop a mountain with an inscription proclaiming:
They [the Qin ministers] recall and contemplate the times of chaos:
When [regional lords] apportioned the land, established their states,
And thus unfolded the pattern of struggle.
Attacks and campaigns were daily waged;
They shed their blood in the open countryside. . . .
Now today, the August Emperor has unified All-under-Heaven into one family—
Warfare will not arise again!
Disaster and harm are exterminated and erased,
The black-headed people live in peace and stability, benefits and blessings are lasting
and enduring.2

Indeed, just two years prior, in 221 BCE, the First Emperor had brought the
Warring States Period to a close by defeating the last remaining state. Hence,
he had realized the aspirations held by the many rulers he subjugated,
that is, to unify the known world under one powerful monarch and, by so doing,
to initiate an age of peace and prosperity, one rooted in obedience to a
sagely ruler.

The title “First Emperor of Qin,” however, was assumed by this conqueror only in the wake of his
final victory, and it made sense. Having crushed the many warring kingdoms, the First Emperor did indeed create something new and more significant:
an immense territorial state centrally administered from his capital, by a monarch with unchallenged sovereignty (see Map 4.8). So how did his state—the Qin kingdom—prevail?

Map 4.8 | The Qin Empire in 210 BCE | The capital was located along the Wei River Valley at Xianyang.
Author: User "Itsmine"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: CC BY-SA 3.0

When the First Emperor inherited the Qin throne at the age of 13 in 246 BCE, he became King Zheng [jung], young ruler of the most powerful of the seven remaining Warring States. Looking back, he would understand that he had inherited a state whose origins dated back to the Western Zhou Period, when land to the west of the Zhou kings was granted as a fief to his chieftain forbears. The Qin star first rose when a Qin lord assisted King Ping in relocating to the eastern capital during the transition from the Western to the Eastern Zhou Period (c. 770 BCE). At that time, the old Zhou heartland was granted to him, and he was elevated to the status of a regional lord, the Duke of Qin.

The Dukes of Qin were important players throughout the centuries of warfare and alliances so characteristic of the Eastern Zhou, and especially after the reforms of Duke Xiao [she-ow] (r. 361 – 338). These reforms were based on the advice of his chancellor Shang Yang [shawng yawng], an individual famed for being one of the founders of another major intellectual tradition that developed during the Warring States Period: Legalism. The legalists were in tune with the efforts
rulers were putting forth to strengthen their states. Their goal was to devise the best techniques for organizing a state’s territory and people so as to maximize a ruler’s power and control in times of both war and peace. Legalists believed that the best way to do so was to concentrate authority in one central administration governed by an absolute monarch.

To these ends, Shang Yang introduced many measures, laying the foundations for future Qin greatness. He believed that the basis for state power lay with an obedient and disciplined farming population, because that was the principal source of revenue and conscripts for the army. So he organized villages across the land into units of five families each, and made the members of each unit responsible for each other. Every member would be rewarded based on the amount of grain the unit produced or the number of severed heads returned from the battlefield. For meritorious service to the state, a unit could advance along a system of ranks, each of which bestowed certain privileges. But should any member commit a crime, everyone would be severely punished. To make this more effective, the Qin state developed a legal code with clear lists of penalties for specific crimes, made it publicly available, and applied it uniformly to people regardless of their social status. Also, the Qin was among the most effective in establishing a civil service and county system to administer the law. Qin subjects lived under a regime with a transparent set of expectations, and also a system of rewards and punishments. Such rationality in matters of efficiently organizing a state through the uniform application of laws and regularizing administration, as implemented by Shang Yang, were a mark of legalist thinkers’ methods.

After Duke Xiao’s and Shang Yang’s time, Qin rulers assumed the title of king and engaged in numerous battles, destroying several neighboring states. Some of these were major engagements. According to one account, after the Qin kingdom defeated the state of Zhao, a Qin general ordered 400,000 captured soldiers buried alive. Also, the Qin put an end to the Zhou royal line after conquering their territory in 256 BCE. Hence, King Zheng was heir to a kingdom whose success in battle derived in part from legalist reforms. In line with that tradition, he too employed a legalist advisor.

As of 230 BCE, only six other Warring States remained (see Map 4.9). Over the next decade, King Zheng led a series of massive campaigns each of which entailed both sides fielding over one hundred thousand
soldiers. This was a bloody time, as one state after another fell. By 221 BCE, the Chinese realm was unified under Qin rule.

Although the Qin Dynasty (221 – 207 BCE) was brief-lived, it had a lasting effect on China because of the stable administrative foundation it laid. The First Emperor of Qin and his advisors invented the title used by all subsequent rulers. They made newly conquered territory a part of their centralized bureaucracy. From his royal court and central administration, the emperor governed a land organized into a hierarchical system of commanderies (provinces that began as military outposts) and counties. His regime standardized currency and the system of writing, and issued regulations for uniform weights and measures.

The emperor was also a great builder. Over 6800 kilometers of road were laid to connect the capital at Xianyang to each province and the northern border. Walls built by former northern states to protect against non-Chinese nomads to their north were linked together in an earlier version of the Great Wall. All of these measures served to facilitate communication and commerce across the land and, therefore, political stability and cultural unification. As a symbol of his power, the First Emperor also constructed an imposing palace (see Figure 4.10) and mausoleum (see Introduction). For all these reasons, historians mark Qin unification as the beginning of China’s imperial era.

4.9 THE HAN DYNASTY, 202 BCE – 220 CE

After the First Emperor died in 210 BCE, the Qin Empire rapidly disintegrated. Historians debate causes but highlight weak successors manipulated by the intrigues of a high minister and court eunuch; excessive demands on the population for building projects, tax revenue, and military conscription; and a climate of fear created by the harshly punitive legal system. Regardless, by 207 BCE revolts were breaking out across the land, as rebels accrued armies, seized territory, and even declared themselves kings. China then fell into a state of civil war for five years until the intervention of Liu Bang [lee-oh bawng] (d. 195 BCE). A former farmer and village headman who rebelled and built an army and kingdom through his military acumen and charisma, Liu Bang defeated his adversaries and declared himself emperor of a new dynasty.

4.9.1 Government and Society during the Han Dynasty

The Han Dynasty, ruled by 24 successive emperors from the Liu imperial family, is normally divided into a Western Han (202 – 8 BCE) and Eastern Han (25 – 220 CE) because for a brief time an imperial in-law usurped the throne and established his own short-lived dynasty. This brief interregnum aside, the Han Dynasty lasted 400 years, making it second in length only to the Zhou Dynasty. So important was the Han to establishing a pattern in Chinese civilization distinguishing people belonging to it from those around them that Chinese people today refer to their ethnic group as Han Chinese. Also, after adopting the foundations laid by the Qin Dynasty, the Han further strengthened them, cementing an imperial pattern that persisted in China until the fall of the last dynasty (Qing) in 1911.
During the Western Han, the capital was located at Chang’an, while during the Eastern Han, it was located at Luoyang. Note the location of the Xiongnu confederation of nomadic pastoralists living on the steppe lands to the north of China. Han China also extended control far into Central Asia in order to secure the Silk Road trade routes. Most of the dependent states and tributary cities indicated by green and orange dots were brought under the control of China during the reign of Emperor Wu.

As opposed to studying a chronology of important events during these centuries, let’s consider the general picture for the political system and society of the Han Empire. The majority of people—as much as 90 percent of the population—were farmers, living out their lives in villages of a dozen to over 100 households. Some were independent farmers who owned small farms; some, tenants who leased land from owners of larger farms; and some, local magnates with large estates (see Figure 4.11). The government relied heavily on the first group for revenue and conscription and therefore tried to keep these owner-farmers in business with low taxes, relief in times of hardship, and improvement in their agricultural methods. Unfortunately, over the course of the dynasty, many farmers fell on hard times and were forced to sell their land to powerful landlords, thus becoming their tenants or even slaves. Landlordism thus became a major social and political problem, as local great families dominated ever more dependent poor, undermining the central government’s revenue base.
The remaining ten percent of the population lived in urban areas—the towns and cities of Han China—as artisans and traders or officials and garrison soldiers. By some estimates, the total population during these centuries hovered at 60 million, which means about six million were urban residents. Many cities, such as the capitals of both the Western and Eastern Han, had over 100,000 residents (see Map 4.10). The first imperial capital, Chang’an [chawng-an] (“Forever Peace”), was a walled city with twelve gates, watchtowers, market places, residential wards, administrative buildings and, of course, the imperial palace. Some of the agricultural produce, manufactured goods, and raw materials filling up the marketplaces testify to what artisans and traders were busy making, buying, and selling: cooked meats, pickled vegetables, fish, and grains; utensils and tools made of wood, brass, and iron; lacquer ware, jade, and furs; and textiles fashioned from silk and hemp. Imperial highways and lesser byways, and canals and other waterways, provided the routes for moving these goods both within and beyond China. Ever suspicious of the profit motive and believing in the foundational importance of the farmer, government officials supervised city markets and established agencies to regulate the most important industries.

These commoner classes—farmers, artisans, and traders—were governed by a highly organized state and its corps of educated, professional civil servants. For administrative purposes, the empire was eventually divided into roughly 100 commanderies and 1300 counties. 130,000 officials constituted the bureaucracy. At the lowest level, working with village and town leaders, county magistrates handled such matters as tax collection, population registration, conscription for military service, law and order, and public works. They submitted reports to, and took orders from, commandery level military and civil officials, who then did the same with the nine ministries of the central government. These ministries handled such matters as revenue, justice, and foreign relations. The heads of each of these ministries, as well as two chancellors, routinely held audiences with the emperor to decide all policy matters. An independent branch of government, the censorate, audited the rest and reported directly to the emperor.

From the outset, the Han Dynasty inherited the Qin legalist system of government, with its emphasis on rational and efficient methods of administration and use of systems of rewards and punishments to promote order. However, early in the Han, Confucian scholars criticized Qin
governing for lacking humaneness, and Han rulers increasingly saw the benefit of Confucian ideas to governing. This change was particularly the case with Emperor Wu [woo] (r. 141 – 87 BCE). During his reign, Confucius’s ideas were molded into an ideology that legitimated monarchy and a hierarchical social order. This ideology is called Imperial Confucianism. As an ideology, it simply provided a blueprint for how the political and social order should function.

Figure 4.12 | Painting depicting paragons of filial piety on a box excavated from a Han Dynasty tomb | During the Han Dynasty, Confucian values penetrated society, especially the idea that a child should actively demonstrate their reverence and respect for parents.
Author: User “PericlesofAthens”
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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Rulers saw the benefit in having officials who were highly educated, loyal, of good character, and who understood the formalities of ritual and etiquette. An Imperial Academy was founded at the capital in 124 so that students could be educated in classical Confucian texts, including the Analects. Across the country, these students were nominated by local officials based on their learnedness and virtuous conduct. Successful graduates went on to serve as officials, and, because that conferred the highest prestige and status on an individual in Han China, Confucian values penetrated society. Texts were compiled explaining good etiquette, conduct, and ritual requirements for each family member and members of society based on their superior or subordinate status. Filial piety was celebrated in both art and texts (see Figure 4.12), and law codes reinforced social norms by, for example, supporting the authority of the family patriarch, division of property among sons, and arranged marriages. In brief, over the course of the Han Dynasty, Chinese increasingly identified themselves as defenders of a Confucian civilization.

The emperor was at the pinnacle of both Han society and the political system, while the imperial family and in-laws constituted a privileged aristocracy. The emperor’s authority derived
in theory from his having received the mandate of Heaven, his virtue, and his role as mediator between the celestial realms and human world; as such, he could expect his subjects’ obedience and loyalty. He resided within the walls of the imperial palace at the capital city, attended by eunuchs who handled his personal needs, palace administration, and the imperial harem. Emperors had numerous consorts but also a principal wife—the empress—who held a special status and was quite influential, usually because she bore the heir to the throne, but also because she and her in-laws were an intimate part of the emperor’s palace life. Often, the imperial family, imperial in-laws, eunuchs, and high officials broke apart into squabbling factions fighting for power and influence; this contention had deleterious consequences for the smooth functioning of the political system.

4.9.2 China and the Outer World during the Han Dynasty

Strengthened by its ever more confident political system and society, Han China also became an expansive empire, occupying and colonizing territory all along its borders. Sometimes this process was gradual: as migrants and merchants moved into neighboring areas, the government followed by setting up garrisons to protect them and eventually counties with civil servants to govern them. In other cases, armies were sent to subdue unstable borders or to secure trade routes. Regardless, as the dominant power in the region, China’s actions profoundly influenced and shaped the history of peoples and states in neighboring areas of Central and East Asia.

Traditionally, the biggest threats to the settled agricultural population of China came from non-Chinese nomadic pastoralists scattered about the steppe lands along the northern border (see Chapter Ten). These skilled horsemen and hunters tended their herds from horseback, resided in mobile campsites made up of yurts, and organized as tribes. These tribes usually selected the most skilled male warriors as their chieftains and also periodically organized into confederations so as to raid Chinese villages and towns (see Chapter Ten). During the Han, the most threatening confederation was knit together by Xiongnu [she-ong-new] (see Map 4.10). The founding emperor, Liu Bang, sought to subdue them with his armies but was defeated and forced to pay tribute and offer imperial princesses in marriage to their chieftains. Emperor Wu, however, enjoying a stronger government, sent massive armies of over 100,000 soldiers campaigning deep into Xiongnu territory, breaking up their confederation and forcing them to relocate. Although his armies suffered great losses, Emperor Wu established garrisons across the northern border to consolidate his gains and protect China.

As Emperor Wu brought the Xiongnu under control, he became curious about Central Asian territories lying to the west of China. Interested in finding allies that might support him in his efforts to control nomad confederations, he sent envoys on exploratory missions. They returned with news of trade routes extending from oasis city-states ringing the forbidding deserts of the Taklamakan Desert to countries lying beyond the Pamir Mountains. What they were speaking of were the earliest **Silk Roads** (see Map 4.11). Merchants had been using camels to carry such goods as silk from China to distant civilizations while bringing back gold, horses, and various handicrafts and foodstuffs. For that reason, beginning in 104 BCE,
Emperor Wu dispatched armies to subdue the region as far as the Pamir Mountains, making the Han Dynasty overlords to Central Asian states, which were now obligated to send tribute and hostages. A frontier network of walls and watchtowers was then extended partway into the region. The Silk Roads were thus secured, and, because it could be conducted more safely, the volume of traffic grew. During the Han Dynasty, China demonstrated its intention of being a dominant player in Central Asia.

Map 4.11 | Map of the Silk Road trade routes during the Han Dynasty
Author: Wikimedia Commons User “Алый Король” and Leo Timm
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4.9.3 Conclusion: The Han Dynasty and Empires in History

These are some of the outstanding features of the Han Empire, and ones that can also be compared to other empires that existed at this time in other parts of the world, such as Mauryan Empire in India (see Chapter Three), Persian Empire in the Middle East (Chapter Five), or Roman Empire (see Chapter Six). Each empire conferred a special status on rulers, had an organized imperial administration with an educated civil service, maintained a large army to defend an expanding and increasingly well-defined territory, and developed an ideology and legal codes that justified authority and reinforced social order. Confident in the superiority of their organized governments, powerful militaries, and worldview, each of these empires proceeded to extend control over neighboring states and peoples.
4.10 THE PERIOD OF DIVISION, 220 – 589 CE

Like these other empires, the Han Dynasty also eventually fell. China was then divided up by independent, short-lived kingdoms until 589 CE, when the Sui Dynasty reunited most of the territory once controlled by the Han. Thus, for four centuries, during what is known as the Period of Division, China was politically unstable and racked by endemic warfare. Yet, in spite of the violence, these centuries also saw vibrant cultural developments, as Buddhism became an organized institutional religion reshaping the spiritual landscape.

4.10.1 Political History–From Three Kingdoms (220 – 280) and the Western Jin (265 – 317) to the Northern and Southern Dynasties (317 – 589)

During the second century CE, a combination of factors led to massive rebellions against the Han Dynasty by lower classes living in the countryside. Many once thriving, independent farmers who fell on hard times lost their land to powerful local families who used their political connections to amass large estates. A series of floods and droughts and the famines and epidemics they caused only worsened these farmers’ plight, and the government was ineffective in providing relief. During the later Han, government revenue had fallen because local magnates kept their growing estates off the tax rolls. Also, many later Liu emperors were mere youths dominated by quarreling factions of imperial in-laws and eunuchs, so the quality of governing declined.

Desperate to escape poverty and starvation, many villagers fled their homes or joined roving bandit gangs. Some rallied behind individuals who promised the dawn of a new age, thereby becoming part of large, militarized religious societies with political goals. One was the Yellow Turbans, a society named after the yellow cloth members wrapped around their heads. The founder, Zhang Jue [jawng joo-eh], claimed he was a devoted follower of the legendary Daoist philosopher Laozi, who had by this time been deified and envisioned living in a Daoist heaven. Zhang accrued a following of disciples by instructing them in faith healing, establishing a rudimentary organization, and prophesying an impending apocalypse. He led his followers to believe that the apocalypse would be followed by an age of peace when the sky would turn yellow and all would be equal. The movement grew into the tens of thousands. Some followers proclaimed 184 CE was propitious, daubing the characters for that year in mud on the gates to government offices. The Yellow Turbans rebelled, and unrest spread across north China. Other similar millenarian religious movements followed.

The Han Dynasty was in crisis but lacked the strong leadership of earlier rulers like the founder Liu Bang or Emperor Wu. Youthful emperors were forced to rely on generals who commanded permanent standing armies around the empire as if they were private possessions. But by empowering military strongmen to suppress rebellions, Han rulers sealed the fate of the dynasty. Generals feuded amongst each other and competed to impose a military dictatorship on the court. Eventually, in 220 CE, one general deposed the Han emperor, but he failed to unite the realm because by that time the country had been divided up by three kingdoms and their rival warlords.
Within their realms, each warlord sought to strengthen his hand against the others by restoring order and establishing a functioning state. After all, they needed fighting men and revenue. **Cao Cao** (155 – 220 CE) was the most effective in achieving these goals. He was the adopted son of a Han court eunuch and eventually entered the military. As a commander, he earned his spurs leading Han armies against the Yellow Turbans. As the dynasty fell apart, he gained control over it and established a dictatorship in northern China. It was his son who removed the last Han ruler and established the Wei [way] Dynasty (220 – 265 AD), one of the **Three Kingdoms** (see Map 4.12).

![Map 4.12 | Map of the Three Kingdoms](image)

*Map 4.12 | Map of the Three Kingdoms | These took shape as the Han Dynasty ended. Cao Cao was the founder of the northern state of Wei.*

*Author: Ian Mladjov*
*Source: Original Work*
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By this time, as a result of the rebellions and civil wars, much land in north China had gone to waste. So Cao Cao turned it into huge state farms where he could settle his soldiers, landless poor, and, most importantly, tribes of nomadic herders from the steppe lands to the far north who had served him as he came to power. Thus, Cao rulers created colonies of farmers who supplied tax revenue
The Western Jin had reunified China, but that unity wasn't to last. The policy of settling tribes of non-Chinese nomads in north China backfired. Among them, rebel chieftains rose up, carved out kingdoms of their own, and expanded their power all across the north. One Xiongnu chieftain, Liu Yuan [lee-oh you-anne], even declared he was a descendant of a Han Dynasty imperial princess and therefore had the right to restore the Han Empire. His son descended on the Western Jin court at Luoyang and eventually, in 317 CE, forced it to flee east to Jiankang [jee-an cawng] (today’s city of Nanjing).

China was again divided up among competing dynasties, a state of affairs that would persist until 589 CE, during a time referred to as the **Northern and Southern Dynasties** (317 – 589). Six successive Southern Dynasties were all located at Jiankang, and had as their base of power the Yangzi River and, as hereditary military families, soldiers for Wei armies. Such state-owned land and hereditary soldiers became the mainstays of warlord dynasties throughout this time.

The two other kingdoms, Wu and Han, were located in the south. Over the course of decades, the ruling warlords of all three states fought each other in campaigns involving much treachery and stratagem. In 263 CE, the Han kingdom fell to the invading forces of Wei commanders. But then, just two years later, a powerful Wei family—the Sima—usurped the throne and changed the kingdom’s name to Western Jin [jean] (265 – 317 CE). The Western Jin conquered Wu in 280 BCE, thereby bringing to an end the Three Kingdoms period.
basin (see Map 4.13). But their rulers were usually militarily weak and lacked revenue, due to southern China’s comprising a colonial frontier dominated by powerful families with large estates and private armies. These families highly valued their pedigrees, intermarried, and saw themselves as the heirs to Confucian civilization. At the southern court, they dominated high offices, thus constituting a hereditary aristocracy. The ruling family was always limited in power by their influence.

The situation was even more complex in the north during those three centuries. The kingdom established by Liu Yuan along the Yellow River was just one of numerous short-lived Northern Dynasties established by non-Chinese chieftains of different ethnicities. The Liu rulers, for instance, were Xiongnu, while others were of Turkic ancestry. At times, the north was divided among numerous, rival regimes, while, at others, it was unified. But all of these kingdoms shared similar characteristics. They were ruled by military dynasts who wanted to restore the Chinese empire. Their armies consisted of an elite, heavily armored cavalry drawn from aristocratic military families that was supplemented by Chinese foot soldiers (see Figure 4.13). They employed educated Chinese to serve as civil officials and administer their territories.

The Northern and Southern Dynasties came to an end in 589 CE after Yang Jian [yawng gee-an], a general hailing from the ruling clan of a northern kingdom, first established control over all of north China and then defeated the last southern dynasty. He ruled his new Sui [sway] Dynasty as Emperor Wen [one]. China was once again united under one dynasty (see Map 4.14).

4.10.2 China’s Third Great Tradition: The Introduction of Buddhism to China

Aside from the shifting configuration of kingdoms, perhaps the most notable development during the Period of Division was the introduction of Mahayana (“Great Vehicle”) Buddhism into
China (for the development of Mahayana Buddhism, see Chapter Three). Beginning from the second century CE, at the end of the Han Dynasty, Buddhist merchants and monks from India and Central Asia brought their faith and scriptures to China by the Silk Roads and maritime trading routes (see Map 4.15). The impact was immense and can be compared to the Christianization of the Mediterranean region and spread of devotional forms of Hinduism in South Asia during this same period of time (see Chapters Three and Six). Historians estimated that by the time the Sui Dynasty reunited China four centuries later, China had approximately 33,000 Buddhist temples and two million monks and nuns. Buddhism had become a large-scale religious organization with these temples, clerics, and scriptures (see Figure 4.14), as well as a widespread popular faith capturing the imagination of common people and rulers alike.

Historians have also hypothesized why this spread occurred. First of all, Buddhism clearly met a spiritual need. During the Period of Division, turmoil from rapid political change and constant warfare brought much suffering and instability to people’s lives. Now, here was a religion that explained their suffering with notions of karma and rebirth and also offered hope with paths to salvation and enlightenment. Buddhism placed the world amidst visions of multiple hells and heavens where merciful Buddhas and Bodhisattvas worked for the salvation of all beings.

Buddhism appealed to people in different ways. For scholarly elites living in capital cities or as hermits in mountain retreats, Buddhist doctrines about the nature of reality, self, and enlightenment were appealing because they seemed similar to concepts in Daoist philosophy. Both philosophies questioned the reality of ordinary understandings of the self and world, emphasized that our desires create an illusory world, and offered techniques for achieving liberation. Nirvana, for instance, was compared to the Dao (Daoist “Way”).

For rulers, Buddhism served political purposes. Since the faith became so popular, rulers who took vows and sponsored temple construction and the ordination of monks looked good because they were upholding the dharma, that is, the Buddhist law. Some even went so far as to have monks recognize them as incarnate Buddhas. Lastly, Buddhist monks—whether foreign or Chinese—were some of the most educated people at their courts and could assist rulers with mundane matters,
like international relations, but also esoteric ones, such as spells and divination. Monks won support by promising that their rituals and incantations had magical potency.

Lastly, for most people, Buddhism was a devotional religion. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were merciful beings to be worshipped because their good karma redounded to the benefit of all beings. By going to a temple and burning incense or praying and making offerings before a Buddha statue, the faithful might have a simple wish granted: an illness cured, loved ones helped, or a better rebirth ensured.

Map 4.15 | Expansion of Buddhism | This map shows how Buddhism spread to China and the rest of East Asia via land-based routes in Central Asia and maritime routes.

Author: Gunawan Kartapranata
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4.11 THE TANG DYNASTY AND THE EMERGENCE OF EAST ASIA

4.11.1 The Early Tang Dynasty

The Sui [sway] Dynasty did not last long (581 – 618 CE) and only had two emperors: Emperor Wen and Emperor Yang. Both envisioned recapturing the glory of the Han Dynasty; hence, they engaged in many construction projects and military campaigns. Immense capital cities were built at Chang’an and Luoyang and, in order to supply them with sufficient grain, a canal system was created to connect the Yellow River to the Yangzi River. These emperors also believed that Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula were properly Chinese territory; therefore, they repeatedly launched enormous military expeditions to attack the most powerful Korean kingdom located there. Emperor Yang’s ground and naval campaign in 611 CE, for instance, required enlisting over one million combat troops and hundreds of thousands of additional men just to transport supplies. All of these campaigns met defeat.

What is more, that very same year, the Yellow River flooded, and rebellions broke out along it. Natural disasters combined with these emperors’ heavy demands led to widespread unrest, and the Sui Dynasty unraveled. Bandit leaders, local officials, and local elites took matters into their own hands by organizing their communities for self-defense. After the emperor took flight to the south, General Li Yuan [lee you-an], who was stationed along the northern border to defend against the steppe nomads, marched into Chang’an, where he declared the founding of the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE). Emperor Yang’s life came to an end when he was assassinated by his own men.

Like the Han Dynasty, the Tang was one of the most dynamic and long-lived dynasties in China’s history. That dynamism was made possible by how effectively early Tang rulers consolidated the empire internally and then engaged in military expansion (see Map 4.16). Consolidating the empire required first re-establishing solid political, economic, and military institutions. Fortunately, Tang rulers could draw upon nearly a millennium of historical experience going back to the Qin Dynasty, when a centralized monarchical political system governing all of China was first established. At the capital, Tang emperors had at their disposal sophisticated ministries that
turn oversaw a vast provincial and county administrative system. To serve in high office, a man usually had to come from one of a small number of highly prestigious families with illustrious family pedigrees. These families took pride in their superior education and manners and maintained their exclusiveness by intermarrying. Thus, the Tang Dynasty was dominated by an aristocracy. Nevertheless, some men from a larger pool of locally prominent families entered the civil service based on merit, by graduating from colleges located at the capitals or succeeding at civil service examinations (see Figure 4.15).

Map 4.16 | The Tang Dynasty at its height in 700 CE
Author: Ian Mladjov
Source: Original Work
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In earlier times, empires rarely flourished without a solid agricultural foundation and revenue base. To ensure sufficient grain and labor service, Tang rulers believed that land must be equitably distributed to farmers. So they implemented the **equal fields system**. In this system, each family was to receive an equal plot of land (adjusted for terrain and productivity) for life, as well as a smaller plot as a permanent possession. The former was for growing grain, and the latter, for
hemp and mulberry trees. In exchange, each farming family had to pay a tax in grain and cloth and provide twenty days of labor service. To make this work, officials carried out censuses and land surveys and periodically redistributed land. Of course, this system was quite onerous and difficult to carry out in practice, but it did function well for about a century.

The Tang also flourished because special attention was paid to molding an orderly society through the promulgation of sophisticated law codes. From ancient times, in China, law was viewed as an expression of the will of the emperor, whose pronouncements defined illegal conduct and proper punishments for it. Also, law was critically important to maintaining order, not only in the social but also the natural world. Crimes committed both by subjects and the state could disturb the cosmos and lead to natural disasters. Thus, law maintained social and cosmic harmony. That is why codes were so important.

The **Tang Code** contains twelve sections, one addressing general principles, and the rest, administrative and penal law. Most of the statutes define criminal offenses and the punishment for each of them. The magistrate’s role, then, was primarily to investigate and determine precisely the nature of the crime so that the proper punishment could be assigned. In Tang times, people believed that the severity of punishment should be based on the relative status of the perpetrator and victim. For instance, a crime committed against a family member was more serious than one committed against a stranger, and a crime committed against an official was more serious than one committed against a commoner. Within families, too, the status of members mattered. Whereas a father could flog his son without consequence, a son faced capital punishment should he beat his father. In brief, Tang laws encoded the status hierarchy and values of imperial Confucianism. The most serious crimes were those committed against the emperor, country, senior family members, and social superiors. Nevertheless, those of higher status were held accountable for their actions; a magistrate who failed to justly administer the law faced punishment. In fact, Tang monarchs were so concerned that justice might fail to be upheld that they often proclaimed amnesties, nullifying the sentences of all but the worst criminals.

Lastly, Tang rulers established a formidable military. At first, the army consisted of six hundred militias stationed at headquarters located near the capitals and throughout the countryside, a large standing army located at the capital, and frontier garrisons strung out along the northern border. These forces were largely maintained by drawing men from a military population. That is, Tang rulers relied on a large number of families that maintained military traditions and provided sons for periods of service in lieu of paying taxes and providing labor service. As necessary, these men could be assembled into expeditionary armies consisting of heavy cavalry and marching infantry (see Figure 4.16).
Having laid these solid institutional foundations, the Tang Dynasty followed with military expansion. Offensives waged to the north divided up and subdued powerful Turkic khans and their confederations of steppe nomads. Tang imperial power was then projected deep into Central Asia, Manchuria, and northern Vietnam, making China the most dominant country in East Asia in the seventh and eighth centuries.

4.11.2 The Emergence of East Asia: The Case of Korea and Japan

In the introduction, we defined East Asia in both geographic and cultural terms, highlighting Korea and Japan. East Asia first emerges as an identifiable cultural sphere during the Tang Dynasty. By Tang times, kingdoms had already emerged on the Korean Peninsula and the main islands of Japan, but it was during the Tang that ruling elites in both of these states made extensive efforts to adapt components of the Chinese political, legal, and writing system, as well as of Chinese culture, to their own societies.

4.11.2.1: Korea’s History from the Fourth Century BCE to 900 CE

We have already learned about China’s history from the Han Dynasty (203 BCE – 220 CE) through the Period of Division (220 – 589 CE) and into the Tang Dynasty. During those same centuries, the first states formed on the Korean Peninsula, and historians generally organize that time into three periods: the early historical period (c. 400 BCE – 313 CE), Three Kingdoms Period (313 – 668 CE), and the Silla Dynasty (668 – 892 CE).

By the fourth century BCE, the peninsula had already long been populated by peoples who had migrated there from northeast Asia and settled into agricultural villages. These peoples were not originally speakers of Chinese; rather, they spoke languages belonging to the Altaic language family, which possibly includes Korean. This point is important because people unfamiliar with East Asia sometimes think that the languages spoken by Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese are closely related, when in fact they are quite different. However, it is also important to note that in ancient times throughout East Asia, the Chinese writing system was adopted by literate elites for the purpose of writing their spoken languages. Only over time were native scripts developed out of it.

The political picture for the early historical period is complex because the peninsula and neighboring Manchuria looked like a mosaic of chiefdom confederations and petty kingdoms, each governed by elite families living in walled towns. These polities first took shape during these centuries. By the early centuries CE, three kingdoms extending from Manchuria to where Seoul lies today (the capital of South Korea) covered the northern half, while the southern half was divided up by confederations of chiefdoms. The most powerful kingdom was Goguryeo [Ko-goo-ryo] c. 37 BCE – 668 CE).

The Korean peninsula lies very close to China, with only Manchuria and the Yellow Sea dividing the two states. Long before Korea’s early historical period, rulers of Chinese states had taken an interest in controlling both trade routes leading into this region and the peoples living there. In 108 BCE, during the Han Dynasty, Emperor Wu even sent expeditions into Manchuria and Korea.
He opened up a corridor leading from China through Manchuria into the peninsula and established four commanderies to control the area (see Map 4.17).

But Han China by no means colonized the entirety of this northeastern region. Kingdoms and tribal confederations remained to the east and south, most notably Goguryeo. After the Han Dynasty collapsed, northern China was in turmoil and unable to control these frontiers. In 313 CE, King Mich’on of Goguryeo, in an effort to expand the size of his kingdom, seized Chinese territory. That date marked the beginning of a new stage in Korean history referred to as the Three Kingdoms period (313 CE – 668 CE).

The Three Kingdoms were Goguryeo, Baekje [peck-jay], and Silla [she-la] (see Map 4.18). Like Goguryeo, the early histories of Baekje and Silla date back to the early historical period, during which time they were consolidated from southern chiefdom confederations (see Map 4.17). Each kingdom was dominated by a warrior elite composed of the ruling and aristocratic clans. For most of the Three Kingdoms period, Goguryeo was the dominant military and political power, spreading its control over much of Manchuria and northern Korea. During the fifth century CE, its capital was moved to Pyongyang, site of a former Han Commandery. This move made this city—the capital of North Korea today—important to Korean history. Murals on Goguryeo tombs located in the vicinity show what this kingdom’s elites valued (see Figure 4.17). They are depicted as heavily-clad warriors fighting on horseback with bows and arrows, and swords and halberds. A cosmos depicts guardian spirits and nature gods belonging to a native Korean tradition of shamanism.

Given the geopolitical position of Korea, it is not surprising that all three kingdoms highly valued martial traditions. First of all, they fought with each other for control over territory and resources on the peninsula. Secondly, positioned as Korea is between China and Japan, those states often intruded upon peninsular conflicts. For all these reasons, Silla, Baekje, and Goguryeo mon-
archs readily borrowed ideas from China that might benefit their realms and give them more power. That borrowing included introducing elements of Chinese political institutions and legal traditions, as well as Buddhism and Confucianism. All of these kingdoms sent students to study in China and patronized Chinese Buddhist monks and learned Confucians who visited their courts. These visitors were knowledgeable in many fields of learning, including science and technology. As we have seen, Buddhism not only promised salvation but also magical powers of healing, and rulers could style themselves as living Buddhas. That is why they sponsored the building of temples and formation of a Buddhist religious order. Confucianism, on the other hand, provided models of civility, courtly etiquette, and bureaucratic governance for ruling elites, and rulers could style themselves in Chinese fashion as sovereign monarchs. Hence, Confucian academies were established to train students of aristocratic families for service.

Towards the end of the Three Kingdoms period, however, it was not the great northeastern power of Goguryeo that unified the Korean Peninsula. This achievement went to the Silla Dynasty and did so for two reasons. First, Silla rulers were particularly effective in using Chinese political practices to centralize their power. They adopted Chinese-style titles, central government agencies, and law codes; made Buddhism a state-sponsored religion; and established an academy for studying Chinese classical texts, law, medicine,
and astronomy. Second, Silla monarchs built alliances with Tang emperors that worked to their advantage. As we have seen, the Chinese Sui Dynasty fell because Sui rulers suffered terrible defeats at the hands of the armies of the great kingdom of Goguryeo. Tang Dynasty rulers continued the invasions but also failed. For that reason, they were open to building alliances with Silla and combining their military forces. Together, they defeated Baekje in 660 and Goguryeo in 668. Much to the Tang emperor’s surprise, Silla then drove out Tang forces, preventing any efforts on China’s part to control the Korean peninsula. The Silla Dynasty (668 – 892 CE) thus became the first one to unify the peninsula (see Map 4.16).

In sum, Goguryeo and the Silla Dynasty were, in succession, two of the most powerful kingdoms in ancient Korea. Their histories were deeply shaped by the intrusion of Chinese states into the region. For that reason, they can be categorized as instances of secondary state formation. Throughout history, some states developed and centralized their control over a territory largely in response to the impact of a powerful neighboring state that had developed before them. As they did so, they also borrowed ideas for how states should be organized from that neighboring power, even as native traditions and language are retained.

4.11.2.2 Japan from the Yayoi Period to the Seventh Century

Those who follow the history of World War II might know that, during those years, the highest authority in Japan was Emperor Hirohito. Even today, Japan has an emperor and empress, although they no longer have any formal political power in this now democratic nation and rather serve in a cultural and symbolic role. Interestingly, the Japanese monarchy is the oldest continuous one in the history of the world and traces its beginnings to at least the fourth century CE.

Japan’s early historical development presents unique characteristics because of its geography. The island archipelago was close enough to Chinese and Korean states to borrow from them and benefit from migration and yet far enough away so that invasions were never a sudden impetus to change (see Map 4.1). Therefore, although we can also speak of secondary state formation for Japan, that is largely because of the conscious choice on the part of ruling elites to adopt political ideas and cultural patterns from China and Korea.

But even during the prehistoric period, geography impacted Japan’s development in other ways. The first evidence for Paleolithic hunter-gatherers dates back to c. 30,000 BCE. In the resource-rich environments of mountainous and forested Japan, small bands of mobile,
multi-generational families were able to thrive on game, shellfish, fruits, tubers, and nuts. In fact, foraging strategies were so successful that even when sedentary village communities first formed, they thrived without agriculture. This period of time is known as the Jōmon [joe-moan] Period (c. 11,000 – 500 BCE). The archaeological record reveals that, up and down the archipelago, foragers had settled into permanent base camps. These were hamlet communities made up of pit dwellings for homes and raised floor structures for holding community functions. Jōmon, meaning “cord-marked,” refers to the type of pottery they used (see Figure 4.18). This case is one of the few in prehistory where a culture invented and used pottery long before farming.

Farming began during the next stage in Japanese history—the Yayoi [ya-yo-ee] Period (500 BCE – 250 CE). The label refers to a site near Tokyo where artifacts were discovered evidencing new developments in Japan. Most importantly, rice-paddy agriculture and dry-field farming were introduced, techniques that supported population growth and the formation of more and larger village communities. The impetus to agriculture was likely earlier experimentation with simple horticulture, a warming climate, and migration from mainland East Asia. Those migrants also brought knowledge of iron- and bronze-working; hence, tools and weapons fashioned from metals became widespread.

During the early centuries of Yayoi, small village communities proliferated across the main islands of Japan, but, during the latter half, they evolved into something more substantial. Archaeologists have excavated the foundations of large settlements surrounded by moats and embankments (see Figure 4.19). These fortified bastions were home to up to two thousand residents and contained ceremonial centers, differentiated residences and burials, watchtowers, and palisades. Some
burials contained skeletons evidencing wounds or dismemberment. Combining this evidence with clues from contemporary Chinese historical sources, specialists have concluded that, by the end of the Yayoi period, powerful chiefdoms had emerged in Japan, and they were allying with and battling each other to control trade routes and territory. In retrospect, the late Yayoi Period clearly was a transitional phase leading to the formation of the first kingdom in Japanese history. That happened in the next stage, the **Mounded Tomb Period** (250 – 600 CE). Among the warring chiefdoms, one emerged as dominant. Hailing from the Kinai region of Japan (see Map 4.1), Yamato chieftains expanded their power through force and diplomacy, and eventually forged a kingdom

(see Map 4.19). The principal evidence for their growing power are the massive, keyhole-shaped tombs giving this period its name (see Figure 4.20). In fact, nearly ten thousand tombs have been identified, but the largest ones belong to the Yamato rulers, the ancestors to the long-lived Japanese imperial line. Although the large royal ones have not yet been excavated, smaller tombs containing an abundance of horse trappings, iron weapons, and armor provide evidence that mounted warfare was introduced from the Korean peninsula, perhaps accelerating the pace of state formation.

As they conquered more territory, Yamato rulers devised strategies for strengthening their monarchy and incorporating leaders of the many powerful chieftain clans dominating local areas up and down the archipelago. For service at their royal court or as provincial officials, they granted them office and noble titles, thereby building a coalition of great clans. In addition, in the sixth century CE,
Yamato rulers began to study the great Sui (581 – 618 CE) and Tang (618 – 907 CE) Dynasties in China and to introduce reforms based upon what they learned. The next two centuries in Japanese history, the Asuka-Nara Period (c. 600 – 800 CE), was defined by these Chinese-style reforms, although the name itself refers to the successive locations of the royal court.

**Prince Shōtoku** [show-toe-coo] (573 – 621 CE) and **Empress Suiko** [sue-ee-ko] (r. 593 – 628) led the way by sending several embassies to the capital of China and then remodeling their capital and court. In his “Seventeen Article Constitution,” Shōtoku called for the introduction of Buddhism and Confucian ethics. His articles, for instance, stated that the sovereign’s relation to subjects was like Heaven’s to the earth, and his or her commands should thus be obeyed. Empress Suiko adopted the title “Heavenly Monarch,” thus shifting the character of the monarch from a martial king to a Chinese-style sovereign. In brief, they introduced a Confucian-oriented, emperor-centered state ideology that clearly established a hierarchical system of ranks and norms for court etiquette. For the remainder of this period, other reformers and monarchs would only deepen the reforms by introducing Chinese-style law codes. These laws reshaped the government and land according to a bureaucratic and administrative structure very similar to that of Tang China.

Nevertheless, distinctly Japanese patterns remained throughout this time. First, the royally-recognized great clans of earlier times evolved into an aristocratic class that dominated the court and the upper ranks of officialdom. Secondly, in addition to establishing a council to manage the growing numbers of Buddhist temples and clerics, the court established a Council of Kami Affairs to oversee native Japanese religious traditions. That tradition is known as **Shinto** [sheen-toe], or the “Way of the Kami.”

Shinto began in prehistoric times as reverence for kami—spirits and deities associated with natural phenomena, such as the sun or moon. Really, anything mysterious might become a kami, including a mountain, charismatic ruler, or serpent. During the Yayoi and Mounded Tomb Periods, these kami became the subjects of myths that explained their origins and powers, and shrines were erected to house sacred objects symbolizing them. By properly purifying

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**Figure 4.21 | The Grand Shrine at Ise |** This Shinto Shrine was first built c. fourth century CE in honor of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, progenitor of the Japanese imperial line. According to legends, it contains the Amaterasu’s sacred mirror, which was handed down to the first emperors. The shrine has been rebuilt many times.

*Author: User “N yotarou”
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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oneself, conducting rituals, and praying to a kami, an individual could avert a disaster and ensure his own or the community’s well-being. Also, clans would claim important kami as their guardian spirits and fashion stories about how their ancestors descended from them. In fact, Yamato monarchs claimed they were descended from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, and constructed a shrine at Ise [ee-say] to house her kami body (see Figure 4.21). Finally, during the Asuka-Nara Period, the Yamato court developed a centralized system to keep track of and regulate Shinto shrines throughout its realm, thereby harnessing higher powers to support its claim to rule the land.

In sum, like Korea, Japan’s history was highly impacted by developments in China, even as native languages, traditions, and creative adaptation remained foundational to the unique identities of each. However, Korea was far more subject to the intrusion of Chinese states in the Korean Peninsula, something that did not happen in Japan. Rather, as the first state formed on the archipelago, ruling elites looked to China for ideas as to how the kingdom might be governed. In the course of doing so, they also introduced the great tradition of Mahayana Buddhism.

4.11.3 The Decline and Collapse of the Tang Dynasty

The Tang Dynasty reached its zenith during the eighth century under the reign of Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712 – 756 CE), but then went into decline. At first, the problem was overexpansion. Tang rulers had expanded the empire’s boundaries in nearly every direction, including far into Central Asia. To defend the northwestern border, a system of regional frontier commands was established, each with its own commander and professional army. The earlier system of militias and garrisons manned by hereditary military families declined.

This decline turned out to be dangerous. After one general, An Lushan, butted heads with the emperor’s chief minister, he marched his frontier army of 100,000 soldiers south to the capital, forcing the court to flee. An was eventually executed by his own men, and a Tang emperor returned to the throne, but the turmoil unleashed by this rebellion rendered the Tang Dynasty ineffective. During the ensuing turmoil, the empire shrank and Central Asia was lost (see Map 4.20). Also, both Tang supporters and pardoned rebels were granted military governorships, giving them control over provinces. Many then chose not to remit tax revenue to the central government, appointed their own subordinates, and designated their successors. They had, in effect, become warlords with their own loyal, regional bases.

Furthermore, as the political system decentralized in this way, the system of equitable land distribution collapsed. Thus, much like during the end of the Han Dynasty, landlords used their power and influence to build great estates. Large numbers of farmers ended up without land and survived only by joining bandit gangs or the ranks of warlord armies. When droughts and famine hit in the late ninth century, a massive rebellion broke out. The last Tang emperor was turned into a puppet by military commanders and eventually, in 907 CE, abdicated. China then entered yet another period of division until the Song Dynasty restored order in 960 CE.
4.12 THE SONG DYNASTY

Like every Chinese dynasty before it, the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279 CE) was born out of turmoil and warfare. After the Tang Dynasty fell, China was once again divided up by numerous, contending kingdoms. The founder of the Song, Zhao Kuangyin [j-ow kwong-yeen], was a military commander and advisor to the emperor of one of these kingdoms, but after he died and his six-year-old son came to the throne, Zhao staged a coup. He left the capital with his troops, ostensibly to fight enemies to the north. But just outside the capital, his troops instead proclaimed him emperor, a title he accepted only with feigned reluctance and after his followers promised obedience and to treat the child emperor and people living in the capital environs humanely. On February 3, 960, the child was forced to abdicate, and Zhao took the throne as Emperor Taizu [tie-dzoo]. He and his brother, the succeeding Emperor Taizong [tie-dzawng], ruled for the first forty years of a dynasty that would last over three hundred, laying the foundations for its prosperity and cultural brilliance. The Song Dynasty saw a total of eighteen emperors and is most notable for
the challenges it faced from northern conquest dynasties, economic prosperity, a civil service examination system and the educated elite of scholar-officials it created, cultural brilliance, and footbinding.

During the Song, China once again confronted tremendous challenges from conquests by military confederations located along the northern border. So threatening and successful were these that the Song Dynasty counted as just one of many powerful players in a larger geopolitical system in Central and East Asia. The first two northern conquest dynasties, the Liao [lee-ow] and Jin [jean], emerged on the plains of Manchuria when powerful tribal leaders organized communities of hunters, fishers, and farmers for war (see Map 4.21).

As their power grew, they formed states and conquered territory in northern China, forcing the Chinese to pay them large subsidies of silk and silver for peace. So Chinese rulers and their councilors were in constant negotiations with peoples they viewed as culturally-inferior barbarians under conditions where they were forced to treat them as equals, as opposed to weaker

Map 4.21 | The Northern Song Dynasty in 1100 CE | Note that China (in yellow, with the capital at Kaifeng) was surrounded by powerful neighbors, such as the Khitan Liao state to the north. Khitan designates an ethnic group and Liao the name of their dynasty.
Author: Ian Mladjov
Source: Original Work
License: © Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.
tribute-paying states in a Chinese-dominated world. At first, they used a combination of defensive measures and expensive bilateral treaties, which did make for a degree of stability. But a high price was exacted. Halfway through the Song, the Jin Dynasty destroyed the Liao and occupied the entire northern half of China, forcing the Song court to move south (see Map 4.22). To rule Chinese possessions, Jin rulers even took on the trappings of Chinese-style emperors and developed a dual administrative system. Steppe tribes were ruled by a traditional military organization, while the farming population of China was governed with Chinese-style civilian administration. The Song Dynasty thus constantly faced the prospect of extinction and was challenged in its legitimacy by rival emperors claiming the right to rule the Chinese realm.

One reason Song monarchs were able to buy peace was the extraordinary prosperity during their rule and the resulting tax revenue made available. During those centuries, China was by many measures the most developed country in the world. In 1100 CE, the population was one hundred million, more than all of medieval Europe combined. That number doubled the population of

Map 4.22 | China during the Southern Song Dynasty, c. 1200 CE | Another military conquest dynasty, the Jin, had destroyed the Liao Dynasty and forced the Chinese emperor to relocate his capital further south, at Lin’an.
Author: Ian Mladjov
Source: Original Work
License: © Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.
750 CE, just three hundred years prior. The reason for such growth was flourishing agricultural production, especially rice-paddy agriculture. More drought-resistant and earlier-ripening strains of rice, combined with better technology, lead to higher yields per acre.

The impact was enormous. The productivity of farmers stimulated other industries, such as ironworking. Estimates place iron production at as high as twenty thousand tons per year. That amount made iron prices low and, therefore, such products as spades, ploughshares, nails, axles, and pots and pans more cheaply available. Seeing its profitability, wealthy landowning and merchant families invested in metallurgy, spurring better technology. Bellows, for instance, were worked by hydraulic machinery, such as water mills. Explosives derived from gunpowder were engineered to open mines. Similar development of textile and ceramic industries occurred.

Indeed, during the Song, China underwent a veritable economic revolution. Improvements in agriculture and industry, combined with a denser population, spurred the commercialization of the economy. A commercialized economy is one that supports the pursuit of profit through production of specialized products for markets. A Song farmer, for instance, as opposed to just producing rice to get by, might rather purchase it on a market and instead specialize in tea or oranges. Since markets were proliferating in towns and cities and transport via land and water was now readily available, farmers could rely on merchants to market their goods across the country. To support this economic activity, the government minted billions of coins each year as well as the world’s first paper currency.

A denser population and sophisticated economy led to urbanization. During the Song, at a time when London had roughly fifteen thousand people, China had dozens of cities with over fifty thousand people and capitals with a half million. Song painted scrolls show crowds of people moving through streets lined with shops, restaurants, teahouses, and guest houses (see Figure 4.22).

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Figure 4.22 | This section of a Song Dynasty period scroll depicts a bridge in Kaifeng, the first capital.
Author: User “Zhuwq”
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: Public Domain
To manage their realm, Song rulers implemented a national civil service examination to recruit men for office. Prior dynasties had used written examinations testing knowledge of Confucian classics to select men for office, but only as a supplement to recommendation and hereditary privilege. During the collapse of the Tang Dynasty, however, aristocratic families that had for centuries dominated the upper echelons of officialdom disappeared. The first Song emperor, Zhao Kuangyin, rode to power with the support of military men; having largely unified China, he then sought to restore civil governance based in Confucian principles of humaneness and righteousness. So he invited senior commanders to a party and, over a cup of wine, asked them to relinquish their commands for a comfortable retirement. They obliged. He and his successors consequently made the examination system the pre-eminent route to office, even establishing a national school system to help young men prepare for and advance through it. Thus, during the Song Dynasty, civil offices came to be dominated by men who had spent years, even decades, preparing for and passing through a complex series of exams. Hence, they were both scholars and officials. Success in entering this class placed a person at the pinnacle of society, guaranteeing them prestige and wealth. These scholar-officials, and their Confucian worldview, dominated Chinese society until the twentieth century.

In theory, since any adult male could take the examinations, the system was meritocratic. But in reality, because they were so difficult and quotas were set, very few actually passed them. Estimates suggest that only one in one hundred passed the lowest level exam. This ratio meant that, in order to succeed, a young man had to begin memorizing long classical texts as a child and to continue his studies until he passed or gave up hope. Only affluent families could afford to support such an education.

Nevertheless, the meritocratic ideal inspired people from all classes to try and so promoted literacy and a literary revival during the Song Dynasty. As a part of this revival and to provide a curriculum for education, scholar-officials sought to reinvigorate Confucianism. The philosophical movement they began is known as Neo-Confucianism. By the Song Dynasty, whereas Confucianism largely shaped personal behavior and social mores, Buddhist and Daoist explanations of the cosmos, human nature, and the human predicament dominated the individual's spiritual outlook. Neo-Confucians responded to this challenge by providing a metaphysical basis for Confucian morality and governance. Zhu Xi (1130 – 1200), arguably the most important philosopher in later imperial Chinese history, produced a grand synthesis that would shape the worldview of the scholar-official class. He argued that the cosmos consists of a duality of principles and a material force composing physical things. One principle underlies the cosmos and individual principles provide the abstract reason for individual things. In human beings, principle manifests as human nature, which is wholly good and the origins of the human capacity to become moral persons. However, an individual’s physical endowment obscures their good nature and leads to moral failings, which is why a rigorous Confucian curriculum of moral self-cultivation based in classical texts like Confucius’ Analects is necessary. Most importantly, Zhu Xi argued, individual morality was the starting point for producing a well-managed family, orderly government, and peace throughout the world.

Furthermore, during the Song Dynasty, moveable-type printing also began to be widely used, contributing to an increase in literacy and broader exposure to these new ideas. Chinese characters
were carved on wood blocks, which were then arranged in boxes that could be dipped in ink and printed on paper (see Figure 4.23). Books on a multitude of topics—especially classics and histories—became cheaply and widely available, fueling a cultural efflorescence at a time when education had become paramount to climbing the social ladder. Other inventions that made China one of the most technologically innovative during this time include gunpowder weapons (see Figure 4.24) and the mariner’s compass.

Looked at from many angles, then, the Song was truly a dynamic period in China’s history. However, some observers have bemoaned the fact that footbinding began during this dynasty and see that practice as a symbol of increasing gender oppression. Scholars believe footbinding began among professional dancers in the tenth century and was then adopted by the upper classes. Over time it spread to the rest of Chinese society, only to end in the twentieth century. At a young age, a girl’s feet would be wrapped tightly with bandages so that they couldn’t grow, ideally remaining about four-inches long. That stunting made walking very difficult and largely kept women confined to their homes. Eventually, the bound foot, encased in an embroidered silk slipper, became a symbol
of femininity and also one of the criteria for marriageability (see Figure 4.25).

More generally, social norms and the law did place women in a subordinate position. Whereas men dominated public realms like government and business, women married at a young age and lived out most of their lives in the domestic sphere. Indeed, in earlier times, China was patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal. It was patriarchal because the law upheld the authority of senior males in the household and patrilineal because one’s surname and family property passed down the male line—though a wife did have control over her dowry. Importantly, ancestor worship, the pre-eminent social and religious practice in Chinese society, was directed toward patrilineal forbears. That is why it was important for the woman to move into the spouse’s home, where she would live together with her parents-in-law. Patrilocal describes this type of social pattern. Marriages were almost always arranged for the benefit of both families involved, and, during the wedding ceremony, the bride was taken in a curtained sedan chair to the husband’s home where she was to promise to obey her parents-in-law and then bow along with her husband before the ancestral altar. Ideally, she would become a competent household manager, educate the children, and demonstrate much restraint and other excellent interpersonal skills.

Although gender hierarchy was, therefore, the norm, other scholars have observed that ideals were not always reality and women did exercise their agency within the boundaries placed upon them. A wife could gain dignity

![Figure 4.25 | Silk slipper for a bound foot, dating to a later Chinese dynasty.](image1)

Author: User “Vassil”
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: CC0 1.0

![Figure 4.26 | Painting of ladies at the Song court preparing silk.](image2)

Author: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: Public Domain
and a sense of self-worth by handling her roles capably; she would also earn respect. Song literature further reveals that women were often in the fields working or out on city streets shopping. Among the upper classes, literacy and the ability to compose essays or poetry made a woman more marriageable. For this reason, some women were able to excel. Li Qingzhao [lee ching-jow] (c. 1084 – 1155) is one of China’s greatest poets (see Figure 4.27). She came from a prestigious scholar-official family. Her father was both a statesman and classical scholar, and her mother was known for her literary achievements. In her teens, Li began to compose poetry, and, over the course of her life, she produced many volumes of essays and poems. Poems to her husband even suggest mutual love and respect and treating her as an equal. In fact, throughout Chinese history, it was not unusual for women to challenge and transgress boundaries. At the highest level, during both the Han and Tang Dynasties, we find cases of empress dowagers dominating youthful heirs to the throne and even one case of an empress declaring her own dynasty.

4.13 THE YUAN DYNASTY

The last major dynasty prior to China’s early modern period is the Yuan [you-an] Dynasty. Like earlier neighbors lying to the north of the Song, the Yuan was also a northern conquest dynasty. The key players here were steppe nomads living on the grasslands of Mongolia, known as Mongols, and their leader Genghis Khan. The story of their rise and how they created the largest territorial empire in the history of the world properly belongs to Chapter Eleven, which covers Central Asia, so we here only provide a brief introduction. The most important point to bear in mind is that the Mongols conquered many countries, including China, and incorporated them into a large Eurasian empire.

In the twelfth century CE, the Mongols were one of many tribes of nomadic pastoralists living on the steppes of Central Asia. Although these tribes were made up of peoples of differing ethnicity,
they held in common a way of life. Since the steppe was unsuited to farming, they relied principally on their herds, but also on what they could obtain by trading with neighboring sedentary peoples. The nomads lived in temporary campsites, periodically breaking down their yurts and relocating as the seasons required. Since the tribes often fought with each other or turned to raiding, nomads were also excellent at mounted warfare. Their chieftain leaders—referred to as khans—were usually selected based on skill in battle and charisma.

Undoubtedly, the most famous khan in Central Asian history is Genghis Khan. In the late twelfth century, he accrued an army of loyal followers and began to subdue tribes across the Mongolian steppe. In 1206 CE, at a gathering of tribal leaders, he was proclaimed Universal Khan of a tribal confederation. Using a powerful military with a tight command structure, Genghis proceeded to unleash a wave of campaigning in northern China and Central Asia, thereby adding much territory to a growing Mongol Empire (see Map 4.23). After he died in 1227 CE, this empire was divided into four khanates, each of which went to one of his four sons as their territorial inheritance.

Tolui, Genghis Khan’s youngest son, was granted the Mongol homeland as well as subjugated territory in northern China held by the Jin Dynasty. But this rugged warrior died in 1232 at the young
age of forty, so the task of managing Chinese territory fell to Tolui’s capable wife Sorhaghtani Beki and her second son, **Kublai Khan** (1215 – 1294 CE). Unlike his predecessors, who largely treated Chinese as chattel and ruthlessly exploited their towns and villages, Kublai saw the advantages of taking a more enlightened approach. With the advice of Chinese advisors, he adopted Chinese-style methods for governing China. In fact, after Kublai was elected as the fifth Universal Khan in 1260, he chose to move his capital from Mongolia to Beijing, making it the center of his khanate. He then took on the trappings of a Chinese-style sovereign and, in 1273, declared the founding of the Great Yuan Dynasty. Accordingly, he asserted that the Mandate of Heaven had been transferred to him from the Song Dynasty.

Kublai then engaged in a decade of conquest that concluded with the fall of the Song. This victory over the Song Dynasty, China required careful preparation. The Song was located in the southern two-thirds of China, where the terrain was matted with lakes, rivers, and canals. The Mongols had little experience with naval warfare, so they turned to Chinese advisors to build a navy. Mongol cavalry boarded the ships and floated down rivers leading to the Song capital, laying siege to cities along the way. When they reached it in 1276, Kublai’s generals took the capital without bloodshed. The regent to the young Song emperor worked out conditions for surrender to them. Hence, the Mongol Yuan Dynasty had won control over China. After Kublai died, nine of his descendants ruled as emperors until the dynasty fell to native rebellions in 1368.

Historians differently assess the impact of Mongol Yuan rule on China. Earlier generations of historians judged that violent Mongol conquests devastated the land and led to a population drop. The Mongol style of rule was despotic. Rather than sustain the openness of Chinese society and use the merit-based examination system to bring talent into their government, Mongol rulers placed Chinese in rigid occupational categories and suspended the exams. Many capable men simply avoided official service and turned to other professions.

Recent studies, however, offer a more positive assessment. Because Yuan rulers followed the
counsel of Confucian advisors and adopted traditional Chinese methods for governing, for most Chinese life went on as before. Early on, much attention was also paid to the farming population. To promote agriculture, Yuan rulers provided relief measures and promoted the formation of rural cooperatives. Also, Mongols highly valued crafts and implemented policies that greatly benefited artisans and promoted their work. Hence, arts such as textiles and ceramics flourished (see Figure 4.28). Finally, the assessment of Yuan rule in China should be linked to a broader assessment of the impact of Mongol rule on world history (see Chapter Eleven). While duly acknowledging the devastation caused by Mongol conquests, historians also find much merit in Mongol patronage of arts and support for constructions projects and advancements in the areas of medicine and astronomy. Most importantly, the massive Eurasian empire they forged initiated a new era of trade and contacts between Europe and China, as well as the regions lying between.

4.14 CONCLUSION

We have now passed through nearly four millennia of East Asian history. We prefaced that history with the development of Neolithic cultures leading up to the second millennium BCE, at which point the first kingdoms in Chinese history emerged. Longshan culture (3000 – 1900 BCE) consisted of competing chiefdoms that laid the foundations for the emergence of the first major states.

The first major state was the Xia Dynasty (c. 1900 – 1600 BCE). Although historians debate whether or not it was legendary and lack written sources from that time, the archaeological evidence points to a Bronze Age civilization with a capital city at Erlitou. The next dynasty, the Shang (c. 1600 – 1046 BCE), brings us into history proper, because we have written evidence in the form of oracle bones and bronze inscriptions. The last Shang capital was located at Anyang on the North China Plain near the Yellow River. The dynasty’s most important legacies were the earliest form of Chinese writing and ancestor worship. The oracle bones were used to divine the will of higher powers and the spirits of deceased Shang kings.

The next dynasty, the Zhou Dynasty (1045 – 256 BCE), began when chieftains to the west of the Shang declared themselves kings and overthrew it. They justified doing so with the Mandate of Heaven, which states that a higher power withdraws its support from corrupt ruling families and transfers it to righteous ones. Because it lasted eight hundred years and saw much change, the Zhou is divided into two major periods, the Western (1045 – 771 BCE) and Eastern Zhou (770 – 256 BCE). During the Western Zhou, Zhou kings ruled by granting land and noble titles to kinsmen and allies in exchange for loyalty and service. The resulting political system, which saw China divided up by over one hundred feudal states, is known as Zhou feudalism. During the Eastern Zhou, this nobility became increasingly independent and fought with each other for power and territory. A few declared themselves kings and forged powerful militaries by gearing their kingdoms for war. In the end, in 221 BCE, the state of Qin prevailed, initiating China’s imperial era. Also, in the midst of the dislocation caused by Eastern Zhou instability, three of China’s major philosophical traditions emerged: Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism.

The short-lived Qin Dynasty was followed by the much longer lasting Han Dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE). During the Han Dynasty, Confucianism was adopted as the governing philosophy and
also penetrated society, shaping the Chinese worldview. The Han also became an empire, as borders were expanded in all directions. During the reign of Emperor Wu (141 – 87 BCE), China extended control over parts of Korea, northern Vietnam, and also much of Central Asia. The resulting stability and the productivity of the economy spurred the development of the Silk Routes.

After the Han dynasty fell, China was divided up by independent, short-lived kingdoms until 589 CE, when the Sui Dynasty reunited most of the territory once controlled by the Han. Thus, for four centuries, during what is known as the Period of Division (220 – 589 CE), China was politically unstable and racked by endemic warfare. Yet, in spite of the violence, these centuries also saw vibrant cultural developments, as Buddhism became an organized institutional religion reshaping the spiritual landscape.

The Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE) was yet another long-lived one in Chinese history. Tang rulers built an empire on the foundations of solid political and legal institutions, agricultural policy, and a formidable military. Also during the Tang Dynasty, East Asia first emerged as an identifiable cultural sphere. By Tang times, kingdoms had already formed on the Korean Peninsula and the main islands of Japan, but it was during the Tang that ruling elites in both of these states made extensive efforts to adapt components of the Chinese political, legal, and writing system, as well as of Chinese culture, to their own societies. During the seventh century CE, the Silla Dynasty unified the Korean Peninsula, and the Yamato heavenly sovereigns unified much of Japan. Two other unique East Asian civilizations had taken shape.

The last major dynasty surveyed was the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279 CE), one that is notable for the challenges it faced from northern conquest dynasties, its economic prosperity, and the civil service examination system and the educated elite of scholar-officials it created. Also, since footbinding developed during the Song, we considered the status of women in Chinese society, where gender hierarchy was the norm.

The Song Dynasty ended with Mongol conquests in 1279 CE. The Mongol Yuan Dynasty made China one part of a much larger Eurasian territorial empire. Mongol ruled lasted until 1368 CE, when native rebellions overthrew a faltering Yuan state, initiating a new period in Chinese history: the Ming Dynasty. This dynasty properly belongs to early modern history.

### 4.15 Works Consulted and Further Reading


CHAPTER 4: CHINA AND EAST ASIA TO THE MING DYNASTY


### 4.16 Links to Primary Sources

**China**

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/

Confucius – the *Analects* selections and complete online editions.

http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts/analects.html (selections)

http://www.olemiss.edu/courses/inst203/confucianthought.pdf (selections)

Empress Wu Zetian and women during the Tang Dynasty
http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/toc-06.html

The Laozi (Dao de jing) selections and complete online editions.
http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/laozi_daodejing.pdf (selections)
http://ctext.org/dao-de-jing (complete text)
http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Daodejing.pdf (complete text)

Mandate of Heaven
http://ace6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts/shu-jing.html

Mongols and the Mongol Yuan Dynasty
http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/mongols/index.html

Oracle Bones of the Shang Dynasty

Sunzi's (Master Sun's) Art of War
http://classics.mit.edu/Tzu/artwar.html (complete text)

Japan

Prince Shōtoku's Constitution

Yoshinogari (a Yayoi Period archaeological site)
5.1 CHRONOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Period</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c. 3300 – 1150 BCE</td>
<td>Bronze Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 1100 – 700 BCE</td>
<td>Dark Ages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 700 – 480 BCE</td>
<td>Archaic Period</td>
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5.2 INTRODUCTION

Sometime in the eighth century BCE, an aristocratic resident of the Greek trading colony of Pithekoussai—located on the tiny island of Ischia just off the coast of Naples in Italy—held a symposium at his home. Most of what happened at the party stayed at the party, but what we do know is that it must have been a good one. One of the guests, presumably operating under the influence of his host’s excellent wine, took the liberty of scratching the following ditty onto one of his host’s fine exported ceramic wine cups: “I am the Cup of Nestor, good to drink from. Whoever drinks from this cup, straightaway the desire of beautifully-crowned Aphrodite will seize him.”

While party pranks do not commonly make history, this one has: this so-called Cup of Nestor is one of the earliest examples of writing in the Greek alphabet, as well as the earliest known written reference to the Homeric epics. Overall, this cup and the inscription on it exemplify the mobility of the Ancient Greeks and their borrowing of skills and culture from others around the Mediterranean while, at the same time, cultivating a set of values specific to themselves. After all, just like the very residents of Pithekoussai, the cup had originally made the journey all the way from the island of Euboea, off the coast of Athens, to Pithekoussai, on the island of Ischia.

Furthermore, the new script, in which the daring guest wrote on the cup, had just recently been borrowed and adapted by the Greeks from the Phoenicians, a seafaring nation based in modern-
day Lebanon. Indeed, our clever poet wrote from right to left, just like the Phoenicians. Finally, the poem mentions Nestor, one of the heroes of Homer’s *Iliad*, an epic about the Trojan War, and a source of common values that all Greeks held dear: military valor, competitive excellence on both the battlefield and in all areas of everyday life, and a sense of brotherhood that manifested itself most obviously in the shared language of all the Greeks. That feeling of kinship facilitated collaboration of all the Greeks in times of crisis from the mythical Trojan War to the Persian Wars, and finally, during the Greeks’ resistance against the Roman conquest.
5.3 QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING

1. In what ways did Greek geography and topography impact the history of the ancient Greek world?

2. What are the different periods of Greek history, and what are the chief defining characteristics of each period?

3. What primary sources are available for the study of Greek history, and what are the limitations of these sources?

4. What were the most important developments in the Greek world in the Archaic Period?

5. What was the significance of the Persian Wars for the subsequent history of the Greek World?

6. What were the stages of the Peloponnesian War? How did the outcome of the war impact Greece in the fourth century?

7. What were some of the most important contributions of Classical Athens in the areas of art, government and law, philosophy, and literature?

8. How and why did the Macedonians conquer the Greek world? Why did the empire conquered by Philip and Alexander disintegrate after Alexander’s death?

9. What were some of the strengths and weaknesses of the Hellenistic kingdoms as political entities? Why did they prove to be inherently unstable?

10. What were some of the achievements and legacies of the Hellenistic period?

5.4 KEY TERMS

- Achaemenid Empire
- Alexander the Great
- Alexandria
- Antigonid dynasty
- Archaeological evidence
- Archaic Period
- Archidamian War
- Archimedes of Syracuse
- Aristophanes
- Aristotle
- Asia Minor
- Athenian democracy
- Athens
- Battle of Chaeronea
- Battle of Leuctra
- Battle of Marathon
- Battle of Thermopylae
- Bronze Age
- Chigi vase
- Classical Period
- Cleisthenes
- Cleopatra VII
- Crete
- “Cup of Nestor”
- Cynic philosophers
- Cyrus the Great
- Darius
- Dark Ages
- Decelean War
- Delian League / Athenian Empire
- Delphi
- Ekklesia
- Epicureanism
- Epidaurus
- Euripides
- First Peloponnesian War
- Gerousia
- Great Library of Alexandria
- Greek alphabet
- Greek colonization
- Hannukah
- Hellenistic Period
- Helots
- Herodotus
- Herophilus of Chalcedon
- Homer
- Homer’s Iliad
- Hoplite phalanx
- Kingdom of Pergamon
- Kleos
- Isthmus of Corinth
- Linear A
- Linear B
- Macedonian Wars with Rome / Third Macedonian War
- Magna Graecia
- “Mask of Agamemnon”
- Mauryan Empire
- Megara Hyblaea
- Messenia
- Minoans
- Mycenaeans
- Oligarchy
- Olympic Games
- Orientalizing style
- Othimos
- Pan-Hellenic
- Peace of Nicias
- Peisistratus
- Peloponnese
- Peloponnesian War
- Pericles
- Persian Wars
- Pharos of Alexandria
- Philip II of Macedon
- Phoenicians
- Plato
- Polis / poleis
- Ptolemaic Egypt
- Ptolemy I Soter
- Pythia
- Sarissa
- Seleucid Empire
- Septuagint
- Sicilian Expedition
- Skepticism
5.5 GEOGRAPHY AND TOPOGRAPHY

This chapter’s title refers to the Greek World, rather than Greece. While Greece is a unified country today, the territory of the present-day country was not unified under one rule until the rise of the Macedonians in the fourth century BCE. Instead, the basic unit of organization in the period covered in this chapter was the polis, an independent city-state, which consisted of a walled city that controlled and protected the farmland around it. Historians estimate that close to 1,500 of these city-states dotted the ancient Greek landscape.

Each of these poleis (plural form of polis) possessed its own form of government, law-code, army, cults of patron gods, and overall culture that set it apart from the other city-states. While the two most famous poleis, Athens and Sparta, controlled vast territories of farmland, most city-states were quite small, with a population of just a few thousand citizens. Furthermore, the Greek world in antiquity encompassed much more than present-day Greece, extending as far as Italy in the West and the territories of modern-day Turkey and Ukraine in the East.

The geography and topography of the Greek mainland and the Mediterranean region surrounding it influenced the history of the Greek people in a number of crucial ways. First, the mountainous nature of mainland Greece, especially in the north, allowed different regions to remain somewhat isolated. The most isolated of all, Thessaly and Macedon, were viewed as uncivilized barbarians by the rest of the Greeks in the Archaic and Classical periods (one oft-mentioned example of their “barbarism” in Greek literature is that they drank their wine undiluted!) and largely kept to themselves until their rise to military prominence in the mid-fourth century BCE.

The mountains throughout the northern portion of mainland Greece, in addition to isolating regions from each other and promoting regional culture, also provided tactical defenses in the face of external attacks. Most famously, the Persians learned the hard way about the challenges of navigating the Greek landscape during the second Persian invasion of Greece in 480 BCE. Indeed, the story of the 300 Spartans who fought to the death at the Battle of Thermopylae addresses the challenge of the Persian army trying to cross the mountains to the north of Attica in order to invade Athens by land.

The Isthmus, a narrow strip of land controlled by Corinth, played a similar role in separating mainland Greece from the large peninsula of the Peloponnese. An inland city in southern
Peloponnese, Sparta conquered **Messenia**, its surrounding region, early in its history and extended political control over much of the peninsula by early fifth century BCE. Unless the interests of Sparta herself were directly involved, Sparta practiced a policy of isolation and limited military intervention in other city-states affairs and wars, a practice enabled due to Sparta’s far southern location in Peloponnese.

No less influential for the history of the Greek city-states than the topographical features were the resources that the land in different regions provided for agriculture and manufacturing. Mainland Greece was notoriously unsuitable for agriculture. Growing the grain staples wheat and barley in the rocky and clay-filled soil of Athens was especially difficult, while the mountainous regions across the entire mainland were optimal for herding, rather than agriculture. One notable exception, however,
were olive trees, which grew abundantly. Olive oil, as a result, was ubiquitously used for eating, bathing, and lamps, and even as currency or prize for victors in athletic games. In addition, early on in their history, the inhabitants of Attica and Corinth found a way to profit from the clay in their soil by developing advanced ceramic pot-making and decorating techniques. Remains of Athenian and Corinthian wares have been found at archaeological sites all over the Mediterranean, attesting to their popularity abroad.

Finally, precious metals were in short supply in the mainland, but the few that were available had an impact on the history of their regions. Most famously, the discovery of the silver mines at Laurion in Attica contributed to the increased prosperity of Athens in the mid-fifth century BCE.

But the topography and geography of mainland Greece and the Peloponnese only
tells us a part of the story. The Aegean is filled with islands, some of which remained autonomous, but most came under the control of the Athenian maritime empire in the fifth century BCE. In addition, the Greek colonization movement of the seventh and sixth centuries BCE resulted in the foundation of numerous Greek city-states in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), Magna Graecia (southern Italy), Sicily, and the Black Sea littoral.

The history of the Greek world from its earliest settlements to the Roman conquest, therefore, is inextricably tied together with the history of the Mediterranean as a whole. And since the Greek areas of influence overlapped with those controlled by the Phoenicians, Persians, and eventually the Romans, interactions, often warlike, were unavoidable as well. As the modern historians Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell noted, the Mediterranean was “the Corrupting Sea” whose inhabitants were like frogs around the pond, watching each other, and borrowing each other’s cultural and technological achievements. As this chapter and the next will show, the Greeks and the Romans were the farthest-leaping frogs of all.

### 5.6 PERIODS OF GREEK HISTORY

Historians today separate Greek history into particular periods, which shared specific features throughout the Greek world:

**The Bronze Age** (c. 3,300 – 1,150 BCE) – a period characterized by the use of bronze tools and weapons. In addition, two particular periods during the Bronze Age are crucial in the development of early Greece: the Minoan Age on the island of Crete (c. 2,000 – 1,450 BCE) and the Mycenean period on mainland Greece (c. 1,600 – 1,100 BCE), both of them characterized by massive palaces, remnants of which still proudly stand today. The Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations had writing (dubbed Linear A and Linear B, respectively), which they used for keeping lists and palace inventories.

**The Dark Ages** (c. 1,100 – 700 BCE) – a period that is “dark” from the archaeological perspective, which means that the monumental palaces of the Mycenean period disappear, and the archaeological record reveals a general poverty and loss of culture throughout the Greek world. For instance, the Linear A and Linear B writing systems disappear. The Greeks do not rediscover writing until the invention of the Greek alphabet at the end of the Dark Ages or the early Archaic Period.

**Archaic Period** (c. 700 – 480 BCE) – the earliest period for which written evidence survives; this is the age of the rise of the Greek city-states, colonization, and the Persian Wars.

**Classical Period** (c. 480 – 323 BCE) – the period from the end of the Persian Wars to the death of Alexander the Great. One of the most important events during this period is the Peloponnesian War (431 – 404 BCE), which pitted Athens against Sparta, and forced all other Greek city-states to choose to join one side or the other. This period ends with the death of Alexander the Great, who had unified the Greek world into a large kingdom with himself at its helm.

**Hellenistic Period** (323 – 146 BCE) – the period from the death of Alexander to the Roman conquest of Greece; this is the age of the Hellenistic monarchies ruling over territories previously conquered by Alexander and his generals. Some historians end this period in 30

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BCE, with the death of Cleopatra VII, the last surviving ruler of Egypt who was a descendant of one of Alexander’s generals.

The rest of this chapter will be devoted to examining each of these periods in greater detail, covering chief political, military, and cultural developments.

5.7 METHODOLOGY: SOURCES AND PROBLEM

Before launching into the story of the early Greek world, it is important to consider the methodology that Greek historians utilize. In other words, how do we know what we know about the Greek world? Modern scholars of ancient history are notoriously obsessed with evaluating their primary sources critically, and with good reason. Studying Greek history, especially in its earliest periods, is like putting together a puzzle, most of whose pieces are missing, and some pieces from another puzzle have also been added in for good measure. Greek history requires careful consideration of a wide range of sources, which fall into two broad categories: literary sources (including both fiction and non-fiction), and material culture. The job of the historian, then, is to reconstruct the story of the Greek people using these very different sources.

While historians of the modern world rely on such archival sources as newspapers, magazines, and personal diaries and correspondence of individuals and groups, historians of the ancient world must use every available source to reconstruct the world in which their subject dwelled. Literary sources, such as epics, lyric poetry, and drama, may seem strange for historians to use, as they do not necessarily describe specific historical events. Yet, as in the case of other early civilizations, such sources are a crucial window into the culture and values of the people who produced them. For instance, the Epic of Gilgamesh, discussed in Chapter 2, is a key text for the study of early Mesopotamia.

The earliest literary sources for Greek history are the Homeric epics, Iliad and Odyssey. They are, however, one of the most challenging sources to interpret, with one modern historian dubbing them a “historian’s headache.” Composed orally before the existence of the Greek alphabet, the epics were not written down until sometime in the sixth century BCE. The epics most likely do not reflect the society of any particular Greek city-state in any one period, but rather consist of an amalgam of features from the Bronze Age to the early Archaic Period. Their value for historians, as a result, rests more on their impact on subsequent Greek culture, rather than on their providing information about Bronze Age Greeks. More than any other literary source, the Homeric Epics influenced the mentality of the Greeks in thinking about war and what it means to be a hero.

Most other literary sources from the Archaic and Classical periods are easier to interpret than the Homeric Epics, as we often can date these later sources more precisely and thus know the period whose values or problems they reflect. There is, however, one important limitation to keep in mind: the overwhelming majority of surviving literature is from Athens, with very few sources from other city-states. Some of this distribution of evidence has to do with the differing values of the city-states themselves. For example, while Greeks of the Classical period considered Sparta to

be as great a city as Athens, Spartans valued military valor over all else, so they did not cultivate arts and letters the way Athenians did. As a result, the only literary sources from Sparta are the works of two poets, Alcman and Tyrtaeus. Tyrtaeus’ military elegies, like the Homeric epics, glorify heroic death in battle over life without honor and were likely sung by Spartan warriors as they marched into battle.

Several genres of non-fiction survive as well, allowing historians to study specific events and problems in the history of the Greek world, and especially Athens. The works of three major historians survive from Classical Athens. Herodotus, dubbed the Father of History, wrote the Histories about the Persian Wars in mid-fifth century BCE. Thucydides, an Athenian general in the Peloponnesian War, wrote a history of the Peloponnesian War over the course of the war (431 – 404 BCE). Finally, Xenophon wrote a history of the end of the Peloponnesian War, starting with 411 BCE, where Thucydides’ work ended, and into the fourth century. In addition to the works of the historians, philosophical treatises – most notably, those of Plato and Aristotle – provide crucial insight into the political thought, moral values, and perceptions of the world in late fifth and fourth centuries BCE. The approximately 100 surviving courtroom speeches from the same period likewise provide us with a window into the Athenian legal system. Finally, the Hippocratic corpus, a series of medical treatises and physicians’ journals from the Classical period, help us to understand the Greeks’ views of the human body and diseases. But in addition to the geographical restrictions of these sources, which largely document Athens, it is also important to note two other key limitations of the available evidence. First, virtually all of the literary sources were written by men and provide very little evidence of the lives and perspectives of women in the Greek world, except as seen through the eyes of men. Second, most of the authors were wealthy and socially prominent individuals; thus, their perspective does not reflect that of less affluent citizens and slaves.

Archaeological evidence thankfully allows historians to fill some of the gaps in the literary evidence, but also comes with problems of its own. One joke that refers to the optimism of archaeologists reflects some of these problems of interpretation: whenever an archaeologist finds three stones that are together, he labels the find as a Minoan palace. Whenever he finds two stones that are together, he thinks he has found a city wall. Whenever he finds one building stone, he thinks he has found a house.

Still, archaeological sources provide us with key information

Figure 5.3 | Megara Hyblaea, main road, looking north | The careful planning of the road and the buildings is still evident, as the ruins on both sides of the road are perfectly aligned.
Author: User “Alun Salt”
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: CC BY-SA 2.0
about different aspects of everyday life in different city-states. For example, the excavations of the sixth-century BCE colony *Megara Hyblaea* in Sicily shows that Greek colonists were interested in city planning and in equality of citizens, as demonstrated by the equal size of the lots.

Material finds, such as pottery remains, in different sites across the Mediterranean also allow historians to map trading routes – for instance, Figures 5.1 and 5.2 show vases that were made in Euboea and Corinth respectively, but were found in Greek colonies in Italy. In addition, images on pottery provide information about stories and myths that have entered popular culture and that sometimes reflect further aspects of everyday life. For instance, the prevalence of images of women gathering at public fountains on Athenian *hydriae* (water pots) from the late sixth century BCE shows the importance of the public fountains for the social life of women in Athens in the period.

Finally, written archaeological sources, such as inscriptions on stone or pottery shards from all over the Greek world, and papyri from Hellenistic Egypt, are the equivalent of documentary archives from the ancient world. The evidence from epigraphy (inscriptions) includes laws that were written on large stones and set up in public, such as the monumental law-code from Gortyn, Crete, and lists of war-dead, as well as private tomb inscriptions.

Papyri, on the other hand, include such private documents as prenuptial agreements (among the strangest are prenuptial documents for brother-sister marriages – legal
in Egypt but nowhere else in the Greek world), divorce documents, loans, and village police reports (cattle theft appears to have been a serious problem in the Faiyum in the Hellenistic Period!).

Taken together, the literary and archaeological sources allow the historian to complete much more of the puzzle than would have been possible with just one of these types of sources. Still, significant gaps in knowledge remain nevertheless, and are, perhaps, one of the joys of studying ancient history: the historian gets to play the part of a sleuth, attempting to reconstruct the history of events based on just a few available clues.

5.8 FROM MYTHOLOGY TO HISTORY

The terms “mythology” and “history” may seem, by modern definitions, to be antithetical. After all, mythology refers to stories that are clearly false, of long-forgotten gods and heroes and their miraculous feats. History, on the other hand, refers to actual events that involved real people. And yet, the idea that the two are opposites would have seemed baffling to a typical resident of the ancient Mediterranean world. Rather, gods and myths were part of the everyday life, and historical events could become subsumed by myths just as easily as myths could become a part of history. For instance, Gilgamesh, the hero of the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, was a real king of Uruk, yet he also became the hero of the epic. Each Greek city-state, in particular, had a foundation myth describing its origins as well as its own patron gods and goddesses. Etiological myths, furthermore, served to explain why certain institutions or practices existed; for instance, the tragic trilogy Oresteia of the Athenian poet Aeschylus tells the etiological myth for the establishment of the Athenian murder courts in the Classical period.

Yet, while the Greeks saw mythology and history as related concepts and sometimes as two sides of the same coin, one specific mythical event marked, in the eyes of the earliest known Greek historians, the beginning of the story of Greek-speaking peoples. That event was the Trojan War.

5.8.1 Homer and the Trojan War

It is telling that the two earliest Greek historians, Herodotus, writing in the mid-fifth century BCE, and Thucydides, writing in the last third of the fifth century BCE, began their respective histories with the Trojan War, each treating it as a historical event. The Homeric epics Iliad and Odyssey portray the war as an organized attack of a unified Greek army against Troy, a city in Asia Minor (see map 5.2). The instigating offense? The Trojan prince Paris kidnapped Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, from her husband Menelaus, king of Sparta. This offense, interpreted as a slight to Menelaus’ honor, prompted Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and Menelaus’ brother, to raise an army from the entire Greek world and sail to Troy. The mythical tradition had it that after a brutal ten-year siege, the Greeks resorted to a trick: they presented the Trojans with a hollow wooden horse, filled with armed soldiers. The Trojans tragically accepted the gift, ostensibly intended as a dedication to the goddess Athena. That same night, the armed contingent emerged from the horse, and the city finally fell to the Greeks. Picking up the story ten years after the end of the Trojan War, the Odyssey then told the story of Odysseus’s struggles to
return home after the war and the changes that reverberated throughout the Greek world after the fall of Troy.

The Homeric epics were the foundation of Greek education in the Archaic and Classical periods and, as such, are a historian’s best source of pan-Hellenic values. A major theme throughout both epics is personal honor, which Homeric heroes value more than the collective cause. For example, when Agamemnon slights Achilles’ honor in the beginning of the *Iliad*, Achilles, the best hero of the Greeks, withdraws from battle for much of the epic, even though his action causes the Greeks to start losing battles until he rejoins the fight. A related theme is competitive excellence, with *kleos* (eternal glory) as its goal: all Greek heroes want to be the best; thus, even while fighting in the same army, they see each other as competition. Ultimately, Achilles has to make a choice: he can live a long life and die unknown, or he can die in battle young and have everlasting glory. Achilles’ selection of the second option made him the inspiration for such historical Greek warriors and generals as Alexander the Great, who brought his scroll copy of the *Iliad* with him on all campaigns. Finally, the presence of the gods in the background of the Trojan War shows the Greeks’ belief that the gods were everywhere, and acted in the lives of mortals. These gods could be powerful benefactors and patrons of individuals who respected them and sought their favor, or vicious enemies, bent on destruction. Indeed, early in the *Iliad*, the god Apollo sends a plague on the Greek army at Troy, as punishment for disrespecting his priest.

It is important to note that while the Homeric epics influenced Greek values from the Archaic period on, they do not reflect the reality of the Greek world in any one period. Furthermore, they were not composed by a single poet, Homer; indeed, it is possible that Homer never existed. Because the epics were composed orally by multiple bards over the period of several hundred years, they combine details about technological and other aspects of the Bronze Age with those of the Dark Ages and even the early Archaic Age. For instance, the heroes use bronze weapons side-by-side with iron. Archaeological evidence, however, allows historians to reconstruct to some extent a picture of the Greek world in the Bronze Age and the Dark Ages.

### 5.8.2 Greece in the Bronze Age, and the Dark Ages

While there were people living in mainland Greece already in the Neolithic Period, historians typically begin the study of the Greeks as a unique civilization in the Bronze Age, with the Minoans. The first literate civilization in Europe, the Minoans were a palace civilization that flourished on the island of Crete c. 2,000 – 1,450 BCE.

As befits island-dwellers, they were traders and seafarers; indeed, the Greek historian Thucydides credits them with being the first Greeks to sail on ships. Sir Arthur Evans, the archaeologist who first excavated Crete in the early 1900s, dubbed them Minoans, after the mythical Cretan king Minos who was best known for building a labyrinth to house the Minotaur, a monster that was half-man, half-bull. Bulls appear everywhere in surviving Minoan art, suggesting that they indeed held a prominent place in Minoan mythology and religion.

Four major palace sites survive on Crete. The most significant of them, Knossos, has been restored and reconstructed for the benefit of modern tourists.
Historians hypothesize that the palaces were the homes of local rulers, who ruled and protected the surrounding farmland. The palaces seem to have kept records in two different writing systems, the earliest known in Europe: the Cretan hieroglyphic and Linear A scripts. Unfortunately, neither of these systems has been deciphered, but it is likely that these were palace inventories and records pertaining to trade. The palaces had no surrounding walls, suggesting that the Cretans maintained peace with each other and felt safe from outside attacks, since they lived on an island. This sense of security proved to be a mistake as, around 1,450 BCE, the palaces were violently destroyed by invaders, possibly the Mycenaean.
who arrived from mainland Greece. Recent discoveries also suggest that at least some of the destruction may have been the result of tsunamis which accompanied the Santorini/Thera volcanic eruption in the 1600s BCE.

The Mycenaeans, similarly to the Minoans, were a palace civilization. Flourishing on mainland Greece c. 1,600 – 1,100 BCE, they received their name from Mycenae, the most elaborate surviving palace and the mythical home of Agamemnon, the commander-in-chief of the Greek army in the Trojan War. The archaeological excavations of graves in Mycenae reveal a prosperous civilization that produced elaborate pottery, bronze weapons and tools, and extravagant jewelry and other objects made of precious metals and gems. One of the most famous finds is the so-called “Mask of Agamemnon,” a burial mask with which one aristocrat was buried, made of hammered gold.

The Mycenaeans also kept palace records in a syllabic script, known as Linear B. Related to the Cretan Linear A script, Linear B, however, has been deciphered, and identified as Greek. Archaeological evidence also shows that sometime in the 1,200s BCE, the Mycenaean palaces suffered a series of attacks and were gradually abandoned over the next century. The period that begins around 1,000 BCE is known as the “Dark Ages” because of the notable decline, in contrast with the preceding period. The Mycenaean Linear B script disappears, and archaeological evidence shows a poorer Greece with a decline in material wealth and life expectancy. Some contact, however, must have remained with the rest of the Mediterranean, as shown by the emergence of the Greek alphabet, adapted from the Phoenician writing system towards the end of the Dark Ages or early in the Archaic Period.

5.9 ARCHAIC GREECE

The story of the Greek world in the Dark Ages could mostly be described as a story of fragmentation. With a few exceptions,
As this chart shows, in addition to the influence of the Phoenician alphabet on the Greek, there were close connections between the Phoenician, Egyptian, and Hebrew writing systems as well.

Author: Samuel Prideaux Tregelles
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individual sites had limited contact with each other. The Archaic period, however, appears to have been a time of growing contacts and connections between different parts of mainland Greece. Furthermore, it was a time of expansion, as the establishment of overseas colonies and cities brought the Greeks to Italy and Sicily in the West, and Asia Minor and the Black Sea littoral in the East. Furthermore, while Greeks in the Archaic period saw themselves as citizens of individual city-states, this period also witnessed the rise of a Pan-Hellenic identity, as all Greeks saw themselves connected by virtue of their common language, religion, and Homeric values. This Pan-Hellenic identity was ultimately cemented during the Persian Wars: two invasions of Greece by the Persian Empire at the end of the Archaic period.

5.9.1 Rise of the Hoplite Phalanx and the Polis

A Corinthian vase, known today as the Chigi Vase, made in the mid-seventh century BCE, presents a tantalizing glimpse of the changing times from the Dark Ages to the Archaic Period. Taking up much of the decorated space on the vase is a battle scene. Two armies of warriors with round shields, helmets, and spears are facing each other and appear to be marching in formation towards each other in preparation for attack.

Modern scholars largely consider the vase to be the earliest artistic portrayal of the hoplite phalanx, a new way of fighting that spread around the Greek world in the early Archaic Age and that coincided with the rise of another key institution for subsequent Greek history: the polis, or city-state. From the early Archaic period to the conquest of the Greek world by Philip and Alexander in the late fourth century BCE, the polis was the central unit of organization in the Greek world.

While warfare in the Iliad consisted largely of duels between individual heroes, the hoplite phalanx was a new mode of fighting that did not rely on the skill of individuals. Rather, it required all soldiers in the line to work together as a whole. Armed in the same way – with a helmet, spear, and the round shield, the hoplon, which gave the hoplites their name – the soldiers were arranged in rows, possibly as much as seven deep. Each soldier carried his shield on his left arm, protecting the left side of his own body and the right side of his comrade to the left. Working together as one, then, the phalanx...
would execute the **othismos** (a mass shove) during battle, with the goal of shoving the enemy phalanx off the battlefield.

Historians do not know which came into existence first, the phalanx or the *polis*, but the two clearly reflect a similar ideology. In fact, the phalanx could be seen as a microcosm of the *polis*, exemplifying the chief values of the *polis* on a small scale. Each *polis* was a fully self-sufficient unit of organization, with its own laws, definition of citizenship, government, army, economy, and local cults. Regardless of the differences between the many *poleis* in matters of citizenship, government, and law, one key similarity is clear: the survival of the *polis* depended on the dedication of all its citizens to the collective well-being of the city-state. This dedication included service in the phalanx. As a result, citizenship in most Greek city-states was closely connected to military service, and women were excluded from citizenship. Furthermore, since hoplites had to provide their own armor, these citizen-militias effectively consisted of landowners. This is not to say, though, that the poorer citizens were entirely excluded from serving their city. One example of a way in which they may have participated even in the phalanx appears on the Chigi Vase. Marching between two lines of warriors is an unarmed man, playing a double-reed flute (seen on the right end of the top band in Figure 5.10). Since the success of the phalanx depended on marching together in step, the flute-player’s music would have been essential to ensure that everyone kept the same tempo during the march.

### 5.9.2 Greek Religion

One theory modern scholars have proposed for the rise of the *polis* connects the locations of the city-states to known cult-sites. The theory argues that the Greeks of the Archaic period built city-states around these precincts of various gods in order to live closer to them and protect them. While impossible to know for sure if this theory or any other regarding the rise of the *polis* is true, the building of temples in cities during the Archaic period shows the increasing emphasis that the *poleis* were placing on religion.

It is important to note that Greek religion seems to have been, at least to some extent, an element of continuity from the Bronze Age to the Archaic period and beyond. The important role that the gods play in the Homeric epics attests to their prominence in the oral tradition, going back to the Dark Ages. Furthermore, names of the following major gods worshipped in the Archaic period and beyond were found on the deciphered Linear B tablets: Zeus, king of the gods and god of weather, associated with the thunderbolt; Hera, Zeus’ wife and patroness of childbirth; Poseidon, god of the sea; Hermes, messenger god and patron of thieves and merchants; Athena, goddess of war and wisdom and patroness of women’s crafts; Ares, god of war; Dionysus, god of wine; and the twins Apollo, god of the sun and both god of the plague and a healer, and Artemis, goddess of the hunt and the moon. All of these gods continued to be the major divinities in Greek religion for its duration, and many of them were worshipped as patron gods of individual cities, such as Artemis at Sparta, and Athena at Athens.

While many local cults of even major gods were truly local in appeal, a few local cults achieved truly Pan-Hellenic appeal. Drawing visitors from all over the Greek world, these Pan-Hellenic
cults were seen as belonging equally to all the Greeks. One of the most famous examples is the cult of Asclepius at **Epidaurus**. Asclepius, son of Apollo, was a healer god, and his shrine at Epidaurus attracted the pilgrims from all over the Greek world. Visitors suffering from illness practiced incubation, that is, spending the night in the temple, in the hopes of receiving a vision in their dreams suggesting a cure. In gratitude for the god’s healing, some pilgrims dedicated casts of their healed body parts. Archaeological findings include a plentitude of ears, noses, arms, and feet.

Starting out as local cults, several religious festivals that included athletic competitions as part of the celebration also achieved Pan-Hellenic prominence during the Archaic period. The most influential of these were the **Olympic Games**. Beginning in 776 BCE, the Olympic Games were held in Olympia every four years in honor of Zeus; they drew competitors from all over the Greek world, and even Persia. The Pan-Hellenic appeal of the Olympics is signified by the impact that these games had on Greek politics: for instance, a truce was in effect throughout the Greek world for the duration of each Olympics. In addition, the Olympics provided a Pan-Hellenic system of dating events by Olympiads or four-year cycles.

Finally, perhaps the most politically influential of the Pan-Hellenic cults was the oracle of Apollo at **Delphi**, established sometime in the eighth century BCE. Available for consultation only nine days a year, the oracle spoke responses to the questions asked by inquirers through a priestess, named the **Pythia**. The Pythia’s responses came in the form of poetry and were notoriously difficult to interpret. Nevertheless, city-states and major rulers throughout the Greek world considered it essential to consult the oracle before embarking on any major endeavor, such as war or founding a colony.

### 5.9.3 Maritime Trade and Colonization

The historian Herodotus records that sometime c. 630 BCE, the king of the small island of Thera traveled to Delphi to offer a sacrifice and consult the oracle on a few minor points. To his surprise, the oracle’s response had nothing to do with his queries. Instead, the Pythia directed him to found a colony in Libya, in North Africa. Having never heard of Libya, the king ignored the advice. A seven-year drought ensued, and the Therans felt compelled to consult the oracle again. Receiving the same response as before, they finally sent out a group of colonists who eventually founded the city of Cyrene.
While this story may sound absurd, it is similar to other foundation stories of Greek colonies and emphasizes the importance of the Delphic oracle. At the same time, though, this story still leaves open the question of motive: why did so many Greek city-states of the Archaic period send out colonies to other parts of the Greek world? Archaeology and foundation legends, such as those recorded by Herodotus, suggest two chief reasons: population pressures along with shortage of productive farmland in the cities on mainland Greece, and increased ease of trade that colonies abroad facilitated. In addition to resolving these two problems, however, the colonies also had the unforeseen impact of increasing interactions of the Greeks with the larger Mediterranean world and the ancient Near East. These interactions are visible, for instance, in the so-called Orientalizing style of art in the Archaic period, a style the Greeks borrowed from the Middle East and Egypt.

As section 5.3.5 will show, however, the presence of Greek colonies in Asia Minor also played a major role in bringing about the Greco-Persian Wars.

**5.9.4. Aristocracy, Democracy, and Tyranny in Archaic Greece**

Later Greek historians, including Herodotus and Thucydides, noted a certain trend in the trajectory of the history of most Greek poleis: most city-states started out with a monarchical or quasi-monarchical government. Over time the people gained greater representation, and an assembly of all citizens had at least some degree of political power—although some degree of strife typically materialized between the aristocrats and the poorer elements. Taking advantage of such civic conflicts, tyrants came to power in most city-states for a brief period before the people banded together and drove them out, thenceforth replacing them with a more popular form of government.

Many modern historians are skeptical about some of the stories that the Greek historians tell about origins of some poleis; for instance, it is questionable whether the earliest Thebans truly were born from dragon teeth. Similarly, the stories about some of the Archaic tyrants seem to belong more to the realm of legend than history. Nevertheless, the preservation of stories about tyrants in early oral tradition suggests that city-states likely went through periods of turmoil and change in their form of government before developing a more stable constitution. Furthermore, this line of development accurately describes the early history of Athens, the best-documented polis.

In the early Archaic period, Athens largely had an aristocratic constitution. Widespread debt-slavery, however, caused significant civic strife in the city and led to the appointment of Solon as lawgiver for the year 594/3 BCE, specifically for the purpose of reforming the laws. Solon created a
more democratic constitution and also left poetry documenting justifications for his reforms—and
different citizens’ reactions to them. Most controversial of all, Solon instituted a one-time debt-
forgiveness, *seisachtheia*, which literally means “shaking off.” He proceeded to divide all citizens
into five classes based on income, assigning a level of political participation and responsibility
commensurate with each class. Shortly after Solon’s reforms, a tyrant, **Peisistratus**, illegally
seized control of Athens and remained in power off and on from 561 to 527 BCE. Peisistratus
seems to have been a reasonably popular ruler who had the support of a significant portion of the
Athenian population. His two sons, Hippias and Hipparchus, however, appear to have been less
well-liked. Two men, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, assassinated Hiparchus in 514 BCE; then
in 508 BCE, the Athenians, with the help of a Spartan army, permanently drove out Hippias.
In subsequent Athenian history, Harmodius and Aristogeiton were considered heroes of the
democracy and celebrated as tyrannicides.

![Figure 5.13 | The structure of the Classical Athenian democracy, fourth century BCE](image)

Author: User "Mathieuugp"
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Immediately following the expulsion of Hippias, Athens underwent a second round of democratic reforms, led by Cleisthenes. The Cleisthenic constitution remained in effect, with few changes, until the Macedonian conquest of Athens in the fourth century BCE and is considered to be the Classical Athenian democracy. Central to the democracy was the participation of all citizens in two types of institutions: the ekklesia, an assembly of all citizens, which functioned as the chief deliberative body of the city; and the law-courts, to which citizens were assigned by lot as jurors. Two chief offices, the generals and the archos, ruled over the city and were appointed for one-year terms. Ten generals were elected annually by the ekklesia for the purpose of leading the Athenian military forces. Finally, the leading political office each year, the nine archons, were appointed by lot from all eligible citizens. While this notion of appointing the top political leaders by lot may seem surprising, it exemplifies the Athenians’ pride in their democracy and their desire to believe that, in theory at least, all Athenian citizens were equally valuable and capable of leading their city-state.

Developing in a very different manner from Athens, Sparta was seen by other Greek poleis as a very different sort of city from the rest. Ruled from an early period by two kings – one from each of the two royal houses that ruled jointly – Sparta was a true oligarchy, in which the power

![Figure 5.14 | Structure of the Spartan Constitution](http://example.com)

*Figure 5.14 | Structure of the Spartan Constitution*

*Author: User "Putinovac"*
*Source: Wikimedia Commons*
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rested in its gerousia, a council of thirty elders, whose number included the two kings. While an assembly of all citizens existed as well, its powers were much more limited than were those of the Athenian assembly. Yet because of much more restrictive citizenship rules, Spartan assembly of citizens would have felt as a more selective body, as Figure 5.14 illustrates. A crucial moment in Spartan history was the city’s conquest of the nearby region of Messenia in the eighth century BCE. The Spartans annexed the Messenian territory to their own and made the Messenians helots. While the helots could not be bought or sold, they were permanently tied to the land in a status akin to medieval European serfs. The availability of helot labor allowed the Spartans from that point on to focus their attention on military training. This focus transformed Sparta into the ultimate military state in the Greek world, widely respected by the other Greek poleis for its military prowess. Other Greeks were fascinated by such Spartan practices as the communal bringing up of all children apart from their parents and the requirement that all Spartan girls and women, as well as boys and men, maintain a strict regimen of exercise and training.

But while Athens and Sparta sound like each other’s diametrical opposites, the practices of both poleis ultimately derived from the same belief that all city-states held: that, in order to ensure their city’s survival, the citizens must place their city-state’s interests above their own. A democracy simply approached this goal with a different view of the qualifications of its citizens than did an oligarchy. A final note on gender is necessary, in connection with Greek city-states’ definitions of citizenship. Only children of legally married and freeborn citizen parents could be citizens in most city-states. Women had an ambiguous status in the Greek poleis. While not full-fledged citizens themselves, they produced citizens. This view of the primary importance of wives in the city as the mothers of citizens resulted in diametrically opposite laws in Athens and Sparta, showing the different values that the respective cities emphasized. In Athens, if a husband caught his wife with an adulterer in his home, the law allowed the husband to kill said adulterer on the spot. The
adultery law was so harsh precisely because adultery put into question the citizenship status of potential children, thereby depriving the city of future citizens. By contrast, Spartan law allowed an unmarried man who wanted offspring to sleep with the wife of another man, with the latter’s consent, specifically for the purpose of producing children. This law reflects the importance that Sparta placed on producing strong future soldiers as well as the communal attitude of the city towards family and citizenship.

5.9.5 The Persian Wars

Despite casting their net far and wide in founding colonies, the Greeks seem to have remained in a state of relatively peaceful coexistence with the rest of their Mediterranean neighbors until the sixth century BCE. In the mid-sixth century BCE, Cyrus, an ambitious king of Persia, embarked on a swift program of expansion, ultimately consolidating under his rule the largest empire of the ancient world and earning for himself the title “Cyrus the Great.”

Cyrus’ Achaemenid Empire bordered the area of Asia Minor that had been previously colonized by the Greeks. This expansion of the Persian Empire brought the Persians into direct conflict with the Greeks and became the origin of the Greco-Persian Wars, the greatest military conflict the Greek world had known up until that point.

Over the second half of the sixth century, the Persians had taken over the region of Asia Minor, also known as Ionia, installing as rulers of these Greek city-states tyrants loyal to Persia. In 499 BCE, however, the Greek city-states in Asia Minor joined forces to rebel against the Persian rule. Athens and Eretria sent military support for this Ionian Revolt, and the rebelling forces marched on the Persian capital of Sardis and burned it in 498 BCE, before the revolt was finally subdued by the Persians in 493 BCE.

Seeking revenge on Athens and Eretria, the Persian king Darius launched an expedition in 490 BCE.

Darius’ forces captured Eretria in mid-summer, destroyed the city, and enslaved its inhabitants. Sailing a short distance across the bay, the Persian army then landed at Marathon. The worried Athenians sent a plea for help to Sparta. The Spartans, in the middle of a religious festival, refused to help. So, on September 12, 490 BCE, the Athenians, with only a small force of Plataeans helping, faced the much larger Persian army in the Battle of Marathon. The decisive Athenian victory showed the superiority of the Greek hoplite phalanx and marked the
end of the first Persian invasion of Greece. Furthermore, the victory at Marathon, which remained a point of pride for the Athenians for centuries after, demonstrated to the rest of the Greeks that Sparta was not the only great military power in Greece.

Darius died in 486 BCE, having never realized his dream of revenge against the Greeks. His son, Xerxes, however, continued his father’s plans and launched in 480 BCE a second invasion of Greece, with an army so large that, as the historian Herodotus claims, it drank entire rivers dry on its march. The Greek world reacted in a much more organized fashion to this second invasion than it did to the first. Led by Athens and Sparta, some seventy Greek poleis formed a sworn alliance to fight together against the Persians. This alliance, the first of its kind, proved to be the key to defeating the Persians as it allowed the allies to split forces strategically in order to guard against Persian attack by both land and sea. The few Greek city-states who declared loyalty to the

Map 5.7 | Map of the Greek World during the Persian Wars (500-479 BCE)
Author: User "Bibib Saint-poi"
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end of the first Persian invasion of Greece. Furthermore, the victory at Marathon, which remained a point of pride for the Athenians for centuries after, demonstrated to the rest of the Greeks that Sparta was not the only great military power in Greece.

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Persian Empire instead—most notably, Thebes—were seen as traitors for centuries to come by the rest of the Greeks.

Marching through mainland Greece from the north, the Persians first confronted the Spartans at the Battle of Thermopylae, a narrow mountain pass that stood in the way of the Persians’ accessing any point south. In this now-legendary battle, 300 Spartans, led by their king Leonidas, successfully defended the pass for two days before being betrayed by a local who showed a roundabout route to the Persians. The Persians then were able to outflank the Spartans and kill them to the last man. This battle, although a loss for the Greeks, bought crucial time for the rest of the Greek forces in preparing to face the Persians. It is also important to note that although the Spartans were considered even in the ancient world to be the heroes of Thermopylae, they were also accompanied by small contingents from several other Greek city-states in this endeavor.

The victory at Thermopylae fulfilled the old dream of Darius, as it allowed access to Athens for the Persians. The Athenian statesman Themistocles, however, had ordered a full evacuation of the city in advance of the Persian attack through an unusual interpretation of a Delphic oracle stating that wooden walls will save Athens. Taking the oracle to mean that the wooden walls in question were ships, Themistocles built a massive fleet which he used to send all of the city’s inhabitants to safety. His gamble proved to be successful, and the Persians captured and burned a mostly empty city.

The Athenians proceeded to defeat the Persian fleet at the Battle of Salamis, off the coast of Athens, thus shortly before winter turning the tide of the war in favor of the Greeks. Finally, in June of 479 BCE, the Greek forces were able to strike the two final blows, defeating the Persian land and sea forces on the same day in the Battle of Plataea on land and the Battle of Mycale on sea. The victory at Mycale also resulted in a second Ionian revolt, which this time ended in a victory for the Greek city-states in Asia Minor. Xerxes was left to sail home to his diminished empire.

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of the Persian Wars on subsequent Greek history. Seen by historians as the end-point of the Archaic Period, the Persian Wars cemented Pan-Hellenic identity, as they saw cooperation on an unprecedented scale among the Greek city-states. In addition, the Persian Wars showed the Greek military superiority over the Persians on both land and sea. Finally, the wars showed Athens in a new light to the rest of the Greeks. As the winners of Marathon in the first invasion and the leaders of the navy during the second invasion, the Athenians emerged from the wars as the rivals of Sparta for military prestige among the Greeks. This last point, in particular, proved to be the most influential for Greek history in the subsequent period.

5.10 THE CLASSICAL PERIOD

So far, the story of the Greek world in this chapter has proceeded from a narrative of the fragmented Greek world in the Dark Ages to the emergence and solidification of a Pan-Hellenic identity in the Archaic Period. The story of the Greeks in the Classical Period, by contrast, is best described as the strife for leadership of the Greek world. First, Athens and Sparta spent much of the fifth century BCE battling each other for control of the Greek world. Then, once both were weakened, other states began attempting to fill the power vacuum. Ultimately, the Classical
Period will end with the Greek world under the control of a power that was virtually unknown to the Greeks at the beginning of the fifth century BCE: Macedon.

**5.10.1 From the Delian League to the Athenian Empire**

In 478 BCE, barely a year after the end of the Persian Wars, a group of Greek city-states, mainly those located in Ionia and on the island between mainland Greece and Ionia, founded the Delian League, with the aim of continuing to protect the Greeks in Ionia from Persian attacks. Led by Athens, the league first met on the tiny island of Delos. According to Greek mythology, the twin gods Apollo and Artemis were born on Delos. As a result, the island was considered sacred ground and, as such, was a fitting neutral headquarters for the new alliance. The league allowed member states the option of either contributing a tax (an option that most members selected)
or contributing ships for the league’s navy. The treasury of the league, where the taxes paid by members were deposited, was housed on Delos.

Over the next twenty years, the Delian League gradually transformed from a loose alliance of states led by Athens to a more formal entity. The League’s Athenian leadership, in the meanwhile, grew to be that of an imperial leader. The few members who tried to secede from the League, such as the island of Naxos, quickly learned that doing so was not an option as the revolt was violently subdued. Finally, in 454 BCE, the treasury of the Delian League moved to Athens. That moment marked the transformation of the Delian League into the **Athenian Empire**.

Since the Athenians publicly inscribed each year the one-sixtieth portion of the tribute that they dedicated to Athena, records survive listing the contributing members for a number of years, thereby allowing historians to see the magnitude of the Athenian operation.

While only the Athenian side of the story survives, it appears that the Athenians’ allies in the Delian League were not happy with the transformation of the alliance into a full-fledged Athenian Empire. Non-allies were affected as well. The fifth-century BCE Athenian historian Thucydides dramatizes in his history one particularly harsh treatment of a small island, Melos, which effectively refused to join the Athenian cause. To add insult to injury, once the treasury of the Empire had been moved to Athens, the Athenians had used some funds from it for their own building projects, the most famous of these projects being the Parthenon, the great temple to Athena on the Acropolis.

The bold decision to move the treasury of the Delian League to Athens was the brainchild of the leading Athenian statesman of the fifth century BCE, Pericles. A member of a prominent aristocratic family, Pericles was a predominant politician for forty years, from the early 460s BCE to his death in 429 BCE, and was instrumental in the development of a more popular democracy in Athens. Under his leadership, an especially vibrant feeling of Athenian patriotic pride seems to have developed, and the decision to move the Delian League treasury to Athens fits into this pattern as well. Shortly after moving the treasury to Athens, Pericles sponsored a Citizenship Decree in 451 BCE that restricted Athenian citizenship from thence onwards only to individuals who had two free-born and legitimately-wed Athenian parents, both of whom were also born of Athenian parents. Then c. 449 BCE, Pericles successfully proposed a decree allowing the Athenians to use Delian League funds for Athenian building projects, and, c. 447 BCE, he sponsored the Athenian Coinage Decree, a decree that imposed Athenian standards of weights and measures on all states that were members of the Delian League.
Later in his life, Pericles famously described Athens as “the school of Hellas;” this description would certainly have fit Athens just as much in the mid-fifth century BCE as, in addition to the flourishing of art and architecture, the city was a center of philosophy and drama.

The growing wealth and power of Athens in the twenty or so years since the Persian Wars did not escape Sparta and led to increasingly tense relations between the two leading powers in Greece. Sparta had steadily consolidated the Peloponnesian League in this same time-period, but Sparta’s authority over this league was not quite as strict as was the Athenian control over the Delian League. Finally, in the period of 460-445 BCE, the Spartans and the Athenians engaged in a series of battles, to which modern scholars refer as the First Peloponnesian War. In 445 BCE, the two sides swore to a Thirty Years Peace, a treaty that allowed both sides to return to their pre-war holdings, with few exceptions. Still, Spartan unease in this period of Athenian expansion and prosperity, which resulted in the First Peloponnesian War, was merely a sign of much more serious conflict to come. As the Athenian general and historian Thucydides later wrote about the reasons for the Great Peloponnesian War, which erupted in 431 BCE: “But the real cause of the war was one that was formally kept out of sight. The growing power of Athens, and the fear that it inspired in Sparta, made the war inevitable” (Thucydides, I.23).

5.10.2 The Peloponnesian War (431 – 404 BCE)

Historians today frown on the use of the term “inevitable” to describe historical events. Still, Thucydides’ point about the inevitability of the Peloponnesian War is perhaps appropriate, as following a conflict that had been bubbling under the surface for fifty years, the war finally broke out over a seemingly minor affair. In 433 BCE, Coreya, a colony of Corinth that no longer wanted to be under the control of its mother-city, asked Athens for protection against Corinth. The Corinthians claimed that the Athenian support of Coreya was a violation of the Thirty Years Peace. At a subsequent meeting of the Peloponnesian League in Sparta in 432 BCE, the allies, along with Sparta, voted that the peace had been broken and so declared war against Athens.

At the time of the war’s declaration, no one thought that it would last twenty-seven years and would ultimately embroil the entire Greek-speaking world. Rather, the Spartans expected that they would march with an army to Athens, fight a decisive battle, then return home forthwith. The long duration of the war, however, was partly the result of the different strengths of the two leading powers. Athens was a naval empire, with allies scattered all over the Ionian Sea. Sparta, on the other hand, was a land-locked power with supporters chiefly in the Peloponnesian and with no navy to speak of at the outset of the war.

The Peloponnesian War brought about significant changes in the government of both Athens and Sparta, so that, by the end of the war, neither power looked as it did at its outset. Athens, in particular, became more democratic because of increased need for manpower to row its fleet. The lowest census bracket, the thetes, whose poverty and inability to buy their own armor had previously excluded them from military service, became by the end of the war a full-fledged part of the Athenian forces and required a correspondingly greater degree of political influence. In the case of Sparta, the war had ended the Spartan policy of relative isolationism from the
rest of the affairs of the Greek city-states. The length of the war also brought about significant changes to the nature of Greek warfare. While war was previously largely a seasonal affair, with many conflicts being decided with a single battle, the Peloponnesian War forced the Greek city-states to support standing armies. Finally, while sieges of cities and attacks on civilians were previously frowned upon, they became the norm by the end of the Peloponnesian War. In short, Thucydides’s narrative of the war shows that the war had a detrimental effect on human nature, encouraging a previously unprecedented degree of cruelty on both sides. It is important to note, though, that as brutal as sieges could be during the Peloponnesian War, Greek siege warfare during the fifth century BCE was still quite primitive, as no tools existed for ramming or otherwise damaging the city gates or walls. Furthermore, catapults, so useful for targeting a city from the outside, first came into being in 399 BCE, five years after the war had ended.

Modern historians divide the Peloponnesian War into three distinct stages, based on the tactics used in each: the Archidamian War, the Peace of Nicias, and the Decelean War. The first stage, the Archidamian War (431 – 421 BCE), is named after the Spartan king Archidamus, who proposed the strategy of annual invasions of Attica at the beginning of the war. Beginning in late spring and early summer of 431 BCE, Archidamus led the Spartan army to invade Attica in order to devastate the agricultural land around the city. The Spartans thereby hoped to provoke the Athenians to a battle. Pericles however, refused to enter into battle against the Spartans, and instead ordered all inhabitants of Attica to retreat within the city. Pericles’ decision was wise, as the Athenians would likely have lost a land battle against the Spartans. His decision, though, had unforeseen repercussions. In 430 BCE, the crowded conditions within Athens resulted in the outbreak of a virulent plague which by some estimates killed as much as twenty-five percent of the city’s population over the following three years. Among the dead was none other than Pericles himself.

The plague had significant repercussions for Athens during the first phase of the war because of not only the loss of fighting men to disease and the consequent lowered morale in the city, but also the death of Pericles, the moderate leader. The subsequent leaders who emerged, such as

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Map 5.9 | Map of the Peloponnesian War

Alliances at the Start and Contrasting Strategies, 431 BCE

Author: User "Magnus Manske"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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Cleon, were known as war-hawks. Meanwhile, the Spartans continued their annual invasions of Attica until 425 BCE, when luck was finally on the Athenians' side.

In 425 BCE, the Athenian fleet faced a new Spartan fleet in the Battle of Pylos in the Peloponnese. The Athenians won the battle and also managed to trap 420 Spartans on the tiny island of Sphacteria, just off the coast of Pylos. Sending shockwaves through the entire Greek world, the Spartans surrendered. By bringing the hostages to Athens, the Athenians put an end to the annual invasions of Attica. Finally, in 421 BCE, with the death of the most pro-war generals on both sides, the Athenians with their allies signed a peace treaty with Spartans and their allies. Named the “Peace of Nicias” after the Athenian general who brokered this treaty, it was supposed to be a fifty years' peace; it allowed both sides to return to their pre-war holdings, with a few exceptions. As part of the peace terms, the Spartan hostages from Pylos were finally released.

Despite its ambitious casting as a fifty years' peace, the Peace of Nicias proved to be a short and uneasy time filled with minor battles and skirmishes. One problem with the treaty was that while Athens and all of its allies signed the peace, several key allies of Sparta, including Corinth and Thebes, refused to do so. Furthermore, Athens made the disastrous decision during this stalemate to launch the Sicilian Expedition, a venture that took much of the Athenian fleet to Sicily in 415 BCE.

Syracuse, however, proved to be a difficult target, and the expedition ended in 413 BCE with a complete destruction of the Athenian navy. That same year, the Spartans renewed the fighting, launching the third and final phase of the Peloponnesian War.

In the third stage of the Peloponnesian war, also known as the Decelean War, the Spartans took the war to Attic soil by occupying Decelea, a village in Attica proper, and transforming it into a
military fort. This occupation allowed the Spartans to prevent the Athenians from farming their land and cutting off Athens from most supply routes, effectively crippling the Athenian economy for the remainder of the war. Losing the Sicilian Expedition and the challenge of the Decelean War produced a high level of resentment towards the democratic leaders in Athens. Therefore in 411 BCE, an oligarchic coup briefly replaced the democracy with the rule of the Four Hundred. While this oligarchy was quickly overthrown and the democracy restored, this internal instability highlighted the presence of the aristocratic element in the city as well as the dissatisfaction of at least the aristocratic citizens with the long war.

Remarkably, in a testament to the resilience and power of the Athenian state, the Athenians managed to rebuild a navy after the Sicilian Expedition, and even managed to continue to win battles on sea during this final phase of the war. In 405 BCE, however, the Spartan general Lysander defeated Athens in the naval battle of Aegospotami. He proceeded to besiege Athens, and the city finally surrendered in 404 BCE. For the second time in a decade, the Athenian democracy was overthrown, to be replaced this time by the Spartan-sanctioned oligarchy known as the Tyranny of the Thirty. The rule of the Thirty proved to be a much more brutal oligarchy than that of the Four Hundred. A year later, an army formed largely of Athenian democrats in exile marched on the city and overthrew the Thirty. The democracy thus was restored in 403 BCE, and the painful process of recovery from the war and the oligarchic rule could begin.

5.10.3 Athenian Culture during the Peloponnesian War

Because it drained Athens of manpower and financial resources, the Peloponnesian War proved to be an utter practical disaster for Athens. Nevertheless, the war period was also the pinnacle of Athenian culture, most notably its tragedy, comedy, and philosophy. Tragedy and comedy in Athens were very much popular entertainment, intended to appeal to all citizens. Thus issues considered in these plays were often ones of paramount concern for the city at the time when the plays were written. As one character in a comedy bitterly joked in an address to the audience, more Athenians attended tragic and comic performances than came to vote at assembly meetings. Not surprisingly, war was a common topic of discussion in the plays. Furthermore, war was not portrayed positively, as the playwrights repeatedly emphasized the costs of war for both winners and losers.

Sophocles, one of the two most prominent Athenian tragedians during the Peloponnesian War era, had served his city as a general, albeit at an earlier period; thus, he had direct experience with war. Many of his tragedies that were performed during the war dealt with the darker side of fighting, for both soldiers and generals, and the cities that are affected. By tradition, however, tragedies tackled contemporary issues through integrating them into mythical stories, and the two mythical wars that Sophocles portrayed in his tragedies were the Trojan War, as in Ajax and Philoctetes, and the aftermath of the war of the Seven against Thebes, in which Polynices, the son of Oedipus, led six other heroes to attack Thebes, a city led by his brother Eteocles, as in Oedipus at Colonus. Sophocles’ plays repeatedly showed the emotional and psychological challenges of war for soldiers and civilians alike; they also emphasized the futility of war, as the heroes of his plays,
just as in the original myths on which they were based, died tragic, untimely deaths. Sophocles’ younger contemporary, Euripides, had a similar interest in depicting the horrors of war and wrote a number of tragedies on the impact of war on the defeated, such as in Phoenician Women and Hecuba; both of these plays explored the aftermath of the Trojan War from the perspective of the defeated Trojans.

While the tragic playwrights explored the impact of the war on both the fighters and the civilians through narrating mythical events, the comic playwright Aristophanes was far less subtle. The anti-war civilian who saves the day and ends the war was a common hero in the Aristophanic comedies. For instance, in the Acharnians (425 BCE), the main character is a war-weary farmer who, frustrated with the inefficiency of the Athenian leadership in ending the war, brokers his own personal peace with Sparta. Similarly, in Peace (421 BCE), another anti-war farmer fattens up a dung beetle in order to fly to Olympus and beg Zeus to free Peace. Finally, in Lysistrata (411 BCE), the wives of all Greek city-states, missing their husbands who are at war, band together in a plot to end the war by going on a sex-strike until their husbands make peace. By the end of the play, their wish comes true. Undeniably funny, the jokes in these comedies, nevertheless, have a bitter edge, akin to the portrayal of war in the tragedies. The overall impression from the war-era drama is that the playwrights, as well as perhaps the Athenians themselves, spent much of the Peloponnesian War dreaming of peace.

While the playwrights were dreaming of the things of this world—most notably war—their contemporary, Socrates, was dreaming of difficult questions. One of the most prominent philosophers of the ancient world, Socrates has not left any writings of his own, but thoughts attributed to him survive in dialogues penned by his student, the fourth-century philosopher Plato. In Plato’s writings, Socrates comes across as someone who loved difficult questions and who was not above confronting any passers-by with such questions as “What is courage?”; “What is moral?”; “What would the ideal city look like?” Using what became known ever since as the “Socratic method,” Socrates continued to probe further every definition and answer that his conversation partners provided, guiding them to delve deeper in their reflections on the topics at hand than they had before. As a result of his love of such debates, Socrates was seen as connected to the Sophists, philosophical debate teachers, who (as Aristophanes joked) could teach anyone to convince others of anything at all, regardless of reality or truth. But Socrates radically differed from the Sophists by not charging fees for his teaching. Instead, as he himself is purported to have said, he was a pest-like gadfly that kept disturbing Athens from growing too content and encouraged all with whom he spoke to keep thinking and questioning.

5.10.4 The Fourth Century BCE

In 399 BCE, a seventy-year old Athenian was put on trial for impiety and for corrupting the youth, convicted, and speedily sentenced to death. The trial is especially shocking, since the man in question was none other than Socrates, the philosopher who had spent his life wandering the streets of Athens engaging in endless dialogues regarding the meaning of life. Why did the Athenians suddenly turn against this public teacher and judge him worthy of execution? The answer, most
likely, is not the openly-stated causes of the trial, but rather the connections that Socrates previously had to oligarchic leaders. In particular, Socrates had taught Critias, who became one of the Thirty in 404 BCE. Fueled by their hatred of all enemies of the democracy and anyone who had associated with the Thirty, the Athenians condemned Socrates to death. This trial shows how deeply the scars went in the collective psyche and how difficult it was for the Athenians to forget the terrible end of the Peloponnesian War. And while, as usual, more information survives about how the Athenians—more than any other polis—dealt with the aftermath of the war, it is clear that for the rest of the
Greek world, their life in the fourth century BCE was very much the result of the Peloponnesian War.

The early fourth century saw a power vacuum emerge in the Greek world for the first time since the early Archaic Period. Defeated in the war, Athens was no longer an Empire, while the winner, Sparta, had suffered a catastrophic decline in its population over the course of the Peloponnesian War. At the same time, Thebes had revamped its military, introducing the first two significant changes to the hoplite phalanx way of fighting since its inception: slightly longer spears, and wedge formation. The final key to the Theban military supremacy was the Theban Sacred Band, formed in 378 BCE. An elite core of 300 warriors, the band consisted of 150 couples, based on the assumption that the lovers would fight most bravely in order not to appear to be cowardly to their beloved. In 371 BCE, the Thebans demonstrated the success of their military reforms by defeating the Spartans at the Battle of Leuctra. They continued an aggressive program of military expansion over the next decade, a period known as the Theban Hegemony.

Sometime in the 360’s BCE, a young Macedonian prince stayed for several years in Thebes as a hostage. While there, he caught the eye of the military reformer, Epaminondas, who took the prince under his wing. Circa 364 BCE, the prince returned to Macedon, and, in 359 BCE, he ascended to the throne as king Philip II. Up until that point in Greek history, the Macedonians had largely been known for two things: drinking their
wine undiluted, which had marked them as complete and utter barbarians in the eyes of the rest of the Greeks, and being excellent horsemen. With Philip at the helm, this estimation was about to change. As soon as he came to the throne, Philip began transforming the Macedonian military into a more successful image of what he had seen at Thebes. Philip further lengthened the already longer spears used by the Thebans, creating the Macedonian *sarissa*, a spear of about eighteen feet in length, double that of the traditional Greek hoplite spear.

He retained the Theban wedge formation but also added heavy cavalry to the line, thus incorporating the Macedonians’ strongest element into the phalanx. The results spoke for themselves, as over the next twenty years, Philip systematically conquered all of mainland Greece, with the exception of Sparta, which he chose to leave alone. Philip’s final great victory, which he shared with his teenage son Alexander, was at the Battle of Chaeronea (338 BCE), in which the Macedonian armies defeated the combined forces of Athens and Thebes. Philip’s conquest of the entire mainland was the end of an era, as for the first time, the entire territory was united under the rule of a king.

By all accounts, it appears that Philip was not going to stop at just conquering the Greek world. He did not, however, have this choice. In 336 BCE while on his way to a theatrical performance, Philip was assassinated by one of his own bodyguards. His son Alexander, then twenty years old,
succeeded and continued his father’s ambitious program of conquests. Alexander’s first target was the Persian Empire, motivated in part by his love of Homer’s *Iliad*, and the perception among the Greeks that this new campaign was the continuation of the original, mythical war against Asia. Moving farther and farther East in his campaigns, Alexander conquered the Balkans, Egypt, and the territories of modern-day Lebanon, Syria, and Israel before he achieved a decisive victory over Darius III at the Battle of Gaugamela in 331 BCE.

Continuing to move eastwards, Alexander invaded India in 327 BCE, planning to conquer the known world and assuming that he was close to this achievement, since the Greeks of his day were not aware of China’s existence. His war-weary troops, however, rebelled in 326 BCE and demanded to return home (see Chapter 3). It appears that this mutiny was not the first that occurred in Alexander’s army; indeed, over the course of his rule, Alexander had also been the target of a number of failed assassinations. However, this mutiny forced Alexander to give in. Leaving several of his officers behind as satraps, Alexander turned back. In 323 BCE, he and his army reached Babylon, the city that he had hoped to make the new capital of his world empire. There, Alexander fell ill and died at the ripe old age of thirty-three.

While Alexander’s rule only lasted thirteen years, his legacy reshaped Greece and the rest of ancient Eurasia for the next several centuries. A charismatic leader, albeit one prone to emotional outbursts, Alexander redefined what it meant to be king and general. His coinage reflects this reinvention. On one coin minted during his lifetime, for instance, appears Alexander dressed as
the hero Heracles, while Zeus, whom Alexander alleged to be his real father, appears on the other side.

In addition, by conquering territories that were previously not part of the Greek world, Alexander spread Greek culture farther than had anyone else before him. At the same time, by marrying several non-Greek princesses and encouraging such marriages by his troops, Alexander also encouraged the creation of a “melting-pot” empire; he further cemented this creation by founding new cities named after himself all over his new empire. In particular, Alexandria, the city that he founded in Egypt, became a center of Greek civilization—albeit with an Egyptian twist—was seen as a new Athens well into the Roman Empire. Alexander’s brief time in India produced a significant impact as well, as in 321 BCE, Chandragupta Maurya was able to unify India into a single kingdom for the first time, establishing the Mauryan Empire (see Chapter Three). Finally, in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Greek world, Alexander’s generals divided his conquests into several kingdoms that they and their descendants continued to rule until the Romans conquered these respective areas. It appears that Alexander’s melting-pot empire, burning up as a phoenix upon his death, actually allowed several new empires and kingdoms to arise from its ashes.

5.11 HELLENISTIC PERIOD

Historians today consider the death of Alexander to be the end point of the Classical Period and the beginning of the Hellenistic Period. That moment, for historians, also marks the end of the polis as the main unit of organization in the Greek world. While city-states continued to exist, the main unit of organization from that point on was the great Hellenistic kingdoms. These kingdoms, encompassing much greater territory than the Greek world had before Alexander, contributed to the thorough Hellenization of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The age of the Hellenistic kingdoms also coincided with the rise of Rome as a military power in the West. Ultimately, the Hellenistic kingdoms were conquered and absorbed by Rome.

5.11.1 Hellenistic Kingdoms

Although Alexander had several children from his different wives, he did not leave an heir old enough to take power upon his death. Indeed, his only son, Alexander IV, was only born several months after his father’s death. Instead, Alexander’s most talented generals turned against each other in a contest for the control of the empire that they had helped create.
These Wars of the Diadochi, as they are known in modern scholarship, ended with a partition of Alexander’s empire into a number of kingdoms, each ruled by dynasties. Of these, the four most influential dynasties which retained power for the remainder of the Hellenistic Age, were the following: Seleucus, who took control of Syria and the surrounding areas, thus creating the Seleucid Empire; Antigonus Monophthalmos, the One-Eyed, who took over the territory of Asia Minor and northern Syria, establishing the Antigonid Dynasty; the Attalid Dynasty, which took power over the Kingdom of Pergamon, after the death of its initial ruler, Lysimachus, a general of Alexander; and Ptolemy, Alexander’s most influential general, who took control over Egypt, establishing the Ptolemaic Dynasty.

The most imperialistic of Alexander’s successors, Seleucus I Nicator took Syria, swiftly expanding his empire to the east to encompass the entire stretch of territory from Syria to India. At its greatest expanse, this territory’s ethnic diversity was similar to that of Alexander’s original empire, and Seleucus adopted the same policy of ethnic unity as originally practiced by Alexander; some of Seleucus’ later successors, however, attempted to impose Hellenization on some of the peoples under their rule. These successors had difficulties holding on to Seleucus’ conquests. A notable exception, Antiochus III, attempted to expand the Empire into Anatolia and Greece in the early second century BCE but was ultimately defeated by the Romans. The empire’s story for the remainder of its existence is one of almost constant civil wars and increasingly declining territories. The Seleucids seem to have had a particularly antagonistic relationship with their Jewish subjects, going so far as to outlaw Judaism in 168 BCE. The Jewish holiday Hannukah celebrates a miracle that occurred following the historical victory of the Jews, led by Judah
Maccabee, over the Seleucids in 165 BCE. Shortly afterwards, the Seleucids had to allow autonomy to the Jewish state; it achieved full independence from Seleucid rule in 129 BCE. In 63 BCE, the Roman general Pompey finally conquered the small remnant of the Seleucid Empire, making it into the Roman province of Syria.

Antigonus Monophthalmos, Seleucus’ neighbor, whose holdings included Macedonia, Asia Minor, and the northwestern portion of Syria, harbored ambitious plans that rivaled those of Seleucus. Antigonus’ hopes of reuniting all of Alexander’s original empire under his own rule, however, were never realized as Antigonus died in battle in 301 BCE. The greatest threat to the Antigonids, however, came not from the Seleucid Empire, but from Rome with whom they waged three Macedonian Wars between 214 and 168 BCE. The Roman defeat of king Perseus in 168 BCE at the Battle of Pydna marked the end of the Third Macedonian War, and the end of an era, as control over Greece was now in Roman hands.

The smallest and least imperialistic of the successor states, the kingdom of Pergamon, was originally part of a very short-lived empire established by Lysimachus, one of Alexander’s generals. Lysimachus originally held Macedonia and parts of Asia Minor and Thrace but had lost all of these territories by the time of his death in 281 BCE. One of his officers, Philetaerus, however, took over the city of Pergamon, establishing there the Attalid dynasty that transformed Pergamon into a small and successful kingdom. The final Attalid king, Attalus III, left his kingdom to Rome in his will in 133 BCE.

Lasting from the death of Alexander in 323 BCE to the death of Cleopatra VII in 30 BCE, the Ptolemaic kingdom proved to be the longest lasting and most successful of the kingdoms carved from Alexander’s initial empire. Its founder, Ptolemy I Soter, was a talented general, as well as
an astronomer, philosopher, and historian, who wrote his own histories of Alexander’s campaigns. Aiming to make Alexandria the new Athens of the Mediterranean, Ptolemy spared no expense in building the Museum, an institution of learning and research that included, most famously, the Great Library, and worked tirelessly to attract scholars and cultured elite to his city. Subsequent Ptolemies continued these works so that Alexandria held its reputation as a cultural capital into Late Antiquity. One example of a particularly impressive scientific discovery is the work of Eratosthenes, the head librarian at the Great Library in the second half of the third century BCE, who accurately calculated the earth’s circumference. But while the Ptolemies brought with them Greek language and culture to Egypt, they were also profoundly influenced by Egyptian customs. Portraying themselves as the new Pharaohs, the Ptolemies even adopted the Egyptian royal custom of brother-sister marriages, a practice that eventually percolated down to the general populace as well. Unfortunately, brother-sister marriages did not prevent strife for power within the royal family. The last of the Ptolemaic rulers, Cleopatra VII, first married and ruled jointly with her brother Ptolemy XIII. After defeating him in a civil war, she then married another brother, Ptolemy XIV, remaining his wife until his death, possibly from sisterly poisoning. Best known for her affairs with Julius Caesar and, after Caesar’s death, with Marcus Antonius, Cleopatra teamed with Marcus Antonius in a bid for the Roman Empire. The last surviving ruler who was descended from one of Alexander’s generals, she was finally defeated by Octavian, the future Roman emperor Augustus, in 30 BCE.

The history of the successor states that resulted from the carving of Alexander’s empire shows the imperialistic drive of Greek generals, while also demonstrating the instability of their empires. Historians do not typically engage in counter-factual speculations, but it is very likely that, had he lived longer, Alexander would have seen his empire unravel, as no structure was really in place to hold it together. At the same time, the clash of cultures that Alexander’s empire and the successor states produced resulted in the spread of Greek culture and language further than ever before; simultaneously, it also introduced the Greeks to other peoples, thus bringing foreign customs—such as the brother-sister marriages in Egypt—into the lives of the Greeks living outside the original Greek world.

5.11.2 Hellenistic Culture

The Hellenistic kingdoms spread Greek language, culture, and art all over the areas of Alexander’s former conquests. Furthermore, many Hellenistic kings, especially the Ptolemies, were patrons of art and ideas. Thus the Hellenistic era saw the flourishing of art and architecture, philosophy, medical and scientific writing, and even translations of texts of other civilizations into Greek. The undisputed center for these advances was Alexandria.

Combining the practical with the ambitious, the Pharos, or Lighthouse, of Alexandria was one of the most famous examples of Hellenistic architecture and has remained a symbol of the city to the present day. Constructed in 280 BCE, it was considered to be one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World and was one of the tallest buildings in the world at the time. While its practical purpose was to guide ships into the harbor at night, it also exemplified the bold advances and experimental spirit of Hellenistic architecture. Indeed, it was located on a man-made mole off the
coast of the city. The building comprised three layers, the top one of which housed the furnace that produced the light.

The structure of the Pharos shows an interest in straight lines and orderly shapes, while its function symbolized the ability of man to subdue the sea, even by night. Similarly, both the scientific and medical texts from the Hellenistic Period reveal a fascination with an ordered universe and an interest in discovering how it worked. **Herophilus of Chalcedon**, for instance, pioneered dissection in the early third BCE and was especially interested in the human brain and the nervous system. The mathematician Euclid, who lived and worked in Alexandria during the reign of Ptolemy I (323 – 283 BCE), wrote the *Elements*, an encyclopedic work of mathematics that effectively created the discipline of geometry. Going a step further than Euclid in his research, the third-century BCE scientist and inventor **Archimedes of Syracuse** specialized in applying mathematical concepts to create such devices as a screw pump and a variety of war machines, including the heat ray.

The same fascination with studying the order of the universe appears in Hellenistic philosophy and stems ultimately from the philosophy of Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE), considered to be the last Classical Greek philosopher. Aristotle was a prolific polymath, who wrote on political theory, poetry, music, and a variety of sciences, to list just some of his interests. Engrossed in seeing all disciplines as part of a larger world order, Aristotle specifically argued for empiricism, that is, the belief that knowledge is acquired from sensory experiences rather than from intuition. In the sciences, for instance, this approach required experiments and the careful gathering of data. While Aristotle’s influence on the Hellenistic
philosophers is undeniable, the alternate theories that some of the philosophers developed regarding the structure of the universe and the place of humanity in it differs drastically from Aristotle’s view. For instance, Skepticism, especially as formulated by Pyrrho in the third century BCE, argued that it was impossible to reach any accurate conclusions about the world and the key to happiness was to stop trying. Cynic philosophers, starting in the fourth century BCE, advocated the ascetic life of simplicity and freedom from possessions. A related philosophy, Stoicism, argued for letting go of all emotions and developing a self-control that would allow one to live in accordance to nature. On the other hand, the third-century philosophy of Epicureanism argued for the absence of pain as the ultimate goal in life and saw the universe as ruled by random chance, separate from the intervention of the gods. All of these philosophies, and many others that co-existed with them, aimed to provide a coherent system that made sense of the world and provided a purpose for human life.

Finally, in a testament to the deep influence of the Hellenistic language culture on the conquered regions, the Hellenistic Period saw the translation of texts of other civilizations into Greek. One particularly influential example was the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek. Jews formed a significant minority of the population of Alexandria, the capital of Ptolemaic Egypt, as well as other major cities around the Mediterranean, such as Antioch. By the third century BCE, these Jews appear to have largely lost the knowledge of Hebrew; thus, a translation of the sacred texts into Greek was necessary. In addition, as later legend has it, Ptolemy II Philadelphus allegedly commissioned seventy-two scholars to translate the Old Testament into Greek for his Royal Library. Whether indeed solicited by Ptolemy II or not, the translation was likely completed over the course of the third through first centuries BCE. Named after the legendary seventy-two (or, in some versions, seventy) translators, the text was titled the Septuagint. The completion of this translation showed the thorough Hellenization of even the Jews, who had largely kept themselves apart from mainstream culture of the cities in which they lived.

5.12 CONCLUSION

“Captive Greece has conquered her rude conqueror,” the Roman poet Horace famously wrote in the late first century BCE. This comment about the deep influence of Greek culture on the Roman world, even after the Roman conquest of Greece was complete, continued to be the case well after the days of Horace. Ultimately, the impact of the Hellenization of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, which started with Alexander’s conquests, lasted far beyond the Hellenistic kingdoms, as the Greek language continued to be the language of the Eastern Roman Empire and, subsequently, the Byzantine Empire up until the conquest of that territory by the Ottomans in 1453 CE. In some respects, this spread of the Greeks and their civilization ultimately changed what it meant to be Greek—or, rather, it created a more universal Greek identity, which largely replaced the polis-specific view of citizenship and identity that existed before Philip’s conquest of Greece. And yet, certain cultural constants persisted.

The first of these was Homer, whose epics continued to be as great an inspiration to the Greeks of the Roman world as they were to their Archaic Age counterparts. For instance, the Homeric
values were likely the reason for the minimal advances in military technology in the Greek world, as honor was more important than military success at all cost. The second cultural constant was the work of the philosophers Plato and Aristotle, in whose shadows all subsequent philosophers of the Greco-Roman world labored. Even as the Greek-speaking portions of the Roman Empire turned to Christianity, they could not abandon their philosophical roots, resulting, for instance, in the Gnostic heresies. Horace’s cheeky comment thus proved to be true far longer than he could have expected.

5.13 WORKS CONSULTED AND FURTHER READING


### 5.14 LINKS TO PRIMARY SOURCES

- Ancient History Sourcebook at Fordham University (collection of materials from all periods of Greek history)
  
  [http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/asbook07.asp](http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/asbook07.asp)

- Archimedes’ Inventions
  

- Aristophanes, excerpt from *Clouds*, making fun of Socrates
  
  [http://www.thenagain.info/Classes/Sources/Aristophanes-Clouds.htm](http://www.thenagain.info/Classes/Sources/Aristophanes-Clouds.htm)

- Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*
  
  [http://drama.eserver.org/plays/classical/aristophanes/lysistrata.txt](http://drama.eserver.org/plays/classical/aristophanes/lysistrata.txt)

- Aristotle on Spartan Women
  
  [http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/aristotle-spartanwomen.asp](http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/aristotle-spartanwomen.asp)

- Athens, photographic archive of archaeological materials
  

- Cyrene, primary sources on founding of the colony
  
  [http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/630cyrene.asp](http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/630cyrene.asp)

- Euripides, *The Phoenician Women*
  
  [http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~loxias/phoenissae.htm](http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~loxias/phoenissae.htm)

- The Gortyn Code, selections
  
  [https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/450-gortyn.asp](https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/450-gortyn.asp)

- Herodotus, *Histories*, excerpt on the Battle of Marathon
  
  [http://www.thenagain.info/Classes/Sources/Herodotus-Marathon.html](http://www.thenagain.info/Classes/Sources/Herodotus-Marathon.html)

- History of Greek Philosophy
  
  [http://www.uh.edu/~cfreelan/courses/riceanc.html](http://www.uh.edu/~cfreelan/courses/riceanc.html)

- Justin, on the beginning of the reign of Philip II of Macedon
  
  [http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/justin-philip.asp](http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/justin-philip.asp)

- Linear B Writing
  
Plutarch, *Lives*
http://classics.mit.edu/Browse/browse-Plutarch.html

Solon, selected fragments from political poems

Sophocles, *Antigone*
http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/ant/antigstruct.htm

Thucydides, Pericles’ “Funeral Oration”
http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/pericles-funeralspeech.asp

Thucydides, “Melian Dialogue” from the *History of the Peloponnesian War*
https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/melian.htm

Tyrants, primary sources documents
https://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/650tyranny.asp

Xenophon on the Battle of Leuctra
http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/371leuctra.asp

Xenophon on the Spartan Constitution
http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/xeno-sparta1.asp
6.1 CHRONOLOGY

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<td>c. 753 – 510 BCE</td>
<td>Regal Period</td>
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* See, however, explanation about possible dates proposed by scholars for the fall of the Roman Republic

6.2 INTRODUCTION

In 458 BCE, facing a military attack from the two neighboring tribes of the Aequi and the Sabines, the Roman Senate took a drastic measure, reserved for the direst of circumstances: they appointed a dictator, who would single-handedly lead the state in this time of trouble. As the Roman historian Livy tells it, Cincinnatus, the senator who was appointed dictator, received the news while working on his farm. Abandoning the plow, he immediately rushed to join the army, which he then led to a swift and brilliant victory. Then something astonishing happened: Cincinnatus resigned his extraordinary powers and returned to his farm. For the remainder of the Roman Republic, and well into the Imperial Period, Cincinnatus continued to be seen as the quintessential Roman cultural hero and model of virtue: an aristocratic man who was
a talented soldier, general, and politician who put the interests of Rome first, above his own. While no other Roman politician displayed Cincinnatus’ degree of self-sacrificing humility, the other Roman heroes of the Republic and the Empire were still uniformly male, predominantly aristocratic, and famed for military and political achievements.

But something happened to give rise to a rather different sort of cultural hero by the Late Roman Empire. In 203 CE, a young noblewoman and her slave were executed in Carthage, thrown into the arena with the lions. Their crime? A stubborn faith: the belief that a Jewish man who lived in Judaea a century earlier was the son of God who had died on the cross and rose again. Eager to emulate his suffering in order to win eternal life with their God, the two women, Perpetua and Felicity, gave up a life of relative comfort and the chance to raise their babies—indeed, Felicity gave birth in prison mere hours before her execution!—placing their God above all else. They were not the only ones. Stories of martyrs abound in the Later Roman Empire and were told repeatedly by Christians, thus perpetuating the status of these martyrs as the new cultural heroes. But far from repelling others from imitating their example, these stories, rather, encouraged the rise of more willing martyrs to follow their suit. As a result of the spread of Christianity, therefore, the Roman cultural heroes of Late Antiquity were a far cry from Cincinnatus. Instead of aristocratic generals and politicians, they were nursing mothers and even slave-women who chose to die a humiliating and painful death for their faith and its promise of an eternal reward.

The story of the Roman world from the foundation of the city of Rome and to the fall of the Roman Empire in the West is, overall, a tale of two different transformations. The first of these is the dramatic transformation in cultural values and beliefs, a glimpse of which is reflected in the two stories above. The second is a similarly dramatic geographical transformation, which also brought about drastic clashes of cultures and a variety of changes throughout the entire Mediterranean world and beyond, that is, the transformation of a small village on the Tiber into one of the largest empires in all of world history, followed by a collapse of a part of that Empire, but a collapse from whose ashes arose what we now know as Europe.
CHAPTER 6: THE ROMAN WORLD FROM 753 BCE TO 500 CE

6.3 QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING

1. In what ways did the geography and topography of Rome and the Roman Empire impact the history of the ancient Roman world?

2. What are the different periods of Roman history, and what are the chief defining characteristics of each period?

3. What primary sources are available for the study of Roman history, and what are the limitations of these sources?

4. What were the stages of Roman expansion?

5. What were the key civic conflicts and civil wars of the Roman Republic? What did each of these conflicts demonstrate about the changing nature of Roman politics?

6. When and why did the Roman Republic fall? What were some key differences between the Roman Republic and the Age of Augustus?

7. What are some of the primary sources about the early Christians? What was revolutionary about early Christianity, from the Roman perspective?

8. What were some of the problems with which areas in the periphery of the Roman Empire had to deal in the second century CE?

9. What were the problems that the Roman Empire faced during the third-century crisis, and how did Diocletian attempt to resolve these?

10. What changes did the Roman Empire experience in the fourth century CE, and what were the causes of these changes?

11. How did the Romans’ view of Rome in Late Antiquity differ from their view of Rome in earlier periods?

6.4 KEY TERMS

- Aedile
- Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*
- *ara pacis*
- auctoritas
- Augustine, *City of God*
- Augustus
- Battle of Lake Regillus
- Bithynia
- Caligula
- Carthage
- Catilina
- Cato the Elder, *Origins*
• Censor
• Centuriate Assembly
• Christianity
• Cincinnatus
• Claudius
• Cleopatra
• Conflict of the Orders
• Constantine
• Constantinople
• Consul
• Council of Nicaea
• Crassus
• *cursus honorum*
• *dignitas*
• Diocletian
• Etruscans
• Eusebius
• Five Good Emperors
• Flavian dynasty
• Gaius Gracchus
• *Gravitas*
• Josephus, *Jewish War*
• Julian the Apostate
• Julio-Claudians
• Julius Caesar
• Juno
• Jupiter Optimus Maximus
• Lex Hortensia
• Licinian-Sextian law
• Livy
• Lucretia
• Macedonian Wars
• Magna Graecia
• manipuler legion and legion of cohorts
• Marcus Antonius
• Marius
• Mars
• Minerva
• *mos maiorum*
• Nero
• New Testament
• Numa Pompilius
• *Optimates*
• Ostia
• *paterfamilias*
• Patricians
• Paul
• *pax deorum*
• *Pax Romana*
• Perpetua and Felicity
• Plebeian Council
• Plebeians
• Plebeian tribune
• Pliny the Younger
• Plutarch
• Polybius
• Pompeii
• Pompey
• *Populares*
• Praetor
• Proscriptions
• Punic Wars
• Pyrrhus
• Quaestor
• *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*
6.5 GEOGRAPHY AND TOPOGRAPHY OF ROME AND THE ROMAN EMPIRE

As the title of one recent textbook of Roman history puts it, Roman history is, in a nutshell, the story of Rome’s transformation “from village to empire.”1 The geography and topography of Rome, Italy, and the Mediterranean world as a whole played a key role in the expansion of the empire but also placed challenges in the Romans’ path, challenges which further shaped their history.

Before it became the capital of a major empire, Rome was a village built on seven hills sprawling around the river Tiber. Set sixteen miles inland, the original settlement had distinct strategic advantages: it was immune to attacks from the sea, and the seven hills on which the city was built were easy to fortify. The Tiber, although marshy and prone to flooding, furthermore, provided the ability to trade with the neighboring city-states. By the mid-Republic, requiring access to the sea, the Romans built a harbor at Ostia, which grew to become a full-fledged commercial arm of Rome as a result. Wheeled vehicles were prohibited inside the city of Rome during the day, in order to protect the heavy pedestrian traffic. Thus at night, carts from Ostia poured into Rome, delivering food and other goods for sale from all over Italy and the Empire.

One of the most surprising aspects of the history of early Rome is that, despite constant threats from its more powerful neighbors, it was never swallowed by them. The Etruscans dominated much of northern Italy down to Rome, while the southern half of Italy was so heavily colonized by the Greeks as to earn the nickname “Magna Graecia,” meaning “Great Greece.” In addition, several smaller tribes hemmed the early Romans, mainly, the Latins, the Aequi, and the Sabines.

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The topography of Rome—the advantage of the hills and the river—likely was a boon in the city’s struggles against all of its neighbors. Likewise, the topography of Italy proper, with the Alps and the Appenines providing natural defenses in the north, hampered invasions from the outside. Indeed, the most famous example of an invasion from the north, that of Hannibal during the Second Punic War, is a case in point: he selected that challenging route through the Alps in order to surprise the Romans, and it proved even more destructive for his forces than he had anticipated.

As Rome built a Mediterranean empire, the city itself grew increasingly larger, reaching a population of one million by 100 CE. While Italy boasted fertile farmlands, feeding the city of Rome became a challenge that required the resources of the larger empire, and Egypt in particular became known as the breadbasket of Rome. As a result, emperors were especially cautious to control access to Egypt by prominent senators and other politicians, for fear of losing control over this key area of the Empire.

During the rule of the emperor Trajan in the early second century CE, the Roman Empire reached its greatest extent, stretching to Britain in the west, slightly beyond the Rhine and Danube river in the north, and including much of the Near East and north Africa.

Topography, however, played a role in the Romans’ ultimately unsuccessful struggle to hold on to these territories after Trajan’s death. The natural frontier offered by the Rhine and Danube rivers made it difficult for the Romans to maintain control over the territories on the other side of them. Struggling to fight off the warrior tribes in northern Britain, two second-century CE emperors—Hadrian, and later on Antoninus Pius—built
successive walls, which attempted to separate the un-Romanized tribes from the territory under Roman control. Finally, a persisting challenge for Roman emperors was that of the location of the empire’s capital. When the Roman Empire consisted of Italy alone, the location of Rome in the middle of the Italian peninsula was the ideal location for the capital. Once, however, the empire became a Mediterranean empire that controlled areas far in all directions, the location of Rome was a great distance from all the problem frontiers. As a result, emperors over the course of the second and third centuries spent increasingly less time in Rome. Finally, Diocletian’s split of the Empire in 293 CE into four administrative regions, each with a regional capital, left Rome out, and in 330 CE, the emperor Constantine permanently moved the capital of the empire to his new city of Constantinople, built at the site of the older Greek city of Byzantium.

The large area encompassed by the empire required a sophisticated infrastructure of roads and sea routes, and the Romans provided both. By the first century CE, these roads and routes connected the center of the empire (Rome) to the periphery, providing ways for armies, politicians, traders, tourists, and students to travel with greater security and speed than ever before. As primary sources reveal, travel was never a fully safe undertaking, as bandits lurked on roads and pirates on seas, greedy locals were always eager to fleece unsuspecting tourists, and shipwrecks were an unfortunately common reality. Still, the empire created an unprecedented degree
of networks and connections that allowed anyone in one part of the empire to be able to travel to
any other part, provided he was wealthy enough to be able to afford the journey.

6.6 BASIC CHRONOLOGY AND PERIODS OF ROMAN HISTORY

According to Roman tradition, Rome was founded as a monarchy. That monarchy, however,
was not long-lived, and its history is overshadowed by myth and legend. Historians of Rome have
most often divided its history into two major periods, based on the type of government that Rome
had at the time: the Republic (from the late sixth century BCE to the late first century BCE) and
the Empire (from the late first century BCE to the fall of the Western half of the empire in the
late fifth century CE). Indeed, as seen in the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus, already as
early as the late first century CE, Romans themselves thought of their history in terms of those
two periods. The basic difference between the two periods is quite simple. During the period of
the Republic, Rome was ruled by a Republican government, which distributed power, in theory,
among all Roman citizens. In practice, this was really an aristocratic oligarchy. By contrast, under
the Empire, Rome was under one ruler, the Emperor.

Recent research, however, has challenged the over-simplification of Roman history that can
be implied by thinking of it as comprising just two periods. The work of Harriet Flower has shown
that the Roman Republic is best conceived of as a series of Republics, each with distinct features.
The work of Peter Brown, furthermore, has challenged the myth of the “decline and fall” of the
Roman Empire, first popularized by Edward Gibbon, a nineteenth-century British historian of
Rome. Brown has shown that as a result of the Christianization of the Roman world, Roman
culture in the Late Empire was quite different from that in the earlier periods, yet it was very
much a flourishing culture.

This chapter proceeds chronologically, sub-dividing both the Republic and the Empire into
early and late periods, while also devoting some attention to certain thematic topics that are key
to understanding each period.

6.7 SOURCES AND PROBLEMS

One of the greatest challenges to modern historians of Rome is the Romans’ own seeming
lack of interest in writing their own history for their first 600 years. While, according to Roman
legend, Rome was founded in 753 BCE, the first Roman history in Latin, Origins, composed
by the Republican politician Cato the Elder, was not published until 149 BCE. A few senators
had written about Roman history in Greek earlier on, and some aristocrats kept family histories,
but Cato’s work was truly the first Roman history on a large scale, as it narrated events from the
foundation of the city to Cato’s own death. Only fragments of Cato’s history survive; they reveal
that Cato’s approach to the writing of history was rather unusual. Instead of referring to any indivi-
duals throughout Roman history by name, Cato referred to them by title or political position. As
a result, his history was truly focused on Rome and aimed to glorify the accomplishments of Rome
rather than individual Romans. Thankfully for modern historians, Cato’s experiment of nameless
history did not catch on with subsequent Roman historians. Modern historians are able to reconstruct the story of the Romans from a variety of written and archaeological sources, but some of these sources present problems of which the historian must be aware. Similarly to the challenges modern historians face when studying Greek history, historians of Rome must at times engage in educated guessing when attempting to reconstruct a picture of Rome and Romans based on the limited evidence that is available.

Because the genre of historical writing started so late in Rome, few histories survive from the period of the Republic. Of these, the most famous (and the most voluminous) is the work of Livy, who wrote his *Ab Urbe Condita* (From the Foundation of the City) in the late first century BCE. Livy was very much an “armchair historian,” but he appears to have had access to a number of sources that are now lost, such as family histories from a number of aristocratic families. As the title indicates, Livy began his work with the legends about the founding of Rome. He continued his narrative down to his time, the age of Augustus, and the last known events in his work covered the year 9 BCE. Although Livy’s work consisted of 142 books, only about a quarter survives, including the first ten books, covering the regal period and the early republic and the narrative of the first two Punic Wars. Other prominent historians of the Republic whose works survive include Sallust, a contemporary of Caesar who turned to writing moralistic history after a frustrating political career, and Caesar himself, who wrote two books about his own campaigns: the *Gallic Wars*, about his conquest of Gaul in the 50’s BCE, and the *Civil War*, about his civil war against Pompey in 49 – 45 BCE.

The works of two prominent historians survive from the period of the Roman Empire. Tacitus, another politician-turned-historian, wrote in the early second century CE two works about the history of the Roman Empire in its first century of existence. The *Annals* covered the rule of the emperors Tiberius through Nero, while the *Histories* continued the narrative to the rule of the emperor Domitian. Significant portions of both works survive. Ammianus Marcellinus, a military officer writing in the late fourth century CE, saw himself as a successor of Tacitus, and composed a massive history of the Roman Empire from the end of Tacitus’ work to his own day. In addition, the sensationalizing biographer Suetonius, a contemporary of Tacitus, composed tabloid-style biographies of the first twelve emperors (from Caesar to Domitian). The anonymous *Historia Augusta*, composed sometime in the late Empire, provides similarly sensationalizing biographies of Roman emperors and some usurpers from Hadrian in the early second century CE to Carinus in the late third century CE.

In addition to these Roman historians and biographers, a number of historical works in Greek survive from the late Republic and the Empire that cover topics related to Roman history. To mention just a few examples, in the late first century BCE, Diodorus of Sicily wrote a massive universal history that includes key events of Roman history, alongside Greek history and mythology. The Greek biographer Plutarch, writing in the first century CE, paired for the sake of comparison biographies of famous Greeks and Romans; one exemplary such pairing is that of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. Josephus, a Jewish rebel leader turned Roman citizen, wrote the *Jewish War*, a detailed account of the disastrous Jewish revolt against Rome in the 60’s CE.

Works of history, however, are only one type of source that modern historians of Rome use. Other written sources include poems, novels, letters of politicians and other prominent
figures, military and farming manuals, cookbooks, etc. For instance, one of the best sources for the political ideology of the Augustan age is Vergil’s epic poem Aeneid, which tells the story of the Trojan hero Aeneas and his struggle to reach Italy after the fall of Troy to found Rome. Arguably the single best source for everyday life in the Roman provinces under the Empire is Apuleius’ novel Metamorphoses, better known under the title Golden Ass. The novel is a fictional account of a man accidentally turned into a donkey, who tells the narrative of his travels through the Roman Empire in the late second century CE. And one of the best sources for the government of Roman provinces is the correspondence of Pliny the Younger, governor of the province of Bithynia on the shores of the Black Sea in 111 – 113 CE, with the emperor Trajan. To say the least, the job of the provincial governor, based on these letters, appears to have been decidedly unglamorous.

Early Christianity is one area of Roman history that has been especially well documented from its inception. The New Testament is an invaluable source, as it presents sources by early Christians about their own faith and its spread throughout the Roman Empire. A variety of popular heretical texts from the second and third centuries also survives and allows historians to reconstruct some of the dissenting views held in the early church. Writings in Greek and Latin by a number of influential figures in the early church, dubbed the Church Fathers, document the theological debates that resulted ultimately in the Nicene Creed. Starting in the second century CE, martyrdom accounts and saints’ lives provide admittedly semi-fictional and stylized biographies of individual believers. Finally, two prominent theologians in the Late Empire attempted to write (or re-write) Roman history specifically through a Christian lens. Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea in the fourth century CE, wrote the History of the Church, focusing on the history of Christianity from its beginnings to his day. Then in the early fifth century CE, Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, wrote the City of God, a massive work covering history and legends of Rome from its beginnings to his day, in an attempt to show that Rome’s previous successes were due not to adherence to the pagan gods, but instead always to the Christian God’s mercy.

In addition to written sources of various kinds, archaeological sources provide further insight into Roman life in different periods. Examples of sources that survive include inscriptions, especially gravestones; traded goods, such as lamps or bricks, which allow historians to reconstruct the movement of goods across the empire; and a number of Roman towns and military camps.

One example of the random nature of how some sources were able to survive is the ancient site of Pompeii. The eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE caused volcanic ash to rain down on the resort Roman town of Pompeii and the nearby town of Herculaneum, effectively burying both towns and preserving them completely for
modern archaeologists. The tragedy for the Roman residents of the two towns at the time proved to be a modern archaeologist’s dream.

While, as the above summary shows, abundant sources of different types survive from different periods of Roman history, certain perspectives are difficult to reconstruct from our sources. For instance, slaves in the Roman world were as archaeologically invisible as in the Greek world. Likewise, very little evidence documents women’s lives before the rise of Christianity, and their voices are largely left out from Roman history. Other than epitaphs on their gravestones, most average Romans, in general, left no record of their lives, so our evidence is dominated by the history of the aristocracy. Still, the careful historian can gain at least some insight into these lesser-documented perspectives by gathering all references to them in sources that survive.

### 6.8 EARLY AND MIDDLE REPUBLIC

The period from the founding of Rome to the end of the Punic Wars is less documented than subsequent Roman history. Nevertheless, this period was the formative time during which Rome grew from a village on the Tiber to a pan-Mediterranean empire.
The process was as fascinating to consider for later Romans as for outsiders. The Greek politician-turned-historian Polybius, who spent seventeen years as a hostage in Rome and became quite a fan of the Roman military and political machine, put it simply in the prologue to his *Histories*, in which he documented the meteoric conquest of the Mediterranean world by the Romans:

For who is so worthless or lazy as not to wish to know by what means and under what system of government the Romans in less than fifty-three years have succeeded in subjugating nearly the entire known world to their rule, an achievement unprecedented in history? (Polybius 1.1.5)

Polybius’ question pointed to the answer that he subsequently proposed: part of the reason for the Romans’ success was their adoption of the Republican government as replacement for their original monarchy. Polybius became increasingly convinced during his stay in Rome that the Romans’ government was superior to all others in the Mediterranean at the time.

### 6.8.1 From Monarchy to Republic: Some Myths and Legends

“In the beginning, kings held Rome.” Thus the late first-century CE Roman historian Tacitus opened his *Annals*, a history of the Empire under the rule of the emperors from Tiberius to Nero. Early Roman history is shrouded in myth and legend, but the beliefs of later Romans about their own past are important to consider, as these beliefs, whether truly grounded in reality or not, determined subsequent decisions and actions of the historical Romans later on. This tendency is especially true of the Romans’ myths about the foundation of their city in 753 BCE and the kings who ruled it until the establishment of the Republic in 510 BCE.

According to myth, Rome received its name from its founder Romulus, the son of the war god Mars, and a descendant of the Trojan hero Aeneas. By linking themselves to the Trojans,
the Romans were able to boast an ancient, reputable lineage, rivaling that of the Greeks, and a prominent place in the Greek heroic epic, Homer’s *Iliad*. Furthermore, when embarking on a conquest of Greece later on, the Romans could claim to be seeking revenge for their Trojan ancestors’ defeat and destruction by the Greeks during the Trojan War. Several generations removed from their heroic ancestor Aeneas, Romulus and his twin brother Remus were famously abandoned as infants and then nursed by a she-wolf, the sacred animal of their father Mars.

The sweetness of the story ends there, however. While Romulus was building Rome, Remus insulted the new city, and his brother killed him to avenge its honor. Later, after Romulus had completed the building of the new city with his band of soldiers, he realized the lack of women in the city, so Romulus and his supporters raided the neighboring tribe, the Sabines, and kidnapped their women.

It is telling that later Romans believed that their city was founded on fraternal bloodshed, as well as on rape and kidnapping. The stories of Romulus’ accomplishments, while not laudatory, show an important Roman belief: the greatness of Rome sometimes required morally reprehensible actions. In other words, Rome came first, and if the good of the city required the sacrifice of one’s brother, or required force against others, then the gods were still on the side of the Romans and ordained these actions.

Romans believed that, altogether, their city was ruled by seven different kings in succession. After Romulus, king Numa Pompilius regulated Roman religion and created many of the priestly colleges and positions that continued to exist thereafter. The seventh and final king, however, Tarquin the Proud, was known for his and his family’s brutality. The final straw appears of have been the rape of a nobleman’s wife, Lucretia, by the king’s son. An aristocratic revolution ensued, which appears to have been largely bloodless, if Livy’s account is to be trusted. The royal family was expelled from the city, and two consuls were immediately elected to govern the newly formed Republic. Or so, again, Livy tells us, based on Roman legend. The reality is likely to have been more complicated. Assuming there truly were seven kings who ruled the city, and assuming that the last of them was driven out by an aristocratic revolution, it appears that a period of transition ensued, as the Romans experimented with a variety of short-term solutions before arriving at the model of the Republican government that we
know in the historical period. Furthermore, apparently what guided that gradual evolution of the government was the growing dissatisfaction of the plebeians, the lower socio-economic majority of the city, with their exclusion from the political process.

6.8.2 Early Republic: Conflict of Orders, the Twelve Tables, and Key Legislations

Roman sources from all periods, beginning already in the early Republic, reveal certain common values that all Romans held dear and considered to be foundational for their state. First, Romans had a strong respect for the past and were averse to change. Indeed, reformers had a difficult time passing their proposals in all periods of Roman history. The term for this reverence for the past, mos maiorum, “custom of ancestors” or “custom of elders,” is telling. While innovation is a revered value in the modern world, Romans believed that innovation amounted to disrespect for their ancestors. Ancestral custom, which had first made Rome great, had to be respected, and successful reformers, such as the emperor Augustus, managed to phrase their reforms as a return to something old, rather than as something new. Three additional values that are key to understanding the Romans are auctoritas, “power” or “authority;” dignitas, roughly meaning “dignity;” and gravitas, “seriousness.” Each citizen in the state had a degree of auctoritas, that intangible quality that made others obey him, but the degree of auctoritas varied, depending on one’s social and political standing. Augustus, Rome’s first emperor, would later describe his position in the state as having more auctoritas than anyone else. The other two qualities, dignitas and gravitas, were connected and reflected one’s bearing and behavior as a true Roman. Jocularity was not valued, but seriousness reflected a particularly Roman conduct and determination. It is striking that Romans never smiled in portraits. The austere facial expression, instead, conveyed their power and superiority to others, whom they had conquered.

While sharing common values, Romans were also deeply aware of social divisions between themselves. From its earliest time, Roman citizen population was divided into two orders: the patricians, defined as the descendants from the first one hundred senators appointed to the Roman aristocratic Senate by king Romulus, and the plebeians, that is, everyone who was not a patrician. The plebeians had their own political assembly, the Plebeian Council, while all Roman citizens also belonged to the Centuriate Assembly, which was responsible for annual elections for top political offices. The period of the early Republic, following the expulsion of the kings, was a time of conflict for the two orders, as patricians tried to establish a government
that reserved all political power to themselves, whereas the plebeians fought for the opportunity to hold political and religious offices. Although they did not wield any political power at first, they discovered in the early fifth century that their most powerful weapon was secession, that is, departure en masse from the city, until the patricians acquiesced to a demand. While much about the Conflict of the Orders—just as anything else about the history of the early Republic—is shrouded in legend, it is possible to track its progress through the evidence of legislations that the Romans passed.

In 494 BCE, following the first plebeian secession, the Roman Senate allowed the plebeians to elect plebeian tribunes. An office that eventually was reserved for senators, it was originally merely an opportunity for plebeians to elect officers in the Plebeian Council, the assembly of all plebeian citizens, who would advocate for them. Plebeians next appear to have advocated for a public display of the laws, in order to protect the poor during lawsuits. The result was the first Roman legal code, the Twelve Tables, which was inscribed on twelve tables c. 450 BCE and displayed in public. One of the laws included was a ban on intermarriage between plebeians and patricians, showing a clear commitment on the part of the patricians to maintain the separation of the orders. It is important to note, however, that with the gradual decline in the number of patrician families over the course of the Roman Republic, most began to intermarry with prominent plebeian families.

The highest political office in the Republic, that of the consul, continued to be reserved solely for patricians until 367 BCE, when two senators sponsored the Licinian-Sextian law. The law required that one of the two consuls elected each year had to be plebeian. The phrasing of the law was significant, as it allowed the possibility that both consuls elected in a particular year could be plebeian, although this event did not happen in reality until 215 BCE. Finally, the legislation that modern historians have considered to have ended the early Republican Conflict of the Orders is the Lex Hortensia of 287 BCE. This law made all legislations passed by the Plebeian Council binding on all Romans, patricians and plebeians alike.

As historians connect the dots in the story of the Conflict of the Orders through these legislations, one trend that emerges is the gradual weakening of the patricians along with the growing influence of the plebeians on Roman government. Indeed, by the third century, a number of plebeian families were as wealthy and successful as patrician families, whereas some old patrician families had fallen on hard times.

### 6.8.3 Cursus Honorum and Roman Religion

The debate over plebeian access to political offices in general, and to the consulship in particular, resulted in the creation of a rigid cursus honorum, a sequence or ladder of political offices. The ultimate dream of every Roman who entered politics was to become a consul, but the narrowing pyramid that was the cursus honorum stood in his path. All offices were held for the term of one year, and, in order to prevent any one individual from amassing too much power, candidates had to wait ten years between consulships. Finally, each office had a minimum age requirement, with a special privilege for patricians to subtract two years from that minimum.
The prerequisite for holding any political office was ten years of military service. Thus, aspiring Roman politicians normally entered the army around eighteen years of age. Following ten years of distinguished service, candidates who were at least thirty years of age were allowed to run for the first office in the *cursus*: the quaestorship. The number of *quaestors* each year rose over time to twenty by the late Republic. Each quaestor was assigned to a particular duty for his year in office, varying from supervising the coin mint in Rome to serving as an assistant to a provincial governor or a consul in charge of a war.

While not officially part of the required *cursus honorum*, most ex-quaestors next ran for the office of the *plebeian tribune*, if they were plebeian, or an aedile. Ten plebeian tribunes were elected each year and were supposed to advocate for the benefit of the plebeians during Senatorial debates. Aediles—a term derived from the Latin “aedes,” meaning “building” or “temple”—were in charge of public building projects and often also sponsored public entertainment.

The next step in the *cursus* was the praetorship. Similarly to the quaestors, the number of *praetors* rose over time, until topping at eight in the late Republic. Praetors could hold *imperium*, the right to command an army; thus, they often served in military roles or in administrative capacity by governing a province. Finally, one praetor each year, the *praetor urbanus*, was in charge of administering justice in the city of Rome and keeping track of legal cases and important decisions, which he issued at the end of the year as the Praetor’s Edict.

Upon reaching the age of forty, candidates who had successfully held the praetorship ultimately could run for the consulship. Two *consuls* were elected annually, and this position change to “office” was the pinnacle of the Roman political career. Aristocratic families kept for centuries on display in their homes the ancestor masks of members of the family who had been consuls. Since ten years were required to elapse between successive consulships, very few individuals ever held more than one consulship, until several politicians in the late Republic broke the rules altogether. Last but not least, one additional office existed, for which ex-consuls could run: every five years, two *censors* were elected for a period of eighteen months for the purpose of conducting the census of citizens. While this structure of annually-elected offices was designed to prevent any one individual from usurping all political power in the state, the Senate also realized that, on rare occasions, concentrating all power in one set of hands was needed. Thus the Senate could appoint a dictator for a non-renewable period of six months in times of serious military emergency, such as in the already-mentioned case of Cincinnatus.

The *cursus honorum* is best visualized as a pyramid with a wide base and narrowing each step on the way up. While twenty men each year were elected to the quaestorship, only a fraction of them could ever achieve the praetorship, and a yet smaller fraction could rise to the consulship. Still, election to the quaestorship secured life-long membership in the Senate, the governing body of roughly 300 politicians—doubled in the first century BCE to 600—who effectively governed Rome under the Republic. The question remains, nevertheless: how did some men achieve political advancement while others never made it past the quaestorship? Part of the key to success, it appears, lay outside of politics proper, belonging instead to the realm of religion.

Roman religion, similarly to Greek, was traditionally polytheistic, with many myths and gods aligned to the Greek counterparts. Zeus, Greek king of the gods, became Jupiter, and was a patron
god of Rome under the title *Jupiter Optimus Maximus*, or Jupiter the Best and the Greatest.

His consort, Hera, became the Roman goddess *Juno* and was the patron goddess of marriage. The Greek Athena became Roman *Minerva* and was the patron divinity of women’s crafts. In addition, both *Venus*, the goddess of love, and *Mars*, the god of war, had mythical family connections to Rome’s human founders. Countless other divinities abounded as well; even the Roman sewer system, Cloaca Maxima, had its own patron goddess, Cloacina.

While Romans were expected to worship some of the gods in private, often making vows to them and promising gifts if the gods fulfilled a request, Roman religion also had a significant public component that was reserved for the priestly colleges. Although not limited to politicians, membership in these colleges was at times key for political advancement. One example of this phenomenon in action is the career of Julius Caesar, whose political career took off after his appointment to the religious office of *pontifex maximus*, head of Roman religion. Ultimately, both public and private religion aimed at the same goal: keeping the *pax deorum*, peace with the gods, upon which the success of their state rested, as the Romans believed. Put simply, as long as Romans maintained a respectful peace with their gods, they ensured Rome’s success. Whenever any disasters befell the state, however, Romans typically assumed that *pax deorum* had been violated in some way. The gods then had to be appeased in order to end the disaster and prevent similar events from occurring in the future.

### 6.8.4 Roman Expansion to the End of the Punic Wars

While the legends about the kings of Rome suggest that they had significant military responsibilities, it appears that their military actions were largely defensive. Just a decade or so after the expulsion of the kings, shortly after 500 BCE, however, Roman expansion began in earnest. It is important to note here several key features of the early Roman military. First, until the late Republic, Rome did not maintain a standing army. Rather, a new army was raised for each campaign, and campaigns were typically launched in the spring and ended in the fall. The festival of the October Horse, one of the religious festivals the Romans celebrated each year, involved a ritual purification of the cavalry and originally was likely designed as the end point of the campaign.
season. Also, similarly to the Greek world, the Romans had minimum wealth requirements for military service, since soldiers supplied their own equipment. Finally, one significant trend to note in early Republican military history is the repeated nature of Roman conflicts with the same enemies, such as the three Samnite Wars, the three Punic Wars, and the four Macedonian Wars. This repetition suggests that, for whatever reason, the Romans did not aim to annihilate their opponents, unless absolutely pressed to do so.

It appears that the Roman expansion in the 490s BCE began as a defensive measure. In either 499 BCE or 496 BCE, the expelled seventh king of Rome, Tarquin the Proud, joined forces with the Latin League, a group of about thirty city-states around the area of Rome, and led them to attack the Romans. The result was the Battle of Lake Regillus, a decisive victory for Rome. The Romans signed an uneasy peace treaty with the Latins, but war broke out again in 340 – 338 BCE. The Roman victory this time resulted in the absorption of the Latin city-states into Rome as partial citizens.

The Latins were not the only enemies the nascent Roman Republic had to face. Romans fought and gradually conquered the Etruscan city-states to the north. One especially significant victory was over the powerful Etruscan city of Veii in 396 BCE. A legend preserved by Livy states that Romans were only able to conquer Veii after they performed the ceremony of evocation, “calling out.” Fearing that their siege of Veii was not going well because Juno, the patron goddess of Veii, was not on their side, the Romans called Juno out of Veii; they promised her a nice new temple in Rome if she would switch sides. Shortly thereafter, the city fell to the Romans. When the Roman soldiers were packing up the cult statue of Juno from her temple in Veii for transportation to Rome, a cheeky Roman soldier asked Juno if she wanted to come to Rome. The statue enthusiastically nodded her head. Livy’s history is full of similar tales of divine providence intervening on the side of the Romans. These legends show the Romans’ own belief that throughout the process of expansion, the gods had protected them and guided them to success.

While still fighting the Latins, the Romans embarked upon what turned out to be a series of three wars with their neighbors to the east, the Samnites. Each of these wars, the last of which ended in 290 BCE, resulted in Roman territorial gains; by the end of the Third Samnite War, Rome controlled all of central Italy. It also appears that, at some point during the Samnite Wars, the Romans switched from fighting in the Greek hoplite phalanx fashion to a system of their own making, the manipular legion. This new system apparently allowed more flexibility in the arrangement of the troops on the battlefield; it also allowed using both heavy and light infantry as needed, instead of keeping them in a static formation for the duration of a battle.

![Two Roman Infantrymen and a Cavalryman, second century BCE](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/4d/Two_Roman_Infantrymen_and_a_Cavalryman,_second_century_BCE.jpg/400px-Two_Roman_Infantrymen_and_a_Cavalryman,_second_century_BCE.jpg)
While not much else is known about the manipular legion, it appears to have been an effective system for the Romans for much of the Republican period.

It is striking to consider that the Romans spent eighty of the hundred years in the third century BCE at war. They did not seem to have had the ambition to conquer the Greek city-states who were their neighbors in southern Italy; in 280–275 BCE, Rome nevertheless became embroiled in a war with Pyrrhus, king of Epirus in northern Greece, after providing help to Thurii in its dispute with Tarentum. Tarentum requested Pyrrhus’ help, and he proceeded to invade Italy. The Romans fought three major battles against Pyrrhus, the first two of which he won at great cost to his army. Indeed, the term “Pyrrhic victory” in modern English refers to a victory that is so costly as to be truly a loss. The Romans finally defeated Pyrrhus at their third battle against him in 275 BCE, showing the superiority of the new Roman manipular legion even against the phalanx of the Macedonians, military descendants of Alexander the Great himself. This victory united most of Italy, except for the very northern portion, under Roman rule.

The war with Pyrrhus was the Romans’ first serious conflict with the Greek world, but it was far from their last. The Romans’ proximity to northern Greece, in particular, ensured an intersection of spheres of interest, thus also providing cause for continued conflict. Between 214 and 148 BCE, Rome fought four separate Macedonian Wars. During roughly the same period, from 264 and 146 BCE, the Romans also fought three Punic Wars against Carthage, originally a Phoenician colony that became a leading maritime power. Culminating with the Roman destruction of both Carthage
and Corinth in 146 BCE, the eventual victory of the Romans over both powers allowed the Romans to gain full control over them and their previous land holdings. Their victory effectively put the entire Mediterranean world under Roman rule.

In 146 BCE, when the Romans found themselves in control of a Mediterranean empire, they appeared to foresee little of the consequences of such a rapid expansion on internal stability in Rome proper. A critical question nevertheless faced them: how would the Republic, whose system of government was designed for a small city-state, adapt to ruling a large empire? The preliminary answer on which the Romans settled was to divide the conquered territories into provinces, to which senatorial governors were assigned for terms that varied from one to five years. The system continued, with minor variations, into the Empire.

The new availability of governor positions, however, only made the political competition in the Republic even stiffer than before. Senators competed for the most desirable positions; typically, these were provinces in which military action was on-going—since this provided the potential
for winning military glory—or provinces that were wealthy, with the potential opportunity in governing them to acquire wealth.

6.9 FALL OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

The victory over Carthage in the Second Punic War allowed Rome to “close” the circle of the Mediterranean almost completely, acquiring control over all territories that had previously belonged to Carthage. The destruction of Carthage in the Third Punic War, while largely a symbolic gesture, further cemented Rome’s control over the entire Mediterranean. The late Republican historian Sallust, though, grimly saw the Roman victory in the Punic Wars as the beginning of the end of the Republic. As Sallust and some other conservative politicians of his day believed, this victory corrupted the noble Roman character, traditionally steeled by privation. More importantly, the abundance of resources that flowed in following the victories over Carthage raised the question of distribution of this new wealth and land. The disagreements over this question dominated the politics of the Late Republic, creating two new political factions: the Populares, or those who protected the interests of the people, and the Optimates, or those who protected the interests of the best element of the populace—namely, themselves.

6.9.1 The Gracchi and the Beginning of Political Violence

It is striking to consider that political violence was minimal in the Roman Republic until 133 BCE. Indeed, if the legends are true, even the expulsion of the kings in 510 BCE was a bloodless event. Starting with 133 BCE, however, the final century of the Roman Republic was defined by political violence and civil wars.

In 133 BCE, Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, a scion on his mother’s side of one of the oldest and most respected families in Rome, the Cornelii Scipiones, was one of the ten annually elected plebeian tribunes. Alarmed that the lands acquired through recent Roman conquests had largely been taken over by rich landowners at the expense of poorer Romans, Gracchus proposed a land distribution law, known as the Lex Sempronia Agraria. Gracchus argued that the advantages of such land redistribution would have benefited the state, since land-ownership was a pre-requisite for military service. Aware that the Senate’s Optimates faction opposed his proposal, Gracchus took his law directly to the Plebeian Council, which passed it. This measure resulted in escalating conflict between Gracchus and the rest of the Senate. At a meeting of the Senate, the pontifex maximus, who was Tiberius Gracchus’ own cousin Publius Cornelius Scipio Nasica, ultimately argued that Gracchus had attempted to make himself king; thus, he had to be stopped. Since weapons were banned inside the Senate building, enraged Senators grabbed whatever was on hand, including chair and table legs, and clubbed Gracchus to death. As the biographer Plutarch states, this was the first instance of civic strife of this kind in ancient Rome.

The death of Tiberius Gracchus also meant the death of his proposed law. Ten years later, however, Gracchus’ proposed reforms gained a second life in the hands of his younger brother, Gaius Gracchus, who was elected plebeian tribune in 123 BCE and served a second term in that
office in 122 BCE. Gaius Gracchus’ revived agrarian reform proposal was even more ambitious than his brother’s a decade earlier. Especially controversial was Gaius Gracchus’ proposal of granting full Roman citizenship to Rome’s Italian allies. Finally, in 121 BCE, alarmed at Gaius Gracchus’ popularity with the people, the consul Lucius Opimius proposed a new measure in the Senate: a *senatus consultum ultimum*, or the final decree of the Senate, which amounted to allowing the consuls to do whatever was necessary to safeguard the state. Realizing that the passing of this law amounted to his death sentence, Gaius Gracchus committed suicide.

The proposed reforms of Gaius Gracchus were overturned after his death, but the legacy of the Gracchi for the remainder of the history of the Roman Republic cannot be underestimated. First, their proposed laws showed the growing conflict between the rich and the poor in the Roman state. Second, the willingness on the part of prominent Senators to resort to violence to resolve matters set a dangerous precedent for the remainder of the Republic and fundamentally changed the nature of Roman politics. Finally, the support that the Gracchi received from the Roman people, as well as the residents of Italian cities who were not full citizens, showed that the causes that the Gracchi adopted were not going to go away permanently after their death. Indeed, Rome’s Italian allies went to war against Rome in 90 – 88 BCE; the result of this Social War, after “socii,” meaning “allies,” was the grant of full Roman citizenship rights to Italians.

### 6.9.2 The Civil War of Marius and Sulla, and the Conspiracy of Catilina

The affair of the Gracchi was the first clear instance in the late Republic of Populares and Optimates in a violent conflict. Forty years later, a conflict between two politicians, representing different sides in this debate, resulted in a full-fledged civil war.

In 107 BCE, impatient over the prolonged and challenging war against the Numidian king Jugurtha, the Romans elected as consul Gaius Marius.

While Marius had already enjoyed a distinguished military career, he was a *novus homo*, or “new man,” a term the Romans used to refer to newcomers to Roman politics, meaning individuals who have not had any family members elected to political office. Even more shockingly, Marius was not even from Rome proper, but from the town of Arpinum, located sixty miles south of Rome. Marius benefited from the sense of frustration in Rome over the length of the war and the perceived corruption of the aristocratic leaders abroad. Once elected, he took over the command in the war and passed the most comprehensive reforms to the Roman military since the Romans switched to the manipular legion. First, Marius abolished the property requirement for military
service, allowing landless Romans to serve in the army for the first time in Roman history. A second and related change was the new commitment on the part of the Roman state to arm its troops and also pay them for service. Henceforth, the military became a profession, rather than a seasonal occupation for farmers. Finally, Marius changed the tactics of the legionary organization on the battlefield, changing the legion of maniples into a **legion of cohorts**.

Marius’ reforms, while controversial, proved immensely successful, and he swiftly was able to defeat Jugurtha, ending the war in 104 BCE. As a result of his victories, Marius had gained unprecedented popularity in Rome and was elected to five more successive consulships in 104 – 100 BCE. While a law existed requiring ten years between successive consulships, Marius’ popularity and military success, in conjunction with the Romans’ fear of on-going foreign wars, elevated him above the law. While Marius began his military career fighting for Rome, though, he ended it by causing the worst civil war Rome had seen to that point.

In 88 BCE, the Roman Senate was facing a war against Mithridates, king of Pontus, who had long been a thorn in Rome’s side in the Eastern provinces of the empire. Sensing that Marius was too old to undertake the war, the Senate appointed instead Lucius Cornelius **Sulla**, a distinguished general who had started his career as Marius’ quaestor in the Jugurthine War and was now a consul himself. Marius, however, had another trick up his sleeve. Summoning the Plebeian Council, Marius overturned the decision of the Senate and drove Sulla out of Rome. Instead of going lightly into exile, however, Sulla gathered an army and marched on Rome—the first time in Roman history that a Roman general led a Roman army against Rome!
Sulla took over Rome, swiftly had himself declared commander of the war on Mithridates, and departed for the Black Sea. In 86 BCE, Marius was elected consul for the seventh and final time in his career then promptly died of natural causes, just seventeen days after taking office. The civil war that he started with Sulla, though, was still far from over.

In 83 BCE, victorious over Mithridates but facing a hostile reception from the Senate, Sulla marched on Rome for the second time. This time, he truly meant business. Declaring himself dictator for reforming the Roman constitution, Sulla ruled Rome as a dictator for the next three years. His reforms aimed to prevent the rise of another Marius so significantly curtailed the powers of the plebeian tribunes. In addition, he established the **proscriptions**—a list of enemies of the state, whom anyone could kill on sight, and whose property was confiscated. Incidentally, one name on Sulla’s list was the young **Julius Caesar**, whose aunt had been married to Gaius Marius. While Caesar obviously survived the proscription, and went on to become a prominent politician himself, the confiscation of his property by Sulla ensured that he remained painfully strapped financially and in debt for the rest of his life.

After enacting his reforms, Sulla just as suddenly resigned from politics, retiring to a family estate outside of Rome in 79 BCE, where he appears to have drunk himself into an early grave—based on Plutarch’s description of his death, the symptoms appear to fit with cirrhosis of the liver. Over the next several decades, some of Sulla’s reforms were overturned, such as those pertaining to the plebeian tribunes. Most historians of the Republic agree, however, that the Republican constitution never afterward reverted to its old state. The Republic after Sulla was a different Republic than before him.

The civil war of Marius and Sulla showed the increasingly greater degree of competition in the Republic as well as the lengths to which some Roman politicians were willing to go to get power and hold on to it. Furthermore, it demonstrated one dangerous side effect of Marius’ military reforms: before Marius, Roman farmer-soldiers did not feel a personal affinity for their generals. After Marius’ reforms, however, because soldiers were paid by their generals, their loyalty was to their generals, as much or more than to the Roman state. Finally, Marius’ incredible political success—election to a record-setting and law-breaking seven consulships over the course of his life—showed that military ability had somewhat leveled the playing field between old patrician families such as Sulla’s—that had dominated the consulship for centuries—and the newcomers to Roman politics. This challenge by the newcomers to the old Roman political families was an especially bitter pill to swallow for some.

In 63 BCE, Lucius Sergius **Catilina**, a patrician who had unsuccessfully run for consulship and who was defeated that very year by another newcomer from Arpinum, Marcus Tullius Cicero, banded with other frustrated Senators to plan a conspiracy to assassinate the consuls and take over the state. Catilina’s conspiracy failed, and modern historians can read Cicero’s own reports to the Senate and the people about how he discovered and stopped this conspiracy. Catilina’s frustration, just like that of Sulla twenty years earlier, nevertheless shows how difficult it was for Roman “old-school” political families to accept that their competition for the consulship now was not just against each other. Catilina’s plan to resort to violence to achieve power also shows just how quickly political violence became the “normal” solution to problems in Roman Republican politics after the Gracchi.
The political careers of Marius and Sulla, as well as Catilina, show the increased level of competition in the late Republic and the ruthlessness with which some Roman politicians in the period attempted to gain the consulship. In 60 BCE, however, a group of three politicians tried to achieve its goals by doing something atypical of Roman politicians who had largely only looked out for themselves: the three formed an alliance in order to help each other. Spectacularly, their alliance even transcended the usual division of Populares and Optimates, showing that, for these three men at least, the thirst for political power was more important than any other personal convictions.

Marcus Licinius Crassus was the wealthiest man in Rome, son of a consul, and consul himself in 70 BCE. His colleague in the consulship in 70 BCE, Gnaeus Pompey, achieved military fame in his youth, earning him the nickname “Magnus,” or “the Great,” from Sulla himself.

By 60 BCE, however, both Crassus and Pompey felt frustrated with their political careers so joined forces with a relative newcomer to the world of politics, Gaius Julius Caesar. The three men formed their alliance, secret at first, an alliance which Cicero later dubbed the Triumvirate. To cement the alliance, Caesar’s daughter, Julia, married Pompey. Together, they lobbied to help each other rise again to the consulship and achieve desirable military commands.

The alliance paid immediate dividends for Caesar, who was promptly elected consul for 59 BCE and was then awarded Gaul as his province for five years after the consulship. Crassus and Pompey, in the meanwhile, were re-elected consuls for 55 BCE, and, in the same year, Caesar’s command in Gaul was renewed for another five years. One modern historian has called it “the worst piece of legislation in Roman history,” since the renewal did not specify whether the five-year clock started afresh in 55 BCE—in which case, Caesar’s command was to end in 50 BCE—or if the five years were added to the original five-year term—in which case, Caesar’s command would have ended in 48 BCE.

A talented writer, as well as skilled general, Caesar made sure to publish an account of his Gallic campaigns in installments during his time in Gaul. As a result, Romans were continually aware of Caesar’s successes, and his popularity actually grew in his absence. His rising popularity was a source of frustration for the other two triumvirs. Finally, the already uneasy alliance disintegrated in 53 BCE. First, Julia died in childbirth, and her baby died with her. In the same year, Crassus was killed at the Battle of Carrhae, fighting the Parthians. With the death of both Julia and Crassus, no links were left connecting Caesar and Pompey; the two former family relations, albeit by marriage, swiftly became official enemies.
Late in 50 BCE, the Senate, under the leadership of Pompey, informed Caesar that his command had expired and demanded that he surrender his army. Caesar, however, refused to return to Rome as a private citizen, demanding to be allowed to stand for the consulship *in absentia*. When his demands were refused, on January 10th of 49 BCE, Caesar and his army crossed the Rubicon, a river which marked the border of his province. By leaving his province with his army against the wishes of the Senate, Caesar committed an act of treason, as defined in Roman law; the civil war began.

While most of the Senate was on Pompey’s side, Caesar started the war with a distinct advantage: his troops had just spent a larger part of a decade fighting with him in Gaul; many of Pompey’s army, on the other hand, was disorganized. As a result, for much of 49 BCE, Pompey retreated to the south of Italy, with Caesar in pursuit. Finally, in late 48 BCE, the two fought a decisive battle at Pharsalus in northern Greece. There, Caesar’s army managed to defeat Pompey’s much larger forces. After the defeat, Pompey fled to Egypt, where he was assassinated by order
of Ptolemy XIII, who had hoped to win Caesar’s favor by this action. When he arrived in Egypt in pursuit of Pompey, Caesar, however, sided with Ptolemy’s sister Cleopatra VII and appears to have fathered a son with her, Caesarion.

With Pompey’s death, the civil war was largely over, although Caesar still fought a number of battles across the Roman world with the remnants of the senatorial army. It is indeed striking to look at a map of Caesar’s military career. While his military actions on behalf of Rome were largely limited to Gaul, with a couple of forays into Britain, his civil war against Pompey and his allies took Caesar all over the Roman world from 49 to 45 BCE.

6.9.4 Aftermath of the Civil War, the Second Triumvirate, and the Age of Augustus

Victorious in the civil war against Pompey and his supporters, Caesar was faced with the challenging question of what to do next. Clearly, he was planning to hold on to power in some way. Based on previous history, there were two options available to him: the Marius model of rule, meaning election to successive consulships, and the Sulla model, meaning dictatorship. Initially, Caesar followed the first model, holding the consulship first with a colleague in 47 BCE and 46 BCE then serving as sole consul in 45 BCE. By early 44 BCE, however, Caesar appears to have decided to adopt the Sulla model instead. In February of 44 BCE, he took the title of dictator perpetuo, or “dictator for life,” and had coins minted with his image and new title. His was the first instance in Roman history of a living individual’s placing his likeness on coinage.

This new title appears to have been the final straw for a group of about sixty senators who feared that Caesar aimed to make himself a king. On the Ides of March (March 15th) of 44 BCE, the conspirators rushed Caesar during a Senate meeting and stabbed him to death. But if the conspirators had thought that by assassinating Caesar they were going to restore the Republic, they turned out to be sorely mistaken.

Caesar’s will, in which he left money to each resident of the city of Rome and donated his gardens for use by the public, only further increased his popularity among the people, and popular rioting ensued throughout the city. Since Caesar did not have legitimate sons who could inherit—Caesarion, his son with Cleopatra, was illegitimate—he adopted an heir in his will, a common Roman practice. The heir in question was his grand-nephew Gaius Octavius, whose name after the adoption became Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus (or Octavian, in English). It is interesting to note that Caesar’s will also named a back-up heir, in case the main heir would have died before inheriting. The back-up heir was none other than Brutus, one of Caesar’s assassins.
At the time of his adoption as Caesar’s heir, Octavian was nineteen years old; thus, he was too young to have had much military or political experience. Quickly, though, he showed political acumen, initially using an alliance with two much more experienced former allies of Caesar: Marcus Antonius and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus. Forming what became known as the Second Triumvirate, the three men renewed the proscriptions in 43 BCE, aggressively pursuing the enemies of Caesar and also fighting a small-scale civil war with Caesar’s assassins. The triumvirs defeated Caesar’s assassins at the Battle of Philippi in northern Greece in 42 BCE; they then carved out the Roman world into regions to be ruled by each. Marcus Antonius, who claimed Egypt, although it was not yet a Roman province, proceeded to marry Cleopatra and rule Egypt with her over the following decade. Ultimately, however, another civil war resulted between Antonius and Octavian, with the latter winning a decisive victory in the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE. From that moment until his death in 14 CE, Octavian—soon to be named Augustus in 27 BCE, the name he subsequently used—ruled what henceforth was known as the Roman Empire, and is considered by modern historians of Rome to have been the first emperor.

While modern historians refer to Augustus as the first emperor of Rome, that is not the title that he himself had, nor would he have said that he was inaugurating a new form of government in Rome. Rather, throughout his time in power, Augustus claimed to have restored the Roman Republic, and, with the exception of a few elected offices, he did not have any official position. How did he manage to rule the Roman Empire for over forty years without any official position? Some answers can be found in the Res Gestae Divi Augusti, an autobiography that Augustus himself composed in the year before he died and which he ordered to be posted on his Mausoleum in Rome, with copies also posted in all major cities throughout the Empire.

Reflecting on his forty-year rule in this document, Augustus described himself as the first citizen, or princeps, of the Roman state, superior to others in his auctoritas. In addition, he was especially proud of the title of “Pater Patriae,” or “Father of the Fatherland,” voted to him by the Senate and reflecting his status as the patron of all citizens. It is striking to consider that other than these honorary titles and positions, Augustus did not have an official position as a ruler. Indeed, having learned from Caesar’s example, he avoided accepting any titles that might have smacked of a desire for kingship. Instead, he brilliantly created for himself new titles and powers, thoroughly grounded in previous, Republican tradition. In addition, he proved to be
a master diplomat, who shared power with the Senate in a way beneficial to himself, and by all of these actions seamlessly married the entire Republican political structure with one-man rule.

The question remains: when did the Roman Republic actually fall? Different historians have proposed several possible answers. One minority position is that the Republic had fallen with the dictatorship of Sulla, since it fundamentally altered the nature of the Republican government and permanently destabilized it. Another possible answer is the assassination of Caesar in 44 BCE, since afterwards, the Republic was never quite the same as it had been before the civil war of Pompey and Caesar. Another possible answer is 27 BCE, when the Senate granted Octavian the title of Augustus, recognizing his albeit unofficial consolidation of power. Finally, yet another possible answer is the death of Augustus in 14 CE. Overall, all of these possible dates and events show the instability of the Roman state in the late first century BCE.

### 6.9.5 Roman Culture of the Late Republic and the Augustan Age

While the political structure of the Roman Republic in its final century of existence was becoming increasingly unstable, the period from the end of the Second Punic War on was actually one of increasing flourishing of entertainment culture and literary arts in Rome. Although much of Roman literary culture was based on Greek literature, the Romans adapted what they borrowed to make it distinctly their own. Thus, while adapting Greek tragedies and comedies and, in some cases, apparently translating them wholesale, Romans still injected Roman values into them, thus making them relatable to Roman Republican audiences. For example, in one fragment from a Roman tragedy, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, adapted by the Roman poet Ennius from the Greek tragedian Euripides’ play by the same name, the chorus of frustrated Greek soldiers debates the merits of *otium*, or leisure, and *negotium*, or business (a specifically Roman concept). Similarly, while Roman philosophy and rhetoric of the Republic were heavily based on their Greek counterparts,
their writers thoroughly Romanized the concepts discussed, as well as the presentation. For instance, Cicero, a preeminent rhetorician and philosopher of the late Republic, adapted the model of the Socratic dialogue in several of his philosophical treatises to make dialogues between prominent Romans of the Middle Republic. His *De Republica*, a work expressly modeled on Plato’s *Republic*, features Scipio Aemilianus, the victor over Carthage in the Third Punic War.

While the late Republic was a period of growth for Roman literary arts, with much of the writing done by politicians, the age of Augustus saw an even greater flourishing of Roman literature. This increase was due in large part to Augustus’ own investment in sponsoring prominent poets to write about the greatness of Rome. The three most prominent poets of the Augustan age, Virgil, Horace, and Ovid, all wrote poetry glorifying Augustan Rome. Virgil’s *Aeneid*, finished in 19 BCE, aimed to be the Roman national epic and indeed achieved that goal. The epic, intended to be the Roman version of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined, told about the travels of the Trojan prince Aeneas who, by will of the gods, became the founder of Rome. Clearly connecting the Roman to the Greek heroic tradition, the epic also includes a myth explaining the origins of the Punic Wars: during his travels, before he arrived in Italy, Aeneas was ship-wrecked and landed in Carthage. Dido, the queen of Carthage, fell in love with him and wanted him to stay with her, but the gods ordered Aeneas to sail on to Italy. After Aeneas abandoned her, Dido committed suicide and cursed the future Romans to be at war with her people.

The works of Horace and Ovid were more humorous at times, but they still included significant elements from early Roman myths. They thus served to showcase the *pax deorum* that caused Rome to flourish in the past and, again now, in the age of Augustus. Ovid appears to have pushed the envelope beyond acceptable limits, whether in his poetry or in his personal conduct. Therefore, Augustus exiled him in 8 CE to the city of Tomis on the Black Sea, where Ovid spent the remainder of his life writing mournful poetry and begging unsuccessfully to be recalled back to Rome.

In addition to sponsoring literature, the age of Augustus was a time of building and rebuilding around Rome. In his *Res Gestae*, Augustus includes a very long list of temples that he had restored or built. Among some new building projects that he undertook to stand as symbols of renewal and prosperity ordained

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**Figure 6.16 | The Ara Pacis**

Author: User “Manfred Heyde”
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by the gods themselves, none is as famous as the *Ara Pacis*, or Altar of Peace, in Rome. The altar features a number of mythological scenes and processions of gods; it also integrates scenes of the imperial family, including Augustus himself making a sacrifice to the gods, while flanked by his grandsons Gaius and Lucius.

The message of these building projects, as well as the other arts that Augustus sponsored is, overall, simple: Augustus wanted to show that his rule was a new Golden Age of Roman history, a time when peace was restored and Rome flourished, truly blessed by the gods.

### 6.10 THE EARLY EMPIRE

The period from the consolidation of power by Augustus in 27 BCE to the death of the emperor Marcus Aurelius in 180 CE was one of relative peace and prosperity throughout the Roman Empire. For this reason, the Romans themselves referred to this time as the *Pax Romana*, or Roman peace. During this period, the Empire became increasingly more of a smoothly run bureaucratic machine when commerce prospered, and the overall territory grew to its largest extent in the early second century CE. Of course, some of the Roman subjects did not feel quite as happy with this peace and what it brought to them. The Roman historian Tacitus narrates a speech of a British tribal rebel leader, Calgacus, to his men before they fought—and were defeated by—the Romans in 85 CE: “they (the Romans) make a desert, and call it peace.” Other evidence from the territories in the periphery of the Empire also shows that Romanization was not absolute, as some remote rural areas in provinces far from Italy did not really feel the impact of the Empire. Finally, the period of the early Empire witnessed the rise of a new religion, *Christianity*. This new religion did not have a profound impact on the state yet at this point, but the seeds planted in this period allowed for fundamental changes to occur centuries later. This is, after all, one of the marvels of history. It can take centuries to see the long-term impact of events that seem so small and insignificant at first.

### 6.10.1 The Julio-Claudian Dynasty

The historian Tacitus describes in detail the emotions in the Roman Senate upon the death of Augustus. Some Senators were hoping for the return of the Republic, while others assumed that Augustus’ stepson would inherit his nebulous yet amazingly powerful position. The scales were heavily weighed in favor of the latter option: as Tacitus points out, most Senators by 14 CE—fifty years after Caesar’s assassination—had never lived under a Republic; thus, they did not really know what a true Republic looked like. Still, the question that all were pondering in 14 CE was: how do you pass on something that does not exist? After all, Augustus did not have any official position. The first succession was a test case to see if the imperial system of government would become the new normal for Rome or if Augustus would prove to have been an exception.

Augustus himself seems to have been worried about appointing a successor for his entire time in power. Because of untimely deaths of all other possible candidates, Augustus eventually settled on adopting his stepson Tiberius Claudius Nero (not to be confused with the later
emperor Nero), son of his wife Livia from her first marriage. Over the final years of his life, Augustus gradually shared more of his unofficial powers with Tiberius, in order to smooth the process of succession. Augustus’ plan appears to have worked, as after a brief conversation in the Senate, as Tacitus reports, the Senators conferred upon Tiberius all of Augustus’ previous powers. Tiberius’ succession is the reason for which historians refer to the first Roman imperial dynasty as the **Julio-Claudians**.

Tiberius, a decorated military general in his youth, appears in our sources as a sullen and possibly cruel individual, whose temperament made Augustus himself feel sorry for the Romans for leaving such a ruler in his stead—or so Suetonius tells us.

He also appears to have been a rather reluctant emperor, who much preferred life out of the public eye. Finally, in 26 CE, Tiberius retired to Capri for the final eleven years of his rule. It is a testament to the spectacular bureaucratic system that was the Roman Empire that the eleven-year absence of the emperor was hardly felt, one exception being a foiled plot against Tiberius by his chief trusted advisor in Rome, Sejanus.

Similarly to Augustus, Tiberius had a difficult time selecting a successor, as repeatedly, each relative who was identified as a candidate died an untimely death. Ultimately, Tiberius adopted as his successor his grandnephew Gaius **Caligula**, or “little boot,” son of the popular military hero Germanicus, who died young.

While Caligula began his power with full support of both the people and the Senate, and with an unprecedented degree of popularity, he swiftly proved to be mentally unstable and bankrupted the state in his short rule of just under four years. In 41 CE, he was assassinated by three disgruntled officers in the Praetorian Guard, which ironically was the body formed by Augustus in order to protect the emperor.

Caligula’s assassination left Rome in disarray. The biographer Suetonius reports that, while the
confused Senate was meeting and planning to declare the restoration of the Roman Republic, the Praetorian Guard proclaimed as the next emperor **Claudius**, uncle of Caligula and the brother of Germanicus.

While Claudius was a member of the imperial family, he was never considered a candidate for succession before. He had a speech impediment; as a result, Augustus considered him an embarrassment to the imperial family. Claudius proved to be a productive emperor, but his downfall appears to have been pretty women of bad character, as he repeatedly weathered plots against his life by first one wife and then the next. Finally, in 54 CE, Claudius died and was widely believed to have been poisoned by his wife, Agrippina the Younger. Since the cause, as Suetonius tells us, was mushrooms, a popular joke thereafter in Rome was that mushrooms were the food of the gods—a reference to the deification of most emperors after their death.

Although Claudius had a biological son from an earlier marriage, that son was poisoned soon after his death. His successor instead became **Nero**, his stepson, who was only sixteen years old when he gained power.

Showing the danger of inexperience for an emperor, Nero gradually alienated the Senate, the people, and the army over the course of his fourteen-year rule. He destroyed his own reputation by performing on stage—behavior that was considered disgraceful in Roman society. Furthermore, Nero is believed in 64 CE to have caused the great fire of Rome in order to free up space in the middle of the city for his ambitious new palace, the Domus Aurea, or Golden House.

The last years of Nero’s reign seem to have been characterized by provincial rebellions, as a revolt broke out in Judea in 66 CE, and then the governor of Gaul, Gaius Julius Vindex, also rebelled against Nero. The revolt of Vindex ultimately proved to be the end of Nero, since Vindex convinced the governor of Spain, Servius Sulpicius Galba, to join the rebellion and, furthermore, proclaim himself emperor. While the rebellion of Vindex was quickly squashed, and Vindex himself committed suicide, popular support for Galba
grew just as quickly. Finally, terrified by rumors of Galba marching to Rome, Nero committed suicide in June of 68 CE. His death marked the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.

### 6.10.2 The Year of the Four Emperors, the Flavian Dynasty, and the Five Good Emperors

The year and a half after Nero’s death saw more civil war and instability throughout the empire than any other period since the late Republic. In particular, the year 69 CE became known as the year of the four emperors, as four emperors in succession came to power: Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian. Each challenged his predecessor to a civil war, and each was as swiftly defeated by the next challenger.

In the process, as the historian Tacitus later noted, the year of the four emperors revealed two key secrets that continued to be a factor in subsequent history of the Empire. First, emperors...
could now be made outside of Rome, as seen, for example, with Galba’s proclamation as emperor in Spain. Second, the army could make emperors; indeed, each of the four emperors in 69 CE was proclaimed emperor by his troops. These two *arcana imperii*, or “secrets of empire,” as Tacitus dubbed them, continued to play a strong role in subsequent history of the Roman Empire. Their unveiling showed the declining importance of Rome as the center of political power and the concomitant decline in the importance of the Senate, once an advisory body to the entire empire, but now increasingly confined in its authority to Rome proper alone.

Several reasons caused Vespasian, a mere son of a tax-collector, to be the only successful emperor of 69 CE and the founder of the *Flavian dynasty*. First, a talented military commander, Vespasian

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**Figure 6.21 | Arch of Titus** | Arch of Titus, celebrating his victory over Judaea, and featuring images of war spoils on the inside.  
Author: User “Jebulon”  
Source: Wikimedia Commons  
License: CC0 1.0

**Map 6.9 | Map of Roman Trade Routes** | This map of Roman trade routes c. 180 CE shows the economic prosperity in the urban centers.  
Author: User “Adhavoc”  
Source: Wikimedia Commons  
License: CC BY-SA 3.0
proved to be already in command of a major military force in 69 CE, since he had been working on subduing the Jewish Revolt since 67 CE. Ironically, Nero had originally appointed him to command the Jewish War because of Vespasian’s humble family origins—which to Nero meant that he was not a political threat. Second, Vespasian was the only one of the four emperors of 69 CE who had grown sons, and thus obvious successors. Furthermore, his older son, Titus, was already a popular military commander in his own right and cemented his reputation even further by his conquest of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

The Flavian dynasty did not last long, however, as it ended in 96 CE with the assassination of Emperor Domitian, Vespasian’s younger son. The period from 96 CE to 180 CE saw a different experiment in determining imperial succession, instead of establishing traditional dynasties in which sons succeeded their fathers. Known as the period of the “Five Good Emperors,” the trend in the second century CE was for each emperor to adopt a talented leader with potential as his successor. The result was what Edward Gibbon, the nineteenth-century British historian of Rome, called “the happiest age” of mankind. But was life everywhere in the Roman Empire in the second century equally happy for all? The evidence suggests that while Rome and other major urban centers flourished, life in the periphery could be a very different experience.

6.10.3 Center Versus Periphery in the Roman Empire: the Evidence of Pliny and Apuleius

Much of extant evidence from the Roman Empire comes from Rome and Italy. As is so often the case with empires, though, life in Rome was not representative of everyday life in the empire. The problems with which residents of Rome had to contend were a far cry from those with which residents of distant provinces had to deal. Careful examination of two sources from the second century CE reveals that the relationship of the Roman Empire to the provinces in the periphery was often uneasy. Writing about two different provinces within a half-century of each other, the two sources, Pliny the Younger and Apuleius, show the complicated blessings of living in a province far away from Rome that was yet under Roman rule.

It is shocking to consider today that most Roman governors setting out for the job received just one type of personnel to assist them with their duties: a flute-player, whose job was to play during sacrifice ceremonies. Since military forces were expensive to maintain and needed for emergencies in those areas of the Empire considered to be the most at risk for rebellion or outside attack, most governors did not have a legion stationed in their province. So how did governors resolve problems, and what resources did they find when they arrived? The single best sources of information about Roman provincial government is the prolific letter-writer Pliny the Younger, who served as governor of the province of Bithynia on the shore of the Black Sea in 111 – 113 CE. Pliny was a cautious and conscientious governor, and thus believed in consulting the emperor Trajan on every single issue that he encountered in his province. Luckily for us, their correspondence survives.

Pliny’s letters reveal a myriad of problems that the governor was expected to solve: staffing personnel for prisons (is it acceptable to use slaves as prison guards?), building repairs and water supply, abandoned infants and their legal status (should they be considered slave-born or free?),
fire brigades (are they a potential security risk to the Empire?) and, most famously, what to do with Christians in the province. The emperor Trajan patiently responded to each letter that he received from Pliny and appears to have placed stability and peace in the province foremost in his concerns. Thus, for instance, with regard to the issue of Christians in Bithynia, Trajan recommends that Pliny not worry about tracking down Christians in his province, as they were not a threat.

Another perspective from the periphery comes from the novel *Metamorphoses* or *Golden Ass*, written by the North African intellectual Apuleius sometime in the later part of the second century CE. The protagonist of the novel, Lucius, is a curious intellectual who is traveling through Greece and, through a magic experiment gone wrong, accidentally is turned into a donkey. For the remainder of the novel, Lucius, in his donkey form, is repeatedly stolen, traded, beaten, and abused, until finally being rescued at the end of the novel by the Egyptian goddess Isis, whose service he then enters as a priest. Throughout his travels, though, Lucius’ observations reveal the limits of Romanization in the remote parts of Greece. Law and order are largely absent, highway robbery is simply a normal part of life, and on the one occasion when a poor farmer runs into a Roman soldier on the road, the soldier forcibly requisitions the farmer’s sole possession: his donkey. Overall, the picture that Apuleius paints reveals the dark side of the *Pax Romana*. Yes, the Empire was at peace, and few attacks were happening on the frontiers. Yet life in the provinces was anything but truly peaceful.

### 6.10.4 Early Christianity in the Context of the Roman Empire

One of the problems that arose in Bithynia during Pliny’s time as governor in 111 – 113 CE involved procedural questions on how to treat Christians in the province. Pliny does not seem to have much knowledge about them but is struck by what he describes as their stubbornness in clinging to their faith even when threatened with death. As he points out in his letter on the subject to Trajan, he has judged this stubbornness alone sufficient to merit punishment, presumably because it showed a dangerous level of disrespect towards Roman rule. Pliny’s perspective is one of the earliest non-Christian sources about the new religion and shows how quickly it had spread over the Empire. But how and why did the new religion spread so rapidly over the Empire, and why was it so attractive to different populations? After all, quite a number of different cults and self-proclaimed prophets periodically appeared in the Roman world, yet none had the long-term impact of Christianity, which just two centuries after Pliny’s day became the religion of the Roman emperor himself.

Early Christianity is, in some ways, an ancient historian’s dream: for few other topics in Roman history do we have so many primary sources from both the perspective of insiders and outsiders, beginning with the earliest days of the movement. The *New Testament*, in particular, is a collection of primary sources by early Christians about their movement, with some of the letters composed merely twenty-five years after Jesus’ crucifixion. It is a remarkably open document, collecting theological beliefs and stories about Jesus on which the faith was built. At the same time, however, the New Testament does not “white-wash” the early churches; rather, it documents their failings and short-comings with remarkable frankness, allowing the historian to
consider the challenges that the early Christians faced from not only the outside but also within the movement.

The story of the origins of the faith is explained more plainly in the four Gospels, placed at the beginning of the New Testament. While different emphases are present in each of the four Gospels, the basic story is as follows: God himself came to earth as a human baby, lived a life among the Jews, performed a number of miracles that hinted at his true identity, but ultimately was crucified, died, and rose again on the third day. His resurrection proved to contemporary witnesses that his teachings were true and inspired many of those who originally rejected him to follow him. While the movement originated as a movement within Judaism, it ultimately floundered in Judea but quickly spread throughout the Greek-speaking world—due to the work of such early missionaries as Paul. (Visit the following link to view a map of Paul’s missionary journeys: http://www.allaboutturkey.com/highres/paulsjourneys.jpg.)

It would be no exaggeration to call the early Christian movement revolutionary. In a variety of respects, it went completely against every foundational aspect of Roman (and, really, Greek) society. First, the Christian view of God was very different from the pagan conceptions of gods throughout the ancient Mediterranean. While in traditional Roman paganism the gods had petty concerns and could treat humans unfairly, if they so wished, Christianity by contrast presented the message that God himself became man and dwelt with men as an equal. This concept of God incarnate had revolutionary implications for social relations in a Christian worldview. For early Christians, their God’s willingness to take on humanity and then sacrifice himself for the sins of the world served as the greatest equalizer: since God had suffered for all of them, they were all equally important to him, and their social positions in the Roman world had no significance in God’s eyes. Finally, early Christianity was an apocalyptic religion. Many early Christians believed that Jesus was coming back soon, and they eagerly awaited his arrival, which would erase all inequality and social distinctions.

By contrast, traditional Roman society, as the conflict of the orders in the early Republic showed, was extremely stratified. While the conflict of the orders was resolved by the mid-Republic, sharp divisions between the rich and poor remained. While social mobility was
possible—for instance, slaves could be freed, and within a generation, their descendants could be Senators—extreme mobility was the exception rather than the rule. Furthermore, gender roles in Roman society were extremely rigid, as all women were subject to male authority. Indeed, the *paterfamilias*, or head of the household, had the power of life or death over all living under his roof, including in some cases adult sons, who had their own families. Christianity challenged all of these traditional relationships, nullifying any social differences, and treating the slave and the free the same way. Furthermore, Christianity provided a greater degree of freedom than women had previously known in the ancient world, with only the Stoics coming anywhere close in their view on gender roles. Christianity allowed women to serve in the church and remain unmarried, if they so chose, and even to become heroes of the faith by virtue of their lives or deaths, as in the case of the early martyrs. Indeed, the *Passion of the Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, which documents the two women’s martyrdom in Carthage in 203 CE, shows all of these reversals of Roman tradition in practice.

_*The Passion of the Saints Perpetua and Felicity* was compiled by an editor shortly after the fact and includes Perpetua’s own prison diary, as she awaited execution. The inclusion of a woman’s writings already makes the text unusual, as virtually all surviving texts from the Roman world are by men. In addition, Perpetua was a noblewoman, yet she was imprisoned and martyred together with her slave, Felicity. The two women, as the text shows, saw each other as equals, despite their obvious social distinction. Furthermore, Perpetua challenged her father’s authority as *paterfamilias* by refusing to obey his command to renounce her faith and thus secure freedom. Such outright disobedience would have been shocking to Roman audiences. Finally, both Perpetua and Felicity placed their role as mothers beneath their Christian identity, as both gave up their babies in order to be able to be martyred. Their story, as those of other martyrs, was truly shocking in their rebellion against Roman values, but their extraordinary faith in the face of death proved to be contagious. As recent research shows, conversion in the Roman Empire sped up over the course of the second and third centuries CE, despite periodic persecutions by such emperors as Septimius Severus, who issued an edict in 203 CE forbidding any conversions to Judaism and Christianity. That edict led to the execution of Perpetua and Felicity.

Most of the early Christians lived less eventful (and less painful) lives than Perpetua and Felicity, but the reversals to tradition inherent in Christianity appear clearly in their lives as well. First, the evidence of the New Testament, portions of which were written as early as the 60s CE, shows that the earliest Christians were from all walks of life; Paul, for instance, was a tent-maker. Some other professions of Christians and new converts that are mentioned in the New Testament include prison guards, Roman military officials of varying ranks, and merchants. Some, like Paul, were Roman citizens, with all the perks inherent in that position, including the right of appeal to the Emperor and the right to be tried in Rome. Others were non-citizen free males of varying provinces, women, and slaves. Stories preserved in *Acts* and in the epistles of Paul that are part of the New Testament reveal ways—the good, the bad, and the ugly—in which these very different people tried to come together and treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Some of the struggles that these early churches faced included sexual scandal (the Corinthian church witnessed the affair of a stepmother with her stepson), unnecessary quarrelling and litigation between
members, and the challenge of figuring out the appropriate relationship between the requirements of Judaism and Christianity (to circumcise or not to circumcise? That was the question. And then there were the strict Jewish dietary laws). It is important to note that early Christianity appears to have been predominantly an urban religion and spread most quickly throughout urban centers. Thus Paul’s letters address the churches in different cities throughout the Greek-speaking world and show the existence of a network of relationships between the early churches, despite the physical distance between them. Through that network, the churches were able to carry out group projects, such as fundraising for areas in distress, and could also assist Christian missionaries in their work. By the early second century CE, urban churches were led by bishops, who functioned as overseers for spiritual and practical matters of the church in their region.

6.11 THE THIRD-CENTURY CRISIS, AND LATE ANTIQUITY

While the second century CE was a time when the Empire flourished, the third century was a time of crisis, defined by political instability and civil wars, which ultimately demonstrated that the Empire had become too large to be effectively controlled by one ruler. Furthermore, the increasing pressures on the frontiers, which required emperors to spend much of their time on campaigns, resulted in the decline of the importance of the city of Rome. By the end of the third century, an experiment with dividing the empire showed a different model of rule, one which lasted, albeit with some interludes, until the last Western emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed in 476 CE. While the political narrative of the third century and Late Antiquity could be described as a story of decline and fall of the Roman Empire (as the British historian Gibbon famously called it), nevertheless, it was a period in which culture, and especially Christian culture, flourished and replaced the traditional Roman pagan mode of thinking. Far from being culturally a time of “decline and fall,” Late Antiquity, rather, was looking forward to the world of the Middle Ages. It was also the period of Roman history that produced some of its most influential leaders, most notably, Constantine.

6.11.1 The Third-Century Crisis and Diocletian

Although composed during a time of prosperity in the Empire, Apuleius’ novel Metamorphoses showed tensions in the provinces, indicative of the failure of Empire to govern all portions equally effectively. While not visible in the larger urban centers until the third century CE, these tensions manifested themselves clearly during the third-century crisis, a period of almost fifty years (235 – 284 CE) that was characterized by unprecedented political, social, and economic upheaval across the Empire. In effect, the third-century crisis was the year 69 CE repeated, but this time it stretched over half a century. The same secrets of power that 69 CE revealed for the first time—that armies could make emperors and that emperors could be made outside of Rome—were now on display yet again.

In 235 CE, the emperor Severus Alexander was assassinated by his troops on campaign, who then proclaimed as emperor their general Maximinus Thrax. Over the subsequent half-century, twenty-six emperors were officially recognized by the Roman Senate, and a number of others
were proclaimed emperors but did not live long enough to consolidate power and be officially accepted as emperors by the Senate. Most of these new emperors were military generals who were proclaimed by their troops on campaign. Most of them did not have any previous political experience and thus had no clear program for ruling the empire. The competing claims resulted in the temporary breaking away from the Roman Empire of regions to the East and the Northwest.

The political instability that resulted was not, however, the only problem with which the Empire had to contend. In addition to political upheaval and near-constant civil wars, the Empire was also dealing with increasing pressures on the frontiers, a plague that devastated the population, a famine, and rampant inflation. Roman emperors, starting with Nero, had been debasing the Roman coinage, but not until the third-century crisis did the inflation hit in full force.

The third-century crisis showed that a single emperor stationed in Rome was no longer equipped to deal with the challenges of ruling such a vast territory. And, indeed, so recognized the man who ended the crisis: the emperor Diocletian. Born to a socially insignificant family in the province of Dalmatia, Diocletian had a successful military career. Proclaimed emperor by his troops in 284 CE, Diocletian promptly displayed a political acumen that none of his predecessors in the third century possessed. Realizing that, as the third-century crisis showed, a single emperor in charge of the entire empire was a “sitting duck,” whose assassination would throw the entire
empire into yet another civil war, Diocletian established a new system of rule: the Tetrarchy, or the rule of four. He divided the empire into four regions, each with its own capital.

It is important to note that Rome was not the capital of its region. Diocletian clearly wanted to select as capitals cities with strategic importance, taking into account such factors as proximity to problematic frontiers. Of course, as a Dalmatian of low birth, Diocletian also lacked the emotional connection to Rome that the earliest emperors possessed. Two of the regions of the Tetrarchy were ruled by senior emperors, named Augusti (“Augustus” in the singular), and two were ruled by junior emperors, named Caesares (“Caesar” in the singular). One of the Augusti was Diocletian himself, with Maximian as the second Augustus. The two men’s sons-in-law, Galerius and Constantus Chlorus, became the two Caesares. Finally, it is important to note that in addition to reforming imperial rule, Diocletian attempted to address other major problems, such as inflation, by passing the Edict of Maximum Prices. This edict set a maximum price that could be charged on basic goods and services in the Empire. He also significantly increased the imperial bureaucracy.

Map 6.11 | Map of the Roman Empire under the Tetrarchy
Author: Coppermine Photo Gallery
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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In a nutshell, as some modern historians have described him, Diocletian was the most significant Roman reformer since Augustus.

Diocletian’s political experiment was most clearly successful in achieving one goal: ending the third-century crisis. The four men were able to rule the empire and restore a degree of political stability. A statue column of the Tetrarchs together displays their message of unity in rule: the four men are portrayed identically, so it is impossible to tell them apart. Showing their predominantly military roles, they are dressed in military garb, rather than the toga, the garb of politicians and citizens, and each holds one hand on the hilt of his sword and hugs one of the other Tetrarchs with the other.

While it succeeded in restoring stability to the Empire, inherent within the Tetrarchy was the question of succession, which turned out to be a much greater problem than Diocletian had anticipated. Hoping to provide for a smooth transition of power, Diocletian abdicated in 305 CE and required Maximian to do the same. The two Caesares, junior emperors, were promptly promoted to Augusti, and two new Caesares were appointed. The following year, however, Constantius Chlorus, a newly minted Augustus, died. His death resulted in a series of wars for succession, which ended Diocletian’s experiment of the Tetrarchy. The wars ended with Constantius’ son, Constantine, reuniting the entire Roman Empire under his rule in 324 CE. In the process, Constantine also brought about a major religious shift in the Empire.

### 6.11.2 From Constantine to the Last Pagans of Rome

While traditional Roman religion was the ultimate melting pot, organically incorporating a broad variety of new cults and movements from the earliest periods of Roman expansion, Christianity’s monotheistic exclusivity challenged traditional Roman religion and transformed Roman ways of thinking about religion in late antiquity. By the early fourth century CE, historians estimate that about ten percent of those living in the Roman Empire were Christians. With Constantine, however, this changed, and the previously largely underground faith grew exponentially because of the emperor’s endorsement. The emperor’s conversion must have seemed nothing short of miraculous to contemporaries, and a miracle is told to explain it in contemporary sources. Before a major battle in 312
CE, Constantine reportedly had a dream or a vision in which Christ himself told Constantine to place the Greek letters X and P (Chi, Rho, the first two letters of Christ’s name in the Greek alphabet) on his soldiers’ shields in order to assure victory.

Grateful for his subsequent victory, Constantine proceeded to play a major role in the government of the church over the course of his rule, although he was not baptized himself until he was on his deathbed. Constantine, for instance, summoned the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, which gathered major bishops from all over the Empire. The Council settled, among other issues, the question of the relationship of God the Father and God the Son, declaring them to have been one being from the creation of the world, thus affirming the doctrine of the Trinity. The Council set a significant precedent for communication of bishops in the Empire. It ended up being merely the first of seven major ecumenical councils, the last of them being the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE. The councils allowed the increasingly different churches of the Eastern and Western parts of the Roman Empire to work together on key doctrines and beliefs of the church.

Last but not least, Constantine’s rule marked the end of the city of Rome as the capital of the Roman Empire. Upon reuniting the Empire in 324 CE, Constantine established his capital at the old location of the Greek city of Byzantium, but renamed it Constantinople (the location of Byzantium appears on Map 6.11). The location had strategic advantages for the Empire at that stage. First, it had an excellent harbor. Second, it was close to the Persian frontier, as well as the Danube frontier, a trouble area that required attention from the emperor. Finally, building this new city, to which he also referred as “New Rome,” allowed Constantine to send the message that his rule was a new beginning of sorts for the Roman Empire, which was now to be a Christian empire.

With the Emperor’s backing, Christianity seems to have grown exponentially over the course of the fourth century CE, much to the chagrin of Julian the Apostate, Rome’s final pagan emperor, who tried hard to restore traditional Roman paganism during his brief rule (361 – 363 CE). Finally, the Emperor Theodosius gradually banned paganism altogether by 395 CE. Thus a mere eighty-three years after Constantine’s initial expression of support for Christianity, it became the official religion of Rome. Paganism continued to limp on for another century or so, but without state support, it slowly died out.
6.11.3 The Decline of the Empire—Looking Forward while Looking Back with Augustine and the Last Pagans of Rome

Imagine that you are a citizen of the greatest empire on earth. In fact, you reside in the greatest city of the greatest empire on earth. You feel protected by the pact that was made between the founders of your state and the traditional gods. The *pax deorum*, or peace with the gods, struck a clear bargain: as long as you and your state worshipped the gods and maintained peace with them, they would make it prosper. And prosper it did! Starting out as a tiny village on the marshes of the Tiber, the Roman Empire at its height encircled the entire Mediterranean, extending to Britain and the Rhine and Danube frontiers to the north, and including a wide strip of North Africa in its southern half. But something went so terribly wrong along the way, testing the gods’ patience with Rome. A new sect started out in Judaea in the first century CE, one which followed a crucified Messiah. Spreading outward like a wildfire to all parts of the empire, this sect challenged and gradually replaced the worship of the traditional gods, bringing even the emperors into its fold, starting with Constantine in the early fourth century CE. This outright violation of the thousand-year old pact between the Romans and their gods could have only one outcome: the ultimate punishment would come from the gods upon this rebellious state. And come it did; in 410 CE, the unthinkable happened. The city of Rome, untouched by foreign foe since the early days of the Republic, was sacked by the Goths, a Germanic tribe, led by the fearsome Alaric. How could something so terrible happen? And how could the Roman Empire recover from it? Such was the thought process of the typical Roman pagan, and especially the pagan aristocrat, as few of those as were left by 410 CE. And it was in response to these questions that Augustine, veteran theologian, philosopher, and bishop of Hippo in North Africa, wrote the final *magnum opus* of his career, the monumental twenty-two-book effort that he appropriately titled *De Civitate Dei Contra Paganos*, or On the *City of God* against the Pagans.

It is no coincidence that Peter Brown, the scholar credited with creating the academic field of study of Late Antiquity, began his career as a researcher by writing a biography of Augustine. Indeed, no other figure exemplifies so clearly the different culture that emerged in Late Antiquity, a culture of rethinking the Roman past, with an eye to a future in which Rome no longer existed as the capital of the Roman Empire. Born in North Africa in 354 CE, Augustine was
educated in Rome and Milan, and, after a wild youth—about which he tells us in his *Confessions*—he rose to the post of the Bishop of Hippo in 396 CE. A famous figure by 410 CE, he was ideally suited to address the tragedy of the sack of Rome and the concerns that this event inspired in Christians and pagans alike.

In his book, Augustine presented an argument that challenged the core of Roman traditional beliefs about the state. Challenging the fundamental Roman pagan belief that Roman success was the result of the *pax deorum*, Augustine effectively argued that there was nothing special about Rome. It only prospered in its earlier history because God allowed it to do so. Furthermore, argued Augustine, obsession with Rome, emblematic of obsession with the earthly kingdom and way of life, was the wrong place for turning one’s attention. The City of God was the only place that mattered, and the City of God was most definitely not Rome. By turning away from this world and focusing on the next, one could find true happiness and identity as a citizen of God’s kingdom, which is the only city that is everlasting and free from threat of invasion or destruction.

Augustine’s message would have made the Republican hero Cincinnatus weep. For Cincinnatus, nothing was more valuable than Rome. For Augustine, however, nothing was less valuable than Rome.

### 6.12 CONCLUSION: FROM LATE ANTIQUITY TO THE MIDDLE AGES

After the death of the Emperor Theodosius in 395 CE, the Roman Empire became permanently divided into Eastern and Western Empires, with instability and pressures on the frontiers continuing, especially in the West.

The sack of Rome by the Goths in 410 CE, which so shocked Augustine’s contemporaries, was followed by an equally destructive sack of Carthage by the Vandals in 439 CE, as well as continuing raids of Roman territories by the Huns, a nomadic tribe from Eastern Europe, the Caucasus region, and south-eastern China. The Huns experienced an especially prolific period of conquest in the 440s and early 450s CE under the leadership of Attila. While they were not able to hold on to their conquests after Attila’s death in 453 CE, their attacks further destabilized an already weakened Western
Roman Empire. Finally, the deposition of the Emperor Romulus Augustulus in 476 CE marked the end of the Roman Empire in the West, although the Eastern half of the Empire continued to flourish for another thousand years.

The fall of the Roman Empire in the West, however, was not really as clear and dramatic a fall as might seem. A number of tribes carved out territories, each for its own control. Over the next five hundred years, led by ambitious tribal chiefs, these territories coalesced into actual kingdoms. Rome was gone, yet its specter loomed large over these tribes and their leaders, who spoke forms of Latin (albeit increasingly barbaric versions of it), believed in the Christian faith, and dreamed of the title of Roman Emperor.

6.13 WORKS CONSULTED AND FURTHER READING


6.14 LINKS TO PRIMARY SOURCES

Appian, Selections from Civil Wars on the Gracchi
http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/appian-civwars1.asp

Apuleius, Resources and Selections from Writings
http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/apuleius/

Augustus, Res Gestae Divi Augusti
http://classics.mit.edu/Augustus/deeds.html
Caesar, *Gallic Wars* and *Civil War*  
http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/Caesar/index.html

Cicero, First Oration Against Catiline  
http://www.bartleby.com/268/2/11.html

Etruscans (descriptions from Herodotus and Livy)  
http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/etrucans2.asp

Livy, The Rape of Lucretia and Roman way of declaring war  
http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/livy-rape.asp  
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Passion of the Saints Perpetua and Felicity  
http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/perpetua.asp

Pliny, Correspondence with Trajan about Christians in Bithynia  
http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/pliny.html

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http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Polybius/1*.html  
http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/polybius6.asp

Polybius, Comparison of the Roman Maniple with Macedonian Phalanx  
http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/polybius-maniple.asp

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http://www.forumromanum.org/literature/sallust/catilinae.html

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http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/suetonius-index.asp

Tacitus, *Annals* and *Histories*  
http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.html  
http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/histories.html

The Twelve Tables  
http://avalon.law.yale.edu/ancient/twelve_tables.asp